

**‘The Red Light of Emotion’:
Reading Anger in Contemporary
British Women’s Working-Class
Fiction**

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‘The Red Light of Emotion’: Reading Anger in Contemporary British Women’s Working-Class Writing.¹

Abstract

This thesis investigates the representation of anger in contemporary British women’s writing. It argues that Helen Zahavi, Pat Barker, Livi Michael and Anne McManus foreground anger (frequently materialising as anxiety and offset with humour) to pose a series of questions with regard to gender, class and sexuality and that they do so in contemporary ‘versions’ of the British working-class novel. In exploring the writing of Zahavi, Barker, Michael and McManus I define them as both feminist and working-class writers, but not in an absolute or inviolable way. In this thesis I am more interested in how anger, women’s writing and the working-class novel offer what Mikhail Bakhtin calls ‘a play of voices in a social context’.

The introduction examines antecedent working-class novels and discusses the ‘slipperiness’ of such literary terms as ‘the working-class novel’ and ‘realism’. I suggest that the male-authored working-class novels of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century frequently objectify the working classes and place working-class women within a literary straitjacket. Chapter 1 explores how working-class women writers have been silenced and are generally absent from a working-class tradition and explores notions of anger and anxiety that relate to their absence within the paradigms of more recent feminist theory. The subsequent chapters offer close readings of the writers under discussion to exemplify the ways in which their representations of anger offer original, inventive and complex interrogations of a range of issues. The final chapter draws on a range of recent fictions by women writers and argues that they use representations of anger strategically in imaginative and accessible narratives that focus on contemporary British society.

¹ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 38.

Introduction

Realism and Representation: Women and The Working-class Novel

It would have been quite impossible for any of the poor,
struggling coping women... to have won the time or the quiet to put pen to paper (Nicola
Beauman, *A Very Great Profession*)

Throughout much of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century working-class women's writing was rarely published.¹ Women had little access to publishers who, in any event, were not really interested in their (mainly autobiographical) work and working-class women and girls had little earning power and no 'spare' money for books (which could cost at least three to four times the average weekly wage of a factory girl) or the magazines in which many novels were serialised.² There were, however, numerous novels written *about* the working classes, where working-class women (and working-class men) were habitually inappropriately and reductively represented. In his study of Victorian fiction, P. J. Keating observes that 'most working-class novels are... usually written by authors who are not working class, for an audience that is not working class, and character and environment are presented so as to contain, implicitly or explicitly, a class judgement.'³ The class position of the writer, the class position of the consumers of the novels and the ideological position from which the novels were conceived are determining factors in the representation of the working classes. The novels were written for a minority of the population and they were driven by views of society that were determined by social, economic and political factors that frequently stood in conflict to their subject matter.

While it is evident that cultural, political and economic relations oppress 'ordinary people', what becomes apparent in many of these novels is that working-class women are more oppressed than their male counterparts.⁴ This is evidenced in a range of nineteenth- and

twentieth-century novels. For example, Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) is a novel that is overtly concerned with class relations and throughout Gaskell attempts to evoke sympathy for the conditions of the working classes.⁵ However, she detaches herself from political attitudes towards the making of these conditions and makes John Barton the 'hero' of the novel insofar as he becomes politicised, joins a Trade Union (pp. 59-60) and later becomes a Chartist and a Communist and is 'all that is wild and visionary' (p. 220). He has the vision and it is he who understands that 'class distrusted class' and that 'their want of mutual confidence wrought sorrow to both' (p. 220). It is *his* class antagonism that is apparent; the only feeling he has is the 'clear and undisturbed... tumult of his heart' and the 'hatred of one class and keen sympathy with the other' (p. 219). Mary Barton is as much a victim of social, moral and economic injustices as her father; so much so that her oppression made her 'weary of her life' (p. 224). As with the majority of working-class women characters in what are termed 'condition of England novels' she is acted upon rather than being active herself and the fact that Mary escapes to a new life at the end of the novel does not really redress the balance of representation. Again, in Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1841) and *Hard Times* (1854) it is the working-class women (Nancy and Rachel respectively) who suffer extreme economic and sexual oppression. George Gissing's *The Nether World* (1889) depicts working-class women in the most abject circumstances: Jane Snowdon has to make a bed for herself each night 'dragging together a little heap of rags' (p. 11), and sleeps on the floor of the Peckover's. Mrs Hewett is twenty-seven years of age 'but looks years older' and is 'wrapped up rather than dressed'. She has five children, one a baby who 'moaned at her bosom in the act of sucking' (p. 16).⁶ It is the women here who carry the burden of abjection.

In the twentieth century Robert Tressell, Walter Greenwood and Lewis Grassie Gibbon in *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), *Love on the Dole* (1933) and *A*

Scots Quair (1946) respectively, continue the somewhat restricted representation of economically and sexually oppressed working-class women. In *A Scots Quair*, for example, Chris's father tells her 'I can do with you what I will'. He says she must 'come to him' and do what 'they'd done... in Old Testament times'. She is forced to suffer his 'glooming and glaring... his whisperings' until all she could do was 'drag herself' around.⁷ All of these representations of women fall into what Raymond Williams calls 'a choral mode, a generalising description... of *attitudes* towards suffering'.⁸ They also represent a certain attitude towards working-class women.⁹ Their misrepresentation in literature and more significantly, their absence from the analysis of culture is significant as literature performs what Catherine Belsey calls 'the work of ideology'. Literature not only represents 'a world of consistent subjects who are the origin of meaning, knowledge and action', it also portrays 'characters and situations that are understandable', and offers an ideal position from which to debate the inequalities that feminists see as inherent in gender and class relationships. A reader who recognises the situation and the characters thereby determines the 'truth' of a text. Belsey calls this person the 'knowledgeable reader'.¹⁰ Insofar as it is possible to say how a text will be read, realism is, or can be, the ideal medium for readers to reflect upon narrative and to read it in relation to their own subjectivity, their own 'real' lives. Belsey's debate on classic realism in nineteenth-century novels sees the predominance of characters whose 'traits of character, understood as essential and predominantly given, constrain the choices they make' and whose development is always in relation to any given personality trait or situation.¹¹

While this may be true of classic nineteenth-century novels such as those Belsey provides as examples, it implies that the 'knowledgeable reader' will find affirmation and recognition of themselves in these texts. In terms of a middle-class readership this is probably true, but not for working-class women. One has to question how working-class

women, who must see themselves as marginalised or generally absent, find any sort of affirmation in novels that are bourgeois. How can working-class women find representations that confirm or renegotiate their position in society when they are absent from much fiction? Although the social and economic situation has been modified since the nineteenth century, state power and control still exploit the working classes, with women carrying the brunt of that exploitation.¹² Middle-class feminists were often caught up in the fight against patriarchal systems of power, but failed to understand how little this affected the lives of working-class women. Sheila Rowbotham debates some of the earliest responses to feminism and socialism in the 1920s in Britain, and quotes from a pamphlet written by Lily Gair Wilkinson, who argues that 'bourgeois feminists' far from serving the cause of women 'serve that of the enemy instead'.¹³ Gair believes that the oppression of women is linked to capitalism and class relations and that socialism is one way to attack this exploitation. Feminism did at least recognise the oppression of women, as it is embedded in unequal relations between men and women and the hierarchical structure of a society that maintains women in a position of subordination. It is clear, however, that there was almost no recognition of the specific position of working-class women.

The writers under consideration in this thesis unsettle and defamiliarise the concept of the 'knowledgeable reader' and provide a reading experience that is transformative in many ways. By writing in what might be called a realist, working-class tradition, many contemporary British women writers are able to make visible the inherent class injustices and gender inequalities in a patriarchal society. Pat Barker, Livi Michael, Helen Zahavi and Anne McManus deploy an aesthetic of anger in their work in order to address issues of class, gender and sexuality and in doing so they subvert the unifying affirmation and recognition (and to my mind complacency) of many readings of working-class characters in what might be termed working-class novels. There is a refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the

'bourgeois' novel and across all their work there is a move towards a tangible rendering of working-class women's anger that not only confirms their disaffection and feelings of alienation and estrangement, but also conflicts with or renegotiates literary representations of both working-class women and men. In my discussion of anger I foreground class as an issue throughout and, drawing on Gustav Klaus, I take working-class writing as that which evidences both class consciousness and a political awareness of class antagonisms. It is not my intention to be reductive or to homogenise these experiences: it is clear that novels can and do fulfil one or all of the above categories. The writers under discussion are, to borrow Terry Lovell's words, escaping the 'interpretative control' of classic realism.¹⁴ In this thesis I am much more interested in how realism and the working-class novel coexist and how women writers use both to reflect upon their positions in society.

As the twentieth century developed, the differences in the expectations of women from different classes became more apparent to the women's movement. The systematic disparity and unequal distribution of power within patriarchal systems was very much apparent in the restriction of women, particularly so for working-class women. Patriarchy is generally understood as a pervasive system of oppression that subordinates all women in one form or another and is described by Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, as:

the power of the fathers: a familial-social, ideological, political system in which men by force, direct law, and language, customs, etiquette, education and the division of labor determine what part women shall or shall not play, and which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male. It does not necessarily imply that no woman has power, or that all women in a given culture may not have certain powers.¹⁵

Rich locates patriarchy firmly within the apparatus of society, but particularly in political systems that ideologically hinders women. The family is also a site of patriarchal power and

a microcosm of the wider influences that are brought to bear on women. Annette Kuhn describes patriarchy as:

a structure written into particular expressions of the sexual division of labour whereby property, the means of production of exchange values, is appropriated by men, and whereby this property relation informs household and family relations in such a way that men may appropriate the labour and the actual persons of women.¹⁶

As part of her Marxist approach, Kuhn sees the family as the construction that most closely represents the carrier of ideology that subjugates and marginalises women. In this discussion patriarchy is taken as the system of ideology that subsumes the interests of women, within which society is imagined from a male perspective. It is clearly apparent and most obviously represented in the oppression working-class women are faced with both inside and outside the home. In the novels explored, realism offers a multiplicity of experiences ordered through the appearance of verisimilitude, where differences may be reconciled under the mutual recognition of the oppression of women (and men). Those experiences that are ‘knowable’ and therefore shared, are public, and those that are ‘unknowable’ or impossible to reconcile, are private. The ‘realities’ of this form of writing offer a balance of form in which subjectivity and judgement, based on individual personal perceptions of patriarchy and oppression, can coexist with wider externally observed facts regarding the position of women in society. Elizabeth Deeds Ermath observes that realism uses language that is both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ the public and private sphere and that ‘surface and depth’ are needed in any conceptions of realism.¹⁷ Of course, language systems are important in relation to any discussion of realism and this factor is addressed in the proceeding chapters. The writers I discuss use realism in its many forms to highlight the position of women, within patriarchal structures, and their writing correlates with definitions of typicality and verisimilitude.

I am aware that the political and ideological contemplation of the ‘working-class novel’ is fraught with difficulties and that any attempt to unravel the contradictory positions that exist as constituents or characteristics of the genre will be, by necessity, complex. The inference from some critics that working-class novels are merely sounding boards for socialist and Marxist politics is problematic and while it is acknowledged that many working-class novels do have an ideological content, it is not true that they all have politically-driven narratives. Gustav Klaus notes the problems inherent in any attempt to categorise working-class writing. He states that ‘working-class and/or socialist [novels]... range from interchangeability to mutual exclusiveness’ and that this adds to the confusion. Klaus also asserts that ‘an ideal-type definition’ of working-class writing ‘yields two criteria, authorship and subject matter’.¹⁸ Klaus’s definition is important as a sound base for debating what constitutes working-class fiction, but it cannot work as a definitive description as ‘authorship’ raises further questions in itself. Klaus defines working-class writers as ‘authors still in the production process or subjected to unemployment’ and writers of a working-class background ‘depicting their milieu of origin’; David Storey describes the working class as ‘those who live by the sale of their labour-power and draw no income from surplus-value created by others’.¹⁹ These definitions draw strongly on Marxist interpretations of class and although both are perfectly valid, they could be seen as rather reductionist. ‘Working class’ as a category comprises a complex set of phenomena that cannot be readily determined in terms of component parts; class has to be looked at both historically and socially and in relation to social hierarchies.

Perceptions of class change over time. E. P. Thompson states that as a descriptive term, working class ‘evades as much as it describes’ and this is certainly true when trying to determine what comprises working-class writing at the end of the twentieth century.²⁰ As an ‘umbrella’ term, working class is generally seen to refer to those members of society who are

employed to labour in manual and industrial occupations, but, of course, as Thompson points out, this description evades many other positions that could usefully be described as working class. The stratification of British society went hand-in-hand with the rise of industrialism and capitalism and class positions were formed historically in relation to these movements. At the end of the nineteenth century, the working class was a recognisable group, seen in alienation from the middle, or bourgeois classes. In terms of working-class writing, the working-class tradition (apart from rural poets such as John Clare and the Chartist poets) did not really develop until the twentieth century. Historically, novels deemed working-class were written *about* the working class by novelists who were invariably members of the middle classes but ‘politicised into socialist ways of thinking’.²¹ This, according to Brunhild de la Motte, was the result of ‘the polarisation of the classes’ and the ‘general politicisation of the working people... and an attempt by middle-class people to solve the concepts of humanist transcendence’.²² There is little doubt that class antagonism at the end of the nineteenth century produced writing that sought to evaluate the threat of the working-class ‘masses’.

The motivation behind these nineteenth-century ‘Condition of England’ or ‘Industrial’ novels may certainly be humanist, an attempt to show the dignity of the working man (the protagonists are nearly always men) struggling against inhuman conditions. But, more often than not, the authors remained distanced from their subject matter, treating the working classes as specimens, seen through the gaze of a middle-class writer. George Gissing in particular evidences both sympathy and revulsion for his subject matter:

Not one in a thousand shows the elements of taste in dress; vulgarity and worse glares in all but every costume. Observe the middle-aged women; it would be small surprise that their good looks had vanished, but whence comes it they are animal, repulsive,

absolutely vicious in ugliness? Mark the men in their turn: four in every six have visages so deformed by ill-health that they excite disgust.²³

Gissing's description of the masses invariably renders them as 'other' and grotesque. Do his sympathies lie with the working classes? Although he clearly attempts to portray the condition of the people here his disgust is also apparent. According to Fredric Jameson, Gissing's *The Nether World* is fraught with contradictions. He argues that Gissing's 'conception of the novel about "the people" is a form of naturalist specialization that seeks to pass itself off as a map of social totality'.²⁴ Gissing's attempt to realistically portray the working classes is not terribly convincing and what Jameson calls 'naturalist specialization' is nothing more than an illustration of a middle-class experience/perception of the people. However, the contradiction that Jameson observes is evident in *The Nether World* and in other nineteenth-century 'Condition of England' novels, such as Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and Dickens's *Hard Times*, or the utopian and dystopian fictions of William Morris and H. G. Wells respectively. These writers also offer only a distanced perspective on the masses, albeit often humanist; they wrote about the working classes from a liberal, often nonconformist, middle-class perspective. But, should these novels be seen as working-class? If we take Klaus's view that subject matter is the basis for classification then novels written *about* the working class fall into the category.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century there were, however, a number of writers with strong links with the working-class tradition. Arthur Morrison, Kathleen Woodhead, Margaret Harkness, Ethel Carnie, Edwin Pugh, Richard Whiteing and William Pett Ridge were all published writers around the turn of the nineteenth century who evidence what Klaus calls 'a standpoint consistent with that of the class-conscious sections of this class'.²⁵ That is to say they write from an 'informed' perspective in the interests of the working class, although how informed that perspective might be is

difficult to determine. Pugh, Whiteing and Pett Ridge were quite prolific writers but they were lower middle-class in origin and according to Vincent Brome, ‘lesser novelists who showed exceptional skills in evoking the London scene’. What is worthy of note about these nineteenth-century writers is that many worked in journalism (including Arthur Morrison and Margaret Harkness) and this, I believe, granted them a perspective on class relations, class politics and class antagonisms and the platform to write about them.²⁶

In his study of working-class writing P. J. Keating argues that the nineteenth century saw a proliferation of ‘realist’ writing that purported to be about the lives of ‘ordinary people’. Keating acknowledges that in the Victorian period, ‘there were some hundreds of novels’ written about the working classes. He also acknowledges that there are ‘few English novels which deal with working-class characters in a working-class environment in the same sense as there are novels about the middle and upper classes in their own recognizably real settings’.²⁷ Fictional writing at this time was almost entirely ‘non-working class’. Keating’s point that the industrial novel develops only after Chartism ‘paved the way’ is important when considering the fictional writing of the period. The difference in status between working-class novels by a middle-class writer and working-class novels by a working-class writer is obvious. The working-class writer is assigned a limited status, and by confining their essence as the social experience rather than the human experience, critics almost certainly guarantee their literary diminishment.²⁸ As Raymond Williams argues, ‘the implication of [working-class writing’s] marginality, or as often, its inferiority of status and interest, is rejected by deliberate selection and emphasis’.²⁹ Williams indicates the limited status and the narrowness perceived in working-class writing (by writers whose roots are in the working class) that is still apparent in the latter part of the twentieth century. The narrowness of vision that Williams discusses ensures the marginalisation of working-class writing. Williams believes that the regional novel is equated with working-class writing and

that 'region' takes on its modern meaning of a subordinate area. Inevitably, if we follow this line of argument, the working-class novel takes on the meaning of 'a subordinate class' and a subordinate literary form.³⁰ In this sense the working-class novel and the working-class writer are ideologically regional, that is removed from the cultural and metropolitan centre.

The growth in political awareness at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth did not necessarily give rise to more working-class novels. However, there was a fundamental change in the attitude to class as represented in the novel. As Mary Eagleton and David Pierce point out, this change 'has clear implications for the treatment of the working class; from being problematic, dangerous, threatening, the working class now emerges as valiant, exploited victimized'.³¹ Novels such as Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*, and later, Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* are examples of this sort of representation and received much critical attention.³² Tressell's socialist rhetoric and Greenwood's bathetic engagement with the working classes could be read as more 'authentic'. Nevertheless they are problematic in that the social conditions they expose opened a schism between what was considered 'literature' and what was read as 'sociological fiction' and mere cultural pretension. Tressell and Greenwood, albeit in considerably different ways, exposed the underlying exploitation and the naked and unremitting struggle of working-class life. Both articulate the experiences of the working classes in the novel, the most bourgeois of literary forms, whereas previously, the only 'real' working-class experience was seen to be located in autobiographical writing or the Chartist novels. The importance of Tressell's and Greenwood's work lies not only in the fact that they give voice to an authentic working-class experience, but that the form of the bourgeois novel is disinherited, and claimed for the 'working-class voice'. *Love on the Dole* was well received by many critics and hailed as a working-class masterpiece, but, unlike Tressell's *Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, it is a portrayal of working-class life that is non-confrontational

and distanced. This appears to be the sort of writing about the working class that found acceptance with a middle-class readership.³³

The ‘condition’ of being working class cannot be depicted in writing that is conveniently compartmentalised into neat and discrete categories. The genre *has* to remain open to interpretation in that it can only purport to represent certain aspects of working-class life at particular historical moments and writers can and do move away from their working-class roots. It would be reductive to see it as a closed category. Writers who are considered working class frequently regard their categorisation as precarious and in some cases simply untenable. Alan Sillitoe, for example, states:

The greatest inaccuracy was ever to call [*Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*] a ‘working-class novel’ for it is really nothing of the sort. It is simply a novel, and the label given it by most reviewers at the time it came out, even the intelligent ones who should have known better, was simply a way of categorizing a piece of work they weren’t capable of assessing from their narrow class standpoint.³⁴

If Klaus’s analysis of working-class writers and writing is taken into account then, surely, Sillitoe must be seen as a working-class writer. His ‘milieu of origin’ is working-class and regional and his subject matter is working-class. Pat Barker and Livi Michael (discussed in detail later) are again seen as working-class in that their subject is a working-class experience and their origins are quite categorically working-class and regional. Michael sees the problems inherent in this categorisation, stating:

No writer can speak for these people. And unlike the heroine of *Educating Rita* I do not think I have a choice where I place myself in society. I certainly do not think I have a choice to return to the estate where I grew up and be accepted as “one of them”. To “them”, as to most people, I am ineradicably middle-class.³⁵

These comments demonstrate that in the latter half of the twentieth century the working-class voice is often ephemeral and transitory on the way to middle-class recognition and a rise in social status. The very act of writing and publishing places the working-class writer, in terms of social mobility and standing, outside of a working-class classification. Ian Haywood, in *Working-Class Fiction: from Chartism to Trainspotting*, locates his view of working-class fiction firmly within the labour movement and political tradition, arguing that this writing articulates ‘the collective struggle for equal representation in the political, social and literary spheres.’³⁶ While some writing is politically motivated it cannot be said that all working-class writing falls into the category of working-class fiction. In male-authored working-class novels the ‘collective’ struggle does not seem to incorporate the position of women. Class positions do, however, embody collective traditions and social values but these are not the same for every working-class writer.

Tony Davies judges that the working-class novel uses social-realism to portray the ‘static, homogenous (and almost always, white and predominantly male) working-class’.³⁷ While this is certainly true of the writing that emerged in the 1950s it is not necessarily so at the end of the twentieth century. However, Davies is correct in his acknowledgement of the absence of women’s representation in any discussion of the working-class novel, there being no recognisable history of working-class women’s novels and very few critical studies of their work.³⁸ Although Brunhild de la Motte believes that ‘the most radical novels of the late nineteenth century were written by middle-class women who had become politicised’, it is also worth noting that many of these novels are now virtually unknown. This also conforms to the general view that the working classes were being written *about* rather than writing about themselves.³⁹ Although there were women from the working classes writing about working-class experiences at this time, they used mainly autobiographical forms. If the working-class novel is destined to remain outside the canon of ‘literary’ writing then

working-class women's writing remains virtually invisible. According to de la Motte the ambiguous position of working-class women places them in a contradictory position in relation to class and sex. She argues that:

Depending on the issue, working-class women could form alliances either with men from their own class to achieve class goals, or with women from other classes to fight for their rights as a sex, or, in fact, with both at the same time.

In other words working-class women, like men, are subordinated by class concerns. But, they are also oppressed by patriarchal systems both in and out of their class. Women, according to de la Motte, 'have a common interest in the achievement of equality' as they are not only 'linked with their own class' but also 'across class lines to fight for legal, educational and political rights'.⁴⁰ Women's subordination and oppression is linked quite specifically to patriarchal structures, both in the home and in society in general. The experiences of women are embodied in traditions and value systems so it follows that if society is patriarchal then they are marginalised and if that society is bourgeois as well, working-class women are doubly marginalised: they are practically voiceless.

Working-class women and their writings are inevitably set against the social structure of society and as such they are practically non-existent. Nevertheless that does not stop working-class women being written about by male writers, in whose portrayal, according to Gill Davies, 'a negative image of working-class culture is found'.⁴¹ Arthur Morrison's *A Child of the Jago* (1896) and Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* both include representations of women that render them grotesque and 'other' in the same way middle-class writers render the working class grotesque:

Down the middle of Old Jago Street came Sally Green: red faced, stripped to the waist, dancing, hoarse and triumphant. Nail scores wide as the finger striped her back, her face, her throat, and she had a black eye; but in one great hand she dangled a long

bunch of clotted hair, as she whooped defiance to the Jago. It was a trophy rent from the scalp of Norah Walsh.⁴²

This depiction from *A Child of the Jago* is animalistic, the woman is bestial and brutish. Keating argues that Morrison is impressive in his handling of violence and believes ‘his writing... evokes an atmosphere of crude reality’ that had never been seen in the English working-class novel. But, Keating never really addresses the problems inherent in this representation and the women in Morrison’s novel never rise above this sort of portrayal:

Norah Walsh, vanquished champion, now somewhat recovered, looked from a window, saw her enemy vulnerable, and ran out armed with a bottle. She stopped at the kerb to knock the bottom off the bottle, and then with an exultant shout, seized Sally Green by the hair and stabbed her about the face with the jagged points... Norah Walsh, kneeling on her breast stabbed and stabbed again, till pieces of the bottle broke away.⁴³

The violence is rarely mediated by alternative representations of women as strong and determined. Male writers habitually foreground male protagonists so it was perhaps inevitable that until working-class women could write about themselves they suffered the worst kind of representation.⁴⁴ In *Love on the Dole*, for example, the over-riding emphasis is on stoic women who attempt to come to terms with the grinding poverty of their lives. But Greenwood has problems representing women in positive or affirmative ways; his women are either downtrodden but respectable, or slovenly and gin sodden, or tartars giving their husbands a hard time. A cast of women characters varies from the grotesque to the sacrificial virgin: for example, Mrs. Hardcastle; Mrs Nattle, Mrs Bull and Mrs Cranford, Mrs Scodger, and Sally Hardcastle. Greenwood also presents the stereotypical, comic figure of a large, emasculating woman that is found in many male-authored working-class novels. The social

tension and underlying fear of women and the contradictions of male perspective are articulated in the portrayal of such women:

Buxom Mrs Scodger puffing, pushing and pulling on the brass... lowered her chin and frowned at the blacksmith over her spectacles. She jerked her thumb rudely, towards the room at the back... adding peremptorily: 'Kitchen,' adding, imperiously: 'An' tek them there Sunday clo'es off. You ain't goin' out o' this house till I'm ready to go wi y', '... 'You heard me...'⁴⁵

Images of women such as the above are typical of male-authored, working-class novels and reflect an ideological stance that represents women stereotypically as harridans. Working-class women (amongst others) at the turn of the twentieth century suffered particularly from poor self-esteem, and as Merylyn Cherry notes, 'this low-level of self-awareness... must have played a large part in preventing them from writing about themselves and their lives'.⁴⁶ Not only did working-class women suffer from poor self-esteem, the division of labour usually resulted in their taking the worst paid, unskilled jobs that were available to them as well as working in the home. It is highly unlikely they had the time or energy to write.

Although the early twentieth century was significant for the working classes in terms of evolving political awareness and class consciousness, it was also a time of rapid change and emancipation for many women. The fight for women's emancipation, however, did little to change the lives of the majority of working-class women and in the literary world working-class women remained of little interest. The 1930s saw the virtual silence of authors (from a range of backgrounds) who had been writing ostensibly working-class novels. The ownership of production (publishers) was in the hands of middle-class and bourgeois groups. These were from public schools, Oxbridge and red brick universities which according to David Hewitt, 'bred "such self-confident literary castes as the members of the Bloomsbury Group"'.⁴⁷ The 'woman's novel' between the wars was, according to

Nicola Beaman, 'written by middle-class women for middle-class women'. The novels were written for women and men who were 'living the same kind of lives' as the authors.⁴⁸ Writers such as Rosamund Lehmann, a Girton scholar, Rose Macaulay, an Oxford graduate, May Sinclair and Vera Brittain were publishing at this time along with a variety of other predominantly middle-class, educated women. The Bloomsbury Group cast a long shadow over the literary establishment in the inter-war years and in this literary climate novels by and about working-class women found no place. Rebecca O'Rourke is aware of this great omission and argues that 'what is most damaging of all is the consequent idea that they cannot, or do not... want to write for themselves'.⁴⁹ As O'Rourke persuasively argues 'working-class women are most fully of their class when silenced'.⁵⁰ It is this silence that later writers from working-class backgrounds seek to fill.⁵¹

Realism and class are closely linked terms. Of course, realism can be argued as being essentially 'about' people and society with the working classes existing as 'real', but in debating working-class fiction and realism there needs to be a defining framework for debate.⁵² Realism cannot be taken at face value, although there are some consistencies upheld by this form of writing. Pam Morris acknowledges that in realist writing 'characters are lifelike, believably shaped by social and personal circumstances; the events of the narrative are similarly credible' and that 'the language used and the syntax are unobtrusive, the self-effacing style preserving the illusion that what is offered is direct, unmediated access to real people and real lives.'⁵³ But what is meant by 'real'? According to Raymond Williams realism has been 'accused of evading the real' even when 'characters ... actions and situations are realistically described'.⁵⁴ Realism, in the form of the outward appearance of a social reality is consciously used by many working-class writers as a political discourse, to examine class antagonism or examples of class injustice. However, as Morris has argued 'works of literature cannot simply reflect life', just as a class of women and men cannot be

contemplated as an homogenous mass which reflects 'life as it is' for the working classes. Realism is a representation of life as it could be, but of course reality is not fixed for every person within that society.

In the nineteenth century, realism was the principal method of literary representation. This has become known as 'classical or bourgeois realism'. Realism is a mode of expression that according to Fredric Jameson 'reflects social reality in its most concrete historicity'.⁵⁵ This departure links in part to E. P. Thompson's view that we cannot understand class unless it is embodied within an historical process and linked to social and cultural formation.⁵⁶ The link between working-class writing and socialism with the emphasis on the social experiences of those represented is clear. Friedrich Engels's views on realism are widely acknowledged by many critics and are summarised here in a letter to Margaret Harkness:

Realism to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the true reproduction. Of typical characters in typical circumstances. Your characters are typical enough as far as they go; but the same cannot be said of the circumstances in which they move and which drive them to action. In *City Girl* the working class figures as a passive mass, incapable of helping itself, not even desiring to make the effort to help itself. All attempts to get out of this deadening poverty proceed from outside, from above (in the words of Saint-Simon that class is 'la plus pauvre, la plus souffrante, la plus nombreuse', 'the poorest, most debased class as Robert Owen says)... [I am] guided by the principle that the emancipation of the working class must be at the act of the working class itself. The revolutionary resistance of the working class against the oppression of its environment, its feverish attempts, conscious or half-conscious, to obtain its human rights are a part of history and may demand a place in the sphere of realism.⁵⁷

Engels believes the working classes are represented as a passive mass in many realist nineteenth-century novels. In *The Novel and the People*, Ralph Fox argues that this is incorrect and that seemingly trivial and individual acts of protest are carried out everyday against oppression whether they are ‘swearing at a charge hand or more serious collective action.’ He believes that a writer should be concerned ‘with change, with the relation of cause and effect, with crisis and conflict, and not merely with description or subjective analysis.’⁵⁸ This is clearly a call for a new kind of realism, one that would portray the working classes as shaped by both internal and external forces: a realism that would make visible the interior life and imagination of the people. Fox rightly ridicules the false hypocrisy and sentimentality of some fictional representations of the working classes in this period.⁵⁹ Queenie Leavis also discusses the sentimentalising of the working classes in her 1935 article in *Scrunity*, ‘The Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders’. She condemns middle-class writers who ‘smear everything with a nauseating brand of sentimentality’ and argues that ‘[these] writers give the same impression of having had to go out, notebook in hand, to examine proletarian homes and their inmates to equip themselves for writing about what their literary ancestors would have undoubtedly called the lower classes’. Leavis accuses them of lacking in any sort of humility in their approach but gives herself away somewhat in her use of such words as ‘inmates’, ‘simple people’ and ‘the peculiar quality of life’, in that she also renders the working classes as other. Although she does at least acknowledge that ‘they’ are ‘not necessarily incapacitated for delicacy and refinement of feeling’.⁶⁰ The sense that the working classes fail to have any sort of interiority has always proved a sticking point for middle-class writers and critics.

George Lukács takes up Engels’s idea of typical characters in typical circumstances in his discussion of ‘typicality’ in relation to realism. Lukács draws a distinction between ‘typicality’ and ‘topicality’, arguing that a character is typical ‘when his innermost being is

determined by objective forces at work in society'. This again is linked firmly into realism as an historical concept formed by ideology and political intent. The typical protagonist is written about from knowledge within, or as Lukács states 'from the inside'. One key definition of working-class writing must be that it stems from knowledge within that class. Lukács's notion of 'topicality' is therefore related to 'illustrative' characters who are 'prescribed by a specific political intent'. If his argument is followed then this sort of realism is written from the 'outside'. Ultimately neither typical or topical characters are capable of portraying society as a whole, but each can be linked to the complex, interrelated notion of what class is and how it is portrayed through realist writing. Lukács debates at length the differences and similarities of critical realism and social realism. He believes that social realism 'is in a position' to 'portray the totality of a society in its immediacy' via protagonists who are typical human beings.⁶¹ The reality that is depicted is human reality, or as George Biztray believes, 'man's social environment elevated to the level of consciousness'. Realism at this level is no longer the imitative, static form so often seen as merely descriptive. Biztray's informative and persuasive study of realism begins with the proposition that, as realism is such a slippery term, and 'it knows no bounds'; it is too general a term to apply to texts. Contemporary uses of realism incorporate elements of fantasy, myth, symbol, allegory and so continue to revise any discussion of the term. Biztray believes that 'great realism is a polyphony of many components' and this is a description that holds sway in contemporary literary theory.⁶² Realism (whether classic, bourgeois, socialist, or magic) can only be seen in its widest sense in that it reflects life in all its labyrinthine forms. Fox's call for a new kind of realism to depict the working class in all its facets never really materialised until the latter part of the twentieth century when writers brought a new intellectual rigour to working-class novels and imbued their characters with a sense of vibrancy and complexity. These writers are discussed in later chapters.

In any debate concerning contemporary British working-class literature the period that immediately follows the Second World War is significant for a number of reasons; most particularly it was a time of exceptional social change when many people began to question the traditional hierarchical structures that were inherent in British society.⁶³ Although this period saw diverse cultural changes, the numerous freedoms gained by working-class women throughout the duration of the war were mostly invalidated after, as traditional, patriarchal paradigms were re-established. In literature, the disaffection and anger that many young people felt found a place in the novels and plays of new young writers. The term ‘angry young men’ originates from this time of unprecedented change and was applied to a group of writers whose protagonists were rebellious and critical of the society they saw around them. The phrase was originally borrowed from Leslie Allen Paul’s autobiography, *Angry Young Man* published in 1957 and applied wholesale to a group of young male writers. Writers traditionally associated with the rise of working-class fiction in this period such as Alan Sillitoe, Stan Barstow, David Storey and Keith Waterhouse, were all writing about the disenfranchised north and the ‘likely lads’ of their novels seemed to encapsulate a sense of time and place that came to be representative of a whole class and culture.⁶⁴

The realist working-class novels of the late 1950s had strong, anarchic working-class heroes, men who railed against the dull, grey monotony of post-war England. The re-emergence of working-class writing, the angry voice of a class, appears to have a common cause in the fight against a society that discriminated against the working classes. While the heroes of these male-authored works are defined in alienation to the class they perceive as oppressing them, contradictions and tensions are notable in their relationships with women. Their own oppression of working-class women is exposed. Although male working-class writers struggled with the limitations of working-class objectification this was a specifically *masculine* plight. In the novels of Sillitoe, Barstow and Braine, anger is displaced from

society and directed towards women. Jonathon Dollimore argues that ‘the destructive and unjust operations of power that its male protagonists identify and attack in society at large are reproduced and sanctioned (more or less unconsciously) by those protagonists in their personal lives and relationships’.⁶⁵ Dollimore is correct in that the women are quite consciously used in these narratives to foreground male dominance. In novels of the late 1950s and early 1960s such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958), *Room at the Top* (1957), *This Sporting Life* (1960) and *A Kind of Loving* (1960) the ‘them and us’ syndrome is made manifest as characters rant and rage against unseen and untouchable oppressors. Arthur Seaton makes his anger very clear; he will be ‘fighting with mothers and wives, landlords and gaffers, coppers, army and government’ and he is sure he will be ‘fighting every day until I die’ (*SNSM*, p. 213). Violence against women is unconsciously and consciously sanctioned through the patriarchal structure of society and made manifest in working-class writing of this period.

Anger, hostility and aggression are understood to be negative emotions, but in the novels of the 1950s and 1960s anger is seen as a positive force of expression for men, while women’s anger is turned against them. There were no ‘angry young women’ writing about their experiences at this time; angry women do appear in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, but they are usually portrayed as unwholesome and destructive and systematically humiliated, ridiculed and reviled. These are ‘women with battleship faces and hearts as tough as nails who rattle a big fist at you and roar’. Sillitoe also places emphasis on ‘ideal’ women, who are ‘more than ornaments and skivvies’ but ‘warm wonderful creatures that needed and deserved to be looked after’.⁶⁶ This ‘ideal’ is as destructive as other representations in that it diminishes women and denies them autonomy. Christine Bridgwood argues that the privileging of the male gaze and of masculine-centred discourse ‘makes room for the dissection of exactly how men construct women as a mythical ‘other’

against which man takes his definition'.⁶⁷ In the novels and plays of this period women are often represented as "other" and they are frequently simple-minded and easy to exploit both physically and sexually. It is against this representation that masculinity is constructed.

The writing of this time clearly objectifies women. Jimmy Porter, one of the first fictional 'angry young men' of the post-war period, set the trend for those who came after him. In *Look Back in Anger* (1956) he claims women are 'pusillanimous... wanting of firmness of mind, of small courage, having little mind, mean spirited, cowardly, timid of mind. From the Latin, pusillus, very little, and animus, the mind'.⁶⁸ Stan Barstow, in particular, creates an unbelievably derogatory collection of images of fictional working-class women, the strongest of which are references to rank pieces of meat. In *A Kind of Loving*, Vic Brown says, 'I get up and dance and pick a bird that looks okay from a distance and pongs like beef gravy gone off close to'. He describes working-class young women as 'bints with bitten fingernails and mucky hair who smell like last week's joint gone off and warmed up'.⁶⁹ Like Sillitoe, Barstow also creates women characters who are wholesome creatures and are always perceived as objects of sexual desire. Vic says 'I'm interested in bints for just one thing', or he idealises women as, 'clean and pure and soft, as though just to touch [their] cheek would be better than anything these other bints could give me'.⁷⁰ The appropriation of the female body by a male writer is significant here: the female body has historical importance in feminism's fight for women's autonomy and as such, women have continually sought to reclaim the body through self-identification and self-knowledge. Women's sexuality is the site of a battle for their subordination and these counter images of 'respectable' and 'whorish' women expose the contempt levelled at them. Novels and plays demonstrate that male bias *has* privileged the discourse of patriarchy, silencing and marginalising the anger of women, particularly the anger of working-class women. The

women writers under discussion ‘write back’ to this sort of representation and reclaim women’s bodies for their own specific purposes.

Male anger forms part of the macho, achievement-oriented, aggressive masculine roles reinforced by society.⁷¹ Significantly, the ‘angry young men’ of the 1950s created a literary genre that is inextricably linked to working-class writing and thus it is important to this discussion of anger, women and class. In Britain, working-class women derive their sense of identity from an inherited history of alienation and dependency with its concomitant sense of social inferiority lived within a biological straitjacket. In Evelyn Haythorne’s *On Earth to Make the Numbers Up* (1991), an autobiography that is claimed to give ‘the silenced voices of the working people’ a hearing, the expectations of working-class women are acutely observed:

“If you think I’m going begging to give her high falutin’ ways you’re wrong and anyway what sort of life do you think she’d have at her posh school if they knew we’d had to beg to get her there? No! It’s not as if it was one of the lads that had passed (the eleven plus). She’s a lass and she’d no sooner get through school than she’d be getting married; then where’s her education gone, down the bloody washtub with the mucky nappies.”⁷²

The plight of the young working-class girl who has passed her eleven-plus examination but cannot go to grammar school is clearly representative of how education is shown as ‘wasted’ on girls. Patricia Waugh acknowledges the difference in expectations of many women even in the latter part of the twentieth century, arguing that, ‘a woman’s “different” characteristics are produced not as a consequence of her innate “narcissism”, or “masochism”, or anatomical difference, but as a consequence of her history’.⁷³ If, as Waugh also states, ‘women’s experience... has been defined almost entirely through interpersonal, usually domestic and filial relationships: serving the needs of others’, then women, traditionally, are always read in

relation to their 'function'. The economic dependency, the fear of poverty and destitution of working-class women, reduces them in the eyes of society to the basest form of functionalism. Pamela Fox argues that, 'women's own distinctive practices are at best treated superficially... and at worst dismissed entirely' in working-class fictions.⁷⁴

It is certainly true that the depiction of working-class women in literature has often been presented through a narrow and prejudiced perspective. As recently as the 1990s, when trying to get her first novel published, Livi Michael was told that 'people did not want to read about women living in the North'.⁷⁵ Despite this, *Under a Thin Moon* (1992) became a highly acclaimed and award-winning book which clearly indicates that there is a critical readership for her writing. Feminist writers, who endeavour to examine the limitation of experience habitually ascribed for women, look outside their designated place within culturally determined roles. Working-class women have all too frequently been allocated subject positions in literature that are insufficiently positive or varied. There is a need for female voices to offer a variety of experiences. In reclaiming anger as a narrative attitude the writers under discussion depict the working classes in all their facets and renegotiate new subject positions for their female and male protagonists. They bring a new intellectual rigour to the representation of the working classes and do so with what Fox calls 'a new kind of realism'. The writers promulgate a positive and forceful narrative for the expression of emotions such as fear, anxiety and even hatred and to imbue their characters with a sense of vibrancy and complexity. In doing so they create a new culture of reading and writing about working-class women in particular and working-class men in general, producing literary discourses that are, to a distinctly greater extent, different, or at least, that articulate difference and offer a multiplicity of experiences.

The consideration of realism and representation in the working-class novel and the debate about anger that follows in Chapter 1, introduce the central argument of this thesis.

The writers under discussion foreground anger (frequently materialising as anxiety and offset with humour) to pose a series of questions with regard to gender, class and sexuality within contemporary ‘versions’ of the working-class novel. The following chapters present a close analysis of the works in support of my assertion. My starting point in Chapter 2 is a comprehensive analysis of Zahavi’s three novels, *Dirty Weekend* (1991), *True Romance* (1994) and *Donna and the Fatman* (1998). Zahavi’s narrative strategy is unusual and transgressive in that she uses anger and humour subversively. She provides potentially transformative readings of women characters that allow the representations of their experiences to be seen in all their absurdity. In chapters 3, 4 and 5 the focus is Barker’s first seven novels. I focus on Barker’s writing in detail because she is an important figure in the construction of a canon of British women writing about the working classes. In Chapter 3 *Union Street* (1982), *Blow Your House Down* (1984) and *The Century's Daughter* (1986) are considered as explorations of socially constructed class and gender identity. Chapter 4 looks quite specifically at the making of working-class masculinity and at the anxiety of experience of a young, working-class man in *The Man Who Wasn't There* (1988). It locates Barker’s writing within the subversive tradition of carnival and the chronotope, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories in order to do so. *The Man Who Wasn't There* is often overlooked by reviewers of her work but it marks a stage in the development of her writing that predetermines the further exploration of masculinity she examines in the *Regeneration* trilogy.

The following chapter looks at the way Barker problematises issues of class and masculinity in *Regeneration* (1991), *The Eye in the Door* (1993) and *The Ghost Road* (1995). These three chapters investigate Barker's writing as a body of work that is distinctive in its exploration of social meaning and its interrogation of the function of class in society and as such, provides a critique of both. In the trilogy Barker gives voice to men, who according to

Siegfried Sassoon, 'were victims of conspiracy among... politicians... military caste... people making money out of the war and the complacency of those willing to watch sacrifices of others while they sit safely at home'.⁷⁶ In so doing she offers a renegotiation of masculinity, opening up a world of men and 'exposing the fluidity between masculinity and femininity'.⁷⁷ Barker foregrounds the 'male experience' of the First World War in order to debate gender, sexuality and class antagonism, but, she has not turned her back on the women question. One of the main tensions of a post-war British society was the changing social relationship between men and women. In *Regeneration*, her character Billy Prior makes the point that 'women... have changed so much during the war, to have expanded in all kinds of ways, whereas men over the same period had shrunk into a smaller and smaller space'.⁷⁸ Elaine Showalter argues that after the First World War women novelists found themselves confronted through the suffrage movement by a number of challenges and threats. These were the 'spectre of violence, the ruthlessness of female authoritarianism, the elimination of class boundaries, the politics of action rather than influence, and by collectivism and the loss of the secure privacy in which they had been cultivating their special moral qualities'.⁷⁹ This fear is present in Virginia Woolf's representation of the tensions of a post-war society in *Mrs Dalloway*. However, the contrast between Barker's and Woolf's representation of the working classes is palpable. Chapter 6 focuses on Livi Michael's novels of anger and alienation, positioning them within a Marxist frame of reference and discusses her representation of the 'invisible' substrata of working-class lives. Both Barker and Michael are important to this discussion because of their insistence on viable and visible representations of working-class women. In conclusion, chapter 7 discusses McManus's highly wrought and outrageously rude novel *I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing* (1998), within a broad overview of a range of new women writers. Chapter 2 and chapter 7 provide a

supporting theoretical structure for the key texts in my discussion of women's narratives of anger and class.

Endnotes

¹ I recognise that it is always problematic to use generalised and sweeping terms such as ‘the working class’ and ‘working-class women’. The classification of ‘working class’ has historically been attributed to those members of society who belong to the lowest and least privileged social stratum. ‘The working class’ cannot be classified as an homogenous group, equally so, neither can an underclass, the middle class or the upper class. Within the working class there are levels of stratification that disallow one overarching classification. For the purposes of this discussion, the term ‘working-class’ is used to signify people who would have traditionally been part of the ‘labouring classes’. However, class positions are never fixed or absolute, neither are they singular or immutable. There are many subject positions within the working class and there is no one fixed identity. I use the term ‘working classes’ here to indicate a position in relation to the ideological social structures of society that place groups of people within certain perceptual frameworks. A working-class position is adopted in relation to an ongoing struggle against oppression, used here to signify women’s struggle against oppression. These issues are discussed throughout this thesis.

² In a survey of women’s writing between 1914 and 1939 Nicola Beauman lists only one writer of ‘working-class origin’, Ethel Mannin, in her glossary of around fifty women writers. See Nicola Beauman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman’s Novel 1914-39* (London: Virago, 1983), pp. 253-262. Lower rates of literacy among working-class women largely accounts for the scarcity of women writers and in most cases Mutual Improvement Societies were set up by and for working men. According to Jonathon Rose ‘only as working women became more active in corporate bodies such as the Labour Party, trade unions and the Co-operative Movement did they begin to produce memoirs in large numbers’. However it remained that few women would participate in adult education. Rose quotes Henry Mayhew (chronicler of working class life) as saying that working-class women only very occasionally bought books. Rose also quotes from Florence Bell, ‘What People Read’ a survey carried out in 1905 that states ‘nearly all women of the working classes have a feeling that it is wrong to sit down with a book’. What is equally telling is that Rose’s book contains a very limited amount of information about working-class women’s writing. See Jonathon Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 19, p.18, p. 76 & p. 289.

³ See P. J. Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 2.

⁴ See, for example, Lynne Segal’s discussion of relationships between women and men and gender subordination in Lynne Segal, ‘Slow Change or No Change?: Feminism, Socialism and the Problem of Men’, *Feminist Review*, 31 (Spring 1989), pp. 5-21.

⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* (London: Penguin, 1970). Subsequent references will be included in the text.

⁶ George Gissing, *The Nether World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). Subsequent references will be included in the text.

⁷ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *A Scots Quair* (London: Hutchinson, 1971), p. 89.

⁸ See Raymond Williams, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Hogarth Press), p. 82.

⁹ It is worthy of note that in a number of discussions of the social history of the English novel, English writers and the analysis of culture through literature there is little mention of working-class women. See for example George Orwell, 'England your England', *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (London: Penguin, 1983), pp. 63-90. See also Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1965) and E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin 1974).

¹⁰ Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London & New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 67-68.

¹¹ Belsey, *Critical Practice*, p. 74.

¹² See Sheila Rowbotham's discussion of working-class women in *Hidden from History* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), pp. 55-59.

¹³ Lily Gair Wilkinson, 'Revolutionary Socialism and the Women's Movement', SLC Pamphlet, 1910, p.2, quoted in Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*, p. 99.

¹⁴ See Terry Lovell, 'Landscapes and Stories in 1960s British Realism', *Screen*, 31: 4 (1990), pp. 357-376. Lovell's discussion of realism centres on 1950s and 1960s film and television, drawing on Richard Hoggart's *Uses of Literacy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957) as a point of reference. See also Colin McCabe, 'Theory and Film: Principles of Realism and Pleasure', *Screen*, 17:3 (1976), pp. 3-9.

¹⁵ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 57.

¹⁶ Annette Kuhn, 'Structures of Patriarchy and Capital in the Family', in Annette Kuhn and AnnMarie Wolpe, eds., *Feminism and Materialism: Women and Modes of Production* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul: 1978), p. 65.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Deeds Ermath, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), p. 49.

¹⁸ H. Gustav Klaus, *The Literature of Labour: 200 Years of Working-Class Writing* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1985), p. 106.

¹⁹ Klaus, *The Literature of Labour*, p. 106. David Storey, 'The Roots of Sillitoe's Fiction', in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), p. 99.

²⁰ E.P. Thompson's introduction to his *The Making of the English Working Class* is worthy of note in this context. He argues that class 'is not a structure, nor even a category', rather it is

‘something which in fact happens... in human relationships’. He goes further to state that it is not possible to give a ‘pure specimen of class as... the relationship must always be embodied in real people and in a real context’. See E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 1968), p. 9.

²¹Brunhild de la Motte, makes this point in ‘Radicalism - feminism- socialism: the case for women novelists’, in H. Gustav Klaus, ed., *The Rise of Socialist Fiction 1890 -1914* (Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1987), p. 35. Other critics who agree include Gustav Klaus, and P. J. Keating. See also D. A. Williams, ed., *The Monster in the Mirror: Studies in Nineteenth Century Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), especially essays by Cecil Jenkins, ‘Realism and the Novel Form’, pp. 1-17 and D. A. Williams, ‘The Practice of Realism’, pp. 257-280. See also Maurice Larkin, *Man and Society in Nineteenth-Century Realism* (London: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 44-45.

²²de la Motte, ‘Radicalism’, p. 28.

²³Gissing, *The Nether World*, p. 109.

²⁴Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 190.

²⁵Klaus, *The Literature of Labour*, pp. 106-108.

²⁶Writers such as Edwin Pugh, William Pett Ridge and Richard Whiteing are all but forgotten. Pugh, for example, wrote about the working class and sought to escape from the sordid and wretched descriptions found in novels such as Arthur Morrison’s *The Hole in the Wall* and his collection of short stories *Tales of Mean Streets*. Brome quotes from a 1916 essay written by Pugh where he calls for ‘a picture of life in which the light and shade are in their due proportions’. In many nineteenth-century novels the working classes are depicted in degradation and hopelessness: nobody is happy, nobody laughs and nobody sings apart from in drunken bawdiness. See Vincent Brome, *Four Realist Novelists* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1965), p. 32. Edwin Pugh’s essay ‘Real Realism’, (1916) is quoted in Brome, p. 21.

²⁷Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, p. 2.

²⁸Keating details the principal Chartist novels as Thomas Martin Wheeler’s, *Sunshine and Shadow: A Tale of the Nineteenth Century*, serialised in *The Northern Star*, 1849-50; Thomas Frost’s, *The Secret*, serialised in the *National Instructor* 1850; and Ernest Jones’s ‘The Working Man’s Wife’, *Woman’s Wrongs* (1855). These he considers ‘working-class writing’. See Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, p. 3 & p. 269.

²⁹Raymond Williams, *Writing and Society* (London: Verso, 1990), p. 233.

³⁰Williams, *Writing and Society*, pp. 229-236.

³¹Mary Eagleton and David Pierce, *Attitudes to Class in the English Novel* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), p. 69.

³²Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* was first published by Jonathon Cape in 1933. All references are taken from *Love on the Dole* (London: Penguin, 1987). Lawrence Wishart first published Robert Tressell's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* in 1955. All references are taken from *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* (London: Paladin, 1991).

³³Comments in contemporary reviews include, 'As a novel it stands very high... it was a very moving book... we passionately desire this novel to be read... no one will read this without being moved... I do not know when I have been so deeply, so terribly moved'. See Stephen Constantine, 'Love on the Dole' and its Reception in the 1930s,' *Literature and History*, 2 (1982), pp. 232 -247.

³⁴David Craig, ed., *Alan Sillitoe, Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (London: Longman, 1968), pp. viii - xii, quoted in David Craig, 'The Roots of Sillitoe's Fiction', in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), p. 105.

³⁵Livi Michael, 'Feminism and the Class Ceiling', in Natasha Walter, ed., *On the Move: Feminism for a New Generation* (London: Little Brown, 1999).

³⁶Ian Haywood argues there is a political framework for defining working-class fiction. He states that 'this does not mean that a working-class novel... must always reveal a high degree of class consciousness, but class factors will always be a material influence on the working-class text's production and reception.' See Ian Haywood, *Working-Class Fiction from Chartism to Trainspotting* (Basingstoke: Northcote House, 1997), p. 3.

³⁷Tony Davies, 'Unfinished Business: Realism and Working-Class Writing', in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British Working Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), p. 126.

³⁸Nicola Beauman discusses women writers (1914-1939) in *A Very Great Profession*. While there are one or two pages where she discusses the representation of working-class women in the novels written at this time, there are virtually no instances of working-class novelists adding to the discussion. There is one study of working-class women's writing that addresses the absence and lack of recognition of many women from a working-class background. See Sara Richardson, Merylyn Cherry, Sammy Palfrey and Gail Chester eds., *Writing On The Line: 20th Century Working-Class Women Writers* (London: Working Press, 1996).

³⁹The following examples are used by de la Motte's as evidence of this claim: Constance Howell, *A More Excellent Way* (1888), Clementina Black, *An Agitator* (1894), Margaret Harkness, *Out of Work* (1888) and George Eastmont, *Wanderer* (1905), Emma Brooke's *Transition* (1895) and Gertrude Dix, *The Image Breakers* (1900). She makes clear the point that working-class women were written about, rather than writing about themselves. The simultaneous occurrence of vigorous feminist writers that she discusses such as Sarah Grand, Olive Schreiner, Mona Caird and George Egerton, are all middle class. With the exception of Olive Schreiner and George Egerton, these writers are now virtually unknown. See de la Motte, 'Radicalism', pp. 28-29.

⁴⁰de la Motte, 'Radicalism', p. 32.

⁴¹See Gill Davies, 'Foreign Bodies: Images of the London Working Class at the End of the 19th Century', *Literature and History*, 14:1 (1988), p. 75.

⁴²Morrison, *A Child of the Jago* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1969), p. 63.

⁴³Keating, *The Working Classes in Victorian Fiction*, p. 182 & p. 65.

⁴⁴It follows that once working-class women were writing and published there were some positive representations of their lives as Merylyn Cherry acknowledges in her introduction to *Writing on the Line: Twentieth Century Working-Class Writing*. But she points out that most of the early writers are virtually unknown and their novels are not in print any more and as such they hold no place in literary discussions. See Merylyn Cherry, 'Towards Recognition of Working-Class Women Writers', in Cherry, Palfrey and Chester eds, *Writing on the Line*, pp. 75-121.

⁴⁵Greenwood, *Love on the Dole*, p. 59.

⁴⁶Cherry, 'Towards Recognition of Working-Class Women Writers', p. 59 & p. 76.

⁴⁷D. Hewitt, *English Fiction of the Early Modern Period 1890-1940* (London: Longman, 1988), p.199, quoted in Cherry, *Writing on the Line*, p. 115.

⁴⁸Beauman, *A Very Great Profession*, p. 3.

⁴⁹See Rebecca O'Rourke, 'Were There No Women? British Working-Class Writing in the Inter-War Years', *Literature and History*, 14 (Spring 1988), p. 52.

⁵⁰Women who were writing possible 'working-class experience' novels such as Nell Dunn, *Up the Junction* (1963) and *Poor Cow* (1967) and Maureen Duffy, *That's How It Was* (1962) and *The Microcosm* (1962) are not listed. Neither are Scottish working-class writer Jessie Kesson's *The White Bird Passes* (1958) and *The Glitter of Mica* (1963). There were, of course, a number of women writing from the turn of the century, namely Margaret Harkness, a clergyman's daughter and Ethel Carnie, a former mill girl born in 1886, writing poetry, short stories and political essays. See H. Gustav Klaus, ed. *The Rise of Socialist Fiction 1880-1914* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1987). See also Alison Light's comments on this subject in 'Writing fictions: femininity and the 1950s' in Jean Radford, ed., *The Progress of Romance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986) p. 139.

⁵¹In her discussion of women writers Elaine Showalter also notes the absence of working-class writers. She states that 'there is a female voice that has rarely spoken for itself in the English novel -- the voice of the shopgirl and the charwoman, the housewife and the barmaid'. Elaine Showalter, 'Beyond the Female Aesthetic,' in *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 1977), p. 134.

⁵²The relationship of subject matter to genre is especially difficult when the term realism is used. The term is frequently used in conjunction with a number of genres and theoretical positions: classic bourgeois realism, social realism, magic realism, Marxism, formalism and structuralism. Realism is a notoriously slippery term. Raymond Williams problematises the

concept and states that '[realism] developed four distinguishable meanings: as a term to describe, historically, the doctrines of Realists; as a term to describe new doctrines of the physical world as independent of mind or spirit, in this sense sometimes interchangeable with Naturalism or Materialism; as a description of facing up to things as they really are and not as we imagine them to be; as a term to describe a method or an attitude in art and literature -- at first an exceptional accuracy of representation, later a commitment to describing real events and showing things as they actually exist.' On a very basic level realism is taken to mean the attempt to make a social 'reality' the basis of the text; but this argument is examined further later in this chapter. See Raymond Williams. *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Flamingo, 1983), pp. 257-262. See also Raymond Tallis's discussion of the case against the realist novel and how literary theory negates a realist approach to fiction. See Raymond Tallis, 'Is Reality No Longer Realistic', in *In Defence of Realism* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), pp. 9-20.

⁵³Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 64.

⁵⁴Williams, *Keywords*, p. 260.

⁵⁵Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 191.

⁵⁶Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 9-10.

⁵⁷Friedrich Engels' letter to Margaret Harkness in K. Marx and F. Engels *Literature and Art* (New York: International Publishers, 1947) p. 41, quoted in Ralph Fox *The Novel and the People* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979), pp. 118-119. See also George Bizstray, *Marxist Models of Literary Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p. 16.

⁵⁸Fox, *The Novel and the People*, p. 120 & p. 102.

⁵⁹Fox includes an example of the hypocrisy and class antagonism that was still apparent at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'There are things you cannot say to the masses if you are a decent middle-class man. A judge who last year (1936) tried a case of obscenity against the author of a book on sex quite seriously pointed out that it is quite all right to describe the pleasures of love for a select public, but that when you write down certain things and make them accessible to any woman of the working class, it is altogether a different affair'. This also serves to show how oppressed and marginalised working-class women were in a bourgeois and patriarchal society. See Fox, *The Novel and the People*, pp. 69-70.

⁶⁰Q. D. Leavis, 'Lady Novelists and the Lower Orders', *Scrutiny*, IV: 2 (1935), pp. 112-132.

⁶¹George Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1979), p. 93, p. 122, p. 123 and pp. 99-101.

⁶²Bizstray, *Marxist Models of Literary Realism*, p. 63.

⁶³Social historians such as Arthur Marwick saw British society as 'overshadowed by the positive and negative consequences of the war'. For further information on the social

implications inherent in post-war British society see Arthur Marwick, *British Society Since 1945* (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 18-22.

⁶⁴I am thinking here of novels such as Stan Barstow's *A Kind of Loving* (London: Penguin, 1960), Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (London: Pan Publisher, 1958), *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (London: Grafton, 1960) and John Braine's *Room at the Top* (London: Penguin, 1957). The presentation of masculinity in these novels is often celebratory and each book expresses a recognition of the 'masculine self', albeit in different ways. The celebration of anger and working-class masculinity is apparent but the rage expressed is often coexistent with the negation of working-class women.

⁶⁵See Jonathon Dollimore 'The Challenge of Sexuality', in Alan Sinfield, ed., *Society and Literature 1945 - 1970* (London: Methuen and Co, 1983), p. 69. See also 'Them' and 'Us', in Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, (London: Penguin (Pelican) 1963), pp. 77-101

⁶⁶Sillitoe, *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (London: Longman, 1968), p. 213 & p. 38.

⁶⁷Christine Bridgwood, 'Family Romances: The Contemporary Popular Family Saga', in Jean Radford, ed. *The Progress of Romance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 179.

⁶⁸John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* Act 1.

⁶⁹See, for example, Stan Barstow, *A Kind of Loving* (London: Black Swan, 1987), pp. 37-42.

⁷⁰Barstow, *A Kind of Loving*, p. 19.

⁷¹Testosterone is the hormonal basis for aggression in males but recent research has shown that women can also have high levels of testosterone. A number of studies show that there is, in fact, little difference between the genders in relation to the causes of and reactions to anger. The most notable difference is that in the after effects of anger, women are more likely to feel guilty, gloomy or sad after outbursts. See Ernest H. Johnson, *The Deadly Emotions: The Role of Anger, Hostility, and Aggression in Health and Emotional Well-being* (New York and London: Praeger Publishers, 1990) p.139. Johnson cites W. D. Frost and J. R. Averill, 'Sex differences in the every day experience of anger', a paper presented to the Eastern Psychological Association, Washington, D.C., 1978.

⁷²Evelyn Hawthorne, *On Earth to Make the Numbers Up* (Yorkshire: Yorkshire Art Circus, 1991), p.52. The reference to an authentic working-class voice is from Diana Birch, who writes the Introduction, pp. 3-4.

⁷³Patricia Waugh, *Feminist Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 43.

⁷⁴Pamela Fox, *Class Fictions: Shame and Resistance in the British Working-Class Novel, 1890 - 1945* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), p. 41.

⁷⁵See 'Out Of The Frame', *Metropolitan: New Urban Writing*, no.3, Winter 1994/5, pp. 23-25 and Pat Wheeler and Sharon Monteith, 'Interview with Livi Michael', *Critical Survey*, 12:3 (2000), pp. 94-107.

⁷⁶Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Man* (London: Faber & Faber, MCMXLIA), p. 203.

⁷⁷Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books) 1996), p.136.

⁷⁸Pat Barker, *Regeneration* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 90.

⁷⁹Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (London: Virago, 1979), p. 239.

Chapter 1

Anger and Anxiety: Gender and Sexuality in Working-class Writing.

We need to promote self-conscious, collectively supported, and politically clear articulations of our anger and our rage' (Julia Lesage)

The twentieth century was for many women a time of critical thinking about the politics of identity, gender and sexuality. In 1989 *The Feminist Review* published a special edition, 'The Past Before Us: Twenty Years of Feminism', that reflected upon much of that critical and political thinking by and about women. The preface to the edition proclaimed that what was needed in the latter part of the twentieth century was 'a politics that builds upon the phenomenal advances of women's liberation'. The politics they envisaged took into account 'the limitations of a parochial and ethnocentric feminism' and 'reassessed and changed' the engagement and debate feminism (in particular socialist feminism) has with the 'black and lesbian women's movement, the Left, the peace movement, gay and anti-racist activists'. Such politics, they claim, 'are the most important legacy we inherit from twenty years of feminism'.¹ Although reference is made to socio-economic aspects of women's liberation there is scant reference to women of the lower classes. The parochial nature of early second-wave feminism is not a new debate, nor is the ethnocentric, middle-class position of much of the critical and theoretical writing by early British feminists, but it is important to my discussion of the representation of working-class women. Not only were working-class women writers virtually absent from much of twentieth-century fiction, by virtue of being of a different class, they were also not readily identified with in early, second-wave feminist politics.

Seventeen years earlier, in 1972, Sheila Rowbotham had recognised the need for feminism to relate to the working class and the lives of working-class women.² At that time

feminist criticism was beginning to create a new dynamic in literature, moving away from the first phase of criticism of the male canon and its representation of women, towards a reclamation or rediscovery of ‘lost’ women writers. At this time in ‘What Can a Heroine Do Or Why Can’t Women Write?’ Joanna Russ was arguing that ‘of all possible actions people can do in fiction, very few can be done by women’. She believed that (western) literature was not about women, it was not even about women and men, it was ‘by and about men’. Women such as ‘modest maidens, wicked temptresses, pretty schoolmarms, beautiful bitches and faithful wives’ appear in literature, she argued, but these are ‘images of women’ and they exist only in relation to the protagonist (who is male). According to Russ these women do not really exist at all and ‘at best they are depictions of social roles women are supposed to play’.³ So, what can a heroine do and how do contemporary women writers engage in reflexive, transformative practices that unsettle and defamiliarise received narrative representations?

The writers under discussion challenge readers’ relations to what Kim Worthington calls, ‘the procedural bounds of... inherited literary “rules”’ and present what in many ways has previously been deemed unrepresentable: women who do not rely on male protagonists to inscribe them with meaning.⁴ They also address issues of class, alienation and economic deprivation that are often negated in debates about women’s writing, particularly in the debate that surrounds the future of feminism. The fantasy constantly purveyed by the media proclaims we are living in a post-feminist era, where the popular ideological view is that women are now seen to ‘have it all’.⁵ In the 1990s it was this image that seemed to inform a greater part of the ‘new’ political consciousness of contemporary British society. To challenge and discredit this image and to attempt to articulate the plight of women who are dispossessed in contemporary society as do the writers under discussion, goes against ‘fashionable’ literary culture. Whereas prevailing feminist theories enable women to

perceive themselves as engaged in a debate as to their subject position within a society that is still deemed patriarchal, the recent tendency has been to move towards generating meaning out of gender, with emphasis on the plurality of meaning engendered by deconstructing the term.⁶ Within the ‘popular’ debate that surrounds feminism, class and poverty are further diminished by the ever-increasing debate regarding masculine and feminine identities in crises. Writers who are conspicuous in the popular press are fêted for their opinions as if they represent the majority of women’s thinking. For example the new face of feminism is articulated by writers such as Natasha Walter and Naomi Wolf, together with women who are purported to represent an older, more radical feminism such as Camille Paglia, Fay Weldon, and Germaine Greer. These are prominent among the ‘voices’ of feminism as far as the popular media are concerned.

In ‘Slow Change or No Change?: Feminism, Socialism and the Problem of Men’, Lynne Segal states that she cannot see the value of a feminist perspective ‘which does not encompass class... oppression’.⁷ It is hard to see the value of feminist fiction that does not address issues of class (as well as race, gender and sexuality). The beginnings of a working-class canon of British literature came in the wake of a period of rapid change in gender politics in the twentieth century. In the male-authored, working-class novels of the 1950s and 1960s discussed briefly in the previous chapter, Alan Sillitoe, John Braine and David Storey (among others) began to question the long-accepted marginality of working-class men in British fiction. They attempted to present ‘new truths’ about post-war Britain and to challenge what they saw as the sterility and complacency of British, middle-class society. They presented a world born out of their immediate experience, a world of predominantly white and almost always heterosexual, working-class men in working-class milieus. The authors quite consciously turned away from what they saw as the linguistic excesses of modernism and in their use of the empirical ‘realities’ of working-class life they provided a

reading experience that was in many ways transformative. They were able to locate protagonists within those working-class communities which exhibit what George Lukács describes as, ‘the qualities that may make for a new social order’.⁸ The novels offered a predatory, male-centred worldview that not only defamiliarised the concept of the working classes, but also offered an examination of the cultural and ideological positioning of masculinity in both a literary and a cultural framework.

The consequence of this reinscription of the working-class novel was the rendering of working-class writing into almost exclusively male and heterosexual terms. In looking at the material conditions under which these novels were written and in analysing the narratives, it becomes obvious that anything that functions on the boundaries of a shared, male and heterosexual environment was deemed ‘unknowable’. The correlation between class and masculinity as constructed in the writing of this period tends to reinforce the conceptualisation of the working-class male and establishes its contemporary literary legacy. Many of these novels are particularly inconsistent in their representation of women characters. Masculinity and class were certainly renegotiated, but as Jonathon Dollimore notes in ‘The Challenge of Sexuality’, not only is gender politics generally absent from this literature, but also most notably it is ‘elitist literature’ of the period that deals with sexual transgression.⁹ In the canon of working-class, twentieth-century British literature women and homosexuals were denied any sort of affirming subjectivity. The writers under discussion recognise that there is a conscious need to present new images of working-class women and to unsettle the literary legacy of working-class, heterosexual masculinity.

Feminist fictions actively engage in the transformation and renegotiation of dominant social orders. For Maria Lauret these fictions have historically ‘come to fulfil an important role... as a site of struggle over cultural meanings of gender’.¹⁰ There is little doubt that much of contemporary women’s writing focuses on women’s experience but not all writers

actively seek to enter the terrain of feminist politics. It does not necessarily follow that all women writers should be feminist, but distinctions need to be made in relation to the writers under discussion. Rosalind Coward argued in 1980 that in order for women's fiction to be feminist it had to concern itself with 'an arena of political struggle'.¹¹ However, antecedent British women writers of the twentieth century who attempted to subvert the marginalisation of women in fiction were rather more circumspect in their depiction of women. That is not to say they were not writing against the grain of representation, rather that there were practical considerations to be taken into account. Susan Gorksy has made a detailed study of women writers in England (1840 – 1920) and the images of women they present in literature. She states that 'most of the characters fit stock roles: the heroines are blends of angelic grace, saintly virtue, and an occasional touch of harmless demon for spice'; she notes that there are relatively few 'bad women' and where there are, these are 'generally the victims of evil men'. Charlotte Brontë's eponymous heroine Shirley is aware of this problem of representation, saying;

If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest of men are often under an illusion about women... their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend. Then to hear them fall into ecstasies with each other's creations, worshipping the heroine of such a poem -- novel -- drama, thinking it fine, divine! Fine and divine it may be, but often quite artificial.¹²

This 'artificial' representation of women was not the sole prerogative of male writers of the period. Gorksy examined a variety of women's writings among which were both popular best sellers and what are seen as 'classic' novels. Towards the end of the period studied, Gorksy might have expected some of the modernist writers to reject the traditional roles habitually prescribed for women. Many of the versions of women she encountered rather

than projecting reality, on the contrary, limited the options open to women while simultaneously idealising their nature. However, she acknowledges that the audience for these novels largely comprised of middle-class and upper middle-class readers who could be expected to share the assumptions about women upon which the received notion of a feminised ideal was predicated. Gorsky argues that ‘few women writers of this period were reformers’, but she states that some women writers reveal their anger at the social conditions that bring about such subordination.¹³

It seems obvious to state that women’s writing reveals something about the world of women during particular periods and at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, women’s place in society remained subordinate. One thing that is absolutely clear in much of this fiction is that transgression of the rules of ‘femininity’ is inevitably punished. Anger or aggression, overt curiosity or explicit sexuality lead, in almost all cases, to increased unhappiness and in some instances death. This can be seen, for example, in George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) with Dorothea Brooke and Maggie Tulliver respectively and later in Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca* (1938). Women characters are depicted in a middle-class milieu by middle-class writers. Gorsky’s discussion exemplifies the problem of both the representation of working-class women and the absence of working-class women writers. *Images of Women in Fiction* (in which Gorsky’s essay appears) was published in 1972 with the aim to ‘search for the women we cannot find in literature’, but few of the essays prioritise the question of class. The collection is a product of its time in many respects, although at that time Sheila Rowbotham was calling on feminists to address the question of working-class women. While claiming to recognise the ‘distortions of meanings of women’s experiences’ in their debates, working-class women are notable by their absence, both from the literature under discussion and in the criticism applied.

It is not my intention here to criticise writers for their failure to represent working-class women, but rather to point to an absence: the silence of working-class women speaks for itself. The failure of working-class writers to break into the middle-class publishing world is well documented in Owen Ashton's and Stephen Roberts's *The Victorian Working-Class Writers*. They point to the fact that 'the appearance of working-class writing operated within an arena that was determined by middle-class opinion'. Where the working classes were published it was usually 'artisan authors' such as Ben Brierly, whose *Home Thoughts and Recollections of a Life* (1842) was deemed worthy of publication. Ashton and Roberts recognise the absence of women writers and mention just a few, including Ellen Johnson, a Glasgow poet and power loom worker; Charlotte Richardson, a cook; Mary Colling, a servant; Louisa Horsfield, a factory worker and Mary Smith, the daughter of a shoemaker. These women were more successful as regional writers and are only remembered now through a process of feminist historical recovery.¹⁴

In 'When Writers Don't Write', Tillie Olson discusses the absence of women working-class writers. She quotes Australian H. H. Richardson, who when asked why she had no children, yet could write so profoundly about them, said, 'there are enough women to do the childbearing and childrearing. I know none who can write... books'. Olson speaks of her own silence, of her years of bearing and rearing children and says at that time, 'the simplest circumstances for creation did not exist'. The hope of writing was ever present, and she describes this hope as 'the air [she] breathed, so long as [she] breathed at all'. When finally she found the time to write she had to carry it around with her, through her job (as a transcriber in a dairy equipment company), on the bus to and from work and write in the 'deep night hours' for as long as she could stay awake. It was, she says, no accident that the first work she considered publishable began, 'I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron'. Writing as an activity had to take place after

the domestic work was finished. It is obvious that along with other working-class women it was almost impossible to have the time or the quiet to put pen to paper to write. Olson says that her work 'died' when she had to devote more time to domestic matters and what she wanted to write 'seethed and bubbled' in her. Unable to express her anger and frustration openly Olson became rather ill and it was not until (with the support of others) she was awarded a grant to write that she became, in her words, 'human'. She says:

This most harmful of my silences has ended, but I am not yet recovered, may still be a one-book instead of a hidden and foregrounded silence.¹⁵

Olson felt all but destroyed by her hope of writing and was not sure that she would ever write again.

Working-class women *were* constrained by circumstance and those who were writing out of a working-class experience, tended to be women who had moved away from their roots or who moved in to a working-class area, such as Nell Dunn.¹⁶ As Rebecca O'Rourke points out, this is a 'testament to the sheer impossibility of their combining their creativity with their class destiny'.¹⁷ Representations of working-class women in Dunn's *Up the Junction* (1963) and *Poor Cow* (1967) are homogenised into an existence that is generalised in its portrayal. Margaret Drabble believes that Nell Dunn's reports of London life are not 'worked up' or politically motivated. She maintains that they are 'simple, apparently artless, sympathetic, participatory'. While acknowledging that it is notoriously difficult to write across the class divide, she praises Dunn for writing 'without an ideology, without a superimposed interpretation'. Having stated that Dunn's work started life as sketches in magazines, I wonder whether Drabble perceives this writing as rather limited. The voyeuristic element remains strongly realised in Dunn's work, as does the idealised vision of the working classes, coping heroically with poverty and degradation. Drabble makes the point that in the 1960s working-class women were able to work, it was freely available, and

this enabled them to survive in the world, without the patronage of men. The argument only goes so far.¹⁸ More recently Dunn's *My Silver Shoes* (1996) updates the story of Joy in *Poor Cow*. Her husband is dead, her son Jonny is a deserter and she lives in a council flat next door to her increasingly senile mother. When Joy gives up her job to look after her mother, her life revolves around cleaning and making her home 'nice'. As Maroula Joannou notes in *Contemporary Women's Writing*, Dunn's version of the working classes is 'highly selective' and 'aspects of working-class life that do not interest her are simply omitted from her writing'.¹⁹ The limited status and the narrowness perceived in working-class life are still very apparent in Dunn's writing.

In his discussion of working-class writers Ken Worpole virtually ignores women, and according to Joannou, he does not even consider the question of women worth exploring. In '*Ladies, Please Don't Smash These Windows*' Joannou explores women's writing in the first half of the twentieth century and notes that in literature 'anything that detracts from our understanding of working-class conditions' is seen as 'inexorably tragic or pathetic'. While Joannou is correct in her observation that working-class women's reading and writing experiences were conspicuous by their absences in many studies, she fails to fully address the problem in her own study of women writers. She discusses Vera Brittain, Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall and limits her discussion of working-class writing to Leonora Eyles and a small group of socialist writers. She does, however, take to task socialist critics who 'include the cult of masculinity which is often confused with militancy' in their appreciation of a working-class canon of socialist writing. For women their absence has almost nothing to do with the betrayal of class, but has everything to do with distance from and incomprehension of working-class women's lives.²⁰

Accordingly it can be seen that historically, working-class women have been powerless and voiceless and virtually absent from a working-class canon of twentieth-

century literature. They have for the most part been unable to express their anger at this continuing oppression and this has led (as evidenced in Tillie Olson's case) to frustration and in some cases psychological illness. Feelings of anger and alienation have always been prevalent in working-class fictions, but writing that utilises anger as a narrative strategy is historically ascribed to male authors and women's expressions of anger have been categorically ignored in British fiction. This can be deduced from any study of working-class writing from the beginning of the twentieth century.²¹ Julia Lesage, argues that '[women] have found few conceptual or social structures through which [they] might authentically express [their] rage'. Lesage appropriates Frantz Fanon's essay 'Concerning Violence' to make her point regarding a more open use of anger against oppression, translating the decolonisation of the colonial subject to the 'colonised' mind of women, stating:

Feminist revolution never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms passive femininity.... A new kind of woman brings a new rhythm into existence, with a new language and a new humanity; combating women's oppression means the veritable creation of new women become fully human by the same process by which they freed themselves... At the level of individuals, anger is a cleansing force. It frees the woman from her inferiority complex and from despair and inaction; it makes her fearless and restores her self-respect.

By a 'new rhythm of existence', I believe Lesage refers to anger as a political and aesthetic tool to end subjugation.²² Lesage believes this can be achieved if women stop turning their anger against each other and recognise their revolutionary potential. Although predominantly focussed on issues of consciousness raising for all women and in tune with Fanon's views on decolonisation, Lesage's point is worthy of note in that, firstly, she makes the assumption that there are fora for *all* women to express their rage, and, secondly, that they will also be

listened to. Lesage is correct in her assumption that there are few dominant ideological forms that allow us to think expressly of women's rage. Fanon's essay primarily debates violence and Lesage actively links expressions of anger to the feminist debate as a component of violence: violence of expression.

Women were not always in a position to express their anger at what they saw as their misrepresentation in literature. In 1928, when Virginia Woolf presented influential papers at Newnham and Girton, she argued that women were badly treated in the fictional representations of her male counterparts. Writing about women, she asserted, attracts 'agreeable essayists, light-fingered novelists, young men who have taken the MA degree; men who have no degree; men who have no apparent qualification save that they are not women'.²³ Clearly, Woolf was trying to come to terms with the overwhelming evidence that male writers of all professions were horribly misrepresenting women. She lists them accordingly: professors, schoolmasters, sociologists, clergymen and journalists. The books written by men, about women, she determined, were written in the 'red light of emotion not the white light of truth'.²⁴ She saw that men, for some indefinable reason, were angry with women and that this clouded their representations. Their anger took many forms and although it was often disguised and complex, there was not a doubt in her mind that it was there. Woolf's reflection on male anger precipitated her own investigation of the social and economic position of women that culminated in her observations in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). Her reflection on female anger, however, is rather more problematic. While allowing that women should 'have the courage to write what [they] think', she also argues that books written in rage, will inevitably be read as 'deformed and twisted'.²⁵ It appears that Woolf feared the open expressions of women's rage, or perhaps the response of a patriarchal society to expressions of female anger.

Woolf is acutely conscious of the need to theorise the objectification of women by men, but she acknowledges that expressions of extreme emotion *may* appear to be inarticulate, unformed and crude. Woolf's hostility is directed at the exclusivity of male institutions, but, as Jane Marcus succinctly points out, her anger is, 'cooled by a generous amount of money to buy time, privacy and freedom'. Marcus questions the viability of Woolf's anger in the public sphere, maintaining that she 'articulates the scapegoat theory'.²⁶ In other words, Woolf recorded her anger in her diaries, but did not necessarily use it to attack the patriarchal structures of power she wished to challenge.²⁷ Anger appears to be, certainly for Woolf, rather vulgar. She believed that a woman had to be a 'pork butcher's daughter and have inherited a share in a pig factory to have access to the vulgar power of language'.²⁸ In other words, only a certain 'type' of woman uses angry and violent language. Cora Kaplan observes that Woolf's desire to 'exclude anger from art' is indicative of her alienation of 'potentially disruptive other[s]'. Kaplan argues that anger (in this respect) is 'a thread which links the imperilled woman writer by association to a whole chain of subordinate subjectivities... [that is] used as the measure of good or bad writing'.²⁹ Woolf certainly appears to believe that anger, linked to violence of expression, constitutes 'bad' or non-literary writing, but equally, she hopes a new generation of young women will emerge to tell the truth about their anger.

The problem is that Woolf links anger to inadequacy, often conjoined with her representation of lower-class women and men and this says more about her own antagonism towards the 'lower classes' than anything else. Woolf's assertion that women writers should write calmly and wisely, otherwise they will die cramped and thwarted, is strange. By negating the outward expression of anger as a viable mode of resistance for all women, she closes off a significant aspect of female expression. It is perhaps, inevitable, that women's anger will find its way into literature as more and more women writers are published. Clare

Watling believes that contemporary women writers are exploring violence, anger and its relation to sadism so that female readers 'might experience certain satisfaction at the victorious conclusions of the exchange'. This in itself can be seen as an act of empowerment for women, offering as it does, a way of reading and writing that subverts the notion that the female subject is acted upon, rather than active. Watling claims that fictions of revenge offer the possibility of 'multiple pleasures' for women.³⁰

Lyn Mikel Brown, in her study of girl gangs and young women's anger, argues that there is a 'palpable upsurge of feminine rage and sexual/political hypersensitivity is gradually giving rise to the vengeful demonization of men by resentful women'. Helen Zahavi, Pat Barker, Livi Michael and Anne McManus are often shocking and disturbing in their portrayals of women. Selected contemporary women writers have begun to interrogate images of femininity that according to Brown, 'narrow the experiences of young women'.³¹ Women protagonists have their lives inscribed on their bodies in ways that are often harrowing, but they are also highly creative in their responses. Linda Curti acknowledges that women writers need to find 'new ways of writing and narrating women's stories' as feminist theories of subjectivity 'are inscribed and incorporated in the strategies of women's fictions'.³² Barker, Michael, Zahavi and McManus, for example, have discovered new ways of writing through their appropriation of violence and violence of expression. It is clear that innovative forms of writing have emerged that offer new strategies for narrating women's lives.

Anger is an authentic reaction to the oppression of women and its use as a political tool of expression is a powerful force in feminist debate. It is, however, as Peter Middleton argues in *The Inward Gaze*, 'an emotion... that shapes many gender divisions in social life'. Middleton engages in a debate on the loss of a language of emotion, linking it specifically to masculine subjectivity in contemporary culture. He appears to validate some forms of

extreme emotion as predominantly feminine, stating that ‘men lack a language for emotion altogether’. He wonders if this is because ‘emotion is necessarily unsayable’. In his discussion, Middleton draws on Hegel’s argument that language of emotion can never be a real language as it is the most insignificant, the most untrue. At the most basic level of determination, emotions are any strong feelings, not necessarily unsayable, but linked to individual subjectivity and culturally bound, and sometimes largely indeterminable or unquantifiable. Middleton recognises that in literary theory, emotion’s ‘sociopolitical dimension’ is often ‘overlooked’ and the ‘rationality and significance of these relations is unrecognised’.³³ For women writers, extreme emotion and the outward expression of anger through narrative is often perceived as questionable. The *politics* of anger in many contemporary women’s novels remains inconsequential for many reviewers; the focus is on the *way* they write, not what they are writing about.

Anger is a highly charged emotion, but it is realised in many differing forms of expression. The outward expression of anger has tended to be the prerogative of male discourse, a right reserved exclusively for men in an achievement-oriented role strengthened by social acceptance of masculinity. Ernest Johnson supports this position, judging that, ‘men are more likely to experience intense feelings of anger and resentment and are expected to express anger openly, while women are supposed to... suppress their anger.’³⁴ Although this idea is continually legitimated, increasingly, women *are* calling upon their anger. Woolf may have called for the expression of anger without bitterness, but many feminist writers and critics are refusing to ‘cool’ their anger. Jane Marcus, for example, calls for women to embrace their anger, to ‘spit it out’:

No more burying our wrath, turning it against ourselves. No more ethical suicides, no more literary pacifism. We must make the literary profession as safe for women as well as for ladies. It is our historical responsibility. Think how clear the air will be for

our daughters. They will write with joy and freedom only after we have written in anger.³⁵

For Marcus, anger becomes a cleansing force as well as a source of creative energy. African-American women have called upon their collective anger to fight against misogyny and racism. Audre Lorde states in *Sister Outsider* that her anger is a response to ‘exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of racial distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, misnaming, betrayal and co-optation’. Lorde sees anger as a natural response to the assumptions made about women that arise out of the reflection of those attitudes. She claims that ‘anger expressed and translated into action... is a liberating and strengthening act’.³⁶ In reclaiming anger, and in understanding the structures that generate it, women can give voice to those opposing elements in society that oppress them. Feminist debate in all its diversity fundamentally allows women to encounter each others’ positions and to acknowledge each others’ needs, however diverse and contradictory they may seem.³⁷ In continuing to question conceptual paradigms of ‘sameness’ and ‘difference’ that are attributed to women, feminist writers seek to create new ways of continuing the debate over women’s position in society. The subject matter of women’s writing in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s tended to reflect the social position and social concerns of a range of predominantly middle-class women. Margaret Drabble’s *A Summer Birdcage* (1963) explores the lives of two middle-class, well-educated women and their concerns about suitable jobs and suitable marriages. Doris Lessing questions the constraints of marriage in *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954) and *A Ripple from the Storm* (1958), later reissued as *The Children of Violence* series. Martha the young protagonist of Lessing’s early novels fights against her biological destiny:

She sat under her tree, hugging her sun-warmed arms....[remembering] the swollen bodies of the pregnant women she had seen, with shuddering anger, as at the sight of

a cage designed for herself. Never, never, never, she swore to herself, but with a creeping premonition.³⁸

In a similar manner Fay Weldon attacks the domestic stereotypes that restrict women's potential in *Down Amongst the Women* (1971), *Female Friends* (1974) and *Puffball* (1980). In *Down Amongst the Women*, Wanda says, 'Down among the women. What a place to be... we live at floor level... if we look upward it's not towards the stars or the ineffable, it's to dust the top of the windows. We have only ourselves to blame.'³⁹ Weldon believed 'there was an enormous amount to be said because life for women was unjust' and Lessing was clearly angry with women for accepting the *status quo*.⁴⁰ In later novels such as *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974) and *The Good Terrorist* (1985), Lessing moves towards a more angry discourse, whilst Weldon goes on to add a satirical, cutting edge to her writing in novels such as *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (1983) and *The Cloning of Joanna May* (1990). Ruth, the central protagonist in *She-Devil* sets about recreating herself in order to avenge the unfaithfulness of her husband, Bobbo. According to Patricia Waugh, the protagonist of this novel believes 'she has broken free from the dominant economic and social structures of power', yet she uses her freedom 'in a romantic myth that continues to oppress her'. Ruth might recreate herself 'with hellish fury' but she transforms herself into the image of Mary Fisher, Bobbo's lover and the epitome of femininity.⁴¹ She is still the victim of cultural oppression. The domestic arena was the 'battleground' for many women writers at this point and although their protagonists were beginning to express their anger at the inequalities of their lives and the constraints of their biology they were frequently diminished by their rage and remained perpetual victims of paternal or patriarchal attitudes.

The common situation of women's oppression that formed the basis of much of British feminist fiction from the 1960s onwards was taken up in the 1970s by writers as diverse as Angela Carter and Buchi Emecheta, in novels such as *The Magic Toyshop* (1967),

Heroes and Villains (1969), *The Bloody Chamber* (1979) *In the Ditch* (1972) and *Second Class Citizen* (1974). Each explored women's struggles to overcome predetermined definitions that formulated the oppression deemed endemic in women's lives. After all, as Adah, in *Second Class Citizen* says, 'women ha[d] nothing to lose but their chains'. Joan Riley's protagonist in *Waiting in the Twilight* (1987) expresses indignation at the position of women forced to suppress their anger:

The insolence ran through her and she gripped the mop tighter with her feeling hand, forcing back anger that still bubbled up after so many years. 'Thou shalt rise up before the hoary head' she muttered under her breath, 'No wonda yu treat yu old people dem so bad'.... Adella straightened carefully... 'Yes, Mam,' she said patiently, hiding the hard anger growing inside her with the ease of long practice.⁴²

There was something of a 'mind-shift' in the representation of women as protagonists became more active, more obsessive and angrier. The anger was frequently turned inwards, however, with women characters often self-harming and self-mutilating. In Alison Fell's *The Bad Box* (1987), Isla 'resolves never to marry' (p. 84), eschews the trappings of 'femininity' and frequently mutilates her body:

The first snag of the hairs against the blade set her teeth on edge.... But then she found... she could go in quite deep and it hardly hurt at all. She felt a small flow of sourness into her mouth, and then a keen satisfaction at the ragged line of blood.⁴³

Isla appears to abnegate her autonomy or personal freedom by this and other acts of violence against herself, but conversely, these may be seen as radical steps forward in political agency. She is, in a way, taking action or exerting power over her body. Regardless of the contradictions and dialectic tensions inherent in feminist theory, one incontrovertible component of feminist debate remains constant; women are repeatedly forced to strive

against socially constructed notions of identity and femininity, examining ideology that defines their gender roles.

In 1996 Elaine Showalter stated that in the latter part of the twentieth century women writers have found a 'genuine freedom to explore fantasy, sexuality, anger and adventure'. It appears, however, that 'freedom' comes with a price because:

Depression and breakdown are still significant themes in contemporary women's writing. Although they may be leading healthier lives, with less drudgery and more exercise, not to mention HRT, they are also more obsessed with eating rituals, dieting and food taboos, and more concerned with what Naomi Wolf has called the PBR -the Professional Beauty Requirement to look and dress well in order to succeed. Passive resistance, in the form of refusal -- refusal to marry, to eat, to play the expected feminine roles -- is still a dominant negotiating strategy for many, although it may only be a metaphor for self-denial.

Showalter based these assumptions on writers such as Susie Orbach, Erica Jong, Margaret Drabble, Nicola Barker, Jenni Diski, and Joan Smith.⁴⁴ It appears that the exploration of previously constrained areas of women's lives such as sexuality and anger leads to feelings of anxiety and guilt. While Showalter's comments address important issues, poverty and class often remain peripheral to these debates. At the same time Showalter made this point it was still possible to argue, as Merylyn Cherry did, that 'the feminist movement and feminist literary criticism do not seem to recognise British working-class women'.⁴⁵ The economic deprivation of working-class women created an unfashionable underclass in British society that was often condemned and demonised by the media, but generally society ignored them and in many cases positively denied their existence.⁴⁶ It seems obvious to state that women have different experiences, of course they do, but the oppression of women *is* however, fundamental to all feminist thought. What is missing from Showalter's argument is that

women's anger can be an empowering and productive force. It is important not to allow negative feelings (that are frequently attached to women's outward projection of anger) to dominate any discussion of women's fiction. Anger can be constructive.

In *The Bitch is Back*, Sarah Appleton Aguair argues that in the attempts of women writers to subvert literary representations of 'objectified' women, 'somehow, somewhere along the road to subjectivity... something has been lost'. Aguair believes that the 'vital woman, empowered with anger, wit' and 'ruthless survival instincts' has been lost from feminist fictions.⁴⁷ Such women characters did not disappear from feminist fictions, rather they disappeared from 'mainstream' women's fiction. Feminist science fiction, utopian and dystopian writing for example, has an abundance of angry female protagonists, one of whom is Jael, in Joanna Russ's *Female Man* (1975) who is from an alternative gender-divided future, and who enjoys murdering men with her surgically modified killer teeth and claws.⁴⁸ Neither is it 'unfeminist' to portray women who behave 'badly'; but 'acceptable' literary representations of women tend to fall into conformist and non-conformist modes of behaviour. Anger *is* being vocalised by a range of young women protagonists in contemporary fiction by women. A generation of women writers who are not afraid to voice *their* disaffection are writing themselves into literary discourse.

Although this thesis primarily examines representations of anger and its manifestation in forms of anxiety and guilt, the writers I explore are united in that they use humour to accentuate highly politicised debates about gender, class and sexuality. While humour is personal (we do not all laugh at the same things), it is often used to both reveal certain situations and to offer some sort of indication as to how a situation might be changed. There are, according to most theorists, three primary theories of humour: superiority theories, repression/release theories and incongruity theories. These can loosely be termed as laughter that is associated with the glorification of the self, usually at the expense of

someone else; the release of repression (usually sexual and emotional); and the collision of two seemingly disparate worlds within a single context that are capable of different interpretations.⁴⁹ In ‘The Frames of Comic Freedom’, Umberto Eco argues that attempts to define humour are jeopardised by the fact that it is an umbrella term. However, humour as a term of reference brings together what Eco calls a ‘disturbing ensemble of diverse and not completely homogeneous phenomena’ such as irony, parody, satire and wit.⁵⁰ Eco refers to ‘the broken frame’ of reference (which must be presupposed, but never spelt out) for humour to occur and argues that one must understand ‘to what degree certain behaviors are forbidden’ in order to appreciate their transgression. In the works discussed, humour ‘breaks the frame’ of patriarchal reference to ‘underscore the absurdities’ inherent within that frame. Zahavi and McManus are savagely satirical. Anger is often the prerogative of the ‘angry satirist’ or is indicative of ‘sane indignation’. S. H. Braund makes distinctions between different forms of expression of anger which are useful for this discussion:

Indignatio may be conveyed by what is said or how it is said - the familiar division of content and style, of manner and matter. The stylistic features of anger are rhetorical questions and angry exclamations, expressed in short, swift, insistent sentences, emphasised by repetition, pointed by anaphora and punctuated by apostrophe. Anger uses the extremes of expression, from lofty hyperbole to vulgar and contemptuous diminutives.

Braund argues that anger can often give way to irony and satire, claiming that irony is more intellectually balanced than latent hostility and antagonism and that satire offers a degree of identification with the plight of the protagonists. The schematic definitions of anger proffered by Braund offer an insight into the writers under discussion. Barker and Michael use anger as a form of apologia, a written defence of their strong feelings at the oppression and negation of working-class women. Zahavi’s and McManus’s use of anger is much more satirical,

emphasised by repetition and angry exclamations and focussing on the oppression of the strong by the weak. To borrow Braund's words, they all establish their anger through the 'stylistics of the novel and through highly charged rhetoric'.⁵¹

Among the writers discussed humour moves from parody and role reversal (as evidenced in Zahavi's fiction) to a third stage of linguistic and cognitive incongruity (as evidenced in Zahavi's and McManus's novels): Linda Huebl-Naranjo sees this manoeuvre as 'creating new norms, a new culture' in women's writing that seeks new representations. Women take their oppression and, with humour, turn it around to create what Regenia Gagnier calls 'a process of imaginative engagement'. This creativity represents women's attempts to deal with the incongruities of women's situation in a patriarchal society while maintaining a relationship with each other.⁵² In 'What's So Funny? The Explosion of Laughter in Feminist Criticism', Debra Beilke argues that feminist critics have focussed mainly on the 'rebellious, angry nature of women's humor' and believes that 'comedy can effectively channel anger' so that it can be an 'unsettling, disruptive political source, shaking the core of male domination'.⁵³ The writers discussed in the chapters that follow use anger and humour to show the tension between women and social frames of reference that confine them to acceptable modes of behaviour. What is clear from the reception to some of the fiction under discussion is that women frequently find humour in this tension that male readers do not.⁵⁴ Gagnier claims that:

men fear women's humor for much the same reason that they fear women's sexual freedom... because they encourage women's aggression and promiscuity and thus disrupt the social order; that therefore men desire to control women's humor just as they desire to control women's sexuality ... to wit, in the public domain.⁵⁵

Women writers use humour to disrupt the social order, to show the incongruities in their social positions. For example, Marleen Barr allows that 'humor is a signal to [female]

readers that they can relax and safely laugh at the vicissitudes of being a woman living under patriarchy'.⁵⁶ Women may laugh, but equally they do not have to accept the 'vicissitudes' of their lives:

The potential comedy of ideological narratives is not only that of a society whose defining law or principle of selection, whose quintessence, excludes its own actual members, but that of a field of action on which the would-be political subject can never be in the right place at the right time.⁵⁷

If the 'field of action', as James English argues, is patriarchy, or women's oppression, or compulsory heterosexuality then feminist practice must be the refusal to play by the rules of the game. Zahavi makes this point very succinctly through Bella in *Dirty Weekend*. Her bold satire posits a female serial killer as a 'new' feminist icon. *True Romance* features an unnamed, exploited woman as the nemesis of patriarchal, predatory males and *Donna and the Fatman* depicts an avenging 'angel' wreaking havoc on bullying, oppressive men. It has been argued that 'reversing sexual roles in fiction may make good burlesque or good fantasy' but ultimately it is ludicrous because culture is male.⁵⁸ However, while the reverse dialectics of Zahavi's writing may seem ludicrous in some ways, they engage with very basic rules of humour. According to Simon Critchley, for humour to work there has to be 'a sort of tacit consensus', implicit shared understanding as to what constitutes the joke. He argues that 'in order for the incongruity of the joke to be seen as absurd', there has to be congruence between the structure of the joke and the social structure. In other words if there is no social congruity then there is no comic incongruity.⁵⁹ Who the joke is upon is very much up for debate in Zahavi's writing -- the butt of the jokes is not always obvious but many are aimed at social and sexual mores. Bergson believes humour 'must answer to certain requirements... it must have a *social* significance'.⁶⁰ The important thing is that Zahavi's protagonists are socially transgressive women who indulge in quite boisterous transgressions. In doing so

they refute 'patriarchal order'. What is happening in the novels under discussion is that in the representation of anger the power structures of society are exposed. In the representation of equilibrating humour, by laughing at that power 'we expose its contingency'.⁶¹

According to Max Schulz most efforts to come to terms with the comic have 'foundered on the submerged rocks of psychologists' attempts to explain what it is that makes us laugh'. Schulz's discussion of 'black humor' is particularly revealing in that the writers he discusses are all men. Schulz talks about 'desperate men' who have abandoned the safety of received options in their writing. This humour, he claims, shows 'a shift in perspective from the self and its ability to create a moral ambience through an act... to an emphasis on all the moving forces of life which converge collectively upon the individual'.⁶² As with other male theorists he neglects women's writing. Barker's fiction actually exhibits many of the tendencies he claims for his male writers in that her humour is more ironic in its references and she creates moral ambivalence in her protagonists. Both Iris King in *Union Street* and Billy Prior in *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road* are good examples. Barker and Michael place an emphasis on the forces of life that converge collectively upon the individual and it is often out of the resultant incongruity that humour is found. In women's writing there is often more emphasis on 'recognition rather than resolution' and on 'process rather than conclusion'. Accordingly, as Beilke says, the 'primary aim of women's humor is communication' of women's shared experience.⁶³

In Schulz's emphasis on male writers there is a latent hostility towards women and their humour. Women's laughter is after all a serious matter as it plays a part in challenging social control of their behaviour. McManus's protagonist Charlie provokes a 'transgressive laughter that questions the legitimacy of the law' and she is linked thematically with the struggle to make cultural space for a community of "free" women. In *I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing*, an attempt is made to create cultural space for working-class women, but it is the

subversion of syntax that is the key as a mode of resistance to patriarchal (rational, linear) discourse. McManus is willing to take risks in her clever and biting satire where she juxtaposes the academic, sociological study of street women with the lived 'reality' of life on the streets. Michael's humour is subversive and self-parodic; Barker utilises both the comedic processes of carnival and parody in her ironic reinscription of masculinity and depiction of male anxiety in both *The Man Who Wasn't There* and the First World War trilogy. The writers use not only 'the comic force of women's transgressions', but most particularly they see the possibility that 'a woman's laughter might serve as a... tactic of resistance'.⁶⁴ The novels discussed deviate from and resist the usual or expected representation of women and all provoke laughter; women can and do laugh at representations of themselves. In doing so they create a space where they can be defiant.

One perception of the novel is that it has invariably functioned for the class or group that wrote it and accordingly, marginalised and disenfranchised groups have seen the novel and literary canon as the repository and exclusive domain of white middle-class values and beliefs.⁶⁵ Even when politically motivated by issues of class, oppression and subjugation, many writers tend to articulate a stoic, romantic version of working-class life, even as they seek to expose the degradation and hardship they perceive.⁶⁶ Zahavi, Barker, Michael and McManus move away from rudimentary and romantic images of working-class women. In their fictions prostitutes are articulate and funny, drunken bag ladies quote R. D. Laing and Foucault, isolated young women in dreadful tower blocks have fascinating dream lives and analyse their lives in quite sophisticated ways. Recognising the plurality of experiences within the working-class consciousness, allows, as Kim Worthington suggests, 'a reading experience, to disavow the prescriptions of received narrow conventions, and to challenge the complacent reader to conceive of their relation to the world'. Worthington asserts that certain contemporary fictions are 'engaged in transformative practices within the procedural

bounds of inherited communicative and literary “rules”.⁶⁷ In other words, in attempting to represent the previously unrepresentable, in this instance women’s anger, women writers must engage in transformative processes, through the re-appropriation of conventional patriarchal discourses. Language is a social semiotic and functions as a signifier of cultural and social differences. Therefore difference, or ‘otherness’ within language can arguably challenge dominant discourses and narratives.⁶⁸ Speech patterns in women traditionally conform to the norms of (socially constructed) femininity, mirroring the subordination of women in a patriarchal society.⁶⁹ According to Robyn Lakoff women’s language has certain discernable qualities. She believes that there is a ‘typical’ female speech style associated with a desire for approval and approbation; one of the determining features she argues, is the use of a trivial lexis and empty adjectives.⁷⁰ Lakoff believes that the social norms of womanhood and femininity in a male dominated society are reflected in women’s language and that assertion, authority and control are masculine qualities reflected in the language men use.

The challenge to gendered discourse is apparent when Zahavi, Barker, Michael and McManus use language in distinctive ways, and they each recognise that it is a social and cultural signification that needs to be reclaimed for discourses of difference. While foregrounding the experiences of working-class women, my chosen writers challenge ‘standard’ discourses, those signifiers of meaning and identity that marginalise working-class women, and the dialogic nature of their novels counters monologic, hegemonic discourses.⁷¹ As women writers they deny the opposition between anger and literature that has always deemed anger unsuitable or inappropriate and create discourses that articulate imaginative visions of the strength and intensity of women’s rage. The following chapter which focuses on Helen Zahavi’s novels, shows how the incorporation of humour is important to this investigation of representations of anger. According to James English, ‘comic practice is

always on some level... an assertion of group against group, an effect and event of struggle, a form of symbolic violence'.⁷² Zahavi's novels are a prime example of this. She effectively uses, what Laura Marcus calls 'anger's incandescence', together with 'the light of laughter' to explore positions of gender, class and sexuality in contemporary British society.⁷³

Endnotes

¹Editorial Preface, 'The Past Before Us: Twenty Years of Feminism', *Feminist Review*, 31 (Spring, 1989), p. 4.

²See Sheila Rowbotham, *Women, Resistance and Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin (Pelican), 1972), pp. 78-98.

³Joanna Russ, 'What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write', in Susan Koppelman Cornillon, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1972), pp. 4-5.

⁴Kim Worthington, *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), p. 30.

⁵I have used this 'offensive' terminology because it is constantly used in relation to the current debate about women's place in society. This phrase is so overworked and overused that it has become virtually impossible, or perhaps even unnecessary, to attribute the quotation to one person in particular. Post-feminism in this context is taken as an ideological stance that believes the aspirations and aims of feminism have mainly been accomplished.

⁶See, for example, Judith Butler's discussion in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990) and Sally Robinson's Introduction 'Engendering the Subject' in *Gender and Self-Representation in Contemporary Women's Fiction* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1991). Obviously debates that centre on gender construction, representation and women's invisibility are not new but in relation to the novels of Livi Michael that are discussed here, women, gender, subjectivity, specificity and class are of particular importance.

⁷Lynne Segal, 'Slow Change or No Change?: Feminism, Socialism and the Problem of Men', *Feminist Review*, 31 (Spring, 1989), p. 5.

⁸George Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1979), p. 94.

⁹Jonathon Dollimore, 'The Challenge of Sexuality' in Alan Sinfield, ed., *Society and Literature 1945-1970* (London: Methuen & Co, 1983), p. 76.

¹⁰Maria Lauret, 'Seizing Time and Making New: Feminist Criticism, Politics and Contemporary Feminist Fiction', *Feminist Review*, 31 (1989), p. 95.

¹¹Rosalind Coward, 'Are Women's Novels Feminist Novels?', *Feminist Review*, 5 (1980), p. 238.

¹²Cited by Susan Gorsky, 'The Gentle Doubters: Images of Women in Englishwomen's Novels, 1840-1920', in Cornillon, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction*, p. 52.

¹³Gorsky gives such novels as Mrs Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and *North and South*, Charlotte Bronte's *Villette* and Charlotte Yonge's *The Daisy Chain* as examples of this. See Gorsky,

'The Gentle Doubters: Images of Women in Englishwomen's Novels, 1840-1920', pp. 28-54.

¹⁴See Owen Ashton and Stephen Roberts, *The Victorian Working-Class Writers* (London & New York: Cassell, 1999), p. 5. See also Paul Thomas Murphy, *Towards A Working-Class Canon: Literary Criticism in British Working-Class Periodicals (1816 – 1858)*, p. 2.

¹⁵Tillie Olson, 'When Writers Don't Speak', in S. Cornillon, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction*, p. 110.

¹⁶Ethel Mannin, Kathleen Woodward and Flora Thompson, for example.

¹⁷Rebecca O' Rourke, 'Were There No Women? British Working-Class Writing in the Inter-War Period', *Literature and History*, 14 (Spring 1988), p. 51.

¹⁸See Margaret Drabble, 'Introduction', in Nell Dunn, *Poor Cow* (London: Virago Press, 1988), pp.xi - xviii.

¹⁹Joannou, *Contemporary Women's Writing*, p. 68.

²⁰Maroula Joannou, '*Ladies Please Don't Smash These Windows*' (Oxford: Berg, 1995), p. 56, p. 57. Joannou redresses the balance somewhat in her latest book *Contemporary Women's Writing: From The Golden Notebook to The Color Purple* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000) which offers a broad overview of women's writing and has a short chapter on working-class women's experiences.

²¹See for instance Jeremy Hawthorn ed., *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984). See also James Gindin's chapter 'Anger as Affirmation' in *Postwar British Fiction* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963); Christopher Pawling ed., *Popular Fiction and Social Change* (London: Macmillan, 1984); Ralph Fox, *The Novel and the People* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979). Pamela Fox in *Class Fictions* attempts a reading strategy of working-class writing that has succeeded in bringing new insight into working-class culture and literary practice.

²²See Julia Lesage, 'Women's Rage' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: MacMillan, 1988), p. 421, p. 428.

²³Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyeme* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 32.

²⁴Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 38.

²⁵Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 76. I realise that Virginia Woolf is speaking predominantly of nineteenth-century writers such as Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë and George Eliot, but, the sentiments she registers are predisposed towards all women expressing their anger covertly.

²⁶Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), p. 132.

²⁷The power Woolf wished to challenge is patriarchal power. She states in *A Room of One's Own* that 'The most transient visitor to this planet... who picked up this paper could not fail to be aware... that England is under the rule of a patriarchy'. The power available to women is negligible, she lists the power of men: '*His* was the power and the money. *He* was the proprietor of the paper and its editor and sub-editor. *He* was the Foreign Secretary and the Judge. *He* was the cricketer; *he* owned the racehorses and the yachts. *He* was the director of the company...*He* left money to charities...With the exception of the fog *he* seemed to control everything' (my italics). Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 39.

²⁸Marcus, *Art and Anger*, p. 131.

²⁹Cora Kaplan, 'Like a Housemaid's Fancies': The Representation of Working-class Women in Nineteenth-century Writing', in Susan Sheridan, ed., *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (London & New York: Verso, 1988), p. 60.

³⁰Clare Watling, 'Who's read *Macho Sluts?*', in Judith Still and Michael Worton, eds., *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 196 & p. 199.

³¹Lyn Mikel Brown, *Raising their Voices: The Politics of Girls' Anger* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 6 & p. 7.

³²Linda Curti, *Female Stories, Female Bodies: Narrative, Identity and Representation* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), p. xi.

³³Peter Middleton, 'The Lost Language of Emotion', in *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 169, p. 168 & p. 174.

³⁴Ernest H. Johnson, 'Gender and Ethnic Differences in the Experience and Expression of Anger', in Ernest H. Johnson, *The Deadly Emotions: The Role of Anger, Hostility, and Aggression in Health and Emotional Well-being* (New York and London: Praeger Publishers, 1990), pp. 131-155.

³⁵Marcus, *Art and Anger*, pp. 153-4.

³⁶Audre Lorde, 'The Uses of Anger: Women Responding To Racism', in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1984), p. 124.

³⁷Lesage, 'Women's Rage', p. 420.

³⁸Doris Lessing, *Martha Quest* (London: Granada, 1966), p. 66.

³⁹Fay Weldon, *Down Amongst the Women* (London: Penguin, 1971), p. 83.

⁴⁰Olga Kenyon, *Women Novelists Today: A Survey of English Writing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1988), p. 104.

⁴¹Patricia Waugh, *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 190.

⁴²Joan Riley, *Waiting in the Twilight* (London: Women's Press, 1987), pp. 2-3.

⁴³Alison Fell, *The Bad Box* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 63. Fell worked in radical feminist theatre, she was an early member of the Women's Liberation Movement and the Spare Rib Collective.

⁴⁴Elaine Showalter, 'Utopia comes alive. New Women sharing their aspirations and desires with New Men, *New Statesman*, Dec 13, 1996, pp. 16-17.

⁴⁵Merylyn Cherry, 'Towards Recognition of Working-Class Women Writers', in S. Richardson, M. Cherry, Palfrey, S. Chester, eds., *Writing On The Line: 20th Century Working-Class Women Writer* (London: Working Press, 1996), p. 75.

⁴⁶The classification of 'underclass' is now usually attributed to those members of society who belong to the lowest and least privileged social stratum. Just as the working class cannot be classified as an homogenous group, equally so, neither can an underclass. Here, however, it is used to signify members of society who have been rendered 'invisible' by severe economic deprivation, as opposed to definitions of the working class as 'those who live by the sale of their labour power and draw no income from surplus-value created by others'. See David Craig, 'The Roots of Sillitoe's Fiction', in Jeremy Hawthorn, ed., *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century*, p. 99.

⁴⁷Sarah Appleton Aguir, *The Bitch is Back* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), p .1.

⁴⁸For example, Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (London: The Women's Press, 1985), *We Who Are About To...* (London: The Women's Press, 1987), Jody Scott, *Passing for Human* (London: The Women's Press, 1986), Angela Carter, *Heroes and Villains* (London: Penguin, 1981), Suzy McKee Charnas *Motherlines* (London: Gallancz, 1979), Zoe Fairbairns, *Benefits* (London: Virago, 1979). These are examples of the many science fiction novels by women, who have strong, angry women characters. The Women's Press and Virago published most of these novels. Once these publishing houses were taken over, the range of novels by women changed considerably.

⁴⁹See, for example, Mahadev L. Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); Mary Crawford, 'Just Kidding: Gender and Conversational Humor,' in Regina Barreca, ed., *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992); Lawrence La Fave, Jay Haddad and William A. Maesen, 'Superiority, Enhanced Self-Esteem, and Perceived Incongruity Humour Theory,' in Antony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, eds., *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications* (London: John Wiley & Sons, 1976); Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee, *The Psychology of Humor: Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues* (New York: Academic Press, 1972); Ron Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Regina Barreca, ed., *Last Laughs: Perspectives on Women and Comedy* (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1988); Alice Sheppard, 'Social Cognition, Gender Roles, and Women's Humor,' in June Sochen, ed., *Women's Comic*

Visions (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991); Murray S. Davis, *What's So Funny? The Comic Conception of Culture and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious', (1905), in vol. 8, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, James Strachey, ed. and trans. (London: Hogarth Press, 1931). See Linda Huebl-Naranjo, 'From Peek-A-Boo to Sarcasm: Women's Humor as a Means of Both Connection and Resistance', *Contemporary Women's Issues Database*, 1 (1995), pp. 371- 385, for these and other references.

⁵⁰Umberto Eco, 'The Frames of Comic Freedom', in Thomas A Sebeok, ed., *Umberto Eco, V.V. Ivanov, Monica Rector, Carnival* (Berlin: Marton Publishers, 1984), p. 1.

⁵¹S.H. Braund, *Beyond Anger: A Study of Juvenal's Third Book of Satires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 3, p. 206 & p. 6.

⁵²Linda Huebl-Naranjo, 'From Peek-A-Boo to Sarcasm: Women's Humor as a Means of Both Connection and Resistance', p. 385. See also Regenia Gagnier, 'Between Women: A Cross-class Analysis of Status and Anarchic Humor', *Women's Studies* 15:1-3 (1988), p. 138.

⁵³Debra Beilke, 'What's So Funny? The Explosion of Laughter in Feminist Criticism', *Contemporary Women's Issues Database*, 16 (Spring 1994), pp. 8-12.

⁵⁴Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (New York: Macmillan, 1911), p. 27, cited in Huebl-Naranjo, 'From Peek-A-Boo to Sarcasm: Women's Humor as a Means of Both Connection and Resistance', p. 385.

⁵⁵Gagnier, 'Between Women: A Cross-class Analysis of Status and Anarchic Humor', p. 137.

⁵⁶For a detailed discussion of women's use of humour, see Marleen Barr, 'Laughing in a Liberated Defiance: *Egalia's Daughters* and Feminist Tendentious Humor', in Marleen Barr and Richard Feldstein, eds., *Distorted Discourses: Feminism/Textual Intervention/Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 95.

⁵⁷James F. English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 161.

⁵⁸Russ, 'What Can a Heroine Do? Or Why Women Can't Write', p. 7.

⁵⁹Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

⁶⁰Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 65.

⁶¹Critchley, *On Humour*, p. 11.

⁶²I find it hard to believe that there were no women writing this sort of fiction in the United States at that time. See Max Schulz, *Black Humor Fictions of the Sixties* (Athens: Ohio University press, 1973), p. x.

⁶³Beilke, 'What's So Funny? The Explosion of Laughter in Feminist Criticism', p. 8.

⁶⁴English, *Comic Transactions*, p. 168.

⁶⁵See, for example, Toni Morrison, 'Rootedness: The Ancestor of Foundation', in Mari Evans, ed., *Black Women Writers* (London: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 340. Morrison argues that the working class did not need novels initially as they had their own art forms such as songs, dances, ceremonies and gossip. Morrison's point that the working class and black communities no longer live in large extended family groups and therefore have no ritual of collective story telling is important here. Pat Barker and Livi Michael who are discussed in detail in this thesis draw on a history of oral story telling for their working-class fictions. The novel is seen by Morrison as a very strong force in the battle for all women and all marginalised groups to 'get new information... out'.

⁶⁶It is telling that Pat Barker became more acclaimed as a writer after the publication of *Regeneration*, the first part of the First World War trilogy. Although I see this book very much as a debate on masculinities and class, the notion that this writing is somehow more 'literary' as it engages with the poets Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen has, I believe, contributed to Barker's recognition as a novelist of literary worth.

⁶⁷Kim L. Worthington, *Self as Narrative: Subjectivity and Community in Contemporary Fiction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 30-31.

⁶⁸For a discussion of these issues, see, for example, Dale Spender's *Manmade Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980) which discusses the construction of language and feminism's intervention into language, Deborah Cameron's *Feminism and Linguistic Theory: Second Edition* (London: Macmillan, 1992), and Deborah Cameron and Jennifer Coates, *Women in their Speech Communities* (London: Longman, 1988) which looks at how women use language. See also Robin Lakoff *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

⁶⁹Cameron and Coates, *Women in Their Speech Communities*, p. 79.

⁷⁰See Robyn Lakoff, *Language and Women's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

⁷¹This is obviously a very broad statement. What I am trying to identify in the work of Pat Barker and Livi Michael is the dialogic voicing that they utilise, using and often subverting language that comes with prescribed meaning and intention. Dialogism is taken as the way meaning is determined in language, an intertextual relationship between polysemic utterances. In this way, pre-inscribed meanings that accompany language and the relationship between language and the oppression of women's voices is subverted. This is also very apparent in the narrative style of Helen Zahavi and Anne McManus. This is discussed in later chapters. For a broader discussion of Bakhtin's language theories see Mikail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981). See also Dale M Bauer and Susan Jaret McKinstry, eds., *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991) and Peter Hitchcock, *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁷²English, *Comic Transactions*, p. 9.

⁷³Marcus, *Art and Anger*, p. 131.

Chapter 2

‘An Orange Flame of Rage’: Writing with a Vengeance.

We convene; to spread justice... I am an apprentice: sorcerer or assassin or vandal or vigilante; or avenger... (Andrea Dworkin).

Feminist fictions are frequently a site of contention where intersecting discourses and narratives of power can be challenged and debated. One of the most conspicuous aspects of contemporary British feminist fiction of the 1990s is the heterogeneity of women’s writing and its refusal to be contained within a single, paradigmatic framework. However, while feminist writers seek to write against outmoded representations and to construct new ways of writing, there is still considerable antagonism to writing that strays too far from a considered literary centre. Narratives of power that encode a patriarchal ideal, like language itself, can never be seen as value free and the imposition of a literary standard assumes there can be a single mode of experience and interpretation. Feminist writers frequently introduce more complex articulations of gender, sexuality and selfhood in their novels and in doing so they can also posit different perceptions of language. *Écriture féminine* sought to foreground these aspects of women’s writing and to celebrate a discourse that allowed women to write their bodies in new and innovative ways. It was argued that this philosophical movement in feminism gave women the means to create new forms of writing that were a proclamation of the fluid abundance of women, using attributes of female sexuality and multiple pleasure.

To postulate and theorise about women’s writing in such a way causes problems. The need to provide a basis from which to debate women’s writing and literature is significant, but if this argument is adhered to rigidly, it could constrain women’s writing and constitute it as separate from an apotheosis of ‘legitimate’ literature. Women’s writing, while undoubtedly

excluded from the literary centre for so long is in danger of isolating itself within feminist theory.¹ There is the possibility that if 'difference' is taken as representative of biological difference it can further marginalise women from an accepted system of discourse. While it is important for women writers to posit discourses of diversity and to express themselves in different ways, to place an arbitrary abstraction on women's writing as a whole can lessen its authority and reputation. To 'break away from the old, and take up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, in a place other than silence' can be liberating; it can also attenuate the extent, or range, of women's writing.²

To challenge phallogocentric discourse in literature, as feminist novelists attempt to do, is to participate in an activity that constructs its conceptions regarding language and its usage, within certain conceptual and pedagogic frameworks.³ While language can be utilised to account for difference, by challenging concepts of 'otherness' (in terms of race, class, gender or sexuality) it is also unquestionably connected with systems of oppression, such as racism and patriarchy. Language and writing have no real intrinsic value system as such, but they function rather as tokens and carriers of a value system conferred upon them by reference.⁴ The novel and narrative discourse can therefore be seen as a medium of a standard, a repository of dominant ideological discourses and narratives. But, the novel is also the place where that standard can be, and frequently is, challenged. James Snead has argued that language must not be taken merely in philological and etymological terms, but as an entire pool of resources at the disposal of the narrator. His argument, centring on different aspects of writing, also encompasses unconventional ways of utilising vocabulary and syntax as an expression of difference, or as a challenge to patriarchal or colonial discourses.⁵ Women writers, who interrogate gendered oppression, do so within the paradigms of a language system that has been deemed patriarchal and must therefore seek to undermine both cultural and linguistic models of oppression.

Helen Zahavi takes up the challenge to patriarchal structures of language and in doing so creates a distinctive narrative style that articulates a discourse of difference.⁶ She expropriates anger and violence in literature, a narrative convention usually ascribed to male writers and utilises them for her own explicit purposes.⁷ ‘Expropriate’ would seem appropriate because Zahavi takes possession of violence and anger (without permission) and relocates them in her fictions, utilising each in an idiosyncratic and poetic manner. Ideological constructs of women in British society have never countenanced violence in women, in fact they are demonised for such behaviour. Zahavi channels a great deal of rage into her writing and gives expression to thoughts and experiences that are not easy to acknowledge in women. She creates women characters who are not repressed by traditional models of behaviour as a ‘reasonable response to the unreasonable demands’ that are placed on women.⁸ Her narrative style is strongly satirical and ironic, fluid and poetic, and ultimately very powerful. It is acerbic, vitriolic and often unpleasant, but, there is always a humorous and dangerous edge to the revolting utterances. The amalgamation of anger, violence and humour is crucial to her writing.

Zahavi’s three novels form a direct response to the oppression of women by men. Her female characters are dispossessed in many ways and she exposes the impotence and perceived worthlessness of women in certain sectors of society. Zahavi’s writing both embodies and exemplifies stereotypical responses to women, women’s writing and women’s desires -- both sexual and ‘other’. However, she has been accused of reinforcing phallogentric structures, rather than undermining them. Merja Makinen argues that although Zahavi may challenge essentialist beliefs about ‘what women are like’, she is nevertheless a writer who ‘leaves the phallogentric structures’ of society intact. Makinen believes that in *Dirty Weekend*, Bella the protagonist turns ‘mad and bad’ and is merely ‘a woman masquerading in a male role’ which is not ‘a particularly feminist strategy’.⁹ But, what is much more

significant in Zahavi's novels is their importance as a site of feminist intervention into what has previously been seen as essentially male-dominated literature, fiction of anger and revenge.

Zahavi's fictions are explosive, angry and determined to engage with the oppression of women and with gendered constructs of the feminine, femininity and feminist theory. Zahavi exposes the misogynist history of the killer novel, and does *not* merely use violence for the sake of it. Mäkinen argues that Zahavi's use of violence ultimately undermines feminist theory, as it is simple role reversal. When women writers intervene in existing genres they frequently become the subjects of intensified criticism. Patricia Duncker argues that there is a trap inherent in re-writing fiction. That is, it is a carrier of an ideology that often proves too complex and pervasive to circumvent. In Duncker's opinion 'rewriting... within the strait-jacket of... original structures' is impossible and 'explains, amplifies and reproduces rather than alters the original deeply rigidly sexist psychology' of the originals.¹⁰ The argument that women writers, far from subverting misogynistic forms of writing, are complicit in sustaining that ideology cannot be uncomplicatedly applied to Zahavi's work. Her stories have a strength and narrative style that allows her to deride and even to invalidate the constrictive constructions of female stereotypes. As Mäkinen argues 'when a form is used to critique the inscribed ideology, then the form is subtly adapted to inscribe a new set of assumptions'.¹¹ This is surely what Zahavi has achieved. Mäkinen contradicts herself somewhat in disallowing Zahavi's re-writing of revenge novels, or possibly she merely feels that her writing does not have agency in that respect. In my view, Zahavi is not merely re-writing killer novels and sexual, sadistic novels about women, she is writing *about* them. When the stories are read, they are read with the original ideological constructs of women encoded within them and should therefore be seen as an active engagement with the deconstructing of old cultural gender stereotypes.

Feminine desires are equated with passivity and masculine desires with action and although this idea is outmoded it has always been seen as a social truism. Zahavi's protagonists are initially unresisting and suppressed: Bella in *Dirty Weekend* and Donna in *Donna and the Fatman* are quintessentially passive women, oppressed and abused. Bella, for example, is oppressed and abused by her university lecturer, then her boyfriend pimp, and finally by the man who lives opposite her. She is in a state of constant terror at home and on the street. But Zahavi's women respond to their trepidation and fear in very specific ways. In *Dirty Weekend* Zahavi humorously sets out to clean up the streets to make them safe for women. The dirty weekend in question is a weekend of refuse collection for Bella where she exacts her revenge for the years of oppression that women have endured. In *Donna and the Fatman* Donna takes revenge for the fear imposed on the weak and powerless by a variety of deeply unpleasant male characters. What makes Zahavi's novels significant is the idiosyncratic journey to selfhood undertaken by her women protagonists. Bella and Donna become fugitives from society as soon as they acquire dominion over their own bodies. Although the woman character in *True Romance* appears to have no control she embodies the politics of the body. If women's bodies have consistently been the site of a battle in a culture where the female form is traded and circulated in a morally corrupt form of exchange, then the unnamed protagonist serves to represent that exchange.¹²

Zahavi's women are united, not by the need to compete for the attention or favours of men, but by a powerful need to survive. Elaine Showalter believes that Zahavi is using 'a postmodern technique as a shield to enter the subterranean, freakish, and dangerous spaces of the modern city... (where) there is full access to every language, style and subject'.¹³ Zahavi certainly uses that access to language as a very particular narrative strategy to take her exploration of women's oppression further and to allow her women characters access to the anger that, through inherited patterns of thought or action, they have internalised, rather than

outwardly projected. In feminist analyses women's anger is judged on value systems of 'normality' which support existing power structures. Within that structure, women who are adventurous, competitive, sexually active, independent, and who are seen as having 'male' attributes such as aggressive antisocial behaviour, will often be seen as more antagonistic than men who display the same 'symptoms'.¹⁴ In Joan Smith's influential and persuasive *Misogynies*, she writes about misconceptions and the lies that are told about women:

Lies -- the lies men tell about women. It is about men who believe that women are dangerous, dishonest, provocative, and disgusting, that they must be controlled or they will do terrible damage to men.... It is about men who... blame women for their own feelings of sexual arousal, of inadequacy, of anger.... It is about... the denial of female power, the manner in which females are imprisoned in male fantasies.

Smith argues that women collude in keeping secret the misogyny that is at the heart of British society, because 'the truth is too uncomfortable to live with'.¹⁵ Zahavi exposes some of the fear and hatred of women that leads to their oppression. Her woman characters fulfil many of the fears that men have about women. They are dangerous, provocative, occasionally dishonest, but it is the men who are most disgusting. The humour inherent in this form of reverse dialectics is obvious, but it is the juxtaposition of anger, violence and humour that sets her writing apart. She explores anger and transforms and translates it into violence in a manner that can be both physically and sexually liberating. The outward projection of anger becomes, in her hands, a tangible force for liberation.

In her examination of recent (violent and vengeful) fiction by women, Ruth Padel asserts that 'revenge demons such as the Greek Furies are female in nearly every culture'. She further contends that 'since Greek myth is mainly a male construct, these stories must... express men's projected guilt'. Revenge, Padel adds, is countenanced in literature 'within the competitive, male honour/shame system', where for male writers 'women's humiliation and

revenge are mainly sexual'. If, as Padel believes, men project their own modes of revenge on to the women they harm, and turn their own guilt into female fantasy-figures, then women writers who incorporate revenge into their fictions are merely fulfilling a conventional construct fabricated by man's imagination.¹⁶ The problem with this argument is that retribution and revenge are frequently represented as fundamentally *male* instincts in western literature. Where then, does this leave female anger and vengeance as a particular feminist strategy? According to Zahavi:

Revenge is a dirty word these days and one tries not to mention it in polite company. Decent people with decent, wholesome lives are not, it seems, attuned to vengeance. So refined have they become, so acute their moral sense, that the very concept, let alone the word, is enough to turn their well-filled, decent stomachs.¹⁷

For Zahavi it is important that women are able to express frustration and rage in their writing and to enact fictitious acts of revenge. Jane Marcus makes a similar point when she states that women's anger 'is a vital source of intellectual energy in changing the subject of literary discourse'.¹⁸ Although this 'energy' is often seen as disturbing, it allows women to project anger through the voices of their woman characters. Male anger is often seen as an affirmation of strength and masculinity but, as Vanessa Freidman observes 'unspeakable female rage, when enacted... is primarily (seen as) a crime against... culturally prescribed nature'. She concludes that 'almost nothing would seem as horrible as a woman who can kill'.¹⁹ Culturally constructed ideals of femininity have engendered a tyrannical and unjust severity of response to any transgression of 'normal' behaviour for women and, indeed, for women writers who articulate extremes of anger and/or violence.

The reclamation of anger by women writers is a significant step forward in feminist literary traditions where there is a need for women to be able to reclaim new identities, outside the restraints of cultural ideology. Marcus also points out that 'anger and righteous

indignation are the two emotions that provoke the most hostility from the powerful when expressed by the powerless' and women's writing 'is judged in a special category, as if writing inspired by anger were not worthy of the name of art'.²⁰ This is certainly true in Zahavi's case. There is no doubt that women need to reclaim identities in new ways. For Phyllis Chesler 'the most important undertaking by women writers in recent fiction is 'that [they] have begun to imagine... women killers... in print. She argues that women (including women writers) are conditioned to be the social enforcers of the status quo, to challenge and condemn any woman (or man) who "steps out of line"'. She asserts that women writers need 'to create female heroes and anti-heroes, larger than life... not just "nice" girls or "perfect" victims, not when it's safe, but precisely when it's risky'.²¹ If women writers are to be celebrated for taking risks, it seems rather singular that Zahavi has been castigated so vehemently for her use of violence and anger. Virginia Woolf says that women are disinclined to tell the truth about female passion, desire and emotion because many men prefer 'conventional' behaviour in women and they vilify any woman who will not conform to conventional 'feminine' behaviour.

According to Joan Smith, Zahavi's heroine in *True Romance* (a nameless East European refugee who is serially beaten and raped) constitutes a real problem for readers. She argues that Zahavi's first two books, *Dirty Weekend* and *True Romance* offer contemporary versions of the Marquis de Sade's predator Juliette (*The Misfortunes Of Vice*) and his perpetual victim Justine (*The Misfortunes Of Virtue*). Smith then proceeds to dismiss them and maintains that 'somewhere along the line, Virginia Woolf's truth "about the body, about the passions", has got lost again'.²² The sadomasochistic sexual tendencies of the woman character in *True Romance* prove difficult for many readers, but Zahavi is, in fact, providing ways of reading her novels that allow a multiplicity of sexual and subject positions. In 'Who's Read Macho Sluts?', Claire Watling argues that this multiplicity of positions is of

importance for many feminists who call for ways of reading which allow, ‘multiple viewing pleasures’.²³ Does the literary representation of anger always have to conform to an absolute idea of passion and truth? Anger can be an emotional response to an unreasonable situation and I would judge that Zahavi hopes to have a cognitive impact upon her readers, galvanising them into some sort of political and emotional response to her novels.

Zahavi’s novels specifically engage in a debate on power and powerlessness. The lack of women’s autonomy is at the forefront and Zahavi shows that indigent and impoverished women have little control over their bodies, their sexuality, their anger or their lives. The oppressor(s) are defined by their incessant need for power, in whatever forms it takes, but Zahavi empowers her protagonists, allowing them to seize control of their lives. It might be a strange sort of empowerment but it can be effective and liberating. Bella, in *Dirty Weekend*

woke up one morning and realised she’d had enough.

She’s no-one special. England’s full of wounded people. Quietly choking. Shrieking softly so the neighbours won’t hear them. You must have seen them. You’ve probably passed them. You’ve certainly stepped on them. Too many people have had enough.

It’s nothing new. It’s what you do about it that really counts (*DW*, p. 1).

Zahavi’s writing articulates anger at the ways that women are expected to behave. She implicates the reader in Bella’s predicament (you’ve certainly stepped on them) challenging them with wry humour to think of the consequences. It may be, as Sue Vice believes, that Zahavi’s ‘style-based approach’ conforms to Bakhtin’s observation that ‘the study of verbal art can and must overcome the divorce between an abstract “formal” approach and an equally abstract “ideological” approach’.²⁴ In the following passage Zahavi combines both a fluidity of expression and an ideological positioning for women:

She could have done the decent thing. She could have done what decent people do.

She could have filled her gently rounded belly with barbiturates, or flung herself, with

gay abandon, from the top of a tower block. They would have thought it sad, but not unseemly.... She must have had enough, they would say. At least she had the decency to do the decent thing (*DW*, p. 1).

The emphasis here is on what is considered 'appropriate' for a woman. Is it to give up quietly or to take control? Zahavi allows her women to take control of their anger and their lives, which seems to me to be a particularly feminist strategy. While *Dirty Weekend* cannot claim to end a lifetime's oppression of women, it does make a bold statement. Women are prepared to take matters into their own hands -- they want revenge. Zahavi has stated:

My motivation was to express things I hadn't even acknowledged to myself, to channel a great deal of rage and create a woman who would do what I had felt like doing. When men want to batter Bella, and rape her, and shove themselves into her mouth, she eliminates them, a reasonable response to unreasonable demands. The book has been called pornographic and I reject that, nor do I feel the protagonist is sadistic. She strikes the necessary blow. I suspect it might be a good idea.²⁵

The violent acts that Zahavi's protagonists inflict on male characters are a necessary offence and they always occur within a framework of events that determine the oppression of women; the result is political agency. That is, her protagonists are in a constant state of *action* against their oppression or are exerting power in the fight against that oppression. The subversive, dark humour she evokes works towards the achievement of agency, although it is the yoking of humour and violence together that was considered by some to be offensive.²⁶ To argue that Zahavi's woman characters are women masquerading as men, as Makinen does, falls into the trap of equating women who challenge ontological principles with the desire to be men, rather than seeing them as stepping outside predetermined boundaries of selfhood by challenging notions of what women can do.

Zahavi challenges a number of social and critical assumptions in her novels. She articulates repressed instinctual impulses which, according to Freudian analysis, express an unconscious commentary on instinctual life or in Melanie Klein's terms, that 'phantasy emanates from within', but rather than an unconscious process in Zahavi's novels, repressed desires become conscious decisions.²⁷ The essence of repression is represented as the turning away of certain impulses from the conscious. The repression of instinctual feelings and emotions can, according to psychoanalytical theory, form feelings of anxiety and helplessness. According to Freud, 'sadistic impulsion' can be completely successfully repressed; the ideational content is rejected and the effect is made to disappear.²⁸ In Zahavi's fictions the failure of repression as a defence mechanism that protects humans from impulses or ideas that cause anxiety becomes increasingly marked. She creates an ambivalent relationship between repressed desires and conscious and unconscious actions. Her protagonists are characterised by a variety of diametric feelings or attitudes towards their oppression and are often uncertain or unable to decide about what course to follow. Their initial uncertainty gives way to direction and autonomy. In 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes', Freud argues that 'the *ego*, or *self preservative* instincts and the *sexual* instinct' are primal instincts that 'can lay claim to importance' in determining the human condition. The role of repression in these areas provides a base from which to examine the uses of anger in Zahavi's writing.²⁹

In *Dirty Weekend* the anger that has been repressed is released on Bella's visit to Nimrod, the Iranian clairvoyant, who claims to be able to 'unlock your Hidden Powers' (*DW*, p. 22):

'I don't have to take this.'

She suddenly felt hot. As if waves of heat were washing over her.

'I want to put my hands around your neck and squeeze until it snaps'.

‘I want to choke the air from your lungs.’

‘I want to watch the light die in your eyes.’

‘I want to shut your mouth up once and for all.’

‘So what stops you?’

‘You’re stronger than me. All men are stronger than me’ (*DW*, pp. 36-37).

Bella gives voice to her repressed anger and this gives her the strength to confront Tim, the peeping-tom and obscene telephone caller who oppresses her mentally and physically. The following passage illustrates the outward projection of Bella’s anger. If anger ceases to be repressed it can re-emerge into consciousness, particularly when faced with hostility. Bella’s response is to speak the anger that has accumulated over time and emphasises the incongruity of her behaviour:

She picked up the receiver. She waited for his voice...

She listened to the silence... *Now it was her silence* (my emphasis). One afternoon with a raving wreck of a refugee was all she needed to find the strength to silence him.

‘I’ll be coming round to see you,’ he said.

‘I think you’re impotent.’

‘You want to try stroking it.’

‘Dirty slutbitch.’

‘You want to try sucking it.’

‘You want to try bribing it.’

‘Shut your fucking mouth.’

‘My mouth doesn’t fuck,’ she said. ‘I don’t have a mouth that fucks. I don’t fuck with my mouth.’

The narrator intercedes to state that it is not meant to be this way, women are not supposed to fight back:

It must be tough if you're Tim. If you're an ordinary, honest-to-goodness, salt-of-the-earth sort of guy, who likes swilling beer with the boys, and swapping tales of random conquest. If you find a silent woman to feed your fantasy, and you stroke your heavy scrotum as you whisper dank obscenities down the line. If you trail her in the street, and watch her shrivel up, and it makes you feel a man.... You've got a cock, and the cock is king. Then suddenly, horribly, disgustingly, she opens her filthy mouth and she whispers filthy words. And it's not meant to be like this (*DW*, pp. 44-45).

In this instance anger allows a certain freedom of expression for Zahavi's character, a release. Ernest Johnson believes that anger is always 'a complex emotional response that includes elements of past injustices and provocations' but typically women are expected to contain their anger or to express it in more guarded ways.³⁰ Bella's response provokes shock in her listener. It is the need *not* to be angry, confrontational and antagonistic that forces women to repress their emotions.³¹ If women have traditionally repressed their anger in order to conform to socially accepted ideas of femininity, then the outward projection of that anger can be liberating in the extreme.³² Zahavi abrogates the notion that anger is harmful and negative. If anger produces heightened activity, antagonistic thought patterns and aggressive behaviour, symptoms displayed by Zahavi's protagonists, anger may also be understood as a most fundamental weapon in the fight against the patriarchal subjugation of women.

Some of the most vitriolic criticism of Zahavi has centred on her second novel *True Romance* for its representations of sexual fetishisms and domestic violence. In early feminist writing women sought to "decondition" men... to establish a more realistic image of female sexuality'.³³ Women are still seeking to establish a more varied representation of female sexuality, but what is meant by 'realistic'? Female sexuality can and does vary considerably

and women's relationships to their own sexual desires are often ambivalent and contradictory. To return to Freud momentarily; he contends that the sexual instinct is one of the foremost primal instincts in determining the self. In this context Zahavi also engages in a literary debate on the sexual imperative in women and men. In *True Romance* woman is constructed as a pure sex object. Max, one of the males in the sexual threesome, expresses the male propensity to see women in determined roles. He states that the refugee he takes into his home 'although disinclined to cook a meal, or make the bed, or wash his generous smalls... pandered to his tastes in many other ways (*TR*, p. 23). The kitchen and/or the bedroom are still the only places where this man can envisage women. Zahavi's novel is hugely satirical, even though this feature is sometimes often forgotten in the heated debates on its publication, and it is drawn from her observations of the sexual and social behaviour of men and women in contemporary British society. The overt sexual imagery in this novel allows a discussion of the sexual instinct in women as well as men. The 'problem' inherent in *True Romance* is that it does not conform to ideologically 'sound' definitions of women's sexuality.³⁴

Zahavi uses the situation of the woman in *True Romance* to expose the iniquity and hypocrisy still prevalent in social relations between the sexes and there is little doubt that the novel is also a satirical critique of their exploitative relationships. The unnamed woman character appears to be quite happy to be taken into the male character's home. The narrator states knowingly, 'If she had been another type of woman, one more suited to privation, [she] might have found a furnished room, or felt a sudden urge to take a job. But she didn't have the patience. She had different kinds of urges' (*TR*, p. 6). If feminism has exceeded its objective of seeking political equality for women and has ended by rejecting contingency, as some feminist critics have argued, then what better way to explore women's estate than in a book that examines the relationship between sex, sexuality and power?³⁵ The relationship

between sex and power has been explored many times before but Zahavi is distinct in providing us with a spectre that haunts the complacent acceptance of moral and social constructions of sexuality.

Romance is sometimes presented in ‘coercive and stereotyping narratives, which invite the reader to identify with a passive heroine who only finds true happiness in submitting to a masterful male’.³⁶ In entitling her novel *True Romance*, Zahavi’s ironic take on female masochism in relation to love and romance is immediately apparent. She even appears to engage in an intertextual debate with Daphne du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, one of the most widely read romantic novels of the twentieth century and the similarities are obvious. *Rebecca* also has a nameless female protagonist and a powerful, rich male protagonist called Max, who is a bully, a misogynist and a murderer. Both novels are plotted along a trajectory of jealousy, adultery and murder, which are the driving forces of romance writing. The narrative of the nameless woman in *True Romance* articulates the prejudiced and preconceived conceptions of women’s behaviour in relation to their subject positions. The woman seems determined to fulfil the prophecy preordained for her:

So quietly vicious. To think she’d found a man like that, in a house like this....

Once inside the hall -- or vestibule, so grand it was -she nearly fainted from the scent, she almost buckled at the knee. Such an odour of delight, a smell of inch-thick carpeting and polished wood and total lack of doubt. A concentrated money smell. Stuffing both her nostrils with the unaccustomed reek, inhaling with abandon, she let him take her coat. (Not just rich, she thought approvingly. But manners, too.)

(*TR*, p. 9).

Zahavi offers a very pointed critique of the conditioning that accompanies the reading of romance. Tania Modleski points out that ‘analysts of women’s romances have generally seen the fantasy embodied in romantic fiction either as evidence of female “masochism” or as a

simple reflection of the dominant male ideology'.³⁷ The heroes of romance novels usually begin by being 'brutal' and showing 'indifference and contempt' towards the woman characters. As Modleski observes, 'knowing the hero will eventually imply or state he has loved the heroine from the beginning' is all part of the formulaic approach to romance writing.³⁸ Male brutality is not, however, an expression of love in Zahavi's fiction, it is an acceptable form of behaviour towards women. This, according to Zahavi, is the *true* nature of romance.

Zahavi's anger *at* women and *on behalf* of women is at its most obvious in this novel. Her woman character is 'so trained... her reactions so Pavlovian' (*TR*, p. 109) that 'the salivating thought of being held, and spread' makes her feel 'controlled, contained, and immensely grateful' (*TR*, p. 46). But, the novel is not just a straightforward satirical critique of women who accept their allotted position as subservient, nor is it merely an assault on the brutality of men. For Zahavi, it is more complex and she overturns perceptions in a number of ways. For example, it is not the nameless woman character who gives in to feelings of insecurity as one might suspect when the three-way relationship begins to pall. It is Max who seems to 'go to pieces'. He says, 'I might be silent... but I'm screaming inside' (*TR*, p. 132) and he resorts to what is generally seen as a predominantly female condition, bulimia nervosa, forcing oneself to vomit at moments of stress:

He wanted them to comfort him, the pair of them to hold him close. He'd been abandoned in his bed. The bastards didn't need him anymore... and he ached with it, the sense of loss, the total isolation...

[he] watched the brownish jet which issued from his mouth splash down the marble bowl.

He felt better straight away. The cleansing nature of a good spew, the healing effects of a good hard puke, were often underestimated. Regurgitation, he remembered, was often quite uplifting (*TR*, pp. 132-3).

This juxtaposition of revolting imagery with basic humour is typical of Zahavi's narrative approach. She follows this episode with Max symbolically cutting off his hair: 'He knew his hair would have to go.... He began to chop the hair away, though carefully, methodically, making sure he didn't stray too near the scalp' (*TR*, pp. 134-135). Zahavi attributes feminine feelings of worthlessness to a male character, but she overlays these with a typically masculine precision and discipline. The incongruity is apparent and it is here that the ironic humour lies. Vanity and control assert themselves, however, as the character surveys his new image: 'The inner man was mirrored in the outer form. So hard. So very different. Such hidden vicious beauty' (*TR*, p. 136).

Zahavi's woman character in *True Romance* is fragmented and dispersed and the constant use of mirror images throughout the novel enforces this idea. Lacanian theory locates the mirror stage, or mirror images, as fundamental in the formation of desire and autoeroticism. If, as Jacques Lacan states, the subject (self) is determined by a chain of signifiers, then this can be understood to be represented by the many images the nameless woman sees of herself in mirrors. Lacan argues that women tend to use violence predominantly against other women, who are viewed as mirror images of the self. Zahavi subverts this idea. Lacan developed his early theories based on his observation of female criminals and it is worthy of note that in each of Zahavi's novels the woman characters engage in criminal activity; they all execute criminal acts, but, not against other women.³⁹ In Freudian theory, self-hatred in the female 'hysteric' often turns to self-mutilation, but in Lacanian theory self-hatred precipitates the barrier between fantasy, imagination and reality

being diminished, resulting in violence perpetrated on others. The nameless woman in *True Romance* evidences self-hatred and tellingly, self-love:

She saw the mirror image of herself. She couldn't help but see it, for he'd clamped her head and turned it to the glass. But when she saw it, when she saw the drained, anaemic image in the glass, she shut her eyes and pushed away the creeping recognition that those things they did, those rank and furtive things... the mess they made, the joys they gave -- might bear a heavy price (*TR*, p. 141).

Zahavi quite ruthlessly imagines the underlying unconscious recognition of self-knowledge. In both examples the nameless woman can only define herself in relation to her sexual activities:

Opposite, there was an oval mirror.... She observed herself, her curled and tinted hair spread out around her head, her narrow body nearly hidden, trapped behind the heaving Bruno back.

She was open-eyed with admiration. That's me she thought, and smiled at her reflection. He's doing that to me, she thought and blew herself a large and silent kiss.

She felt as though she was the centre of the cosmos, the focus of existence. She pulsed and throbbed with self-esteem (*TR*, p. 87).

Women have traditionally been viewed through the masculine gaze and consequently defined as 'other', but here Zahavi has superimposed a female gaze; the woman is looking back at both herself and her place within the dominant construction of female sexuality.

In Zahavi's novels the women characters embody the qualities of the *femme fatale*. The *femme fatale*, whether in literature or film noir, often subverts active/passive binaries and their preconditioned gendering that accompanies such representation. Mary Ann Doane believes this 'indicates that masculine "activity" is always already an escape from the abysmal dimension of the feminine *act*', and that the *femme fatale* is 'a symptom of male

fears about feminism'.⁴⁰ For Lacan, females who acted out their 'romances' through violent assault were giving a classic indication of paranoia and psychotic behaviour. In an extended scene in *True Romance* Zahavi subverts the belief that women who revert to violent behaviour do so because they suffer a mental disorder in which contact with reality is lost or highly distorted. The protagonist of this novel *appears* to be in complete contact with reality as she inspects the man behind the counter of the petrol station she is in the process of robbing with a calm, clear gaze:

She gazed at the man -- at his rectal mouth, and his venal face -- and wondered if she would have wanted him, if she might have let him touch her tender places with his thick and warty fingers, had he only been astute enough to reside in Little Venice (*TR*, p. 100).

The woman is very aware of herself and the power she has by holding the sawn-off shotgun beneath her coat. Zahavi also imbues the gun, the ultimate phallic symbol, with a feminine sexuality, an act of deliberate subversion:

She imagined the thing beneath her coat was getting warmer, pinkly glowing in advance, heating up in readiness. It almost felt as if her mute and silent implement were throbbing with excitement, pulsating in suspense...

'Frankly speaking then,' he said, 'I think you're what one tends to call a cunt.'

.... She reached inside her coat, and touched her hidden preciousness.... She pulled out her glorious thing.

'I'm a cunt with a sawn-off shotgun' (*TR*, pp. 100-105).

Again, Zahavi's satirical prose articulates a knowing acceptance of the power that the woman has at this stage, holding her instrument of power, the gun.

However, the power afforded by the gun is a temporary innovation although there is no doubt it offers the woman particular pleasure. It has been posited that 'women's

knowledge of, and willingness to use guns affords a pleasure familiar to feminists'. Kirsten Marthe Letz believes that 'guns are one of the most overdetermined, almost comically obvious signifiers of masculinity', and that women's knowledge and aptitude for using weapons allow them mastery of 'masculine practices and traits'.⁴¹ The use of guns and violence works as satire in Zahavi's novels although it is not necessarily commensurate with the empowerment of women. Lentz states that in cases where women gain control in this way 'the dynamic reverses so as to create the sense that it is her *agency/freedom* which is only temporary and that she will soon return to her normally victimised, compromised position'.⁴² In many ways, this is true. However, the theory that surrounds 'victimhood' is decidedly complex. Women are often seen to be complicit in their own victimhood. This is one of the main issues that Zahavi explores in *True Romance*:

Sometimes women love their chains. They want to feel them tight around their wrists. They want to bend the knee, and kiss the glory of the master. Even when they've got a shooter in their hands, they get the urge to hand it back to someone else, and let him help them climb inside. Some girls don't deserve a gun (*TR*, p. 121).

The observation is taken further in *Donna and the Fatman* where it is not exclusively women who are victims. Joe, one of the male protagonists, a driver for 'fatman' the gangster, 'was born for violation' (*DATF*, p. 171). From contending that there are only two types of women in *True Romance* 'those with money and those without' (*TR*, p. 110), Zahavi now argues that there are only two types of man. These are 'the ones who are bent and shafted, and the ones who do the shafting' (*DATF*, p. 52). Zahavi makes clear differentiation between male constructed masculinity and female response to it in this novel. The narrative is much more hard edged, but the dark humour still endures.

Donna and the Fatman has the same themes and preoccupations as *Dirty Weekend* and *True Romance* and in this sense is very much the third novel in a trilogy. However, she

turns her attention to the oppression of men through violence. Zahavi explores masculinity through characters such as Henry the fatman, Merv the perv and Billy the skinhead, who are ‘well-built men with perfect teeth’, who ‘smiled a lot and who could blame them’ (*DATF*, p. 7). These men *appear* to be very secure in their maleness and their power. The opening chapter of the novel in which the gangsters are introduced is set in a restaurant and is extremely funny but undercut by polite intimidation. The swaggering menace of masculinity in its most exaggerated form is caught precisely by Zahavi’s sharp, satirical dialogue:

‘You hungry, Merv?’

‘Bit peckish frankly.’

‘Get a menu, shall I?’

‘If you wouldn’t mind.’

.... The skinhead... threaded his way between the tables and watched the punters tucking in. Now and then he added a remark, if he thought it might be helpful -- asked them if they liked his hair, or told them food was good for them -but he mostly merely stood and watched.

....‘That looks tasty.’

He bent and peered.

‘It got a name?’

The husband studied the razored scalp.

‘Zabaglione.’

The skinhead frowned.

‘Not English then?’

.... ‘You should try it sometime.’

.... ‘Well just a weeny bit, as you’re offering,’ and he slipped his finger in the bowl, scooped out some stuff, and licked it off. A moment’s contemplation...

‘Bit sweet, old mate, if I’m being honest’ (*DATF*, pp. 7-9).

The tension created with Zahavi’s spare dialogue is palpable. There is an acutely observed interaction between the social and political implications of what the skinhead Billy is signifying with his appearance and the masculinity he is ‘performing’ for the benefit of his (captive) audience.

In current debates on masculinity, it has been argued that there is a general assumption that there may be a fixed, true masculinity. R. W. Connell states that this is ‘inherent in the male body’ and it is one reason why men are more prone to violent acts.⁴³ Zahavi disrupts socially constructed ideas of masculinity and femininity by showing them in absurd exaggeration. One of the criticisms levelled at this writer is that that her women characters take on masculine attributes and that this may not be ‘a good thing’ for feminism. The idea that masculinity and femininity are not at ‘opposite poles... but in different perpendicular dimensions’, offers more opportunity to debate constructed images of men and women.⁴⁴ If masculinity and femininity are ‘independently variable’, then such criticism of Zahavi’s women is largely negated. If masculinity is not only ‘about’ men, then femininity is not only ‘about’ women; the two do not exist in fixed opposition to each other, nor are they always recognisable.⁴⁵ If masculinity belongs to no single gender, then the attributes that have been socially adjudged as masculine can be found in men and women; it is rather that women have repressed them.

Donna and The Fatman explores the cross gendering of violence, or who is oppressing whom in society. The anger of *Dirty Weekend* is still very much apparent in Zahavi’s third novel, but more significantly, it is the eroding of differences *between* the genders that baffles Henry the fatman, the chief oppressor. He is rich, powerful and a respecter of ‘real men’. He has strong views on what makes a man and how women’s propensity for preferring ‘womanly’ men is worrying:

‘Some girls prefer (men) like that’.

‘.... sweet good-natured boys with gentle lips. Tender lads who can’t protect them. As if there’s nothing bad, out there. As if you can walk down the street with a gutless man, and God will protect you’.

‘.... because they don’t like men with balls, any more. Not big round balls they can kiss every night. Not ballsy men’ (*DATF*, p. 54).

Henry is very fond of women having to ‘bend their knee’ and kiss the signifier of real power. In one foul stroke, however, Zahavi exposes Henry’s power base for what it is. Donna, who has chosen Henry’s poor, but young and good looking driver, Joe, over him is ‘invited’ to his mansion so that she can ‘wipe’ Joe’s debt:

(H)e dipped his hand in the open jar and scooped out a generous glob. Then he parted his legs and anointed himself, spreading it over the purple sack, the veined and baggy Henry pouch, which contained his modest orbs.

‘For you, this is,’ he reminded her. ‘So come on darling...’

She gazed, entranced, at the glistening mess. The words ‘horrified fascination’ slipped, unbidden into her brain. Henry was dripping on the floor. His belly hung discreetly down, not quite obscuring his bits and bobs, the moist and waiting succulence that nestled coyly between his thighs. The air, she realised smelled of milk and honey. She had reached the Promised Land (*DATF*, pp. 70-71).

The combination of revulsion and fascination that marks Zahavi’s work is not quite so shockingly realised in *Donna and The Fatman*, but there is some memorable imagery. Donna realises at this stage that she will not bend. She will not let the fatman oppress her. Zahavi’s anger at the oppression of the weak by the strong is given a new dimension in this novel. Not only women suffer at the hands of the bullies and the cheats, it is also weaker men. Donna knows that she will never manage to rise above the role that has been determined for her; as a

powerless female she is destined to be one of life's losers: 'she's only a soft boned girly, and she knows she's a loser really. She's got it written on her forehead: I am nothing on this earth. Predestined for a shitty life' (*DATF*, p. 99). Zahavi extricates Donna from this mindset empowering her with a sense of anger and injustice that culminates in a final act of violent destruction. Donna knows very early on that she is destined to die. She wants it to be a spectacular death, one she can go to knowing that she has had her revenge on those who persecute her. She eliminates Merv the perv and Billy the skinhead, but her final retribution is consummate. The conflict between oppressor and oppressed, that all of Zahavi's writing engages with, is finally resolved in the explosive conclusion of the novel and her suicide:

All finished, she realised. God save me now. One final drag on the nicotine, and she tossed the flame into the petrol tank. There was an endless moment of infinite horror, and the sudden bliss of nothingness. Then rest in peace. Then fuck them all. Then Donna bitch in paradise' (*DATF*, p. 252).

Zahavi's spectacle is no simple political allegory of revenge; her writing throughout all three novels is often irreverent and satirical, but it is undeniably challenging on a number of levels. She explores the contradictions within the politics of gender with a carnivalesque impudence that is frequently gross and often sacrilegious. Elements of carnival may be detected in 'textual images, plot or language itself... producing a "spectacle"'.⁴⁶ Zahavi's writing is spectacular in its imagery and its narrative style; violence, anger and retribution are all gloriously encompassing.

Zahavi's writing engages with what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour for women or, what is acceptable as literary discourse. That is to say, what is considered 'literary' is comfortably approved of and what falls outside acceptable paradigms of 'literariness' is disapproved of or disparaged. Zahavi's distinctive narrative style and subject matter challenge conventional notions of female behaviour. She subverts the notion of the

compliant and acquiescent woman, attributing her protagonists with an anger that liberates them. If as Anita Harris and Diane Baker argue, violence is the most basic tool of any system of oppression, then feminist writers who use violence as a feminist strategy are allowing women to seize control for themselves. Zahavi achieves autonomy for her women characters, a personal independence of sorts. Bella in *Dirty Weekend* and Donna in *Donna and the Fatman* connect on many levels; but fused they create belladonna, a perennial Eurasian herb, whose roots and leaves yield atropine. This extract, among other uses, is used to dilate the eyes, to allow them to become wider. Zahavi's powerful use of metaphor here is obvious. The nameless, rootless 'European' protagonist of *True Romance* is a passive belladonna, but even in her passivity Zahavi allows her an important role. Bella/Donna is used by Zahavi to open our eyes and to force us to see clearly the continuing intimidation and oppression of women, and the oppression of the weak by the strong. She parades a diverse range of masculinities before us, parodying male dominated 'worlds' such as academia with the 'almost professor'; medicine with the dentist; business with the small, mean and bitter yuppies; serial killing with Jack (The Ripper) and of course crime, with the gangsters who appear in various forms in *True Romance* and *Donna and the Fatman*. Zahavi's women manage to leave their mark in all these areas. Zahavi creates the archetypal 'angry' woman, but the problem is 'she ha(s)n't played the game' (*DW*, p. 183). What Zahavi is doing is re-stating the rules of the game and playing on her own terms: she *is* the street cleaner, the waste disposal operative; she clears up, clarifies, elucidates and particularises the situation of angry women and how they might respond to their anger.⁴⁷

As early as 1972 feminists were arguing that 'women... want to construct a body of... fantasies and imaginings' that 'have no further need of male definitions'.⁴⁸ Zahavi is, in her own way, constructing her own body of writing that dismisses socially accepted idea of womanly behaviour:

You don't have to have a drill, to know how to kill. She was a natural. It came easily to her. It was breathing in fresh air. It was doing what you were meant to do. It was glorious. (*DW*, p. 165)

Zahavi asserts that she writes fiction and never 'a manifesto or a polemic', stating that she has 'felt extremely vulnerable... felt rage... and it was very odd because I'm not used to feeling rage, but guilt -- the normal female emotion -- but it felt good, that sudden sense of empowerment'.⁴⁹ The study of women's writing according to Elaine Showalter, 'no longer depends on winning critical laurels of genius for the few, but rather on the acceptance of the female tradition as part of the culture as a whole'.⁵⁰ However, while women are part of a literary culture in Britain, those who utilise language in an unorthodox manner and whose subject matter is very controversial are still often critically undermined.⁵¹ These are issues that will be returned to in discussion of Pat Barker, Livi Michael and Anne McManus. Zahavi's novels have put women's writing at the forefront of literary debate.⁵² She sees violence as a function of extreme powerlessness, and as people become more established and more secure in themselves, the need to be violent diminishes.⁵³ In the meantime Zahavi's women characters articulate their anger and establish their own sense of identity by whatever means they can.⁵⁴

Endnotes.

¹In this instance apotheosis is used to signify a model of excellence or perfection in ‘literary’ language/writing that is challenged by Helen Zahavi in the novels discussed here. By positing a separate tradition of women’s writing there is the danger of always seeing it as something apart and marginalised. Dale Bauer has noted that the contradiction of feminist theory itself is that it is at once excluded from discourse and imprisoned within it. See her discussion of Myra Jehlen’s ‘Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism’, in Dale M. Bauer, ‘Gender in Bakhtin’s Carnival’ in *Feminist Dialogics: a theory of failed community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 4.

²Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, in Maggie Humm ed., *Feminisms: A Reader*, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1992), pp. 196-202.

³Phallogocentrism in this context is ‘how patriarchy models its thoughts and language’ as defined by Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*, Second Edition, (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1995), p. 205.

⁴This argument is reinforced by Ann Banfield, *The Linguistics of Writing*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p. 266. See also Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) especially Chapter 2, ‘Dialogism: “... and conflict between them”’, pp. 45-111. Dale Spender’s argument that ‘the English language has been literally man made... is still primarily under male control... [and] is one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy and consequently have ensured the invisibility or “other” nature of females’ is recognised as one of the main reasons why women’s voices have been marginalised. Spender’s point that ‘this primacy is perpetrated while women [and others] continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited’, still has some resonance here, but subversion from *within* language is vital to any reading of feminist fictions. See Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (London and New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), p. 12.

⁵Although this argument was used in a discussion of colonial discourses and centred on African writing, Snead’s point that language may be challenged from within utilising differing narrative strategies, varied syntax, as well as a repertoire of myths, legends, ritual and folklore is entirely relevant and can be extended to gender. See James Snead, ‘European pedigrees/ African contagions’, in Homi K. Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 232.

⁶Helen Zahavi, *Dirty Weekend* (London: Flamingo Press, 1992), *True Romance* (London: Minerva, 1995), *Donna and the Fatman*, (London: Anchor Press, 1998). Further references to these novels will be abbreviated as: *DW*; *TR*; and *DATF*, and will be included in the main body of the text.

⁷Male writers are traditionally seen as the best proponents of this genre of writing but that is not to say that women writers have not written violent books. My point here is that anger has not been accepted from women writers in the same way that it has from male writers. *Dirty Weekend* was deemed so shocking when it was first published that the *Sunday Times* brought in a team of psychiatrists to speculate on the state of Zahavi’s mental health. I tend to agree

with Chris Savage King's comment that this is 'inconceivable' and something that would not happen to male writers such as Brett Easton Ellis. King also argues that the book has not been judged solely as fiction as the moral impact of the story takes attention away from assessment of its literary quality. See C. Savage King, 'INSIDE STORY: Death wish and the maiden', *Guardian*, 4 September, 1993, p. 34.

⁸See Angela Lambert, 'Bella hammers the message home: Angela Lambert has reservations about the rage in Helen Zahavi's novel of revenge', *Independent*, 25 March, 1991, p. 17.

⁹See Merja Makinen, 'Sexual and textual aggression in *The Sadeian Woman* and *The Passion of New Eve*', in Joseph Bristow and Lynn Broughton eds. *The Infernal Desires of Angela Carter*, (London: Longman, 1997), pp. 152-153.

¹⁰Although Duncker is critiquing Angela Carter's re-writing of fairy tales, the point she makes is also relevant here. See Patricia Duncker, 'Re-imagining The Fairy Tales: Angela Carter's *Bloody Chamber*', *Journal of History and Literature*, 10 (1984), p. 4.

¹¹Merja Makinen, 'Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* and the Decolonization of Feminine Sexuality', *Feminist Review*, 42 (1992), p. 26.

¹²Manohla Dargis also makes this point in an essay on *Thelma and Louise*. There have been many different links made between Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend* and Ridley Scott's film. I first linked the two together in a lecture called 'women and revenge' on a module called 'Contemporary Cultural Production', at the University of Hertfordshire, in 1994. For Dargis's discussion of the film see Manohla Dargis, "'Thelma & Louise" and the tradition of the male road movie', in Pam Cook & Philip Dodd, eds., *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), p. 87.

¹³Elaine Showalter, 'The English women's novel, killed by feminism', *Independent*, 13 June, 1998, p. 5.

¹⁴See Jane Ussher, 'Labelling Women's Anger' in *Women's Madness; Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991), p. 168.

¹⁵Joan Smith, *Misogynies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 152-153

¹⁶Ruth Padel believes that the archetypal revenge killer is Medea, who murdered her children in revenge for their father leaving her. But she contends that 'in early versions of the story, other people killed the children, or they died by accident. Euripides invented the version we know in 431 BC: Medea killed them for the first time in his play... Greek tragedy, which laid down most of the sexual stereotypes still running the Western imagination, was composed, directed and performed by men, for men. Medea's revenge killing was invented by a man; and men wrote the archetypal female revenge speeches and arias in novels, plays, and operas'. She also argues that 'women often act up to what men think of them, and some of this revenge stuff connects with real life'. These are general points but they also tend to be somewhat formulaic, seeing women as mere fulfillers of male fantasies, rather than having revenge fantasies of their own. See Ruth Padel, 'Books: The New Avengers', *Independent*, 18 April, 1998, p. 11.

¹⁷Helen Zahavi, 'Like a lion to the slaughter', *Guardian*, 20 February, 1992, p. 36.

¹⁸Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), p. xxi.

¹⁹See Vanessa Freidman, 'Over His Dead Body: Female Murderers, Female Rage and Western Culture', in Renée Curry and Terry L. Allison eds., *States of Rage: Emotional Eruption, Violence, and Social Change* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 62-73.

²⁰Marcus, *Art and Anger*, p. 122

²¹Phyllis Chesler questions whether women writers such as Austen, the Brontës, Eliot, Woolf, Colette, Wharton, Stein, Barnes, Nin, de Beauvoir, or Lessing have ever given us a portrait of homicidal fury in female form, stating that 'few prefeminist writers have ever dared to imagine the lives of women killers and outlaws'. According to Chesler, this is something that is now changing. In literature as in film she says, 'something's up, it's in the air, it's a sea-change, and suddenly, or so it seems, we are being bombarded by... images of women killing men'. Of course, women writers of science fiction have frequently given their readers women who kill. See 'Women killers in literature, film and the social sciences', *Contemporary Women's Issues Database: Off Our Backs*, 23 (1993), www.elibray.com.

²²See Joan Smith's article, 'Passions: Pornography? There just isn't enough', in *Guardian*, 17 September, 1994, p. 5.

²³Clare Watling, 'Who's read *Macho Sluts?*', in Judith Still and Michael Worton, eds., *Textuality and Sexuality: Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), p. 199

²⁴Sue Vice discusses dialogism and refers in some detail to 'Discourse in the Novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. Michael Holquist (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1981). Zahavi's 'verbal art' conforms substantially to notions of 'carnival', her use of satire, irony, parody and pastiche as well as the overt 'play' in her use of language make her writing style more complex than some critics acknowledge. Sue Vice also argues these points and also contends that Zahavi has produced a novel that has 'a consciousness of its own literariness'. See Sue Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 84.

²⁵Lambert, 'Bella hammers the message home', p. 17.

²⁶Diane Elam states that 'the danger is that women stop being a question for feminism and that identity politics can work... to exclude... those individuals who fail to conform to the correct model of womanhood'. See Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms. en Abyeme*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 72-73.

²⁷I would not equate Klein's arguments wholesale with Zahavi's writing but the concept of human drive having no object is noteworthy. Klein has stated that 'phantasy emanates from what is within and images what is without' and this has resonance for Zahavi's novels. See Juliet Mitchell, ed., *The Selected Melanie Klein* (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 22-23.

²⁸See 'Repression', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and*

Other Works, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, Vol. XIV (1914-1916), (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), p. 157.

²⁹Freud, 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, Vol. XIV (1914-1916), p. 124.

³⁰I realise this is a generalisation in relation to men and anger. There are many different ways of expressing anger, not all culminate in violence or violent acts. Yet women are not free to express their anger in the same way that men can, without some form of vilification. This is born out in the initial responses to Helen Zahavi's use of anger and violence.

³¹See Ernest H. Johnson, 'Gender and Ethnic Differences in the Experience and Expression of Anger,' in *The Deadly Emotions: The Role of Anger, Hostility, and Aggression in Health and Emotional Well-being* (New York and London: Praeger Publishers, 1990) pp. 131-155. See also Ernest H Johnson, 'Anger, Hostility and Aggression: The AHA! Syndrome', in *The Deadly Emotions: The Role of Anger, Hostility and Aggression in Health and Emotional Well-being*, pp. 7-33.

³²Johnson has also stated that women's survival is dependent on the success of their relationships -- particularly with the opposite sex. In many ways the repression of anger and hostility in women can be seen as part of that need to 'survive'. See Johnson, 'Gender and Ethnic Differences in the Experience and Expression of Anger,' p. 138. Having taught *Dirty Weekend* to students of both sexes, it is predominantly the women who find this an exhilarating and liberating novel. Women appear to recognise and embrace the outward projection of rage within the novel, something they feel they cannot otherwise express.

³³See Pat Whiting, 'Female Sexuality: Its Political Implications', in Michelene Wandor, ed., *The Body Politic: Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement in Britain 1969-1972* (London: Stage 1, 1972), p. 189.

³⁴According to Louise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach 'female sexuality is not simply experienced by the woman as an aspect of herself that she can enjoy and communicate; it is, because of her social position, both a product for herself and her product in the world'. They further argue that the paradox of female sexuality is that it is used for the female to find a home, and yet once found, women have to be both sexual and to have to curb their sexuality. See Luise Eichenbaum and Susie Orbach, 'Women's Psychological Development: Themes and Consequences', in *Understanding Women* (London: Penguin 1983), p. 155.

³⁵Camille Paglia, is one critic who has made this point quite vociferously. She has often been seen as controversial in her relationship to feminism. However, with regard to her comments on the nature of sex and violence and pornography, I tend to agree with Paglia's observation that 'sex is a far darker power than feminism has admitted'. She also states that the Romantic imperative in relation to sex and sexuality still permeates our culture, which is to an extent true. *True Romance*, an ironic title if ever there was one, proves that sex still has the power to

bring certain sections of society to frenzy. See Camille Paglia, *Sex and Violence, or Nature and Art* (London: Penguin, 1995), pp. 4-5.

³⁶See Alison Light, 'Returning to Manderley'- Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class', *Feminist Review*, 16 (1984), p. 7.

³⁷Tania Modleski, 'The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances', in *Loving with a Vengeance* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 436.

³⁸Modleski, 'The Disappearing Act', p. 439.

³⁹Lacan's study of the Papin sisters who murdered a mother and daughter for whom they worked and a young woman named 'Aimée', who stabbed an actress, informed his early theories. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen has stated that 'Lacan began with madness – and not just any madness, but murderous, paranoid, madness'. See Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, translated by Douglas Brick, 'Crime and Punishment', in *Lacan the Absolute Master* (Stamford, California: Stamford University Press 1991), p. 21.

⁴⁰Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1991) p.141. See also, Lynda Hart in *Fatal Women: Lesbian Sexuality and the Mark of Aggression* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 147.

⁴¹See Kirsten Marthe Letz, 'THE POPULAR PLEASURES OF FEMALE REVENGE (OR RAGE BURSTING IN A BLAZE OF GUNFIRE)', *Cultural Studies* (1996), pp. 374-375. See also Carol J. Clover's discussion of revenge in, 'High and low: the transformation of the rape-revenge movie', in *Women and Film: A Sight and Sound Reader* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 76-85.

⁴²Letz, 'THE POPULAR PLEASURES OF FEMALE REVENGE', p. 374.

⁴³See R.W. Connell, 'Men's Bodies', in *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. 45.

⁴⁴Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure In Your Masculinity!', in Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis & Simon Watson, eds., *Constructing Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 16.

⁴⁵Berger, Wallis & Watson, eds., 'Introduction', p. 3.

⁴⁶Sue Vice problematises carnival, arguing that this form of textualisation introduces the equivalent of a stage, which can create a distinction between actor and spectator. Zahavi's use of dialogic voicing allows a more immediate recognition of the 'spectacle' she is engaging in. See Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, p. 149.

⁴⁷This phrase was coined in relation to Peter Sutcliffe, The Yorkshire Ripper who believed he was cleaning the streets. See Nicole Ward Jouve, *The Street-Cleaner- Yorkshire Ripper Case on Trial* (London: Marion Boyars, 1988).

⁴⁸Whiting, 'Female Sexuality: Its Political Implications', p. 190.

⁴⁹Lambert, 'Bella hammers the message home', p. 17.

⁵⁰Elaine Showalter, 'The English women's novel, killed by feminism', *Independent*, 13 June, 1998, p. 5.

⁵¹Of course it is not just women writers who are criticised for using different 'varieties' of English. Arguments surrounding the 'literariness' of distinctive narrative strategies utilised by writers of fiction that deviate from the 'standard' are constant and pervasive. The most recent debate includes writers such as Irvine Welsh, whose novel *Filth* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1998) has been castigated for its 'bad' language. Other writers who experiment with dialect such as James Kelman are frequently criticised for their choice of language. Many writers endeavour to elevate 'other' voices to an equal standpoint in the novel, but it still remains that 'standard' uses of English are predominant in what is considered 'literary' writing.

⁵²Candida Crewe castigates Zahavi for 'adding to that brutality and degradation [of women] by writing the type of uninspired trash which may make a few bucks... Such women are betraying their own sex'. See Candida Crewe, 'Why do women writers betray their own sex', *Daily Mail*, 16 September, 1994, p. 8. Caitlin Moran exclaims, 'Helen Zahavi: you've written a stinky, stinky book'. See Caitlin Moran, 'Books: Not Likely', *Mail on Sunday*, 26 June, 1994, p. 37. Harvey Porlock quotes Sally Vincent's view of *True Romance* as being 'probably the most terrible book I have ever read'. See Harvey Porlock, 'On the Critical List; Books', *Sunday Times*, 3 July, 1994, p. 7. My own interest in Zahavi's writing stems from her use of anger and the satirical style of her writing. While I do not claim that her novels are great literary works, I believe they offer a narrative style and subject matter that are radically distinctive. Zahavi's novels are witty and caustic and form part of a debate on power and powerlessness and sexual politics in contemporary British society. Generalisations have frequently encouraged what appears to be quite unsubstantiated criticism. For example, Joan Smith has argued that 'Helen Zahavi invented a female serial killer who has sex with men and then murders them', which is a blatant misreading of *Dirty Weekend*. And Carmen Callil, while arguing that Zahavi 'writes wonderfully... is witty and knowing and manipulates words with real genius', also maintains that her books are 'almost unreadable... totally focussed on masochism, lust, violation and revenge.' Callil argues that reading about such things as violation and revenge cannot compare with the usual narrative pleasures of the novel and condemns Zahavi for her preoccupations. She also states that in *True Romance* we are told that women like molestation and murder, but again, this is an oversimplification of the novel. Women's collusion in their own oppression and subjugation would be a stronger point to make in response to the novel. See Carmen Callil, 'Time to change the subject -- Carmen Callil has a warning for a writer flawed by a fixation for S & M', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 June, 1994.

⁵³Danny Dazinger, 'The Best of Times: When he held the gun to my head, it was', *Independent*, 27 June, 1994, p. 18.

⁵⁴See Anita Harris and Diane Baker, 'IF I HAD A HAMMER: Violence as a Feminist Strategy in Helen Zahavi's *Dirty Weekend*', *Women's Studies International Forum* 18:5/6 (1995), pp. 595-601.

Chapter 3

Pat Barker: The Reclamation of Anger

How daring a feat, how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak.
(Hélène Cixous)

Women writers from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf have been praised for their representations of domestic life and for the elegance of their prose. Women who make forays into wider social and political issues are, as discussed in the previous chapter, sometimes less well received. According to Christine Brooke-Rose women's writing has been 'vastly written up' and given more prominence in the latter part of the twentieth century, but there remain 'different types and levels of critical attention' that can be 'subsumed in the general opposition of canonical/noncanonical' interpretation. In 'Illiterations' Brooke-Rose speculates on some of the 'ancient prejudices' and 'ill iterations of untenable positions in the face of change' that can be applied to the reception of women's writing. She believes that women writers are only a part of an 'originally much larger exclusion', that of the 'lower classes' who were 'long considered incapable of any art worth the dignity of attention'.¹ The exclusion of the 'lower classes' is reflected in the lack of a working-class tradition for women writers. Of course such generalisations are problematic and while many women writers *are* politicised, much of the writing is absent from mainstream literature. The contestation that anger is the unifying, recurrent motif in the writers I discuss does not preclude recognising representations of anger in novels by Austen and Woolf, nor are they less political in their own way than their late twentieth century counterparts; rather definitions of what constitutes 'women's writing' are expanding to encompass varied forms of political agency and commitment.

Pat Barker, one of the most original and inventive writers of the postmodern era, certainly attempts to move away from narrow portrayals of women found in more traditional working-class writing. Her first three novels, *Union Street*, *Blow Your House Down*, and *The Century's Daughter* are contentious in their explicit and often brutal(ised) images of women.² Barker is uncompromising in her choice of subject matter, asking herself at an early stage in her career, 'what is it I *have* to write?' She felt that she should portray the lives of working-class women, saying, 'I'm a northern working-class female bastard, so let me write about that'. The choice was made (typically for Barker) in 'a bloody-minded way'.³ *Union Street* is the book she *had* to write and she makes no concessions to potential readers' sensitivities. The novel deviates from literary expectations in that she values the voices of women in the domestic sphere, using her characters to voice social and political issues previously believed as 'unmentionable' in women's writing. Barker presents an uncompromising literary examination of the ways in which working-class women's lives are defined and shaped by society. In *Union Street*, she experiments with the narrative style and form of the novel and she uses anger both in the narrative structuring and in her style of writing. Barker engages with what she believes is the misrepresentation of working-class women. This is shown through her textual realisation of their experiences as offset against the expectations inherent in a capitalist, patriarchal society. Women are shown to have no control over their lives and in particular, no control over their bodies, reducing them on all levels to instruments of production in the social and domestic spheres. Barker shows how power relations, particularly economic relations in the family, keep women oppressed and she accentuates the dichotomy between expectation and the 'real' experience of women by setting her first novel, *Union Street*, in the 1970s. This was, of course, a time when consciousness-raising was high on the agenda of the feminist movement in Britain and debates regarding the oppression of women were at their most vociferous. However, Barker shows how many working-class

women's lives remained virtually unaffected by the personal and political aspirations of what was predominantly an Anglo-American, middle-class feminist movement. She writes about what is commonly known as 'the underbelly' of society and she engages specifically with those fragile and unexposed places where women are oppressed and fearful. It is her reclamation of anger, on their behalf, that energises her work.⁴ In Barker's case narrative anger operates on psychological and cultural levels to counteract the specifically indefensible and avoidable misrepresentation of women in both the social and literary arenas.⁵

Feminist criticism and theory centres on the need for women to define themselves as subjects and to construct readings and writings of themselves centrally. Janet Batsleer contends that one of the main problems for feminist criticism is the question of bringing the concerns of women to an already constituted body of intellectual work -- literature and literary criticism.⁶ The redefinition of women encompasses problems and contradictions, the first of many being the redefinition of reading and writing as a gendered subject, woman. As Imelda Whelehan argues 'the business of discovering a female literary tradition, while revealing the perpetuation of a male elite, involves feminist academics in an evident double bind.'⁷ Batsleer contends that the radical feminism of the 1970s has been blunted and dulled by feminists needing to keep 'one foot in the academy and one foot out there in the world,' arguing that the academy, with its power, status and prestige invariably tips the balance in its own direction. In an attempt to privilege the representation of women within a specifically 'feminine' mode of writing, French feminist theory tended towards endorsing a more poetic discourse and a conceptual framework of feminist narrative strategies. Hélène Cixous argues that the form of the novel and much of feminist writing cannot help but participate in the marginalisation of gender. If feminist writers are complicit in this marginalisation, albeit unintentionally, then one way to maintain that marginality is surely to formulate a form of spatial relation in literary writing for women writers.

Barker contemplates issues of marginalisation, but her narrative strategies offer a complexity of subject positions for women. The fluidity of the writing stems not from ‘being’ a woman, but from her ability to articulate heterogeneity of experience across the generations. Gayatri Spivak argues that ‘at the crossroads of sexuality and ideology, woman stands constituted as an object. As subject, woman must learn to “speak otherwise” or “*make audible* [w]hat... suffers silently in the *holes of discourse*”’.⁸ Barker uses her women’s voices to ‘speak otherwise’ and to fill that silence. It is possible, however, to misunderstand the difference that she establishes in her writing of ‘speaking’, or making audible, a working-class discourse, and ‘listening’ or reading that discourse. She is interlocutor for the choric, communal voices of women; voices that echo experiences that are shared, but that are also unique in many ways. Barker states that ‘contrary to belief, working-class women have always had plenty to say, it’s just that nobody is listening to them’.⁹ She believes working-class women are very articulate, framing their own experiences and telling each other stories about their lives. It is this orality and a knowledge of oral traditions that Barker brings to her early novels. Philip Hensher has termed this ‘faulty dialogue’, but according to Barker it is the rhythms of a particular group of people, speaking in a recognisable, individual way.¹⁰ Hensher sees this as a transgression against language but it is a distinctive and deliberate displacement of traditional patriarchal discourses and narratives.¹¹

Models of language place women in a subordinate position in a universal system of exchange and feminist linguistic theory constitutes language as literally ‘man-made’, imposing predetermined meanings and interpretations on the written word. This has been of particular relevance for feminist writers since the 1970s, when some feminists took the phallus as the signifier that fixes meaning and identity in language and that further marginalises women. Barker’s use of language has significance with respect to this debate as she appropriates a discourse that can be seen as traditionally ‘masculine’. Barker’s female

protagonists in *Blow Your House Down* inhabit a phallogocentric world where their survival is predicated on the consumption of women as sexual objects. The importance of the phallus (metaphorically and literally) is shown in the position of the women, who take the sign, the signification of male dominance, into their mouths:

‘Do you suck?’ he said. Well, her jaw dropped.... All George ever really wanted was sucking... he actually disliked cunt.... ‘*Do you suck?*’.... She sat back in the seat and closed her eyes. *Oh, yes mister, I suck. I suck until my jaws ache* (BYHD, pp. 23-27).

The signification of this act is not only sexual. The appropriation of language theories of difference and the articulation of a new feminist discourse are carried out from within language. Barker subverts ‘masculine’ locution, putting it literally into the mouths of women. The signification of *fellatio* is paramount in recognising the appropriation of the sign phallus. Barker’s empowerment of women, through language and orality is important in determining autonomy for women.

Union Street was published in 1982, but looks back to a time of extreme hardship for working-class communities. The book is set in the winter of 1971-2, the infamous ‘winter of discontent’ when unemployment was at a post-war peak, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) was in conflict with Edward Heath’s government and the National Union of Mineworkers undertook its first national strike since 1926. British society was in the middle of the most bitter class conflict since the Great Strike. The acute crisis of society is mirrored in the crises of the inhabitants of Union Street and this in turn is reflected through the plight of women in the street who strive for control over their lives. There is a sense of profound change; the change from mass production to mass consumerism had significant consequences for working-class life and the men, often-shadowy presences on the margins of the novel, are victims of the changing circumstances brought about by the virtual dismantling of traditional working-class industries in the north of England.¹²

In *Union Street* it is the women who are pre-eminent. Women become the subject 'I' (or self) and are determined by a chain of signifiers, mirror images that focus on the separate but connected experiences of working-class women. Jacques Lacan identifies the mirror phase as that moment when the child having conceived an image of itself in alienation as the reflection of the 'other', proceeds to enter the symbolic order through a similarly alienating relationship to language.¹³ The child sees itself as separate from the world and the image comes to represent felt experiences. For women the process is doubly alienating, for as Lacan believes, they can do nothing within the social order to change their positions and if they speak outside the social order they will not be heard. But, as Peter Hitchcock states, Barker accords 'a feminist reworking of the centrifugal forces that Bakhtin identifies in language' and gives 'the subaltern subject [a] language [of] her own'.¹⁴ In other words, the voices of women *are* heard and in Barker's narratives they loudly, angrily and vibrantly speak for themselves. The language of the women exemplifies the oppression of feminist discourses by patriarchal language systems. In the all-female Brown household in *Union Street*, it is the introduction of a male presence into the home that changes the language:

Mrs. Brown licked her lips. Then in a refined voice she said, 'Oh, there's sure to be something. Unless our Linda's eat the lot.'

'Our Linda's eat nothing. She's still in bed.'

'Still in bed? What's wrong with her?'

'Day off. She says.'

'Day off, my arse!' The shock had restored Mrs. Brown to her normal accent.... Her voice rose to a shriek... screaming fit to break the glass....

'I'm sorry about that Arthur.' She'd got her posh voice back on the way downstairs
(*US*, p. 6).

Barker makes use of language differences; the change in register is apparent here, as is the socially constructed ideology that is an intrinsic part of the conditioning of women. Mrs Brown's self-conception is mirrored in her acceptance of the need to 'refine' her language to make her more 'acceptable'. Barker refuses to compromise her own use of language and this allows her to express anger at the compromises that women are expected to make. It is not so much *what* Barker writes that is revealing, it is the language she uses. Her writing powerfully and clearly expresses her commitment to the voices of *all* women and allows marginalised working-class women in particular a sense of autonomy and an authoritative sense of self.

Barker's language is often exhilarating and robust, but her use of dialogic voicing sets her books apart in many ways and it is here the strength of the writing lies. This can be seen clearly in the story of Lisa Goddard in *Union Street*, where the community of women and their gendered identity is explored through her use of multiple voicing:

They went together, a whole crowd of women in billowing, shapeless dressing gowns, smelling of milk and blood, walking with that curiously splay-legged, rolling gait that sailors and recently-delivered women share.... 'Me mam said if it was a girl I hadn't to bring it home. "Don't bring it round here if it's got a crack in it," she says....

She lay back in the bed -- they always had to be in bed at visiting time -- and closed her eyes. When she opened them again the baby was awake. It stared at her through the transparent side of its cot. Its eyes were still dark blue, birth-blue. It seemed to Lisa that somewhere in their depths was the beginning of pain, a bewilderment that mirrored her own.... She felt compelled to stare at it, to stare, and go on staring, as though the thin purple eyelids with their network of flickering veins was a code that she had to decipher or die (*US*, pp. 134-139).

The short, spare sentences of Barker's writing move towards a representation of the restricted code of articulation that has been assigned the working-class voice. However, the restricted

code of the voice gives way to a more elaborate voicing of Lisa's thoughts. As Hitchcock also argues, Barker utilises Bakhtin's double-voiced discourse, which 'allows the narrator to move in and out of the language of the sign community'; Barker fragments the knowledge of the community of working-class women across the range of discourses and narratives.¹⁵

In attempting to give voice to that 'unknown community' of working-class women, Barker utilises each story in *Union Street* to explore individual lives and shared experiences. The experiences of the women are fragments of the self and the fragments of each story are the seven ages of women. Past selves and past voices join to constitute a dispersed relational subjectivity which is both part of, and separate from, male discourse and as such, they form the basis for a collective way of living in an oppressive society. Identities merge and separate, underlining the connectedness of women, with the explicit cross-referencing of the stories and the lives of women. Thus, Kelly Brown finds Iris King's daughter's aborted baby when playing in the rubble, Joanne Wilson and Lisa Goddard meet in the supermarket, Muriel Scaife's daughter is a friend of Kelly Brown, Iris King appears in most of the women's lives, Blonde Dinah and Joanne Wilson have sex under the same bridge, and Alice Bell and Kelly Brown meet in the first and last stories. The shared lives of the women establish a sense of connectivity, a feeling of being of 'one flesh'. The stories of the seven women show that women may share a collective consciousness and that they are constantly struggling against economic and patriarchal oppression. Women *are* constrained by a biological straitjacket and Barker has no hesitation in showing the harsh realities of being a woman in impoverished circumstances, but the life affirming nature of being a woman and a mother is also expressed. In particular, Lisa Goddard's final acceptance of her (initially rejected) daughter is genuinely moving:

Now she held her daughter in her arms. And the thought that inside that tiny body was a womb like hers, with eggs waiting to be released, caused the same fear, the same

wonder. She walked across to the window holding the child in her arms.... My daughter (*US*, p. 139).

The female subject is dispersed into multiple voices and the seven stories represent a unified whole, disseminated in an attempt to show how women are oppressed both materially and ideologically. Again, by setting this novel in the 1970s Barker underlines the difference between the theory of radical feminists and the actuality of women's lives. At this time Eva Figes published *Patriarchal Attitudes* (1970) and Shulamith Firestone wrote *The Dialectic of Sex* (1971) calling for the freeing of women from the tyranny of biology by any means available, and the diffusion of child rearing into society as a whole.¹⁶ Barker examines the oppression of deprived working-class women and the tyranny of biological functions for the women in her novel. She accentuates Firestone's position that women will never be free until they are released from the necessity of child rearing. In Barker's novels women bear the main burden of raising children, largely in isolation in the home, with totally inadequate incomes and little support from society. It is clear that political ideology holds up the family as an almost sacred institution and provides a perfect justification for cutting back on the welfare state. Not only children, but also the sick, disabled and the mentally ill can be left in the hands of the family. In practice this means mainly in the care of women, without pay and without the necessary back-up resources.¹⁷

It was not until 1974 that contraceptives were free to all women who wanted them but, still, many working-class women were relying on illegal and dangerous back-street abortions and less than half the working class was practising birth control.¹⁸ In *Union Street*, Joanne Wilson, Lisa Goddard and Iris King's daughter all have unwanted pregnancies. Barker explores the degradation these women suffer, constrained by a biological straitjacket they have no means to control. One woman is forced into a marriage that neither she nor her partner desires, another is denied the right to terminate her baby and yet another is forced into

a back-street abortion. Women are continually oppressed in the home, the workplace, and through their dealings with outside agencies and Barker clearly expresses how women are forced by circumstance into intolerable situations. The need for protest is clear.

Barker explores the plight of women under capitalism, from the beginning of the twentieth century. The doctrine that a woman's place is in the home is peculiarly the product of a period in which men had been displaced from the home as a workplace and production became separate from consumption. In effect, the working classes moved from being mass producers to being mass consumers, a move which had profound consequences for working-class life. Men became the producers and went out to work; women were forced to stay at home, and the ideology of domesticity became popularised and expounded by a dominant patriarchal society. Domestic, and therefore unpaid labour, creates economic dependence in women and keeps them oppressed. In *Union Street* the atmosphere is further permeated with the idea that violence is acceptable and, indeed, required to reinforce male supremacy, especially when loss of identity threatens. Lisa Goddard's husband resorts to violence when his theft of Lisa's savings is discovered:

He had to silence her somehow. So he stood up and hit her, not very hard on the side of the head. But the blow liberated something in him, an enormous anger that had been chained up waiting for this moment. He hit her again. And again. It was easier now (*US*, p. 117).

Lisa's husband uses violence as an appropriate means of problem solving, of demonstrating authority and of keeping his wife subjugated. Barker's anger at the apparent sanctioning of violence in the domestic sphere is apparent when the writing is shocking in its forthrightness. Lisa later plays the scene over in her mind, going over every word until 'her anger went stale' (*US*, p. 118). The 'bitterness' that takes the place of anger in Lisa's mind allows Barker to use the full verbal and physiological power of anger as Lisa finds strength to shout 'bloody

go then' at her husband, and later to show the 'accumulated bitterness' and resentment at her husband's use of violence against her (*US*, p. 119). It is important that there is no mediating voice, that there is no middle-class consciousness or perspective with which the reader can identify and it is the crystallising of violence and anger that impels the reader to confront the lives of the women. Barker states that she perceived the novel 'as a sort of vat with smooth curving sides, once you are in the vat, you are in working-class life and there is no relief. There's no sort of vantage point from which you can assess it, you just have to be in there with it'.¹⁹ Barker's need for the reader to experience the uncompromising existence of working-class women is very conspicuously linked to Gerrod Parrott's understanding of typical uses of anger. He links the expression of anger to being 'objective' in that it allows others to see certain situations in a different ways, to experience others' viewpoints.²⁰ Barker's use of women's anger allows the lives of women to be seen in distinctly separate ways. The violence of the scene described reinforces both violent and offensive behaviour towards women during which Barker shows an acute understanding of the imaginative vision of expressions of anger and violence.

The failure 'to embrace sexual politics or women's experience' is seen by Deborah Phillips and Ian Haywood as a problem in much of post-war working-class writing.²¹ Barker, however, is absolutely clear in her determination to foreground women's social, sexual and economic experiences. According to Toril Moi, feminist writers let their anger show through their writing, while others conceal the same anger 'under elegant wit'.²² Barker's use of anger is often transfused through a dry, deprecating humour and the hollow representation of women's shared experiences, but the intensity of her women characters' anger is related to the nature and source of provocation they undergo. Expressions of anger evidenced here articulate the human condition and portray instances of exploitation and poverty of experience for many women. Barker makes visible the consequences of male sexual

domination of women in the unwanted pregnancies for many of the women in *Union Street*. Sexual acts such as those between Joanne and her boyfriend show no tenderness or love; they are a ritual, nothing more:

something mechanical in his movements, a piston like power and regularity... terrible.

When he lifted his head his glazed expression and hanging face revealed the existence of a private ritual (*US*, p. 63).

It is through Iris King that Barker explores righteous indignation and outward projections of anger. She fights her husband for his wages and attacks him with a frying pan when he beats her in a drunken rage. On one occasion Iris finds herself faced with a strange man outside her bedroom (invited by her husband) who 'stood there... fumbling with his flies. He got it out'. While Iris stares at him in amazement she realises that 'he seemed to be in no doubt he -- and It -- would be welcome' (*US*, p. 193). In the scenes above the words are stripped bare of embellishment and pretension and the silences and elisions throughout the prose reflect the conditions under which many women are forced to live. Historically, the contempt and control of women's sexuality is reflected in the two counter images of their idealisation, the Madonna and the whore. In *Union Street*, Barker allows no such division, leaving George Harrison to observe after his encounter with Blonde Dinah, that the prostitute and his wife are as one:

It disturbed him. She ought not to look like Gladys. He always believed there were two sorts of women: the decent ones and the rest... for how can you tell them apart, how could you remember they were different, if every sag, every wrinkle of their used bodies proclaimed that they were one flesh? (*US*, p. 230).

In one short passage Barker succinctly shows how conflicting attributes of sexuality (good/bad, Madonna/whore) are no more than male ideological constructs.

The isolated world of Kelly Brown that is shown following her rape is one of the most powerfully evoked episodes in *Union Street*. The awful confrontation of the rape scene is brutally expressed and the language terse and compact. Barker does not withdraw from the horror of the situation:

At first he had just wanted her to touch him. ‘Go on,’ he whispered. A single mucoid eye leered at her from under the partially-retracted foreskin. ‘Touch me,’ he said more urgently. ‘Go on.’

But even when he had succeeded in forcing her hand to close around the smelly toadstool, it wasn’t enough. He forced her down and spread himself over her... he heaved and sweated. Then with a final convulsion, it was all over and he was looking at her as if he hated her (*US*, p. 29).²³

Barker’s spare writing exposes the man’s irresistible need and he is neither soothed nor spared. He is forced to face the horror of his crime, observing himself through Kelly’s eyes, the confrontation mirrored a thousand times in the tiles of the fish and chip shop where Kelly forces her attacker to take her. As she watches her assailant, ‘his face [begins] to split, to crack, to disintegrate from within... the face went on cracking. And now moisture of a kind was oozing out of the corners of his eyes... dripping finally, into the open, the agonized mouth.... From every side his reflection leapt back at her, as the mirror-tiles filled with the fragments of his shattered face’ (*US*, p. 33). He is exposed under the harsh lights of the fish and chip shop and Kelly’s brutal gaze.

Kelly is ashamed and alienated and the realisation of her ‘otherness’, is exposed brutally. Firstly, in the middle-class house where she smashes the mirror and mutilates her appearance in the feminine surroundings of the bedroom, and secondly, in the school where she finally fulfils her desire to tear, destroy, scatter and smash the smug, bland world of other

people's existence by smearing her own excrement over the walls of the headmaster's study and writing the worst words she can imagine:

there it was: a smooth gleaming satiny turd. She picked it up and raised it to her face, smelling her own hot, animal stink. It reminded her of The Man's cock, its shape, its weight. She clenched her fist.

She began to daub shit all over...

She careered down the corridor to her own classroom, the smell of her hot shit above the usual smells of gymshoes and custard. She almost ran at the blackboard, and wrote, sobbing, PISS, SHIT, FUCK. Then scoring the board so hard the chalk screamed, the worst word she knew: CUNT (*US*, p. 56).

This is a symbolic personalising of the environments that have excluded and alienated Kelly. Impersonal smells are replaced with the intimate smells of the child/woman that Kelly has become. The appropriation of 'bad' language emphasises what Kelly will become in the world of working-class women. The worst word that Kelly can think of, 'cunt', becomes the stylised orifice that women can be defined by, the scream of the chalk on the board signifies the pain of being a woman and defined and /or defiled in such a way. The violence of the expression mirrors the anger at the heart of the child.

The intertextual weaving of stories in *Union Street* combines to make a communal voice that is 'criss-cross[ed] by patterns of gender and class oppression.'²⁴ The women also take on any number of political stances in relation to their positions. Iris King and Alice Bell in *Union Street* and Liza Jarrett in *The Century's Daughter* express socialist political opinions and the women in the cake factory hold what appear to be conservative beliefs. Racism and ideological values are shown as inculcated throughout society and in turn, they are passed on through the women. It is the women who blame the single mother for the problems in society, saying 'we're all paying for that little caper' (*US*, p. 82). The miners'

strike is also shown to affect everyone in the street. Kelly collects oddments of coal in a bag, Alice cannot afford to heat her house, and Mrs Harrison collects used condoms to burn:

Mrs Harrison scanned the ground closely. And every few steps she swooped down and picked up a French letter with a pair of silver sugar tongs. These were all transferred to a maroon canvas bag....

Further along and another treasure carefully transferred to the bag.

‘They come in very handy....’

‘I use them to get a good blaze on the Mission fire.

Only the other Sunday, the Pastor come in a bit early, and there he was, stood over the fire, warming his hands. ‘Oh, Mrs Harrison, I don’t know how you do it...’

‘Why,’ I said, ‘it’s man’s energy. It’s man’s energy goes onto that fire!’ She chuckled wickedly. ‘It doesn’t half make me laugh, seeing ‘em all sat round, praying and singing hymns’ (*US*, p. 78).

The irony underlines the more serious political commentary but as elsewhere in *Union Street* socio-economic impoverishment is constructed through the narrative. The silver sugar tongs are a nice touch, incongruous against the backdrop of the alley, and used to accentuate the gallows humour of the women:

‘Aren’t you afraid of catching something?’

‘The Bad Disorder? No. The Lord looks after his own. ‘Anyway I never touch them.’

She held up the tongs and smiled. ‘George is the one for sugar in our house’ (*US* p. 78).

The juxtaposition of humour and social comment is powerful and Barker moves through a recognisably complex variety of registers and emotions. The narrative is in the materialist tradition, but vivid imagery and symbolism are present.²⁵ The continuity between past and present is articulated in the shared narrative strands of the women, young and old and the

common experiences of Alice and Kelly. Alice Bell's memories 'threatened to overwhelm her. These fragments. Were they the debris of her own or other women's lives?' (*US*, p. 263). The continuum of Kelly and Alice's shared experience is mirrored in the stream of consciousness of each:

Then a murmuring began... the sound of the sea in an underground cave or blood coursing through the hidden channels of the ear. Then mixed in with the murmuring, a series of sharp, electric clicks as if a group of women were talking and brushing their hair at once (*US*, p. 264)

and 'then a murmuring began and mixed with it, sharp, electric clicks, like the sound of women talking and brushing their hair at once' (*US*, p. 65). The connectedness is most intense in the final story of the book.²⁶ Alice, the old woman on the brink of death and Kelly, the child on the brink of womanhood, come together in a way that echoes the cyclical nature of the book and women's lives. The withered hand and the strong young hand meet and join, emphasising the bond between women.

In *Blow Your House Down* Barker foregrounds the lives of women prostitutes who are stalked by the continual threat of brutality and bloodshed at the hands of a serial killer. In a nameless northern town a group of prostitutes are prey to violent encounters at the hands of their male clients. Barker was incensed at media representations of the women who were murdered or attacked by Peter Sutcliffe. In *Blow Your House Down* she purposefully places the women in the fabric of ordinary life and offers a powerful critique of social institutions such as marriage that circumscribe their lives and force them into prostitution. Feminist critics have identified women as embodying their own sense of place, and within that place in a patriarchal system of exchange, language can become both signifier and signified. Catherine Stimpson argues that, at times, women may speak or write only for themselves and this reinforces an impression of solitude of language and identity.²⁷ In *Blow Your House*

Down Barker reinforces the social isolation of the women, but perversely that solitude becomes a collective identity and the signification of the solidarity of women. The novel is constructed around the image of a projected masculinity that socialises the male into codes of behaviour that condone violence towards women. In her discussion of Peter Sutcliffe, the 'Yorkshire Ripper', Nicole Ward Jouve comments on the general atmosphere of the area where Sutcliffe carried out his crimes. She states that it was 'permeated with an idea that violence towards women is o.k.'²⁸ In *Blow Your House Down* Barker explores the self-perpetuating fear, anxiety and isolation of victims of a society that condones and exploits violence towards women, and in particular, women who are forced, by economic necessity, to work as prostitutes.²⁹ She depicts the lives of women who endure the worst kind of misogyny. In doing so she accentuates the indifference of the police to their suffering and she exposes what is, in reality, an ideological stance that sees them as inferior.

Cixous has called for women writers to break away from the old (*la nouvelle de l'ancien*) and take up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus, in a place other than silence. Whilst supporting Cixous's desire to challenge, women's writing needs to ground itself in the real world of women, not a metaphysical existence, philosophised to the point of invisibility and intangibility.³⁰ Barker's women write themselves through the blood, semen, sweat and tears of their sheer struggle for survival.³¹ She creates her own poetics and quite literally makes hidden, silenced lives appear on her pages, making visible the experiences of women that have long been excluded or misrepresented. Cixous has also argued for 'radical transformation of behaviour, mentalities, roles and political economy', to enable the liberation of women and women's writing from patriarchal constraint and marginalisation.³² But the poetics of women's language that Cixous has propounded can also be seen as a restrictive, limited practise, elevating bourgeois form and practice within literary production. Other French feminists, who have sought to express a

more fluid, erotic, abundant style of writing for women marginalise women's discourse even further. Luce Irigaray entreats women to:

open your lips: don't open them simply.... We -- you/I -- are neither open or closed...
a single word cannot be pronounced, produced, uttered by our mouths. Between our
 lips, yours and mine, several voices, several ways of speaking resound endlessly, back
 and forth.... You/I: we are always several at once.³³

Irigaray affirms women's sensuality and sexuality; the lips, as Pam Morris argues, suggest the plurality of experience and the possibility of loving between mother and daughter, woman and woman.³⁴ Morris's plea that sexuality and language are constructed and contained by the metaphoric use of the lips, whether in terms of the plurality of experience or as an optimistic belief in a place of *difference* for the discourse of women is of significance to this debate. But this difference can also be divisive and exclusive. Irigaray, in Morris's interpretation, obviously recognises the plurality of women's experience and the notion that 'woman' cannot be confined to one meaning or attribute, but the recognition and conscious-raising call for a different way of writing is in danger of making women's writing exclusively different.

What is meant by poetic writing? Barker elevates the voices of women, choosing to inscribe the bodies of women prostitutes with a discourse that is really no less poetic, but also articulates the raw feelings and emotions of women. She achieves a radical transformation of women's voices in fiction by representing the language and *laughter* of women; her women open their lips in more radical ways, literally pissing on the male and metaphorically pissing on the face of patriarchal, bourgeois discourse:

Suddenly Jean leant forward and said 'Hey, you see him sat over there? In the corner'....

'He's the one...' Jean's voice wobbled so that she had to stop and try again. 'He's the one pays her forty quid a week to piss on him.'

‘It isn’t every week,’ said Maureen. ‘I’ve known him go as far as a month.’

‘It’s the *rent*,’ said Brenda. ‘Bloody near.’ She turned to Audrey. ‘Where do they find these men?’...

‘And look at her,’ said Jean. ‘She has the nerve to sit there supping gin.’

‘And what am I meant to sup?’

‘Beer. *Beer!* Give the poor little sod a run for his money.’

‘She’s mebbe afraid of drowning him,’ said Brenda (*BYHD*, p. 13).

The humour articulates the possibility of women understanding and loving each other, but possibly remains outside Cixous’s ideas of feminine poetics. The notion of fluid abundance in women’s writing is ultimately marginalising. Barker’s poetics, worked from within a traditionally masculine discourse, and fuelled by anger and resistance, is a much more subversive form of women’s writing. The women’s language is colourful and powerful in the passage above, and Barker accentuates the strength of the women through their use of ‘masculine’ discourse. The man who visits the prostitute who is described as ‘very nice’, does not say ‘piss’, but uses a more childish expression, ‘wee-wee’ (*BYHD*, p. 14). The potency of the women’s language is compared to the ineffective ‘ladylike’ expression of the male customer, privileging the women’s voices, and disempowering the male. Barker brings in an extra dimension with her juxtaposing of anger and humour, but her point remains clear.

In *Blow Your House Down* rape and murder are brutally and explicitly evoked. It is almost impossible to express the pain and degradation of such appalling acts, but Barker addresses the horror and repugnance of the murder. The passages are extremely disturbing, the double-edged dialogue voicing both the thoughts and the actions of the killer and the victim, the reader experiencing both viewpoints simultaneously. The constantly changing narrative, indirect speech patterns and interchanging viewpoints between the prostitute and the killer, makes it virtually impossible not to partake of the violence, horror and anger:

Kath, terrified and in pain, risked one look and saw the whites of his eyes turned up....
Oh God. She'd landed herself a real nutter this time. *Give him what he wants.* She arched her back even further opening herself up to the thrusts.

Only the pounding of his fist kept him going now. Her asshole had gone slack, it was looser than her cunt. *Useless.* But still he groaned and sweated....

He could feel himself dying. In his mind's eye he could see his buttocks, labouring in and out. Ridiculous....

'There's no need for that,' she said. 'Look you can have your money back.'

Those were the last words she spoke. He hit her again, full on the jaw, and she crumpled up on the floor and lay still. He dragged her back onto the mattress. Then reached into his pocket for the knife.

It was almost soundless....

At some point, unnoticed by him, Kath died (*BYHD*, pp. 64-65).

The angry narrative disturbs; it also takes away any sense of eroticism. As Monteith argues, 'the voyeurism inherent in the act of reading fixes the reader firmly in the scene'.³⁵ There is no escape and no comfortable, distanced position to retreat to. Barker wanted to be able to get into the killer's mind to make him a completely credible and terrifying figure. She believes that 'you can theorise about empowering women or how to treat deviant men but I wanted the reader to feel that if you were alone with that man, you would be alone with somebody who you couldn't reach by any means whatsoever'.³⁶ It *has* to be a terrifying experience and the women *have* to feel anger and anxiety otherwise the act becomes meaningless. Susan Brownmiller's study of rape refers to the process of intimidation whereby all women are kept in a state of fear and subjugation. She argues that 'the theory of aggressive male dominance over women as a natural right is so embedded in our society', that nothing can really change it.³⁷ Male violence is politicised in many feminist debates as it not only expresses individual

anger, but also contributes to women's oppression. Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Fraser go so far as to argue that male violence also expresses 'a collective, culturally sanctioned misogyny which is important in maintaining the collective power of men'.³⁸ The fragmentation of women's experiences is essential for feminist writers, as there is little agreement amongst women as to what exactly constitutes women's experience. Barker's multi-voiced narrative emphasises the plurality of experiences, but also accentuates what is shared, such as oppression and fear. Diana Fuss critiques essentialism precisely in terms of class, citing feminist philosopher Jean Grimshaw's argument that 'experience does not come neatly in segments' and that we cannot base the idea of a class of women on 'essence' or 'experience'.³⁹ Fuss's key point is that much feminist criticism makes no allowance for the 'real, material differences between women' and that however committed the feminist polemics, some women will always be more empowered than others.⁴⁰ Fiction that is self-conscious about such issues can elucidate them in creative and graphic terms.

The hypocrisy of a society that reviles women as much as it uses (or even idolises) them is succinctly evoked in *Blow Your House Down*:

As he was zipping himself up Brenda saw the evening paper lying on the back seat and turned it over to see what the headlines were. Kath Robson's face stared up at her.... 'I see he's got another.' There was no mistaking the satisfaction in his voice.

'He doesn't half pick 'em. Look at that. A right old sperm-bucket, that 'n.'....

'I mean I don't want to be crude or anything like that, but my God, you'd think she'd just climbed out of a tree' (*BYHD*, pp. 70-71).

Characters who work as prostitutes are not the only women to suffer from objectification and systematic devaluation. In the final section Maggie, a factory worker, attempts to reconstruct her shattered self after a brutal attack. It is made quite clear that she must heal and remake

herself otherwise she will always be a victim. Men remain predatory figures in this section and women are confined by the fear of violence:

Their own bedroom.... It ought to've been completely safe, but it wasn't. She found herself listening for Bill's footsteps on the stairs.

This was something she couldn't understand. As long as she could see Bill... she was alright. But if he was behind her, or in a different part of the house, she started to worry. It wasn't fear exactly, but she needed to know what he was doing (*BYHD*, p. 149).

Barker constructs the culturally determined position of women as victims out of the culture of the past *and* the present. Janet Todd argues that women must 'rescue the female component in the culture of the past so that we can use the historical awareness to change the culture of the present'.⁴¹ As a feminist writer Barker measures the power that is available to working-class women and it becomes obvious that they have very little power or control over the position ascribed to them. She never seems to give way to classic literary practices of distancing herself from her subject matter. Peter Hitchcock contends that Barker 'provides a veritable commentary on what community can mean to identity relations'. He argues that this does not in any way 'reassert the divisive incommensurability of women's and working-class issues, but rather suggests heterogeneity'.⁴² The voices of the women that Barker articulates counteract both the predominantly masculine discourse of working-class writing and the propensity for a bourgeois voicing in women's writing.

Theories of difference asserted by feminist writers tend to encode a middle-class ideological stance that has sustained the silencing of a working-class voice. Discussing women's writing Mary O'Connor argues that 'the more voices that are ferreted out, the more discourses that a woman can find herself an intersection of, the freer she is from one dominating voice, from one stereotypical, sexist position'.⁴³ Barker gives voice to working-

class women on many diverse levels and it is this heterogeneity of female experience that allows for an interaction between the self and society. Although Cora Kaplan believes that the study of women's writing does not necessarily produce an 'enclosed literary practice, a feminist literary criticism', it is clear that Barker gives voice to working-class women to highlight the very specific problems of class that are so often missing from middle-class, feminist theories.⁴⁴

Such ideas are particularly relevant to Barker's third novel *The Century's Daughter*. The central character Liza Jarrett, born on the stroke of midnight at the turn of the twentieth century, offers an acute insight into the lives of working-class women. Liza lives in the house she has occupied since 1922, surrounded by the memories of her life and the disintegrating infrastructure of the working-class community of which she has been part. The house is due to be pulled down as part of redevelopment, but Liza is determined to fight one last political battle before she dies. Most critics acknowledge Liza's history is linked very specifically to a matrilineal inheritance, as represented in Liza's box that belonged to both her mother and her grandmother and which contains the history of her family.⁴⁵ Barker beautifully evokes the silenced voices of working-class women throughout history in the description of Liza's mother's flapping sole of her boot (which incidentally is a boot made for a man) where 'the *flap-flap* of... torn sole, sounded... like the *b-b-b-b-b* of a blocked tongue' (*TCD*, p. 34).⁴⁶ By juxtaposing Liza's story with the account of a young male social worker, Barker accentuates the plight of disenfranchised underclasses as represented by Stephen's clients (including Liza) and the young people at the 'project', a drop-in centre for the unemployed near Liza's home. Anger is a fundamental force, offset against the loneliness and degradation of the young working-class males at the youth club at which Stephen works and the plight of working-class women this century. Brian Jackson, one of the youths, stands out because 'he

was angry and the others weren't' (*TCD*, p. 13). Even Stephen is moved to anger by recognising the situation that Liza has been left to cope with in her dilapidated house:

'Don't touch the wall!' Liza called.

Her hearing must be fantastic. 'It's in a bad state isn't it?'

'No point in doing anything about it now.'

But there *would* have been a point, earlier. For the first time in many years, Stephen allowed himself to know that he was angry (*TCD*, p. 19).

Anger and righteous indignation are a source of energy in the novel. Liza's father and her brother Edmund are allowed to sit and read but even this outlet is denied her. She must work in the house and help her mother. The relationship between mother and daughter is shown to be fraught with difficulties, leading to anger and resentment on both their parts. Barker's vivid description of Louise's punishment of her daughters is a case in point:

The woman didn't reply, except to point her breast at the girl and squeeze. A jet of milk shot out and hit her in the face. She leapt back.

'Oh, Mam!'

This was her mother's unvarying response to anything that resembled disobedience in her daughters.... But more even than disobedience, she punished hope, daydreaming, any sign of belief that their lives could be different from hers. *Squirt*, went the milk, and said more clearly than words, *There is only this. Don't think you can escape* (*TCD*, p. 43).

The biological determinism exposes women's inferior position. But, by eschewing the singular identity for working-class women, that Louise espouses, Barker refutes functional readings of women and class. Although working-class women are linked categorically through their biological functions, Barker accentuates plural experiences. As Liza points out, 'we had a way of life, a way of treating people... [but] we [also] had pride. We were poor, but

we were *proud*' (*TCD*, p. 218). Barker works to lift working-class women out of reductive categorising. Liza's story is harsh and uncompromising but, as Stephen comes to realise, she has hope and feelings of humanity. For Stephen, society is full of a 'people without hope' (*TCD*, p. 219). In *The Century's Daughter* Barker shows anger tempered with resignation; Liza, once active in local politics and the Labour Party is forced to give up her political activities because of poverty. Barker acknowledges that with the negating of communal politicised anger, much has been lost.

My appropriation of Barker for a feminist reading of women and class is only one of a number of possible readings. There is no single feminism, there are only feminisms, in the same way there is no one narrative form of realism, only realisms. Penny Boumelha makes the point that 'a feminist reading of a text... needs to know and accept that it is an appropriation of the work in the name of (a) feminism, rather than a revelation of its intrinsic meaning'.⁴⁷ It is not my intention to offer an 'intrinsic meaning' of Barker's novels, but to read them as acceding to a different kind of literary strategy. In discussing the work of another working-class writer, James Kelman, Cairns Craig argues that Kelman has had an enormous impact on the nature of writing in 'three crucial areas: the representation of working-class life, the treatment of 'voice' and the construction of narrative.'⁴⁸ As is so often the case the writing of women is overlooked. Pat Barker's first three novels clearly engage with all of these areas, but she has not always been assigned the same literary credentials. Feminist writers such as Barker seek to affirm a sense of selfhood for women against a predetermined insignificance that has been constructed out of many forms of oppression. That oppression is made manifest in Barker's novels, through ideological dictates and through her appropriation and interpretation of women's language.⁴⁹ For Barker, language is dialogic, even polyphonic, and her use of a many 'voices' in *Union Street*, emphasises this and may be elucidated through Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of language as essentially

dialogic, allowing many differing voices and meanings to be articulated and interpreted in texts.⁵⁰ The dialogic voicing in Barker's novels allows working-class women to reclaim a position in a literary context. Following Bakhtin, Dale Bauer argues that women must be put 'back into the dialogue in order to reconstruct the process by which [they were] read out in the first place', and this is very obviously what Barker achieves. It is through the interplay of characters that she 'reveals the social and/or historical positioning of the self/character' that is inherent in working-class women's positions in society.⁵¹ Bauer recognises that a multi-voiced narrative is a component of feminist dialogics that is essential to feminist debates. Barker's early writing offers an important step forward in reclaiming female identities. Barker interchanges narrative positions continually throughout her novels, alternating the voices of women to explicate and to affirm women's existence even in the most unfavourable of circumstances.

In *Union Street*, *Blow Your House Down* and *The Century's Daughter* Barker provides a penetrating social critique that validates the voices of articulate working-class women, countering monologic discourses previously ascribed to working-class experiences and in particular, the obdurate encoding of the experience of women as inferior. In the 1970s, Elaine Showalter stated that 'there is a female voice that has rarely spoken for itself in the English novel, the voice of the shopgirl and the charwoman, the housewife and the barmaid'.⁵² These women have been 'spoken' about of course, but commonly from a distanced, often liberalised, romanticised perspective. Barker brings their lives into sharp focus and creates fictions that in many ways pre-empt the 'dirty realism' of American contemporary writing. 'Dirty realism' has been described by Bill Buford as a fiction of a 'different scope', writing about the 'belly-side of contemporary life' in a way that makes more traditional realism seem 'ornate and baroque'.⁵³ This observation is taken up by Linden Peach in his discussion of Irish writing, in particular Roddy Doyle's Barrytown trilogy, *The*

Commitments (1987), *The Snapper* (1990) and *The Van* (1991) based on a Dublin housing estate. There are certain thematic similarities to Barker including social and cultural circumstances, but clearly she was writing in this vein much earlier. Peach argues that this form of writing has more depth than Buford allows and makes a strong case for its literary merit. 'Dirty Realism' in all its narrative guises is frequently driven by anxiety, but is also a site of anger and the lived experiences of oppressed peoples.⁵⁴ Frank Kermode believes that this form of writing is, 'fiction so spare in manner it takes time before one realises how completely a whole culture, a whole moral condition is being represented by even the most seemingly slight sketch.'⁵⁵ This description could be equally applied to Barker. She uses anger as a narrative strategy to challenge the perception of the novel as a bourgeois form in which dissociation and alienation are elemental constituents of middle-class angst. Barker's working-class protagonists (women in the early novels, women and men in those that follow) are imbued with a sense of interiority and a philosophical anxiety that has not necessarily been ascribed to working-class characters in the 'literary' novel. In this way Barker is writing experimentally, not only by her insistence on female working-class narrative voices but also by explicitly and subversively linking the expression of women's anger to a culturally and traditionally male literary form.

Endnotes

¹Christine Brooke-Rose, 'Illiterations', in Ellen Friedman & Miriam Fuchs, eds., *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 57.

²Pat Barker, *Union Street* (London: Virago Press, 1982), *Blow Your House Down* (London: Virago Press, 1986), and *The Century's Daughter* (London: Virago Press, 1986). These are the editions referred to throughout and all further references to these novels will be abbreviated as *US*; *BYHD*; and *TCD*, and will be included in the main body of the text.

³Sharon Monteith and Pat Wheeler, 'Interview with Pat Barker', February 1999.

⁴My use of the word 'reclamation' is deliberate here. Various meanings are ascribed to this word, including the transformation of land that has been left to disintegrate into land suitable for habitation or cultivation and the idea of rescuing something/someone from misunderstanding and returning them to a rightful course. For me, women's anger has been consigned to a wasteland, a place where it cannot flourish and hence it has become obliterated and repudiated. Anger in women has been seen as unfeminine and by necessity internalised, laying waste to a natural and rightful emotion. Writers such as Pat Barker, in reclaiming anger as a narrative strategy, return anger to its rightful place, as an expression of emotions such as frustration, resentment and reproach.

⁵In this instance Barker's representation of anger is twofold. It relates psychologically to frustration occasioned by actions or behaviour that are unjustified (the oppression of working-class women) and as a response that is aimed at the correction of some perceived wrong (the misrepresentation of the working classes). See, for example, Leonard Berkowitz, 'Theory of Anger, Emotional Aggression', in Robert Wyer Jnr & Thomas Srull, eds., *Advances in Social Cognition, Vol. VI, Perspectives on Anger and Emotion* (New Jersey, Hove and London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1993), p. 4. See also James R. Averill, *Anger and Aggression: an essay on emotion* (New York: Springer-Verlag, 1982), p. 317.

⁶Janet Batsleer, Tony Davies, Rebecca O'Rourke and Chris Weedon, *Rewriting English; Cultural politics of gender and class* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 114.

⁷Imelda Whelehan, 'Feminism and Trash', in Sara Mills, ed., *Gendering the Reader* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 220.

⁸See Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak's discussion of this point in, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 141.

⁹Lyn Pykett, 'The Century's Daughters: Recent Women's Fiction and History', in *Critical Quarterly*, 29: 3 (Autumn 1987), pp. 71-77.

¹⁰Hensher, P. 'Getting Better all the Time', *Guardian* November 26, 1993, pp. 25-26.

¹¹See Interview with Pat Barker, *Contemporary Authors*, 122 (1988) pp. 40 - 41. See also Sharon Monteith, 'Interview with Pat Barker', in Sharon Monteith, Jenny Newman and Pat Wheeler, *Contemporary British and Irish Fiction: An Introduction through Interview* (London: Arnold, 2004).

¹²Many of the ideas discussed here have evolved over a period of years and are generated from a number of different sources. Issues discussed in relation to *Blow Your House Down* and *Union Street* originate firstly from discussions with George Wotton and Sharon Monteith at the University of Hertfordshire. In 1992/3 George Wotton gave two lectures on *Union Street* which were extremely influential and are acknowledged as a source here. Sharon Monteith's MA course 'Gender and Writing' was also instrumental in providing a number of ideas and responses to Barker's early writing, culminating in her supervision of my MA dissertation on Pat Barker's early novels, 'Up Against the Wall: Pat Barker and the Reclamation of Anger' (1993/4, University of Hertfordshire). See Sharon Monteith, *Pat Barker* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002). See also Sharon Monteith, 'Warring Fictions: Reading Pat Barker', in *Moderna Sprak*, 91:2 (1997), pp. 124-129.

¹³Patricia Waugh, 'Psychoanalysis, Gender and Fiction', in *Feminist Fictions* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 55.

¹⁴Peter Hitchcock, 'Radical Writing', in D. M. Bauer, & S. J. McKinstry, eds., *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), p. 99.

¹⁵Hitchcock, 'Radical Writing', p. 100.

¹⁶See Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1971).

¹⁷See Vivian Seal, 'Ideology and reproductive rights', in *Whose Choice? Working-class Women and the Control of Fertility* (London: Fortress Books, 1990), pp. 7-8.

¹⁸Seal, 'Ideology and reproductive rights', p. 23.

¹⁹Monteith and Wheeler, 'Interview with Pat Barker', February 1999.

²⁰See W. Gerrod Parrott, 'On the Scientific Study of Angry Organisms', in R. Wyer Jnr & Thomas Srull, eds., *Advances in Social Cognition*, p. 174.

²¹Deborah Phillips and Ian Haywood, *Brave New Causes: Women in Post-War Fiction* (London and Washington: Leicester University Press, 1998), p. 10.

²²Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1985), p. 32.

²³A comparison with Ian McEwan's writing of a similar scene may at first seem irrelevant, but the differences in approach are meaningful:

'Touch it,' I said, and shook her gently by the shoulder. She did not move, so I shook her again.

'Touch me, go on. You know what I mean, don't you?' It was such a simple thing I wanted really. This time I took her in both hands and shook her hard and shouted.

'Touch it, touch it.' She reached out her hand and her fingers brushed my tip. It was enough, though. I doubled up and came. I came into my cupped hands... When it was over I remained in that position... my mind was clear, my body was relaxed.

There are dissimilarities between Barker and McEwan. Barker's narrative is coldly and tightly angry, forcing the reader to confront Kelly's situation. McEwan's focus is entirely on the gratification of the male and although ironically clever, his narrative does not reveal the

horror in the way that Barker does. See Ian McEwan, 'Butterflies', in *First love, Last Rites* (London: Picador, 1976), p. 73.

²⁴Hitchcock, 'Radical Writing', p. 97.

²⁵Barker's early reviews concentrated mainly on the sociological, realist nature of her writing. Livi Michael's first novel *Under a Thin Moon* (discussed in chapter six) received a similar response. Barker and Michael were reasonably well received but they were, initially, quite narrowly defined as social fiction writers. Reviewers often failed to engage with other aspects of their work, for example, use of allegory, the narrative and dialogic voicing, and the imagery and symbolism. *Union Street* was not reviewed by the 'literary' press such as the *TLS*, but tellingly *The New York Review of Books* gave it the lead review. The same happened with *Blow Your House Down*. Although Barker was nominated as one of twenty Best Young British Novelists in 1983, she sees her early work as taken more seriously in America. Monteith and Wheeler, 'Interview with Pat Barker, February, 1999'. I do not intend to discuss Barker's novels in relation to the symbolic references she uses, or to the recurring motifs. It is important, however, to note that Barker utilises a myriad of images. These most obviously include mirrors; eggs, smashed and fragmented; the tree of life, withered and unwithered; birds, starlings and seagulls; conkers in their green skins. The recurring use of symbolism and imagery throughout the novel emphasises the shared female experience and intensifies the connectedness of women. Barker's allegorical use of the seagull to emphasise the lives of the men in the steel works underlines, to an extent, her sympathetic reading of the experience of men. I do not see that this novel is specifically anti-men, a view that has frequently been attached to the novel. The men are on the edge of the novel, sympathetically evoked and are, as such, victims of the society that has formed them. These ideas are worked through by Barker in her later novels. Sharon Monteith makes this point in 'Warring Fictions'. See Monteith, 'Warring Fictions: Reading Pat Barker', p. 125.

²⁶The image of connectedness throughout *Union Street* is firmly located in many of the stories of the women. Lisa Goddard is able to see very clearly where she has come from and her thoughts clearly show the perpetuity of women's lives: 'It seemed hardly possible that this heavy woman lumbering round the kitchen of a poky house should be the same person as that girl who had worked all day at the cake bakery and still found the energy to dance at night. Still less possible that she should be that child who had run shouting through the park' (*US*, p. 113).

²⁷See Catherine Stimpson, 'Feminist Criticism', in *Where the Meanings Are* (London: Methuen 1988), p. 119.

²⁸Nicole Ward Jouve also comments that the women who have suffered deserve to be recognised as human beings, not merely as victims and prostitutes. She also argues that fiction is probably the only way in which this could happen and cites 'Pat Barker's remarkable novel, *Blow Your House Down* -- which gives life and humanity back to working-class women -- prostitutes or not.' See Nicole Ward Jouve, *The Street-Cleaner - Yorkshire Ripper Case on Trial* (London: Marion Boyars, 1988), p. 94.

²⁹This novel can also be seen as an example of the postmodernist writer's art: where the definition of postmodernity can be described as the lived reality of the structures of thoughts and feelings which are articulated through an interrogation of the general social, political and economic order. Peter Brooker, in his discussion of postmodernism cites Ihab Hassan's table of features that contrasts postmodernism with modernism and lists many of the features that

can be found in the work of Barker: antiform, play, anarchy, deconstruction, irony and idiolect. See Peter Brooker's discussion in 'Reconstructions', in *Modernism/Post Modernism* (London: Longman, 1992), pp. 1-39.

³⁰Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', in Maggie Humm, ed. *Feminisms: A Reader* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf 1992), pp.196 - 202. This point is also mentioned by Janet Todd in *Feminist Literary History*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), p. 57.

³¹Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', p. 200.

³²Hélène Cixous, 'Sorties', in Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron eds. *New French Feminisms* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1981), p. 96.

³³Luce Irigaray, 'When Our Lips Speak Together', quoted in Pam Morris, 'Writing as a Woman: Cixous and Irigaray', in *Literature and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1993), p. 130.

³⁴Morris, 'Writing as a Woman: Cixous and Irigaray', p. 130.

³⁵Monteith, *Pat Barker*, p. 25. See also Ann Ardis, 'Political Attentiveness vs. Political Correctness: Teaching Pat Barker's *Blow Your House Down*', *College Literature* 18:3 (1991), pp. 44-54.

³⁶Monteith and Wheeler, Interview with Pat Barker, February 1999.

³⁷Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Women and Rape* (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 389.

³⁸Deborah Cameron and Elizabeth Frazer, *The Lust to Kill: A Feminist Investigation of Sexual Murder* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), p. 164.

³⁹Diana Fuss also makes this point in 'Reading Like a Feminist', in *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 25.

⁴⁰Fuss, 'Reading like a Feminist', p. 28.

⁴¹Janet Todd, *Feminist Literary History* (Cambridge: Polity Press 1988), p. 118

⁴²Hitchcock, 'Radical Writing', p. 96.

⁴³Mary O'Connor's discussion of the voices of women and the notion that the 'self' must always be seen in transition as it is always in dialogue with other personalities is noteworthy. She firmly locates her discussion in the notion of language change, 'because one's language is always handed down and always addressed to another'. This argument pertains particularly well to Barker's writing. See Mary O'Connor, 'Subject, Voice and Women', in Bauer & McKinstry, eds., *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic*, p. 202.

⁴⁴Cora Kaplan, 'Language and Gender', in Deborah Cameron ed., *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (London: Routledge 1990), p. 7.

⁴⁵Lyn Pykett provided a significant critical response to Barker's novel. Pykett, 'The Century's Daughter: Recent Women's Fiction and History', pp. 71-77.

⁴⁶Barker also uses this image in the story of Muriel Scaife. This time, though, it is in relation to John Scaife. Barker sympathetically draws the working-class male character as being unable to articulate his feelings. 'The slipper.... The sole of them was actually hanging off.... It lolled towards her like a tongue, trying to clear a passage to get the words out' (*US*, p. 169). The inability of men to express their emotions is strongly evoked in much of Barker's writing. Stephen, the social worker is virtually silent throughout much of *The Century's Daughter* especially in the company of his father. Neither man can talk about his feelings for the other. In *Another World*, (London: Viking, 1998) Geordie and his son speak past each other continually. The idea of men unable to have conversations is made by Monteith, in *Pat Barker*, p. 9, p. 39, & p. 86. For a discussion of miscommunications see Jenny Newman, 'Soles and Arseholes: The Double Vision of *The Century's Daughter*, *Critical Survey* 13:1 (2001), pp. 18-36.

⁴⁷See Penny Boumelha, 'Realism and the Ends of Feminism', in Susan Sheridan, ed. *Grafts: Feminist Cultural Criticism* (London and New York: Verso, 1988), p. 81.

⁴⁸Cairns Craig, 'Resisting Arrest: James Kelman', in *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999).

⁴⁹For a much wider debate of feminist linguistics and the appropriation of language, see for example, Dale Spender's *Manmade Language* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), where she discusses the construction of language and feminism's intervention into language; Deborah Cameron's *Feminism and Linguistic Theory: Second Edition* (London: Macmillan, 1992), and Jennifer Coates and Deborah Cameron's *Women in their Speech Communities* (London: Longman 1988), which looks at women's use of language. Another study that discusses language as it is used by and against women is Robin Lakoff's controversial *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975).

⁵⁰What I am trying to identify in Barker's novels is the dialogic/polyphonic voicing that she utilises, using language that comes with prescribed meaning and intention, but then, subverting the reader's expectations. For a broader discussion see Mikhail Bakhtin, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). See also Bauer and McKinstry, eds., *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic*.

⁵¹See Dale M. Bauer, 'Gender in Bakhtin's carnival', in *Feminist Dialogics: a theory of failed community* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), p. 4.

⁵²Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Virago Press, London 1977), p. 314.

⁵³Bill Buford discusses a 'new' fiction, dirty realism that emerged in America in the 1980s and states that it was unlike anything written in Britain at that time. The bourgeois novel was being challenged by Barker's early writing. See Bill Buford, 'Dirty Realism: New Writing from America', *Granta* 8 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).

⁵⁴Linden Peach, 'K-Mart's and Lost Parents': 'Dirty Realism' in Contemporary American and Irish Fiction, *Critical Survey* 9:2 (1997), pp. 61-79.

⁵⁵Frank Kermode, *Granta* 8, 1983, p. 5.

Chapter 4

Anxiety and Sexual Transgressions: Pat Barker's *The Man Who Wasn't There*.¹

Hush!
Haunt me, and not the house!
I've got to lard
my ghosts' loud bootsoles with fresh midnight oil (Tony Harrison)

There is a significant body of writing that explores issues such as gender and sexuality. In the debates that surround these important questions working-class men are frequently ignored or connected to masculinity in its most essential form. In chapter one I refer to twentieth-century novels that examine the complexities and inherent class inequalities in British society. *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, *Room at the Top* and *A Kind of Loving*, for example, use a range of empirical 'realities' of working-class life, where the writers represented 'new truths' about the societies of which they wrote. Although these writers were sometimes deemed not to be original in the form they chose, they did produce a new type of working-class hero: strong, anarchic male characters that embodied a certain kind of masculinity. Whereas masculinity is certainly renegotiated in the British working-class novels of the 1950s and 1960s, homosexuality or queerness was in effect invisible. This correlation between class and masculinity tends to reinforce the conceptualisation of the working-class male and establishes its contemporary literary legacy. But, as Judith Butler argues, the construction of 'coherence' in sex and gender debates conceals 'discontinuities that run rampant within heterosexual, bisexual and gay and lesbian contexts'.² There is a need to unsettle the literary legacy of working-class, heterosexual masculinity, to expose the discontinuities and to provide a reading experience that subverts the unifying affirmation and coherence of many representations of working-class men in what might be termed working-class novels.

In Pat Barker's first three novels she explores the unwritten male code of violence and legitimated antagonism and brutality towards women, but, simultaneously and sympathetically, she exposes the plight of working-class men such as John Scaife and George Harrison. In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, her fourth novel, Barker takes her exploration of the working classes further, addressing the complex diversity of socially constructed masculinity, and in particular, the anxiety inherent in growing up male in an all-female environment.³ *The Man Who Wasn't There* is important, both in relation to Barker's early books and for her later work. It is overlooked by some reviewers in their assessment of Barker's work, but it provides a link between her novels and marks a stage in the development of writing that predetermines the exploration of male sexuality and class in her acclaimed First World War trilogy, *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*. It is the story of a twelve-year old boy, Colin Harper, growing up in the north of England (in the period after the Second World War) and his search for the identity of his (unknown) father.⁴ Colin is the character through whom Barker explores the anxieties experienced by a twelve-year old boy, sexually ambivalent and uncertain about his identity and future life. Barker moves towards a more moderate narrative voice, the outward expression of anger expressed by her women protagonists is found in the frustration, anxiety and fantasy world of Colin Harper. *The Man Who Wasn't There* can be seen as part of the continuum of Barker's novels where anger is very largely dictated by the cultural and social backgrounds of the characters she writes about. She juxtaposes Colin's external world with all its problems, with a fertile, internal world of fantasy and she achieves a fine balance between the perception and consciousness of constructed masculinity. In examining the role of masculinity through a range of narrative strategies, including Colin's 'realisation' of his future self, Barker defines the move from the working classes to the middle classes and questions the resultant anxieties experienced by that change.

In contemporary fiction sexual and gender difference has frequently been represented as ‘performance’, and as an activity where identity intersects and undermines any form of substantive representation. As Andrew Gibson notes, ‘the habit and practice of gender identification itself is increasingly being put into question’. However, he points out that while many contemporary texts may seem formally adventurous they may also be seen as ‘self-consciously derivative’.⁵ It is this destabilisation of narrative that is at the forefront of much of contemporary fiction and while in some ways it may be ‘derivative’, it is in the dismantling of form and content where the transgression of cultural, sexual and political boundaries occurs. In *The Man Who Wasn't There* Barker disassembles the formal narratives associated with many working-class novels and synthesises a number of genres, including the *bildungsroman*, supernatural elements of gothic writing and the western/heroic narratives of Second World War films of the 1950s. Barker constructs a multifaceted character, Colin, who is instinctively searching for his own sense of self, surrounded as he is by images of masculinity, but growing up in a family of women. Barker creates alternative worlds for her protagonist, using many varieties of language; the language of the streets, the language of the classroom and the heroic language of valour. These are not mutually exclusive discourses, they are reciprocally dependent in defining identity and together they provide an astute interrogation of the formation of masculinity.⁶ In choosing to write about a young male, Barker is able to draw upon a number of narrative strategies; humour, pathos, dialect and slang, amongst others. The dialogic structure veers between the carnival and the absurd, the worldly and the profane, transgressing the limits and boundaries of working-class narrative and confounding early reviewers who insisted on classifying her as a writer who ‘only’ writes sociological fiction about women.⁷

The emphasis in this chapter is on Barker’s use of narrative and genre, reading the novel through a Bakhtinian framework, using the concept of the novel as a dialogic form and

the notion that words and language come to us already imprinted with meaning, intentions and the accents of previous users. Barker's language is essentially dialogic or polyphonic. She interweaves and juxtaposes different ways of speaking, different types of language, interior monologue and doubly-oriented speech, with carnivalesque irreverence towards authoritarian discourses of class and masculinity. Her writing is distinctive in its exploration of social meaning and it is singular in its use of language to interrogate the function of class in society. Although there is a lot of disturbing material in Colin's narrative, the anger and violence of the early novels is tempered here, distilled through a child's imagination into Colin's social and sexual anxieties. *The Man Who Wasn't There* is an amalgamation of serious and comical writing, in keeping with Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of carnival. Carnival is associated with the act of 'deliberately and emphatically contemporizing' mythical heroes.⁸ There are plenty of mythical male heroes in Colin's life, not necessarily the historical figures of myth and legend, but certainly the mythological heroic manliness exhibited in the films of the 1940s and 1950s British Cinema and in the war relics with which he is surrounded. Even fathers who fought in the war are mythologised in his eyes:

Photographs. On mantelpieces, in friends' houses, dads with more hair than they had now sat astride guns, or smiled against the backdrop of ruined cities.... At school too, the endless war between British and Germans was re-fought at every break, and the leaders of the opposing armies were always boys whose fathers had been in the war. Who could produce, when need arose, the ultimate authority: *My dad says (TMWWT, pp. 32-33)*.

As Colin has no father he has to search for his own heroes and for his own versions of masculinity. Barker emphasises the importance of fantasy in the formation of Colin's identity and in his search for self-knowledge. Reality, in psychoanalytical terms, is frequently associated with 'truth' or 'knowledge' of the self. Fantasy often occurs when reality

becomes unmanageable, or when there appears to be external danger or an ‘enemy’ that must be fought. In *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, Colin is constantly ‘at war’ with himself. The quest for identity is played out through his search for evidence of his father and in his search for male identity. There is both introjection and projection of ‘real’ male gendered identities as Colin begins to ask challenging questions about what it means to be a man. In *Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities*, Ian Harris states that, ‘a boy constructs his gender identity in messages he receives from his environment as to how he ought to behave’. It is quite obvious that boys learn how to be ‘men’ through reinforcement of gender roles in the same way that girls learn how to be ‘women’; culturally determined gender identity is often presupposed in that respect. In *The Man Who Wasn’t There*, Barker projects a culturally constructed masculinity onto a young male child who is growing up surrounded by women and who consequently has very few male influences. Harris also argues that from the age of twelve, boys begin to ask themselves, ‘am I a man amongst men?’ He asserts that for young males, ‘their most powerful teacher about masculinity is their father... modelling how men behave’.⁹ Colin looks for confirmation of himself as a ‘man’ in implicit and explicit projections of masculinity: the cinema, on the sports field, in the schoolroom and in vivid re-enactments of war.

Colin’s search for masculinity can be linked in many ways to Bakhtin’s ‘novel of ordeal’, and the *bildungsroman*. The novel of ordeal, according to Bakhtin, ‘is constructed as a series of tests of the main heroes, tests of their fidelity, valor, bravery, virtue, nobility, sanctity and so on... the struggle and testing of the hero’. He also states that, ‘[this] always begins where a deviation from the normal social and biographical course of life begins, and it ends where life resumes its normal course’. From the opening page of the novel, ‘Colin Harper, one eye open for snipers, turned the corner into his own road’ (*TMWWT*, p. 9) to the final, ‘Colin, staring straight ahead, waited for the drone of the Lysander to fade. Then he

gave a sharp, decisive little nod, and said, “The End”” (*TMWWT*, p.158), *The Man Who Wasn't There* charts Colin's struggle for self-knowledge and manliness. His ordeal is enacted and imagined in a number of differing scenarios that reflect states of individual emancipation and survival. Using spatial and temporal indicators, Barker appropriates disparate and often conflicting genres for the landscape of Colin's journey to selfhood. Bakhtin's chronotope offers a sense of space and time allowing 'the relationship of the artistic image to the new geographically and historically concrete, graphically depicted world'.¹⁰ This allows a more typical 'reality' in that the author/artist is not tied to an appearance of truth, rather to an idea of it. In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, the time and space differentiation, the 'real time' of Colin's world and the fantasy world with its shifts in time and location, are vital to our reading of the narrative. The time-span of the novel is just three days, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, while the fantasy sequences are not always defined in time. The chronotope makes the 'other' time visible, the fantasy world becomes part of the making of Colin's masculinity, but remains outside of, or parallel to, the represented events in his 'real' life.¹¹

The temporal shifts begin at the very moment Colin, in search of his 'real' identity, discovers the blank spaces on his birth certificate:

Name and surname of father:-----

Rank or Profession of father:-----

Colin stared at the lines of black ink, even ran his finger across them, as if willing them to disgorge words.

He thought: *It doesn't matter*. After all, whoever his father had been, *he* was still the same person, it made no difference to *him*. And all the while he thought this, he knew it did matter (*TMWWT*, p. 17).

Colin's frustration is evident but his anger has no outlet and is transformed into fantasy; his inability to act on his own behalf in the real world becomes a potent heroism in his fantasy

world. The sequence quoted above is immediately followed by the appearance of Gaston, the heroic English schoolboy, who arrives in France to work with the Resistance. Gaston has false identity papers and the significance of his 'other' identity is important in that it allows Colin to construct an alter-ego. Barker's narrative style is integral to her subversion of genre and, in particular, to that of the 'working-class novel'.¹² She is clearly writing about the experiences of a working-class youth, but allows him a sense of interiority and imaginative awareness that is not always conspicuous in writing in this genre: working-class writing is often denied a sense of literary worth and its 'reality' is frequently questioned. Peter Hitchcock, for example, notes that to reviewers such as Isabel Scholes and Paul Driver, the lives of working-class women, 'could not matter less' and wonders if this is a case of class prejudice as much as anything.¹³ Barker is undoubtedly aware of the problems that exist in the reception of the working-class novel and her subversive and radical narrative serves as an essential constituent in the undermining of those views.

In *Carnivals and Commonplaces: Bakhtin's Chronotope, Cultural Studies, and Film* (1993), Michael Montgomery also discusses the limitations of genre and states that, 'in the relationships that are artistically expressed in literature, each genre possesses a specific field that determines the parameters of events even though the field does not uniquely specify particular events'. Barker works both within and outside the conventions of the working-class novel; consequently the limitations of realism are held in abeyance. She is, to extrapolate on Montgomery's and Bakhtin's arguments, 'exploring more fundamental discursive patterns from which artistic works take their shape and which permit them to be understood'. The settings of 'conventional' working-class novels seem, in Montgomery's view, 'to have a peculiar power to limit narrative possibility, shape characterisation and mould a discursive simulacrum of life and the world'.¹⁴ Barker refutes the insubstantial or vague semblances of working-class sensibility found in many fictions. There is no doubt that the representation of

the working classes is held to account by Barker. Rather than striving for verisimilitude, she offers a debate on masculinity, constructed as it is from contradictory opinions, value judgements and a series of signifying moments in a young man's life.

The chronotope goes much further than conventional conceptions of genres. It is, according to Bakhtin, 'the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied' and where 'casual relationships... are always recognizable as a particular type of text'.¹⁵ Barker uses the narrative structure of the working-class novel and then plays with the expectations that exist as an essential constituent or characteristic in the genre. Simultaneously, as much as genre and chronotope are closely linked by what Bakhtin calls extra-literary historical contexts, the ability to be in literary dialogue with other genres is apparent. According to Holquist, 'a chronotope may also be used as a means to study the relationship between any text and its times' and is thus 'a fundamental tool for broader social and historical analysis'. Colin's search for identity is located both within the socio-historical framework of his childhood and the psychological fragments of memory, history and fantasy. Holquist states that the chronotope is also 'one of several interconnected types of discourse' where 'the distinction between the way in which an event unfolds and the same event ordered in a mediated telling of it -- might be varied or even reversed so as to achieve a particular effect'.¹⁶ Colin re-enacts the events of his life occupying a number of different spaces and times. The discourses that are inherent in his series of events are diverse and resolved through the dialogic voicing of the novel. In questioning his own identity and in constructing his own ideals of masculinity, Colin is able to do what Bakhtin considers important in recognising the inner self. That is, he translates the idea of himself from his 'inner language', the fantasy sequences, into the, 'language of outward expressedness... into the... pictorial fabric of life as a human being amongst other human beings'. Bakhtin argues that the search for identity is carried out through others, 'giving one expression or another that we deem to be essential or

desirable'.¹⁷ As hero of his personal narrative, Colin exhibits both the need to give expression to a heroic form of male identity and gives himself a persona he can present to the world. That these identities merge and separate at moments of disorientation and crisis adds to the disruption of the narrative and problematises notions of masculinity and male identity. The novel's temporal dislocations further complicate Colin's identity. He 'sees' himself as a man, dislikes what he sees and in an encounter with his future self in his mother's bedroom, knows that '[o]nly one of them would walk away, and... at the last moment, that he didn't know which' (*TMWWT*, p. 153). He does not know which version of a man he will become.

In Colin's search for suitable male role models he encounters many versions of masculinity. The conflict between the versions is problematised via a varying set of signifying images, characterised by, 'silences, crisis, uncertainty and invisibility'.¹⁸ Colin's uncertainty regarding his identity is determined by the empty space on his birth certificate where his father's name should be, by his creation of Gaston, who is both hero and traitor and with his engagement with the figure of the man in black who allows him to 'see' the man he is likely to become and it is also evident in his hero worship of Adrian Hennigan, to whom he looks for friendship and affection. This is apparent when Adrian gives him a lift on his motorbike, when 'Colin stood on the gritty pavement watching until Adrian was out of sight. He had his hand raised to wave, but Adrian didn't look back' (*TMWWT*, p. 27) and in the fact that when playing games together, 'for the first time in [his] life, he'd wanted someone else to win' (*TMWWT*, p. 145). His narration embodies the need of male solidarity and homosocial relationships between men, which is part of a blurring of the boundaries between sexuality and gender. The relationship between Colin and Adrian and Adrian and Brian Combey exhibits those needs.

Andrew Tolson believes that, 'manual labour is suffused with masculine qualities and given certain sensual overtones for "the lads"'. The toughness and awkwardness of physical

work and effort... takes on masculine lights and depths and assumes significance beyond itself'.¹⁹ In *The Man Who Wasn't There* the working-class youth, or to be more specific, the 'scholarship boy', is a key motif. The 'scholarship boy' is an obsolete term, but one that pertains peculiarly to Colin. The term is a historical point of reference that locates Colin within a particular moment of British life and also dislocates him from his background and his class. The invisibility of working-class maleness is brought to the centre of the text as Colin fights to remain within the boundaries of his family and his neighbourhood, but becomes increasingly isolated and alienated. His anger at the manner in which he perceives he and his mother are seen, culminates in some of the funniest scenarios enacted in his fantasy world. While anger is generally considered to be an emotional state consisting of feelings of rage, antagonistic thought patterns and aggressive behaviour are also highly relevant. These are manifested in Colin's behaviour, particularly when his emotions are highly charged. It is telling that one his most expressive outburst is in his rejection of his future self.

Barker takes up many aspects of working-class life in this novel, while examining the cultural and ideological positioning of gender and masculinity. The fantasy elements and the fluctuating worlds call existing realities into question. Theo D'haen, in debating the interpretation of postmodernist and magical realist strategies, argues that this form of writing articulates 'the ex-centric [and] the marginalised', and 'speaks from a place other than the center'. He claims that it 'rights the wrongs... [and] invades and takes over dominant discourses' and hopes that it may be it 'a means for writers coming from the privileged centers of literature to disassociate themselves from their own discourse of power and to speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged'.²⁰ Barker's fantasy narrative is used very specifically in that respect, her frustration at the restrictions placed on the working classes is crucial to the position of Colin and his mother. In this novel Barker elides much of her anger

about the representation of working-class positions into the fragmentary nature of the narrative and in the response Colin receives from a society that only determines him as a child of an unmarried mother. She says:

There is something wrong in the kind of wastage of life, the sheer unfairness, that circumscribes the lives of the[se] women. Anger... is an entirely normal reaction, but it is a very measured and controlled and questioning anger.²¹

For Barker, it is the sheer unfairness of the conditions that circumscribe the lives of women such as Viv, as well as the women she writes about in her early books. In particular, Barker addresses the options open to Viv, being a single mother and working in a nightclub as a ‘glorified waitress... dressed as [a] fawn’. Every night before she goes to work she has to ‘steam her ears’, as ‘fawns with bedraggled ears got into trouble’. Viv could not afford trouble because in the eyes of society ‘thirty-six was over the hill, for a fawn’ (*TMWWT*, pp. 11-12). Even the other women have a comment on this, ‘What is it she calls herself?’ said Mrs Hinde. A waitress?... not what they called it in our young day’ (*TMWWT*, p. 25). There is no doubt that *The Man Who Wasn't There* is measured in its anger, but the lack of social expectations for the working classes is addressed throughout. Mr Sedgewick, Colin’s teacher also tries to belittle his mother when finding Colin has no tie. Colin’s response is that his mother says she has better things to spend her money on. Mr Sedgewick’s reply is, ‘like floppy ears and a cottonwool tail, I suppose’ (*TMWWT*, p. 60). Colin understands the biting relevance of these comments, but cannot really imagine what it could be like to have another sort of family. He tries to imagine ‘what it would be like to have been adopted. But of course you couldn’t imagine it. Instead of Nan and Viv and Pauline and Mrs Hennigan, there was just a circle of blank faces’. Barker further emphasises the importance of the women, to Colin: ‘He went to his bedroom, and lay on the bed, and listened as he’d listened many times before, to the sound of women’s voices, bringing memories out of their shared store’.

Importantly, while recognising the impact of the women on his life, Colin realises that, ‘this work of remembering, so careful, so detailed, so intricate, left one enormous gap’ (*TMWWT*, p. 92). That gap is the true knowledge of his identity.

A useful correlation can be made between *The Man Who Wasn't There*, and the work of Richard Hoggart and Tony Harrison.²² Both have written about the anxieties of displacement and dislocation from one's class and, in particular, about being a scholarship boy. In *The School of Eloquence*, for example, Harrison returns to these issues in a number of angry and often accusatory narrative poems. Hoggart contends that ‘the anxious and the uprooted... have a sense of loss [which] is increased precisely because they are emotionally uprooted from their class, often under the stimulus of a stronger critical intelligence or imagination, qualities which can lead them into an unusual self-consciousness before their own situation.’ In Hoggart's discussion of all aspects of working-class life he assumes (or appears to assume) that family consists of mother, father and child. In his discussion of the scholarship boy, as with his other topics in *The Uses of Literacy*, women such as Barker's Viv are invisible. Hoggart argues that a boy like Colin, will find himself estranged from his father and his friends and that he tends to be ‘closer to the women of the house... at the physical centre of the home, where the women's spirit rules’. He concludes that this is probably the reason why many working-class male writers give their women characters ‘so tender and central a place’.²³ Colin's relationship with his mother is much more ambiguous than Hoggart's descriptions, and I would certainly question his view that working-class women are generally treated so reverently by working-class authors.²⁴ But, Hoggart's point regarding the dislocation of the scholarship boy both from his friends and his class is pertinent. Barker's engagement with this issue comes in the confrontation between Colin and his headmaster at the grammar school where he is a pupil:

‘You've been at this school, how long...?’

He knew that as well as Colin did. ‘Just over a year, Sir.’

‘Do you like it here? *Eh?*’

‘I suppose so, Sir.’

‘You suppose?’

Colin didn’t know what to say...

‘Have you made any particular friends at school?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘So whom do you play with after school?’ Colin shrugged. ‘Lads I know’.

‘I see. You mean lads from the Secondary Modern school?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘I don’t suppose they get very much homework, do they?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘Isn’t that a bit difficult? I mean, when they want to go out, and you have to stay in’

(*TMWWT*, pp. 67-68).

Colin and Lorimer, the only other boy from his school to pass the eleven-plus examination, are marginalised in the grammar school they attend. Whereas Colin is able to redeem himself in the eyes of his fellow pupils by excelling at football, Lorimer is ‘very fat with a rather high-pitched voice’. When he is picked on by the sports teacher, the other boys watch, exchanging ‘bright, alert, salivating glances’ (*TMWWT*, p. 73). Colin is the first to be picked for the team, whereas Lorimer is left until last, put in goal and then beaten up in the showers after losing the match. Colin is able to exist in two different worlds in his ‘real’ life as well as his fantasy world. Although the headmaster recognises his problem, Colin is apparently able to keep his class allegiances.

Tony Harrison’s poem ‘Me Tarzan’, also engages with the problems of moving away from your class through education. In it he examines the plight of the scholarship boy:

Outside the whistled gang-call, *Twelfth Street Rag*,
 then a Tarzan yodel for the kid who's bored
 whose hand's on his liana... no, back
 to Labienus and his flaming sword.

Off laikin', then t'fish'oil an all the boys,
off tartin', off t'flicks, but on, on, on.

Harrison exemplifies the distance between the two worlds of the young boy by juxtaposing regional dialect and more standard English. 'Off laikin' and 'off tartin' are placed in direct opposition to 'De Bello Gallico' and 'Labienus and his flaming sword'. In Harrison's poem the boy has to stay in, '*Ah bloody can't ah've gorra Latin prose*'.²⁵ In *The Man Who Wasn't There*, Colin has no restraining figure to keep him at home and at his studies, he is allowed a free rein and wanders the streets late at night. However, the conflict between his two worlds is at the forefront of the novel. Colin turns the confrontation between himself and his headmaster into a fantasy interrogation scene between Von Strohm, head of the Gestapo and Bernard, a transvestite member of the Resistance. The Headmaster tells Colin that 'sooner or later you're going to have to make your mind up whether you belong to this school or not'. He does not want to be too hard on Colin because he can see that 'life must be quite...difficult. It's not easy for a boy, growing up without a father.... It needs a man to... ensure that a boy's development is... healthy. *Normal*' (*TMWWT*, p. 68). In the interrogation of the Resistance member Bernard, Barker turns this argument into wonderful satire:

VON STROHM

Why do you dress as a woman?

Silence

There's no reason to protect them. A joke is not a crime. We Germans are famous for our sense of humour...

VON STROHM

(Con conversationally, as if asking the question for the first time)

Why do you dress like a woman?

BERNARD

All right! All right!

It... it comes over me. I try not to. I sit there night after night... I've even thrown away the key to the wardrobe, and then it comes over me again, and I go and break the lock.

I used to just do it at home... but then I got this urge to go and walk the streets.

Cries.

I've been like it all my life. Ever since I was twelve years old... You see, I never had a father. There was no *male* influence. Nothing *healthy*. Nothing *normal*. I never even joined the boy scouts (*TMWWT*, p. 69-70).

Bakhtin's idea that the image of the hero of the *bildungsroman* is determined by his defence is salient here since Colin's identity is formed in the eyes of his headmaster by the absence of a father. Bernie/Bernard offers the apologia, the defence of what is regarded as abnormal behaviour, or in the case of Colin, why he does not fit in at school. Both are linked in the eyes of society to the absence of a father and Barker makes this seem absurd. Harrison's observation regarding the strong imagination and self-conscious recognition of their situation in the scholarship boy is entirely relevant to the character of Colin Harper and is played out in the fantasy scenes. These sections work to emphasise the boy's situation within what he sees as a hostile environment. Inasmuch as Harrison's poem reflects the working-class schoolboy caught between two different worlds from an adult perspective, *The Man Who Wasn't There* addresses this issue through the eyes of the boy. Colin does not yet have the 'luxury' of distance from his environment, yet he has a glimpse of what is to come with the man in black.

Bakhtin links the *bildungsroman* to a number of different narrative strategies and forms. Amongst these are ‘time’, which he sees as ‘*adventure time* (time taken out of history and biography)’; ‘*fairy tale time*’, which he argues is characterised by ‘a violation of normal temporal categories’, giving the example of the ‘bewitched dream motif’; and ‘*psychological time*’, depicting danger and suspense.²⁶ These elements are found specifically in *The Man Who Wasn't There*. In a Bakhtinian sense:

the novel of ordeal... concentrates on the hero; in the majority of cases the surrounding world and the secondary characters are transformed into a mere background for the hero, into a decoration, a setting. Nonetheless, the surroundings occupy an important position in the novel.... There is no real interaction between the hero and the world: the world is not capable of changing the hero, it only tests him; and the hero does not affect the world, he does not change its appearance; while undergoing tests and vanquishing his enemies, the hero leaves everything in the world in its place. He does not alter the social face of the world. Nor does he restructure it.

Colin's quest for self-knowledge and a place in the world is represented from the perspective of a twelve-year-old boy. In his fantasy world, he remains twelve, but becomes a member of the French Resistance. These function as two separate existences but, at times, the boundaries become blurred and indistinct. The characters in each section are often mirror images, with Von Strohm, for example, taking the place of any male character intimidating or dominating Colin. Such characters form the background to Colin's journey and redemptive experience. Colin is a ‘man in the process of becoming’, as ‘all movements in the novel, all events and escapades depicted in it’ are relevant to his journey of discovery. Bakhtin argues that a key aspect of the *bildungsroman* is ‘the emergence from youthful idealism and fantasies to mature sobriety and practicality... experiencing some degree of resignation’. He asserts that the hero ‘is forced to become a new, unprecedented type of human being.... What is

happening here is precisely the emergence of a new man... a historical future'.²⁷ This is the rite of passage in which Colin is involved. The distance between the young, working-class boy and the man he will become, articulated by Harrison in his poetry and by Hoggart in his deliberations on working-class identity, is acutely observed by Barker.

The 'man in process of becoming' and the emergence of a new man are brought together in the figure of the man in black. As Colin searches for self-identity he is haunted by the recurring figure of this man. The man in black is a projection of the man Colin will eventually become but he is significant in a number of ways. At the end of the novel the young Colin confronts the spectral figure of the man in black in his mother's empty bedroom:

His shadow darkened the doorway. And then he was in the room, staring, as Colin stared at the lighter patches on the wallpaper. He turned towards the window, and Colin opened his mouth to speak, but the eyes passed over him, unseeing.

He was wearing a black suit, and a black tie. He looked out of place in the dingy room, and not merely because it was empty. He could surely never have belonged here. And yet he looked as if he knew it.

He went across to the place where the bed had been, and stood looking down. He said, in a self-conscious, almost experimental tone, 'Mam'?

Colin backed away. He told himself this was a dream, and soon he would wake up, and all the while he knew he wasn't dreaming. This was more terrifying than any nightmare could have been. He was seeing his own ghost.

He moved and the man glanced in his direction, as if for a moment he thought he'd seen a shadow flit between him and the light. Then he smiled, and said: "...it is but a child of air that lingers in the garden there..."

Child of air -- *ballocks*, Colin thought. He didn't like this man. He didn't like his eyes. He didn't like the way he'd said 'Mam' as if the word was a foreign language.

‘You are not me,’ Colin said (*TMWWT*, p. 152).

The distance between Colin the child and the man he may become is emphasised. The man in black looks completely out of place in the shabby, empty bedroom, but he is clearly a constituent of its history. His final appearance at Colin’s ‘vision’ of the death of his mother represents the final separation of Colin from his class. The excessively uncomfortable behaviour emphasises his estrangement. Colin’s response to the sentimentalising of the man’s childhood is ‘*ballocks*’. It is obvious that Colin rejects this version of himself. The self-conscious and experimental tone attached to ‘*Mam*’ accentuates the feeling of a life left behind and Barker’s precise use of the word is central to the debate on class and estrangement. In ‘Wordlists 11’ Harrison uses the same word about ‘the tongue I used to know/but can’t bone up on now, and that’s mi mam’s’.²⁸ In both instances, the male’s distance from mother, home and class is strikingly apparent.

Bakhtin’s notions of heteroglossia and dialogism are also significant in considering Barker as she uses, ‘a multiplicity of social voices’.²⁹ These voices are used throughout Barker’s work but in *The Man Who Wasn’t There* they debate the ambivalence of masculinity in a working-class context. Colin’s mixed feelings and emotions with regard to his own (sexual) feelings and his response to older boys is significant, as is his reaction to Bernie/Bernard the cross dresser. Reading Barker recalls Bakhtin’s carnival, where borders are transgressed and ‘vulgar’ speech brings marginalised areas to the centre. According to Bakhtin, carnival abolishes hierarchies and laughter becomes a subversive force. Carnival is approved and sanctioned as a means of averting insurrection and unrest. Traditionally natural ‘order’ is restored at the end of a period of carnival. The disruption of Colin’s ‘real’ world by his fantasy world is carnivalesque as identities are transformed and transmuted. In *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety and the Male Body on the Line*, Calvin Thomas argues that ‘the traditional relationship between men and their bodies has never been a spoken one; rather it

has been marked by a profound if not pronounced anxiety, one that refuses to speak, refuses to see'.³⁰ Colin has to come to terms with his body and his growing sense of sexual identity and his fantasy world allows him to explore the authority of heterosexuality and to examine sexual identities. Carnival allows other identities to be tried out and discarded and Barker uses this idea to undercut male authority and to release the male body from culturally constructed identity.

The homosocial relationships between young boys are equally important to self-identity and Barker evokes them sympathetically:

A gang of teenage boys had gathered on the steps of the Odeon. Boys Colin knew, from the fourth and fifth year, boys with braying laughs and sudden, falsetto giggles, boys who stood on street corners and watched girls walk past, who punched each other with painful tenderness, who cultivated small moustaches that broke down, when shaved, into crusts of acne thicker than the moustaches had ever been, who lit cigarettes behind cupped hands, narrowing their eyes in pretended indifference to the smoke.

Colin worshipped from a safe distance (*TMWWT*, p. 28)

Colin needs to identify with male figures such as these young men because his own insecurity is linked to his lack of identification with a father figure. He is also unsure about the female body, trying to convince himself he is excited by ogling a female undressing via a penny slot-machine and 'pressing his cock furtively against the edge of the machine, but he wasn't, not really' (*TMWWT*, p. 40). Just a few moments later, he watches Adrian, an older boy, 'noticing how the brown skin became abruptly white just inside the rolled up sleeves of his shirt'; in looking at another young man, Brian Combey, he notices 'the oily skin that seemed to have heat trapped inside it, like tar on roads at the end of a hot day' (*TMWWT*, p. 41). Colin is clearly moved by these glimpses of the male body, rather than the female. Barker

shows the ambivalence of male sexuality and libidinous pleasures. Whereas Colin remains untouched by a supposedly eroticised female body, he unconsciously recognises the beauty inherent in maleness and the male body. Colin remains alienated from the female body, and at times he appears to positively reject it. When encountering Brian Combey having sex in the bomb-damaged house, he feels 'quite vicious' towards the woman, but 'doesn't quite know why' (*TMWWT*, p. 127). The sexuality of the adult Colin is unknown, but references to his 'sensitive mouth' are open to interpretation. However, we are left in no doubt that sexuality and masculinity remains unfixed and transmutable.³¹

In Bernie, the cross-dresser, Barker examines other areas of male identity. Robert Stam agrees that 'the notion of bisexuality and the practice of transvestism [are] a release from the burden of socially imposed sex roles'.³² Von Strohm accuses Bernard of dressing as a woman because they 'carry fewer identity papers -- therefore [have] a lower chance of being found out. *And* they're not liable to forced labour'. He asserts that 'there are a lot of advantages to being a woman, if you can get away with it. It makes life so much easier' (*TMWWT*, p. 76). Barker refutes the idea that Bernie's life is easier because of his appropriation of femininity. Colin first sees Bernie as a grotesque figure, 'blond hair, piled high, a black dress with lace round the collar'. This scene occurs immediately after he is disappointed with the masculinity exhibited in the war film he had seen. He dislikes the film he saw as 'he didn't want to be told about men being frightened. He wanted to be told about heroes' (*TMWWT*, p. 33). Colin is dared to go and speak to Bernie:

It isn't true, he thought. And the closer he got the more he was sure that it couldn't be true, because she'd got nylons on, high heels, everything....

Colin took a deep breath. 'Excuse me, Miss. Have you got the time?

The face that turned towards him was heavily made up. A shiny cupid's bow mouth had been painted over a thin mouth, and the lipstick had leaked into the creases of the

upper lip. As Colin stared, the lips opened and a deep, baritone voice said, 'Piss off sonny' (*TMWWT*, pp. 33-34).

Bernie is the repository of Colin's anxieties and ambivalence towards different male sexualities. The juxtaposing of the two incidents is telling since Bernie becomes Bernard, hero/ine of the Resistance. Is Barker representing transvestite men as heroic? Certainly by making Bernie the hero of the Resistance and well known for his bravery she appears to be representing bravery as concomitant to transvestitism. The appropriation of the female body, by transsexuals and transvestites is often linked to a desire for femininity or those attributes that are constructed as feminine. In doing so, men are going against the cultural constructions of gender and this involves a form of bravery. Mark Simpson states in 'Dragging it Up and Down', that the appropriation of glamour and desirability to the masculine body against the cultural grain does not signify the desire to become a woman. He believes that 'men wish to keep their penises' but need to 'bind the fear and fascination of the feminine to the male body'. Transvestism is thus seen as 'a respite from socially engendered hypocrisy and fear of the body'.³³ The feminisation of the male body is often equated with weakness and vulnerability but Bernie/Bernard appears to be neither weak nor vulnerable and it is he who remains constant throughout. It is other men's fears of the male body, made grotesque through feminisation, that are subverted by Barker. Bernie is the hero of the fantasy, but, he remains a troubling figure for the other men. Pierre, asks him, 'Bernard... There's something that's always... worried me. All this dressing as a woman -- you *do* do it just for France?' (*TMWWT*, p. 158, my emphasis) Bernard merely smiles in response. Barker leaves the question unanswered but demonstrates the fear other men may have of transvestites and of the feminised male body. Because Bernie appears in the 'real' world as a transvestite we are left to surmise that he does it for his own sense of self. Calvin Thomas also argues that 'the dark incontinence of male anxiety' is prevalent in much of male discourse and that

masculinity is 'always an uneasy process of fluidic self-alteration that calls the solid boundaries of masculinity into question'.³⁴ Colin begins to understand that masculinity is not something that can be easily recognised and understood. He begins to see outside of the constructed images of heroism and bravery that are portrayed in the war films of which he is so fond. He recognises that masculinity takes many forms. Barker is engaged in the remaking of knowledge of masculinity and Colin's refusal of a single male figure as a role model is meaningful in this context.

The 'grotesque body' is also a form of celebration of carnival. Bakhtin argues that the relationship to mythological figures in carnival is 'deeply critical and at times resembles a cynical exposé'. By having Bernie/Bernard as the mythical hero of the Resistance, Barker is drawing upon traditional ideas of carnival and a world turned upside down. The authority that is exposed is that of compulsory heterosexuality and its concomitant sense of masculinity. Borders are transgressed in many ways and there is a particularly carnivalesque view of the world. There is a strong sense of 'life creating and transforming power' within Bernie/Bernard and a 'weakening of [the] one sided seriousness... and singular meaning and dogmatism' that is attached to hegemonic masculinity.³⁵ For Bakhtin carnival is characterised by:

its bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic and adventure [that] is internally motivated, justified and devoted to a purely ideational and philosophical end: the creation of *extraordinary situations* for the provoking and testing of a philosophical idea, a discourse, a *truth* embodied in the image of a wise man, the seeker of this truth.³⁶

In a further subversion of this idea, Colin the boy becomes the 'wise man' who is the seeker of truth in male identity. The hero has to descend to other worlds and to wander through fantastic landscapes. Whether Colin *descends* to another world is unclear, but he assuredly

and indubitably travels to a *different* world. Colin's quest takes him to a fantasy world, a magical place where he finds an *idea* of what it is to be a man, not the truth of masculinity. As Bakhtin argues, 'the possibilities of another person and another life are revealed to him' at the end of his journey. Colin becomes aware of the possibilities that are open to him as a man and he may choose or reject those possibilities as he wishes.

Barker blends the highs and lows of moral dilemmas, uses dialects and jargon, combining prosaic and poetic speech, also in keeping with carnivalesque. In one short section each of these elements can be seen clearly. Colin is rebuked by his class teacher for being late (as usual) and for answering him back:

'I'm afraid I can't let this go on,' he said. 'You'll have to go and see Mr Sawdon after Assembly.'

The bell rang. Immediately, the boys clattered to their feet.

'How many times? How many times do I have to say it? *The bell is for me*. The bell is to tell *me* the time. It has absolutely nothing to do with you'....

'When I say the word, you will get up, put your chairs under your desks, *quietly*, line up, *quietly* by the door - QUIETLY - and then - once again *when I give the word* - you will walk down the corridor. What do I mean when I say walk?'

Most of the class looked puzzled.

'Jenkins?'

'You mean WALK, Sir.'

Colin's daydreaming in assembly immediately after this exchange demonstrates those key areas of carnival impudence:

Mr. Sawdon's prayers, like Pond's lipstick went on and on and on. Colin, forced to keep his eyes shut, passed the time trying to imagine what Mr Sedgewick would be like in bed.

'Mildred, what do I mean when I say fuck?'

'Oh, Cedric,' gasped Mildred, her long scarlet fingernails plucking at the knot of his pyjama cord. 'You mean fuck' (TMWWT, pp. 61-62).

The mask of authority that Mr Sedgewick dons is swiftly removed; the situation is a form of moral and psychological exploration in both fantasy and reality. By implicating his teacher in the sexual act Colin succinctly undermines any sense of command his teacher may have and makes him ridiculous. The incorporation of advertising jargon represents the outside world and the power of media language, while the use of 'fuck' conforms to prosaic and 'vulgar' speech patterns. This extract shows clearly a 'multi-styled and hetero-voiced' style that rejects the 'stylistic unity' of a single-voiced narrative.³⁷

In examining Barker's narrative techniques and the role of masculinity in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, there is clearly another area that is important: the actions and activities of Viv/Vivienne in Colin's search for identity. The mother is often the most meaningful influence in a boy's formation. Boys in one-parent families frequently encounter problems in the determination of themselves as individuals. The mother may be judged at fault because of over-compensation and is even considered responsible for emasculating the young male. In 'The Role of the Father', Ian Harris advances a set of statistics regarding the upbringing of sons, by fathers in the period in which Barker was writing. He states that 23% of fathers are physically absent during their sons' upbringing; 29% are psychologically absent; 18% are austere, unrealistic and uninvolved; 15% are dangerous or out of control, while a mere 15% are appropriately involved.³⁸ The male behaviour that is observed by young males within a 'family' environment is also problematic. It is not only single-parent families that have 'absent' fathers. Patriarchal law is intrinsically linked to a 'father figure' so what happens when there is literally no father? Danae Clark asserts that 'the symbolic power of the father

increases where the father is dead or killed', and for Colin this is indicated by the blank space on the birth certificate.³⁹

Colin is shown to be discomforted by his feelings for his mother throughout the novel. The identification with the mother figure and the sexual awakening of the adolescent Colin become entangled. When Viv brings home her manager from work Colin becomes angry and he watches them furtively when they begin to have sex:

His right hand slid down her back, and he felt her bottom, then moved on to her thigh and began rucking up her skirt till her stocking tops showed. She pushed him away, but only to laugh... and pull him up the stairs behind her....

Colin retreated to his bedroom, and shut the door. He lay on the bed, hearing their whispers, the rustle and click of clothes going off, and then the clanging and creaking of springs....

He tried to keep his mind from what was happening next door...he imitated the thrusts of Combey's pelvis but this time it wasn't funny. He felt himself swell and stiffen, his breath caught in his throat, and then all at once, the tension was bursting and flowing out of him.

When it stopped, and he could be still again... he flicked back through the images and knew that in the end it hadn't been... the unknown woman he'd been thinking about.

He began to rub himself dry on the sheet, feeling small, grubby and alone (*TMWWT*, p. 129).

Colin's identification with the sexual act and his arousal at the thought of his mother having sex culminate in ejaculation. This provokes another moment of crisis for Colin and, as with other moments of anger or sexually induced anxiety, his escape is instantaneous. The fantasy sequence that immediately follows results in the death of Vivienne, the Resistance member who has been sleeping with Von Strohm. Fantasy and reality are conjoined as Colin enacts

and re-enacts the Oedipal myth.⁴⁰ When the son's need to displace the father in the mother's affections occurs and there is no father to metaphorically kill, Barker transposes the Oedipal urge onto the mother. Viv has to suffer and Vivienne has to die. Instead of the death of the father, Barker gives us the death of his mother's mirror image in the fantasy world and the metaphorical 'death' of his mother's lover in a wonderful scene where Colin gets rid of Reg and Colin/Gaston, hero of the resistance, betrays his fellow freedom fighters:

He turned as Colin came in. 'Hello, son.'

Poking my mother does not give you the right to call me 'son'. 'Lo.'

.... Colin stared at Mr Boyce, turning him first into the Kommandant -- brutal, blue eyes, skin the colour of pork sausages -- and then into a spiv with slickly Brylcreemed hair, shielding a cigarette in his cupped hands, jacket pulled out of shape by dozens of black market nylons. *That was more his style (TMWWT, p. 136).*

Colin is determined to eliminate the man he believes will supplant him in his mother's affections. Whenever he says anything rude to him, Mr Boyce looks at him 'with a tolerant and understanding expression. *Brought up without a father*, he seemed to say. *What else can you expect?*' (TMWWT, p. 136). Bob Pease believes that, 'men fear dependency and commitment and are terrified by their own vulnerability'.⁴¹ Colin's instincts seem to bear this out and he knows exactly what will get rid of the rival for his mother's affections:

'You know me mam and me were talking the other day about what I ought to call you.'

'Ye-es?'

'Well, you know, "Mr Boyce" sounds a bit stand-offish, doesn't it? So me mam was saying she thought I ought to call you Uncle Reg.'

'Good idea,' said Mr Boyce, without a great deal of enthusiasm.

'I said, why don't I call him "Dad"?''

Mr Boyce seemed a little startled, as if, Colin thought, somebody had just rammed an electric cattle prod up his arse.

‘But me mam says, “No, Colin, it’s a bit early for that”. She says, “I know it means a lot to you, son, but believe me it’s better to wait till we’re living together.”’

‘She said that?’

They heard him clatter down the stairs. Viv went to the bay window to watch him drive away, but though her hand was half-raised, ready to wave, he didn’t look back (*TMWWT*, pp. 136-137).

As his mother waits in vain for her lover to return, Colin feels guilty at his annihilation of Mr Boyce and the assuaging of his guilt occurs in his fantasy world. Gaston must be eliminated as he has betrayed the Resistance and Vivienne is now dead as a result of his duplicity. The people he has betrayed watch his death:

Gaston examines his own identity card, and frowns as he picks out the flaws.

Gaston looks round for a way of escape. On the opposite platform, a man lowers his newspaper. Pierre. Gaston looks past the barrier, and the man queuing for a ticket turns round. Bernard. Neither Pierre nor Bernard shows any sign of recognition.

Gaston’s eyes focus on the guard’s hand, as it reaches out to take the identity card of the woman in front. Fear begins to break up the smooth planes of his face. He turns and runs.

Achtung! Achtung!

*But Gaston is beyond hearing. Rifle-fire cracks out, civilians scatter and Gaston throws up his arms, caught like a runner breasting the tape, and held there for a moment before he slowly falls (*TMWWT*, pp. 155-156).*

By setting the novel against a backdrop of the Second World War, Barker is able to use the unreality of war against Colin’s unmanageable reality of having no father. The link

between war and psychoanalytical theory is well known.⁴² Jacqueline Rose, in *Why War?*, persuasively argues that war ‘has something to say about psychoanalysis... [and] its own conception of what constitutes truth’.⁴³ Colin’s images of masculinity are constructed from images of war, but he realises that the truth is far from the celluloid images he watches:

He was tired of them anyway: the clipped, courageous voices, the thoroughly decent chaps, the British bombs that always landed on target, the British bombers that always managed to limp home. They told lies, he thought. They said it was easy to be brave (*TMWWT*, p. 151).

Rose also states that the relationship between war, truth and knowledge is strong and that the ‘language and discourse of war’ can evoke ‘the present as a trope’.⁴⁴ Colin uses the language of war in his own, private battle to gain selfhood and knowledge of himself. To know himself becomes of primary importance as without that knowledge he cannot resolve the dichotomies and mutually exclusive features he sees within his personality. Inevitably, the enemy to be fought is none other than himself, *the man in black*. What Colin knows of reality is insufficient to fight that battle; fantasy enables Colin to locate himself in the interior and exterior worlds that comprise his existence. The internal and external war that Colin is fighting come together when Pierre and Pauline look down from the *Lysander* and watch Bernard walk away into the distance. Bernard survives in order that Colin can understand that masculinity and self-knowledge are never finished products. Bernie/Bernard represents the mutability of masculinity and sexuality. In the final words of the novel, ‘The End’, we see that in his own way Colin begins to understand that.

Barker’s representations of Colin and his mother subvert many of the formulaic and hackneyed portrayals of working-class life. The strength of their casual relationship is carefully constructed throughout. In Richard Hoggart’s often sentimental exploration of the working-class family, he writes persuasively about the role of the mother but is frequently

contradictory in his approach to the relationship between a boy and his mother. Certainly, he acknowledges that ‘to write of a working-class mother is to run peculiar risks’, and he reflects upon her place in many representations of working-class life in works of literature as being either ‘honoured’ or ‘careless’. But, according to Hoggart the mother is the pivot on which the home rests and however mothers might resent their position, they will always come to accept their preordained position in society. He describes mothers who are:

bitten-in and make it all a harsh ritual and their toil a badge of dreadful honour; there are some who are shiftless: for most there is in varying degrees, a steady and self-forgetful routine, one devoted to the family and beyond self-regard. Behind it, making any vague pity irrelevant, is pride in the knowledge that so much revolves around them. This can make the most unpromising and unprepossessing young woman arrive at a middle-age in which she is, when in the midst of her home and her family, splendidly ‘there’ and, under all the troubles, content.⁴⁵

If there is one thing that can be categorically stated about Barker’s women it is that they never behave in ways that conform to these comfortable representations of themselves and Viv is no exception. Barker is constantly re-evaluating and re-inventing working-class women in her writing and *The Man Who Wasn’t There* continues the tradition. While this chapter has concentrated specifically on Colin and his idiosyncratic journey of discovery, it is important to note how Barker still reflects on the position and the voices of women. Viv’s myopic mothering of Colin bears no resemblance to Hoggart’s view of a ‘good’ mother. She is, however, a ‘good’ mother. It is Viv’s ability to let Colin ‘look after himself’ in many ways that allows him to finally destroy the man he *could* become. Barker clearly engages with outmoded ideas of women’s roles and regimens through Viv and her extended ‘family’.

In conclusion, Barker debates how society forms and influences masculine models and deploys interrogative narrative techniques to explore how environment forms and shapes

us. Colin is in many ways a reflection of the society around him, in that both are undergoing profound changes. He is a man 'in process' and the events that occur throughout the three days of his 'real' life, together with the fantasy world he evokes, form a rite of passage and a transition point in his life that marks his understanding of masculine models as unfixed and changing. It remains unclear at the end of the novel which direction these changes will take, but Barker answers the question she poses:

What if you had been born into an all-female family as a boy rather than a girl? Would you not be debilitated by the same facets of your life which for a girl were sources of strength?... If a boy were raised by these women, to what extent could he take strength from them and to what extent would it be a threat?⁴⁶

The novel debates that question very specifically and in the end, despite the problems that exist as an essential constituent of a boy in an all-female world, Colin derives great strength from his extended 'family' of women. Angela Hague believes that many writers in postwar Britain use a 'picaresque' structure for their observations of 'a new class of uprooted people'.⁴⁷ Barker is part of that tradition of reworking and expanding representations of class, but she takes the debate much further, stating:

A great many of the writers I had read, like David Storey and D. H. Lawrence, notably deal partly with growing up in a working-class background, but I didn't find that particularly helpful. I felt the experiences of women was so minimized in their work, and to some extent distorted, that to me there was no way into it.⁴⁸

She brings her own special intimacy with her subject, giving primary focus to the position of a child growing up in postwar British society, with all the problems a single, working-class mother has. While foregrounding the experiences of Colin in a mock-heroic journey to selfhood, Barker uses language innovatively and forcefully to celebrate 'working-class' experiences. The multiplicity of voices exemplifies the polyphonic nature of her writing and

gives a clear indication that monologic discourses, whether on gender, class or sexuality, no longer hold sway. Peter Hitchcock also believes that Barker's writing is radical and it 'holds some lessons for this way of telling for in the polyphony of women's voices which figure the social relations of her fiction, she suggests that we must retrain our ears to hear beyond the single subject-centred reason that dominates the voice of authority.'⁴⁹ To this assertion we must now add the voices of men.

Endnotes

¹A version of this chapter entitled 'Transgressing Masculinities: Pat Barker's *The Man Who Wasn't There*', is forthcoming in S. Monteith, M. Jolly, N. Yousaf & R. Paul (eds) *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker* (Columbine: University of South Carolina Press, 2005).

²Judith Butler, 'Gender Trouble', in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York & London: Routledge, 1990), p. 336.

³Pat Barker, *The Man Who Wasn't There* (London: Penguin, 1990). This is the version referred to throughout. All further references will be abbreviated as, *TMWWT* and will be included in the main body of the text.

⁴Colin is a pivotal figure who, at various stages of his life, appears in a lot in Barker's books: in *Union Street* (Richard Scaife) in *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door*, *The Ghost Road* (Billy Prior) and in *Another World* (Gareth).

⁵See Andrew Gibson, 'Crossing the Present: Narrative, alterity and gender in postmodern fiction', in Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, eds., *Literature and the Contemporary* (Harlow: Pearson, 1999), p. 195.

⁶See, for example, Robert Stam's discussion of self and identity where he argues a similar point. He states that 'one becomes a self through the process of linguistic hybridization, by acquiring ambient languages and finally forging a kind of personal synthesis. The self lives and breathes any number of languages -- familial, bureaucratic, the language of the streets, the language of the mass media -- which intersect with each other and are not mutually exclusive.' Barker's use of 'linguistic hybridization' is exceptional in this novel, where she uses a variety of Englishes. Robert Stam, *Subversive Pleasures, Bakhtin, Cultural Criticism and Film* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), p. 214.

⁷The articulation of a working-class voice has often proved to be an ephemeral, transitory experience on the way to middle-class recognition; the plebeian voice often given an elevated status as a sign, or signification of an ideological stance. Barker never seems to give way to middle-class literary practices of distancing herself from her subject matter, forcing the reader not merely to watch and observe her characters, but rather to inhabit their world. Pat Barker has described herself as a working-class writer and a feminist, but this in no way implies that her writing is confined to these areas. Although my previous discussion of Barker's writing focuses on the representation of women and class, I do not seek to categorise Barker as 'just' a feminist, working-class writer. This type of labelling tends towards reductionism and oversimplification, which is not my intention: Barker is a complex writer. By focussing on her narrative style and in particular, the varieties of language and voice she uses, it is my intention to emphasise the inherent literariness of her writing. Maggie Humm argues that for writing to be identified as feminist literature, rather than feminist theory, 'it must not only articulate the inequalities of sexism but also *metamorphose literary form itself*' (my emphasis). *The Man Who Wasn't There* is an important novel in that Barker plays around with form and language as much as she debates class and masculinity. See Maggie Humm, 'Landscape for a literary feminism: British women writers 1900 to the present', in Helena Forsas-Scott, ed., *Textual Liberation: European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 13.

⁸M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 108.

⁹Ian M. Harris, *Messages Men Hear: Constructing Masculinities* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1995), pp. 50, 10, & 22.

¹⁰Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Towards a Historical Typology of the Novel)', in Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist eds., *Speech Genres & Other Late Essays*, translated by Vern. W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), pp. 11-12, 15-16, & 25.

¹¹Peter Hitchcock also discusses Pat Barker in relation to Bakhtin. He argues that in *The Century's Daughter* the use of time and space in the narrative offers an analysis of the chronotope. He states that the concept of time-space offers a 'key interpretive model of the fundamental historicity of the novel', linking it specifically to Liza's box, which he sees as the 'chronotopic locus of the story'. Hitchcock links this to the idea of community memory and to working-class women in particular. He is interested in 'the possibilities of reading memory through a specific set of time/space relations' that are provided by a working-class woman's narrative. I am interested in how the time-space disruption in *The Man Who Wasn't There* provides an interrogation of masculinity. See *Dialogics of the Oppressed* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p.75. See also 'Radical Writing', in Dale M. Bauer & S. Jaret McKinstry, eds., *Feminism, Bakhtin and the Dialogic* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 95-121.

¹²The 'working-class novel' and the problems inherent in that definition are discussed in detail in Chapter 1.

¹³Hitchcock, *Dialogics of the Oppressed*, p. 217.

¹⁴Michael Montgomery, *Carnivals and Commonplaces: Bakhtin's Chronotope, Cultural Studies, and Film* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 125-126. (and notes to p.125)

¹⁵Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 110.

¹⁶Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World*, p. 113.

¹⁷This is linked to Jung's concept of mask/face and is discussed in a footnote. The mask that is shown to others is described as the reality which is not reality, but that which others see as 'real'. The mask is often seen as the real self by the individual. This is worthy of note when applied to Colin/Gaston in *The Man Who Wasn't There*. The reality and the face/mask become inseparable at some stages, while at other points the distinction is clear. The footnote makes reference to C. Jung, *Collected Works* (New York: Pantheon, 1959) Vol.9, Part 1, p.123. This idea is discussed in more detail in Michael Holquist and Vadim Laipunov, eds., 'Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity', *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M M Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), pp. 31-33.

¹⁸See Anthony Rowland, Emma Liggins and Eriks Uskalis, 'Introduction', in *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present* (Amsterdam and Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1998), p. 3.

¹⁹Andrew Tolson, *The Limits of Masculinity* (London: Tavistock Press, 1977), p. 25, quoted in Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London: Virago Press, 1990), p. 94. This can be said to arise, in part, from D. H. Lawrence's glorification of the 'phallus' and George Orwell's fetishistic description of Chesterton miners: 'It is impossible to watch the 'fillers' at work without feeling a pang of envy for their toughness... as though they were made of iron... splendid men... nearly all of them have the most noble bodies; wide shoulders tapering to slender supple waists and small pronounced buttocks and sinewy thighs'. Orwell finds it 'humiliating' to watch such men working as it raises in him, momentarily, doubts about his own intellectual status (and masculinity). The working-class male body here signifies physical masculinity, but the men are reduced to 'poor drudges'. Working-class men were seen to have no sense of interiority at all, no life outside of work. Barker clearly subverts this idea with Colin's interior world of fantasy and magical transformations of the self. See George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 20-30.

²⁰Theo D'haen, 'Magic Realism and Postmodernism: De-centering Privileged Centers', in Lois Parkinson Zamora and Wendy B. Faris, eds., *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 195.

²¹Monteith and Wheeler, 'Interview with Pat Barker', (1999).

²²See Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London: Penguin, 1958) and Tony Harrison's poetry, in particular *The School of Eloquence, V* and *The Loiners*. All references to Harrison's poems here are taken from Tony Harrison, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1984).

²³Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, pp. 292 & 295.

²⁴For example, the novels discussed in the opening chapter such as Kathleen Woodhead, *Jipping Street*, Arthur Morrison, *A Child of the Jago*, Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole*, Alan Sillitoe, *Saturday Night Sunday Morning*, Stan Barstow, *A Kind of Loving*. Although these novels do contain problematic images of working-class mothers, there is also the sentimentalising of the 'good' mother. The distinction is nearly always made.

²⁵Tony Harrison, 'Me Tarzan', *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 116.

²⁶Mikhail Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism (Towards a Historical Typology of the Novel)', pp. 15-16.

²⁷Bakhtin, 'The *Bildungsroman* and Its Significance in the History of Realism', pp. 15-16 & 24-25.

²⁸Harrison, 'Wordlists', *Selected Poems*, p. 118.

²⁹Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Discourse and the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, Michael Holquist, ed., translated by Carol Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 263.

³⁰Calvin Thomas, *Male Matters: Masculinity, Anxiety and the Male Body on the Line* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), p. 12.

³¹There are a number of correlations that can be made between Colin and Billy Prior, especially with Colin's ambivalent sexuality and Prior's bisexuality. *The Man Who Wasn't There* provides a clear framework for the discussion of masculinity and male sexuality that is further debated in the First World War trilogy.

³²Stam, *Subversive Pleasures*, p. 93.

³³Mark Simpson, 'Dragging it Up and Down', in *Male Impersonators* (London: Cassell, 1994), p. 132.

³⁴Thomas, *Male Matters*, p. 16

³⁵Thomas, *Male Matters*, pp. 108 & 114.

³⁶Bakhtin, 'Discourse and the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, p. 263.

³⁷Thomas, *Male Matters*, p. 108.

³⁸Harris, 'The Role of the Father', p. 25.

³⁹Danae Clark, 'Father Figure', in Paul Smith, ed., *Boys: Masculinities in Contemporary Culture* (Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press, 1996), p. 23.

⁴⁰The Oedipus complex, according to Sigmund Freud, has a merely symbolic meaning. The mother is unattainable and must be renounced; the father who is killed is the 'inner' father, from whom one must set oneself free in order to become independent. Sigmund Freud, 'On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement', *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, Vol. XIV (1914-1916), (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), p. 66.

⁴¹Bob Pease, *Recreating Men: Postmodernism, Masculinity and Politics* (London, Thousand Oaks, Delhi: Sage Publications, 2000), p. 67.

⁴²The use of war and psychoanalytical theory is another link between *The Man Who Wasn't There* and the First World War trilogy.

⁴³See Jacqueline Rose, *Why War?* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), p. 25.

⁴⁴Rose, *Why War?*, p. 25.

⁴⁵Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, pp. 41 & 50.

⁴⁶Perry, 'Backtalk', pp. 43-61.

⁴⁷Angela Hague debates the narrative style of authors such as John Braine, Alan Sillitoe, David Storey, Kingsley Amis, John Wain and Muriel Spark. See 'Picaresque Structure and the Angry Young Novel', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 32:2 (1986), pp. 209-220.

⁴⁸Interview with Pat Barker, *Contemporary Authors*, 122 (1988), pp. 40-43.

⁴⁹Hitchcock, 'Radical Writing', p. 115.

Chapter 5

Masculinity and Class Antagonism: Billy Prior, Working-class Hero.

What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
 - Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
 (Wilfred Owen).

Pat Barker examines social and economic estrangement to both problematise and explore matters of class, gender and sexuality. The analysis that began in *Union Street*, *Blow Your House Down* and *The Century's Daughter* continues throughout her work and provides a correlation between all her novels and a reciprocal relationship across all of her writing.¹ Barker's consideration of masculinity, anxiety and the role of the father which is central to *The Man Who Wasn't There* is further extended in later novels.² The cohesion of Barker's writing can be seen through the interplay of characters, where quintessential Barker protagonists and recurring motifs appear.³ The contemplation of working-class consciousness is effected through Barker's realisation of both male and female protagonists.⁴ The anger that energises Barker's first three novels is again discernible in the trilogy where representations of anger and guilt relate to the disintegration of social and moral boundaries in British society, and provide a memorable critique of the pity of war. Barker foregrounds the lives of men, examining male identity and class relationships through her exploration of psychoanalytic theory and the 'talking cure'.⁵

In the trilogy, Barker synthesises fact and fiction to explore the unresolved psychological conflicts in men who are emotionally affected by the horrors of war. To write about men and war is obviously not new. As Peter Middleton rightly observes, 'men have written plenty about themselves as men; little of it consciously. When men are conscious of their gender, they talk of heroic masculinity, of manhood and its vicissitudes'.⁶ Barker,

however, explores masculinity in her own inimical manner by bringing fresh perspectives to the lives of men during war. It is through the shattered and disintegrated minds of the officer patients at Craiglockhart War Hospital that she explores issues of masculinity, militarism, and the conflict and guilt inherent in the demands placed upon men in war time. Undoubtedly the relationships between men in war become extraordinarily close, almost consanguineous and as Joanna Bourke states, men ‘play all the required parts: parent, sibling, friend [and] lover’. However, while male bonding in war is legitimized, and the shared experiences of men in the trenches brings them into the most intimate of relationships, those close associations fail to offer any true redefinition of masculinity outside of these environments. In *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, Bourke provides a wide-ranging exploration on the bonding between men, during the war, and recognises that masculinity (as performative gender identity) is multi-dimensional. Bourke engages in a debate on the differences between male bonding as an ‘organic sentiment’ of war and the fostering of a sense of group solidarity by the military authorities, stating that although:

wartime experiences may have given greater potential for experimentation in intimacy between men and may have injected a new uncertainty into romantic masculinity, ... [this] failed to result in any true reconstruction of masculine intimacy.⁷

Whereas bonding between soldiers was positively encouraged during the First World War, the British national preoccupation at this time with ‘sodomites’ and those of a ‘homogenic persuasion’ accentuates Bourke’s point; intimacy between men was not to be condoned, apart from in the exceptional circumstance of war. The preoccupation with intimacy between soldiers is revealed in Richard Aldington’s *Death of a Hero* where he remonstrates with the reader against seeing any form of homosexual desire in his writing about men:

Let me at once disabuse the eagle-eyed Sodomites among my readers by stating emphatically once and for all that there was nothing sodomitical in these friendships [between soldiers].⁸

Homosocial relationships between men are obviously not the same as homosexual relationships but one does not preclude the other. According to Trudi Tate, homoeroticism and homosexuality were present amongst soldiers as among any other areas of society. She also makes the point that the war provided opportunities for erotic relationships among men, which were not necessarily available in peacetime.⁹

In *Regeneration*, Barker draws on an episode in 1917, when the poet Siegfried Sassoon published 'A Soldier's Declaration' against the prolonging of the war and the 'callow complacency with which the majority at home regard the continuance of agonies, which they do not share' (*R*, p. 3). Graham Dawson states that:

the soldier [is] a quintessential figure of masculinity and the nation play[s] its part in constituting preferred forms of masculinity... [which are] approvingly recognized and furthered... while other subversive or non-functional forms [meet] with disapprobation and repression.¹⁰

Sassoon, a decorated war hero, represents the 'preferred' form of masculinity and as such he could not be allowed to voice 'insane' and unpatriotic thoughts, therefore after a Medical Board, he was sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital to be 'cured'. This historical episode is important in that it establishes the notion of intense personal conflict, the most conspicuously conveyed component of Barker's preoccupation in the trilogy. Sassoon's internal conflict between feelings of anger at the government and the need to protest against the prolonging of the war, as juxtaposed with his desire to return to the front to be with his men, forms the basis from which Barker explores the constraints and expectations placed on men. She accomplishes this through historical and fictional characters, but most markedly with W. H.

R. Rivers, the empathetic doctor and psychiatrist and the fictitious Billy Prior, a working-class officer.¹¹ In his work with neurasthenia and psychosis, the historical Rivers considered the relation between the suppression of psychological experience and physiological processes. Instead of advising repression and assisting it by the use of drugs, Rivers believed the patient should be led to face the situation. Like Freud, he concluded that anxiety neurosis is a state of mind in which conflict has not been resolved. By drawing upon Rivers's research and treatment of neurasthenia, Barker uses the unresolved conflict inherent in his soldier patients to extend the debate of war neurosis to include both sexual identity and class consciousness.

It is through Billy Prior that Barker explores masculinity and sexuality and it is through Prior that she eschews the stultifying middle-class perspective that is firmly attached to some First World War fictions. Elaine Showalter believes that 'the real hero of the series is W. H. R. Rivers', but the character who holds the most attention, by far, is Prior, who introduces a rather more modern perspective on masculinity and class antagonisms.¹² He is an older 'version' of Colin Harper, in *The Man Who Wasn't There*, a bright and intelligent young man, sexually ambivalent but keenly aware of the benefits of different sexual personae. Prior is a vigorous character, fuelled by an awareness of class discriminations, and guilt that is the result of frustration at his inability to change matters. But he is determined to make the most of the social and sexual opportunities war affords men such as him. Prior is the most powerfully drawn male protagonist in the trilogy. He is angry, headstrong and at times wilfully disobedient. His anger surfaces in the form of traumatic conflict and anxiety. He feels guilt at his powerlessness in the face of bureaucracy, and his most conspicuous anger comes to the fore in relation to other characters in the trilogy outside of his class. He is positioned at the centre of class politics of the period, particularly in his dealings with the War Office in *The Eye in the Door* and his relationship with Beattie Roper. Prior uses his

bisexuality as a means to transgress the class divide, having sex with his working-class girlfriend Sarah Lumb and Charles Manning, an upper-class officer (among others). His sexual liberation allows him to subvert the established order of society.

In the opening scenes of *Regeneration*, the middle-class surroundings and the middle-class consciousness of the characters are made very apparent. The setting is important because the introduction of a working-class officer, Prior, provides the impetus for the examination of class. Rivers's first session with Siegfried Sassoon is an affirmation of middle-class manners, as he watches Sassoon 'doing complicated things with cup, saucer, plate, sandwiches, cake, sugar tongs and spoon' (*R*, p. 10). It is this encounter and its undercurrent of homosocial affiliation between two men of the same social class that sets the mood of the relationship between them. In contrast, when Rivers first hears Second-Lieutenant Prior speak, there is immediately a hint of class antagonism between them. Once a traumatised Prior has regained his voice, he appears to be 'different' to Rivers, changing from 'a thin, fair-haired young man of twenty two with high cheekbones, a short, blunt nose and a supercilious expression' (*R*, p. 41) to 'a little, spitting, sharp-boned alley cat' (*R*, p. 49). Class antagonism shows in Rivers's description and it seems obvious to state that his opinion of Prior is re-evaluated and governed by the flat, Northern accent he hears for the first time.

In creating the character of Billy Prior and in fictionalising a case history for him, Barker draws on memory and history and the recollections of some of the isolated horrors of the war:

A young and cheerful lance-corporal of ours was making tea [in the trench] when I passed.... I went along three or four bays; one shell dropped without warning behind me.... Soon a cry from that place recalled me... three minutes ago the lance-corporal's mess tin was bubbling over a little flame. For him, how could the gobbets of

blackening flesh, the earth-wall sotted with blood, with flesh, *the eye under the duckboard*, the pulpy bone be the only answer¹³ (my emphasis).

Prior's hypnotic trance allows him to remember the incident that finally caused his mutism. One of his men had been blown up while making tea in the trench. Prior was cleaning up the trench when he, 'shifted his position on the duckboards, glanced down, and found himself staring at an eye. Delicately, like somebody selecting a particularly choice morsel from a plate, he put his thumb and forefinger down through the duckboards... he got it out and held it out towards Logan' (*R*, p. 103).

Prior's anger is subsequently escalated and redirected against himself when he discovers this is the reason for his mutism and loss of memory. On hearing that it was finding an eyeball of one of his dead men that made him finally breakdown, he is 'beside himself with rage' (*R*, p. 104). According to Anne Whitehead, neurasthenia or memory loss can originate 'in a traumatic moment of shock without effect' and the patient's 'history represents a past that has not been experienced at the time which it occurred'. Prior's inability to remember what happened to him reflects that experience. Whitehead states that when 'the event is dislocated from historical process the effect with which it is associated surges back uncontrollably into the present moment, causing a painful and vivid belated experiencing of the trauma'.¹⁴ This, in essence, is the problem from which many of Rivers's patients, including Prior, suffer.

In treating his patients, Rivers, in turn, suffers from a form of 'shell shock', even getting to the point where he 'dreamt their dreams rather than his own' (*TEITD*, p. 244). As his friend Henry Head says, 'what happened to the gently flowing Rivers we all used to know and love' (*TEITD*, p. 149) and later, 'something happened to him in Scotland' (*TEITD*, p. 227). That Rivers is changed by his work during the war is obvious, less obvious perhaps is the power he holds over his patients. Barker is aware that transference is bound to occur

between patient and therapist, the patient's need of Rivers is substantial and that this puts him in a position of great influence. Again Head makes the comment that 'somehow or another [Rivers] acquired this enormous power over young men... it really is amazing, they'll do anything for him. Even get better' (*TEITD*, p. 227). Rivers's considerable influence is illustrated in Siegfried Sassoon's admission that, 'I don't know what I'd do without you' (*TEITD*, p. 236). In Prior's case, although he recognises that he too needs Rivers, the need only provokes exasperation, and forces him to admit 'whenever he needed Rivers, he became angry with him' (*TEITD*, p. 68). Prior's guilt and anger will not let him totally acknowledge his need for another man.

The fact that many of the soldiers find their breakdown an emasculating experience confirms prescribed forms of masculinity. 'Real' men are not supposed to break down under any circumstances, although, as Middleton states, 'a "real man" is a fantasy ideal representing aspirations neither recognisable, nor necessarily desirable'.¹⁵ Prior says, 'I don't think of myself as the kind of person who breaks down', to which Rivers responds, 'I don't know that there is "a kind of person who breaks down"' (*R*, pp. 105-6). However, although he is aware that the men in his care need to be nurtured through their trauma, Rivers is unable to respond physically to Prior when he begins to cry and butts him in the chest. The need for physical contact is important, but Rivers is constrained by his controlled masculinity. The most he can offer is putting his hands on Prior's shoulders. The repression of instinctual feelings that Rivers experiences can, according to Freud, form feelings of anxiety and helplessness.¹⁶ Although new theories on masculinity show that in men, the 'feminine' is 'emerging with new potency... demanding an entirely new understanding of... personal identity and human relationships', Rivers's enforced masculinity in a rightly proscribed historical context does not allow him to express an appreciation of his nurturing instincts.¹⁷ He is used to being seen

as a father figure by his male patients, but ‘disliked the implication’, arising from Prior’s need, that he could also be a ‘male mother’(R, p. 107).

One of the most significant moments in *Regeneration* is River’s realisation that it is he who has been changed by his work. He muses on the fact ‘that he, who was in the business of changing people, should himself have been changed’(R, p. 249). Although the historical Rivers was influenced a great deal by his meeting with Siegfried Sassoon, in the fictional setting it is Prior who is the main catalyst for Rivers’s self-analysis. This, in turn, gives rise to another aspect of Barker’s consideration of masculinity. Prior makes Rivers contemplate his own character and temperament in great detail, ‘pounc[ing] on any item of personal information’ about him (R, p. 64). It is Prior who points out that Rivers stammers and who opens the way for Rivers to question his own background. This idea is brought to the surface in most detail in *the Eye in the Door*, when Prior seeks out Rivers in London while suffering from fugue states. Prior alludes to Rivers’s habit of sweeping his hands over his eyes when, ‘something touches a nerve’ and that Rivers does this ‘[as] a way of hiding [his] feelings’ (*TEITD*, p. 135).¹⁸ By imagining conversations between Rivers and the invented Prior, Barker is able to reconstruct Rivers’s version of masculinity. The conflict in Rivers is brought to the surface in the dialogue, and Barker has said that, ‘instead of having what would be long periods of introspection, with Rivers thinking about what was happening to him, it is dramatised; it comes to the surface in the form of conflict’. This narrative is powerfully evoked by Barker’s portrayal of Prior’s antagonism:

Prior wasn’t actually created to be the centrepiece of the trilogy, because there wasn’t going to be a trilogy. Prior was actually created purely to get up Rivers’s nose. Every characteristic of Prior is something that Rivers as an historical person would find difficult: the working-class background, the fact that he’s an officer, the fact that he is bisexual and that he is aware of a sexual ambivalence in Rivers, that the other

[characters] are either not aware of, or don't find a problem. But... he is flirtatious, he is changeable, he is manipulative and he is extremely intelligent.¹⁹

For the historical Rivers and the society he inhabited, the repression of feelings and emotions was the essence of manliness. Barker's Rivers is also profoundly conscious of the fact that in 'advising his young patients to abandon the attempt of repression and to let themselves *feel* the pity and terror... he was excavating the ground he stood on' (*R*, p. 48). Rivers's relationship with the young men he treats, and more especially, his relationship with Prior leads him to examine his own feelings and beliefs. Military manliness is a fundamental requisite of a nationalistic society at war and the breakdown of 'masculinity' is in essence unrecognised as a psychological complication.²⁰ Prior's father, for example, reiterates society's conviction that damage that cannot be seen does not really exist. He says that his son would get 'a damn sight more sympathy from me if he had a bullet up his arse' (*R*, p. 57). What many people did not understand, and what is most powerfully stated in Barker's trilogy, is that the strain of warfare is borne in conditions of immobility, passivity and helplessness: a very static form of warfare. It was also, according to Dawson, a 'bureaucratic warfare conducted by means of a rigidly disciplined hierarchy and highly organised division of labour; designed to separate... those who thought (and managed), from those who acted.'²¹ These distinctions, often based on class antagonism, are clearly acknowledged in the trilogy.

In *Regeneration* and *The Ghost Road* in particular, Barker explores the predicament of soldiers whose 'performance of masculinity' is undermined by their 'breakdown' in the trenches. These crises take many different forms, as Barker shows with characters such as Burns and Anderson. Burns lands head-first on a gas-filled decomposing body, his mouth filling with putrid flesh, the thought of which makes him vomit when he tries to eat (*R*, p. 19). Anderson, the doctor, dreams of snakes and of being incarcerated and held tight by women's corsets. Anderson is aware that the 'Freudian Johnnies' would have no problem

analysing his dream, although, of course, the historical Rivers was not of the same opinion as Freud and refuses to see this as wish fulfilment or homoerotic in any way. Anderson, however, still sees his predicament as ‘a fairly *emasculating* experience’ (*R*, p. 29). Rivers’s approach to treatment is unique in a climate of compulsory masculinity, where visible wounds are seen as preferable to psychological breakdown. Greg Harris makes the same point that, ‘soldiers receiving psychiatric treatment endured tremendous doses of guilt for not being men in control’.²² Throughout the trilogy Barker proposes a renegotiation of masculinity and offers a powerful expression of personal experience, grounded in psychoanalytic theory, but located in a social framework.²³ It is possible to see class antagonism in Rivers’s response to Anderson’s knowledge of Freud, when compared to his surprise that Billy Prior also has some knowledge of Freud’s theories. Anderson, ‘was, after all, a surgeon’ and so ‘there was no particular reason’ why he should not know about Freud (*R*, p. 31). But, Prior’s knowledge of Freud, shown in a separate encounter with Rivers is met with some incredulity:

‘I see. A negative transference. Is *that* what you think we’ve got?’

‘I hope not.’ Rivers couldn’t altogether conceal his surprise. ‘Where did you learn that term?’

‘I can read’ (*R*, p. 65).

Rivers is also astounded that Prior is reading his anthropological writing on his Melanesian experiences, *The Todas*, asking him, ‘wouldn’t you prefer something lighter’ (*R*, p. 65). Prior, as Barker intends, confounds Rivers’s preconceived expectations of a member of the working classes.

Rivers was not alone in underestimating the working classes. In *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell discusses the disaster that was the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Of 110,000 men who attacked the German lines, 60,000 were killed or wounded in one

day. Fussell attributes a number of causes to this tragedy, but argues that one cause ‘was traceable to the class system and the assumptions it sanctioned’. He goes on to say:

The regulars of the British staff entertained an explicit contempt for the rapidly trained new men of “Kitchener’s Army”, largely recruited among workingmen from the Midlands. The planners assumed that these troops... were too simple and animal to cross the space between the opposing trenches in any way except in broad daylight and aligned in rows or “waves”. It was felt that the troops would become confused by more subtle tactics like rushing from cover to cover, or assault firing, or following close upon a continuous creeping barrage.

That there were glaring differences between the way the officer classes and the working classes were treated in the army was very evident. Fussell talks about the ‘*versus*’ habit of the army, allowing ‘gaping distinctions’ between the officers and men and the fact that ‘a simple antithesis [was] everywhere’.²⁴ In his discussion of the literary tradition of the First World War, Fussell is, however, in danger of negating the contribution of working-class writers. He focuses on many of the middle-class poets that Barker foregrounds in the trilogy: Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves and Wilfred Owen, but, while he recognises that the canon of war writing is ostensibly middle-class, he seems to express surprise that working-class soldiers are also literate.²⁵ At one point, Fussell represents the view of one soldier of the horrors of Passchendaele, and describes him as ‘a *sensitive* Other Rank’, (my emphasis), as if being so was somehow unusual and the rank and file soldier had little or no mental or emotional sensibility.²⁶ Barker does not make the same mistake but gives the working classes a central position in her literary exploration of social and moral sensibility.

The literary heritage of the First World War is, however, particularly middle-class and although the poetry written out of the conflict documented ‘a crisis in the life of the British nation’, for many, it represents the feelings of a minority class. As Claire Tylee observes,

working-class men, for whom the war represents another form of capitulation to the class system, were not recognised as having the same literary credentials as the officer poets.²⁷ Feelings of anxiety, suitably justified, were found in writing about officers' experiences in the trenches, but, as Tylee points out, they frequently 'saw their "men" from the outside... [and] presented the Tommy with affectionate contempt'.²⁸ It cannot be denied that the non-commissioned soldiers underwent the same trauma and horrors as the officers, more so perhaps, but they were not seen as encountering the same sort of psychological crises. The officer is nevertheless set apart from the 'ordinary' man and the difference between the classes is reflected in Prior's acknowledgement:

One of the ways in which he felt different from his brother officers, one of the many, was that *their* England was a pastoral place: fields, streams, wooded valleys, medieval churches surrounded by ancient elms. They couldn't grasp that for him, and for the vast majority of the men, the Front, with its mechanisation, its reduction of the individual to a cog in the machine, its blasted landscape, was not a contrast with the life they'd known at home, in Birmingham or Manchester or Glasgow or the Welsh pit villages, but a nightmarish culmination' (*TEITD*, p. 116).

Barker is obviously well aware of this class difference and it is important that Prior is the focus of all three novels in the trilogy as he gives voice to the working-class experience.

Prior's loyalties are split between his origins and his allegiance to the men in the trenches. This guilt and anger is emphasized by his working-class allegiances and the cause and effects of his neurasthenia.²⁹ It is very apparent in *The Eye in the Door* where Prior investigates Beattie Roper, incarcerated for allegedly plotting to kill the Prime Minister. Prior's remorse and rage is reaffirmed during his meeting with Roper in prison and it is in this section of the book that Barker accentuates Prior's class conflict. Class consciousness is apparent immediately when the warden 'whose face lit up with all the awe and deference of

which the English working class is capable' tells Prior about the upper-class prisoner she is guarding. In marked contrast, Beattie Roper, also a political prisoner is described as 'common as muck' (*TEITD*, p. 29). Prior is torn between his desire to help the Ropers, a family he has known since childhood and his feelings towards the men who are fighting at the front. William Roper, the conscientious objector is forced to sit in a cell, naked, with the uniform he refuses to wear at his side. He is watched constantly through an eye in the door, as is Beattie. The eye painted in the door, 'where no eye should be' is 'deeply disturbing to Prior' (*TEITD*, p. 36). It evokes his own traumatic experience in the trenches and precipitates the transposition of his neurasthenic state to a fugue state. When he debates the feelings this visit arouses in him with Rivers, Prior, in 'a burst of anger' gives voice to his confusion: 'I felt sorry for Beattie. And then I started thinking about William... I *think* I resented that. I resented having my sympathies manipulated. Because it's nothing, is it?' (*TEITD*, p. 69). Prior's anger over Beattie Roper's powerlessness is fundamental to Barker's exploration of class:

'Rubbish. Beattie Roper's a working-class woman from the back streets of Salford. You don't give a fuck about her. I don't mean you personally -- *though that's true too* -- I mean your class.'

Manning looked interested now rather than angry. 'You really do think class determines everything, don't you?'

For Prior class does determine everything; he succinctly says, 'Class prejudice isn't any more admirable for being directed upwards. Just more fucking justified' (*TEITD*, pp. 202-203).

Prior's feelings of anger are further increased by the sight of prosperous looking men in pinstriped suits enjoying themselves in London. Their ostensible inability to sympathise with the slaughter of thousands of men enrages Prior and leads to his first fugue state:

Prior would have liked nothing better, at that moment, than for a tank to come crashing through the doors and crush everybody, the way they sometimes crushed the wounded who couldn't get off the track in time. The violence of his imaginings -- he saw severed limbs, heard screams -- terrified him (*TEITD*, p. 122).

Prior's conflicting emotions precipitate his aggression, but also work as a mode of reflective self-awareness. His anger is an important avenue of exploration as it allows Prior to experience a certain satisfaction at the thought of taking punitive action against a society that disregards oppression. Anger, for Prior (and for the female characters in the work of other writers discussed across this thesis) is a cleansing force substituting agency for subjugation and action for passive acceptance.

Prior's divided allegiances, together with his desire to belong to the 'club of all clubs' causes an increase in his guilt, accelerating the length and intensity of his fugue states and the recurrence of his nightmares. The conflict inherent in the bifurcation of Prior's character is something he is not readily prepared to acknowledge:

'Dreams are attempts to resolve conflict. Right?' Well I can't see any conflict in this one'.

'You stabbed somebody in the eye'.

.... 'So why do you say there is no conflict?'

'Because I was so identified with William or Beattie... or I don't know. William, probably, because I was naked. And I was attacking what seemed to me the most awful feature of their situation, which is the eye. The constant surveillance. So I don't see there is any Conflict. I mean it might be very inconvenient in real life but in the dream there was no doubt whose side I was on. Their' (*TEITD*, pp. 74 - 75).

Prior states that he is in no possible doubt as to where his loyalties are: with his men. His personal struggle is embodied in dreams, 'So,'... "eye" was stabbing myself in the "I"... it's

possible I suppose. I hate what I do' (*TEITD*, p. 75). The eye has become the symbol of Prior's guilt as it forces him to confront his own feelings, to look at himself through inward reflection rather than outward projection.

The situating of conflict and contradiction is a recurring theme in the trilogy and an intrinsic component of many of the characters. In *Regeneration* in particular, Rivers's instinctive awareness of the incongruity of his situation emerges; he has to 'cure' the officers at Craiglockhart War Hospital, only to return them to the front:

Rivers was aware, as a constant background to his work, of a conflict between his belief that the war must be fought to a finish... and his horror that such events as those that led to... breakdown should be allowed to continue.... Recently all his dreams had centred on conflicts arising from his treatment of particular patients... that he was, in effect, inflicting pain (*R*, p. 47).

Rivers is clear that in his work with the soldiers he is 'redefining what it is to be a man' and he comes to understand that during times of war, feelings of tenderness between men are natural and right (*R*, p. 48). Prior has no doubt about his feelings thinking to himself, the 'whole bloody western front's a wanker's paradise' (*TGR*, p. 177).

As noted at the beginning of this chapter attributes of masculinity are paramount to the idea of national identity at times of war and Joanne Sharp discusses this idea in specific relation to gendered identity; she states that men 'are incorporated into the nation metonymically... the nation is embodied within each man and each man comes to embody the nation'.³⁰ In *The Eye in the Door*, Barker foregrounds this obsession with 'moral' masculinity and sexual degeneracy. In a session with Charles Manning, Rivers states that, 'in war there's this enormous glorification of love between men, and yet at the same time it arouses anxiety', because of the undertones of homosexuality (*TEITD*, p. 156). There is, according to Michel Foucault, 'a love that is fine and just', comprising 'virtue, friendship, modesty and candor',

while ‘the love that is not’, leads to excess and hatred.³¹ The hysteria surrounding homosexual love is a result of the need to make sure that the love between soldiers in war is the ‘right kind’ of love. Homosexuality has to be formally disowned and ‘public disapproval’ of it has to be made clear: suppressing gender and sexual differences preserves heterosexual power structures.

The article, ‘The First 47,000’, that appeared in Noel Pemberton Billing’s newspaper charting the sexual degeneracy of certain members of society, is featured in *The Eye in the Door*, where Barker focuses quite specifically on antagonism towards sexual differences. The irony of this voyeuristic obsession is tangible in the trilogy where it is juxtaposed with the slaughter of thousands upon thousands of men. Sassoon, the image of ideal masculinity and a ‘fine upstanding man’ (*R*, p. 53) has to keep his homosexuality a secret. Whereas Prior glories in his bisexuality, Sassoon is forced to admit that he ‘had got [himself] into quite a state’ (*R*, p. 54) about his own life. Barker’s Sassoon claims that meeting Edward Carpenter saved his life and through reading his works, he felt he was no longer a freak. Carpenter, according to Scott McCracken, offers by example ‘a powerful alternative to bourgeois norms of masculine behaviour’.³² Carpenter argues against many principles enforced by Victorian society, in particular the enforced binaries of masculine and feminine behaviour. In describing middle-class, masculine identity Carpenter focuses specifically on relationships formed between men. McCracken argues that Carpenter made a distinction between homosexual desire and homosocial desire and that his beliefs prefigured many twentieth-century theorists. Barker accentuates the strong homosocial bond between men of similar backgrounds in the novels. Rivers and Sassoon share a closeness that Sassoon and Owen cannot share, or Rivers and Prior, for that matter. Prior is aware more than others of this distinction and lack of ease between men of different classes:

‘What did you call me?’

‘Billy. Do you mind? I ...’

‘No, it’s just the first time. Did you know that? Sassoon was Siegfried. Anderson was Ralph. I noticed the other day that you called Manning Charles. I was always “Prior” . In moments of exasperation I was *Mister* Prior.’

... Oh, God, Rivers thought. Prior was incapable of interpreting that as anything other than snobbery. And perhaps it had been. Partly (*TEITD*, p. 24).

Working-class men and women could rarely share that bond between middle-class men at the time Carpenter was writing, a point that is underscored by Rivers’s unthinking rebuff to Prior in the novel. Carpenter’s utopian ideals (ironically undercut by McCracken’s comment that his working-class lovers did all the housework) reinforce class boundaries, even within the resistance Carpenter offered towards ‘any concept of identity as a fixed constellation of gender or class’.³³

Barker’s introduction of historical characters such as Edward Carpenter and Robert Ross offers differing takes on middle-class masculinity. By juxtaposing the characters of Ross and Manning with Prior, Barker is able to emphasise not only the hysteria that surrounded society’s preoccupation with the sexual proclivities of a few distinguished people, but also the contradictions between middle-class and working-class consciousness. The objectification of young, working-class males is apparent throughout the trilogy: they are often seen as recipients of male middle-class sexual fantasies. The confrontation between Manning and Prior at the beginning of *The Eye in the Door* is particularly revealing:

Prior ran his fingers through his cropped hair till it stood up in spikes, lit a cigarette, rolled it in a particular way along his bottom lip and smiled. He’d transformed himself into the sort of working-class boy Manning would think it all right to fuck. A sort of seminal spittoon.... Bending over him, Prior put his hands between his legs, thinking

he'd probably never felt a purer spurt of class antagonism than he felt at that moment (*TEITD*, p. 11).

Prior's masquerade of working-class queerness is successfully performed using knowledge of Manning's middle-class perception of the young working-class male. This performance is distinguishably different from Prior merely possessing that image himself, because there are as many Priors as there are versions of masculinity. It is carried out by Prior because of his own sexual need, rather than an understanding of himself as subordinate to Manning. He is intensely aware of that himself and the image of 'a long corridor of Priors, some with their backs to him, none more obviously real than the rest', accentuates the point (*TEITD*, p. 10). According to Brian Jefferson, 'standards of hegemonic masculinity provide a social ideal against which subordinated masculinities are measured and judged.'³⁴ If hegemonic masculinity exists as a presupposed rigid and uniform 'way of being', then it is middle-class manliness and manners that typify those sorts of expectations. In this respect working-class masculinity is clearly a subordinated form and Prior's masquerade allows Manning to 'let go', sexually. Prior, quite rightly, understands that Manning's middle-class sensibility will not allow him to expose his sexual preferences with 'a social equal' (*TEITD*, p. 11). It is obviously all right to fuck a subordinate, after all that is what the middle classes have been doing for years. However, what is most evident in this episode is that masculinity is transmutable and hegemonic masculinity can be transformed and regenerated. Michael Roper and John Tosh argue a similar point, by stating that masculinity can never be fully possessed but must be asserted and achieved.³⁵ The notion that masculinity can take many forms and is perpetually renegotiated underlies many of the characterisations in the trilogy, and most specifically the character of Prior.

Prior's association with Manning's circle of friends inevitably brings class antagonism to a head. To Manning's comment that 'he needed a good fucking', Prior's thoughts are, '*you*

all do' (*TEITD*, p. 14). Later on, in the same circle of friends, Prior is compelled to provide 'sexual humiliation' for a middle-class homosexual who makes untoward comments about the working classes. Birtwhistle's comments that 'one can't rely on [the working class]. Their values are totally different from ours. They're a different species really', is that society's attitude made manifest (*TGR*, p. 100). The irony, for Prior, is that the difference between these men and the Birtwhistles of the world is that it is primarily working-class men 'who're getting their ballocks shot off' while people like Birtwhistle live an easy life. Prior's anger gives way to feelings of violent dislike, as he feels 'an intimate, obsessive deeply *physical* hatred' of these sorts of people (*TEITD*, p.130).³⁶

With Prior, there is always an underlying acknowledgement of a working-class consciousness and a fight against the elitism inherent in the structures of power that he sees as ridiculous and oppressive. Rivers at one stage asks Prior how he fits in as an officer:

Prior's face shut tight. 'You mean, did I encounter any snobbery?'

'Yes'.

'Not more than I have here'.

Their eyes locked. Rivers said, 'but did you encounter it?'

'Yes. It was made perfectly clear when you arrive that some people are more welcome than others. It helps if you have been to the right school. It helps if you hunt, it helps if your shirts are the right colour. Which is a *deep* shade of khaki... You know they sent me on a course once. You have to ride round and round this bloody ring with your hands clasped behind your head. No saddle. No stirrups... for the first time I realised that somewhere at the back of their... *tiny tiny* minds they really do believe it is going to end in one big glorious *cavalry charge* (*R*, p. 66).

Prior's position on class distinctions is made very clear; although he goes on to say that Rivers should not make too much of the snobbery, it is obvious that it affects Prior. His anger

at the different kinds of experiences of affront to the working class is apparent in this confrontation with Rivers (*R*, p. 67). Prior is very much aware that he is no more than a ‘temporary gentleman’ in the eyes of society.³⁷ Sassoon’s position on the merits of class in *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (1960) tends to confirm such social absurdities in the face of carnage and desperation. He describes meeting a fellow officer, Mansfield, at Clitherland Station, whose ‘shirt and tie were more yellow than khaki. And his breeches were of a bright buff tint’. Sassoon is aware of this coded indication of someone not quite up to scratch, having been told by his tailor when choosing khaki shirts, “‘*You can’t have them too dark.*”” When the two new officers are greeted by the Adjutant, Mansfield was greeted by a ‘prolonged scrutiny’ and ‘unreproducible hauteur’ and the words “‘*Christ! who’s your tailor?*”” Sassoon’s reception is ‘in accordance with the cut of [his] clothes’. Of course, it turns out that Mansfield has a northern accent.

Sassoon, writing his memoirs after the war, was moved to say that although officers such as Mansfield were liable to criticism because their clothes, accents and manners did not conform to those of the ‘carefully selected Special Reserve commissions (like [his] own), they usually turned out to be first-rate officers, when they got to the trenches’.³⁸ They were, however, still ‘temporary gentlemen’, even though as Manning says, in *The Eye in the Door*, ‘one tried not to use it [the term] in connection with people one liked’ (*TEITD*, p. 19). However, it is obvious throughout the trilogy that class awareness prevails, even at the height of battle. Manning acknowledges this:

the amazing thing was how persistent one’s awareness of class distinction was. The mind seemed capable of making these minute social assessments in almost any circumstances. He remembered the Somme, how the Northumberlands and the Durhams had lain, where the machine-guns had caught them, in neat swathes, like harvested wheat. Later that night, crashing through a trench in pitch-blackness... he’d

stumbled into a Northumberlands' officer, very obviously shaken by the carnage inflicted on his battalion. And who could blame him?... Manning, sympathizing, steadying, well aware that his own nerves had not yet been tested, had none the less found time to notice that the Northumberlands' officer had dropped his aitches. He'd been jarred by it (*TEITD*, pp. 20-21).

Class differences are apparent even in the soldiers' responses to the disturbing experiences of the war. Prior is the only officer at Craiglockhart who is suffering from mutism, although according to Rivers, 'at Maghull, where [he] treated private soldiers, it was by far the commonest symptom'. Rivers goes on to say that 'for the labouring classes illness *has* to be physical' and that 'officer's dreams also tend to be more elaborate... as officers hav[e] a more complex mental life' (*R*, p.96). The idea that the working classes have no interior or complex mental life is often reflected in critical responses to writers who foreground working-class characters and it is one reason why the 'working-class' novel has been undervalued. Barker, herself, has often borne the brunt of this form of criticism. What is really telling in the trilogy, is that she has created one of the most demandingly complex and engaging characters in contemporary fiction, Billy Prior, *and* he is working-class. As Prior silences Rivers with, 'are you serious? You honestly believe that that *gaggle* of noodle-brained half-wits down there has a complex mental life', so Barker silences those critics (*R*, p. 97).³⁹

Barker's representation of working-class women in the same era is notable. The new found freedom for women is provided by the extra money they earn, working in war industries. In the trilogy, Prior's girlfriend Sarah Lumb, for example, works in a munitions factory, earning 'fifty bob a week' which was 'five times as much as she earned in service' (*R*, p. 89). The group of women Prior encounters in a café in *Regeneration* is self-assured, self-reliant and humorous.⁴⁰ Barker did not want them to have walk-on, working-class parts and states the women are just as important as the other characters in the trilogy: they are, in

fact, the moral bedrock.⁴¹ The women are regenerated in a number of ways as they are establishing new social positions and they are subject to spiritual regeneration (new ways of thinking). The women have new life and energy afforded by new opportunities. In *The Eye in the Door*, the backlash against women is emphasised by Barker's inclusion of Pemberton Billing and Spencer's article, 'The Cult of the Clitoris'.⁴² Charles Manning states that his wife thinks, 'the... sentimentality about the role women are playing -- doing their bit and all that -- really masks a deep-rooted fear that they're getting out of line' (*TEITD*, p. 156). Prior's opinion is that 'women were out and about, as if they had somewhere to go', rather than being tied to the house and to children (*TEITD*, p. 95). For some working-class women the war had given them opportunities they never had before. Mrs Riley who was a surrogate mother to Prior is now an attractive woman, who wears 'flesh coloured tights *and shoes*' and who has 'flashing white teeth' in place of blackened stumps and gaps. She also goes out drinking with a friend, to a pub. This is something that would have been unheard of as Prior observes: 'No wonder [men] thought Armageddon had arrived' (*TEITD*, pp. 95-96).

Like Zahavi, Barker negotiates the breaking of a number of sexual taboos. She carries this off in her own imaginative, darkly humorous manner. Billy Prior is the exemplar of sexual interdiction and his resistance to sexual obligation or duty is extraordinary in many respects; he breaks down many of society's sexual taboos. He has sex with Manning ('he came quickly, with deep shuddering groans, a feeling of being pulled out of himself that started at his throat. Carefully he lowered Manning's legs and sucked him off' *TEITD*, p. 14). He enjoys sex with his surrogate mother Mrs Riley: ('he kissed her mouth, her nose, her hair, and then, lowering his head in pure delight, feeling every taboo in the whole fucking country crash around his ears, he sucked Mrs Riley's breasts' *TEITD*, p. 117). And with a young French farm boy:

I pulled down his trousers... and started nosing and tonguing around his arse, worrying at the crack to get in... prim pursed hole glistening with spit and, on the other side of that tight French sphincter, German spunk. Not literally... but *there* nevertheless... and my tongue reaching out for them (*TGR*, p. 248).

Prior approaches each of these encounters with humour and relish. He is 'keen, alert, cold, observant, detached, manipulative, ruthless and very, very, sexual' (*TEITD*, p. 76). Barker's renegotiation of sexuality for women is of equal importance to her redefining of masculinity and male sexuality. For Barker, it is unimportant 'who stuffs what into where', for her, the sexual act, in whatever form it takes, is part of everyday life (*TEITD*, p. 13). Barker's Sassoon says at one stage, 'I don't want to spend the rest of my life wrapped up in the sort of cocoon I was in before the war. I want to find out about ordinary people' (*TEITD*, p. 259). With characters such as Billy Prior, Barker proves that in fact the working classes are far from ordinary.

In the trilogy it is Prior that provide the impetus for Barker's renegotiation of class and masculinity, and in *The Ghost Road* a conclusive irony is portrayed. Prior, the temporary gentleman, is finally, on his return to the front, a fully paid up member of the 'club to end all clubs'. Not only is he 'a fairly phoney gentleman', he goes into battle with a 'phoney gentleman's gentleman' by his side (*TGR*, p. 150). Prior, realises he would have been a fool 'not to come back' (*TGR*, p. 258) and he is most alive in this final section. Barker's juxtaposing of Rivers's anthropological research with the depiction of war offers an important counterpoint in *The Ghost Road*. The headhunters in Melanesia are no longer allowed to go off to war, and all the 'young men [are] sitting about like old women, instead of being off in their canoes, as they ought to have been, burning villages, taking heads' (*TGR*, p. 157). Rivers observes a people perishing from the *absence* of war and Prior shows the power and emotion of young men perishing *because* of war. It is obvious that Barker is not

renegotiating public perceptions of war in the trilogy, she is well aware that the past is already 'known' in that respect. For her, 'the past is palimpsest... early memories are always obscured by accumulations of later knowledge', but she does not allow the past to become obscured (*TEITD*, p. 55). She views the past *through* the layers of memory and she uses 'talk *blong tomate*' (the language of ghosts) to provide the impetus for her consideration of war. At one point Sassoon is forced to acknowledge that it is useless to be angry, that anger is such a trivial reaction to so great a tragedy as the war. However, it is anger, articulated through Billy Prior that affords Barker the opportunity to extend her exploration to include social, sexual and political differences. The issues of class, masculinity and sexuality that she engages with in *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road* remain at the forefront of contemporary debate and maintain Barker at the vanguard of contemporary writing. Barker's is a significant body of work that is situated quite specifically in the politics of the body (female and male) and in feminism's notion of sexual politics. It also transgresses literary boundaries in the representation of working-class women and men. This breaking of literary boundaries is recognisable in the writing Helen Zahavi and in the work of Livi Michael.⁴³ In a similar vein to Barker in her early writing Michael advances a political agenda in relation to women's (and men's) oppression. Her novels, published in the 1990s, confront issues of poverty and economic deprivation and she is among the feminist writers who endeavour to ground their novels in politics.

Endnotes

¹Philip Hensher, writing in the *Guardian* at the time Barker was awarded the ‘Guardian Fiction Prize’ for 1993 for *The Eye in the Door*, believes that Barker has managed ‘a remarkable reinvention of herself as a novelist’, and that she has ‘drastically and successfully changed course’. This is not the case. To give one example, Barker moves between the use and abuse of human labour throughout all her novels, where the ‘hands’ of the factories and the ‘bodies’ of the reproduction machines of women in her early novels, become the ‘cannon-fodder’ of the war machine in her later novels. See Philip Hensher, ‘Getting better all the time’, *Guardian*, 26 November, 1993.

²*Another World* (1998), *Border Crossing* (2001) and *Double Vision* (2003) are not discussed in this thesis but each explore matters of anxiety, violence, class and gender in various contexts.

³This is obviously a generalised claim and these elements of Pat Barker’s writing will be discussed in more detail throughout this chapter. I refer to Sharon Monteith’s notion of quintessential ‘Barkeresque’ characters. See Sharon Monteith, *Pat Barker*, (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2002), p. 9.

⁴*Regeneration* (London: Penguin, 1992), *The Eye in the Door* (London: Viking, 1993), *The Ghost Road* (London: Viking, 1995). These are the versions referred to throughout. All further references to these novels will be abbreviated as: *R*; *TEITD*; and *TGR*, and will be included in the main body of the text.

⁵Barker’s dialogue in the ‘male-centred’ novels that constitute the trilogy is very close to the dialogue between women in *Union Street* and *Blow Your House Down*. They are both effecting a ‘talking cure’, but are articulated differently. Barker states that when she was writing the dialogue for *Blow Your House Down* she did not know then that she was ever going to write about the First World War. But, she thought that what she was writing, the way her women characters speak, was the way men spoke in the trenches. She calls it ‘trench dialogue’. Monteith and Wheeler, Interview with Pat Barker’. See also Donna Perry, ‘Going home again: An interview with Pat Barker’, *Literary Review*, 34:1 (1991), pp. 235-242.

⁶See Peter Middleton’s discussion of Idealised Self-Images in ‘Introduction’, *The Inward Gaze: Masculinity and Subjectivity in Modern Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 2.

⁷Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men’s Bodies and the Great War* (London: Reaktion Books) 1996), pp. 126-128.

⁸For a discussion of Richard Aldington, see Trudi Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 81.

⁹Tate, *Modernism, History and the First World War*, p. 81.

¹⁰See Graham Dawson, ‘Introduction: Soldier heroes, masculinity and British national identity’, in *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-2.

¹¹Barker's introduction of the fictitious Billy Prior into the 'real' situation of Craiglockhart hospital allows her to broaden her debate. Prior's conflicting social and sexual identities are the focus of this discussion on class relationships and masculinity. His first appearance in the trilogy is as a voiceless officer, rendered mute, and suffering from shell shock. The term 'shell shock' was first used by Dr. Charles Meyer in 1915. While working in a hospital in France during the war he had assumed that soldiers, who had lost their memory after being in close proximity to a number of shell explosions, had done so because of the shock arising out of their experience. Myers coined the term in an article he wrote for *The Lancet* in February 1915. Inherent in Barker's discussion of neurasthenia and shell shock is the knowledge that it is often an accumulation of incidents that lead to breakdown and that breakdown can take many forms. See Elaine Showalter's discussion of this point in, 'Male Hysteria: W. H. R. Rivers and the Lessons of Shell Shock', in *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture* (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 167-8.

¹²See Elaine Showalter, 'Hysterical Narratives', in *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 96.

¹³This passage is from Blunden's *Undertones of War*, quoted in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 32.

¹⁴See Anne Whitehead, 'Open to Suggestion: Hypnosis and History in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 44:3 (1998), pp. 674-694.

¹⁵Middleton, *The Inward Gaze*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁶See 'Repression', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, Vol. XIV (1914-1916), (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), p. 157.

¹⁷This argument acknowledges that attributes of 'feminine' and 'masculine' identity previously ascribed to within a system of binaries can now be claimed as part of the transformation of both male and female identities. See David J. Tracey, 'The Rising Feminine: Polemical Introduction: Jungian thought and the post-patriarchal psyche', in David J. Tracey, *Remaking Men* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 1.

¹⁸See *The Eye in the Door* pp. 132-139. Barker's fictional encounter between Billy Prior and Rivers offers an intriguing insight into the historical Rivers. Rivers's mind had been trained to be analytical, to keep the emotional and rational elements separate in many ways, and this, to a great extent, provides the model for his 'controlled masculinity'. Barker's interrogation of Rivers, through the fictional Billy Prior, demonstrates an awareness of Rivers as a 'deeply divided man' (*TEITD*, p. 141). Rivers's acknowledgement that his experiments with Henry Head, on the regeneration of nerves has given him the vocabulary to express the divisions within himself, also has a bearing on the notion of a prescribed masculinity. The 'epicritic' came to stand for 'everything rational, ordered, cerebral, objective', stereotypical masculine constructs, while 'protopathic' referred to the emotional, the sensual, the chaotic, and the primitive', generally associated with the 'feminine' (*TEITD*, p. 142). Barker is perhaps

arguing here that the recognition of both elements, the integrating of the 'masculine' and 'feminine' can remake masculinity and as such, masculinity is not eroded, but strengthened.

¹⁹Monteith and Wheeler, 'Interview with Pat Barker'.

²⁰Dawson, *Soldier Heroes*, p. 2.

²¹Graham Dawson, 'The Blond Bedouin', in Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain Since 1800* (London and New York, Routledge 1991), p. 123.

²²See Greg Harris, 'Compulsory Masculinity, Britain and the Great War: the literary historical work of Pat Barker', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 39 (1998), p. 290.

²³Toril Moi has defined writing that contains a 'powerful expression of personal experience in a social framework' as feminist writing. Although the trilogy is foregrounding the lives of men, I see the three novels as essentially feminist. See Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 7.

²⁴Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 13 & p. 82.

²⁵This point is also made by Lynne Hanley, in *Writing War: Fiction, Gender & Memory* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), p. 22.

²⁶Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 88.

²⁷See Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (London: Macmillan Press, 1990), p. 5.

²⁸Tylee is of the opinion that Wilfred Owen, although not in the same 'officer/gentleman' category as Sassoon, Graves etc, also saw his 'men' from the outside. Paul Fussell sees Owen's poetry as different from that of Sassoon, Blunden and Graves, with 'their university bent towards structured general ideas'. Quoting Bergonzi's view that 'Owen 'rarely attempts a contrast, nostalgic or ironic, between the trenches and remembered English scenes' but focuses mainly on 'intimate identification' with boys, Fussell nevertheless remains convinced Owen felt 'profound pity' for the soldier boys he eroticised in his poetry and felt he had to 'testify on their behalf'. The rank and file soldiers of the First World War were far from Graham Dawson's idea of the 'quintessential soldier hero' and were often seen as contemptible by many officers. Medical inspectors graded men into four groups: Grade 1 being men who were fit, Grade 2 being 'adequate' men, Grade 3 consisting of men unable to walk five miles and Grade 4 composed of men in even worse health. From 1917 onwards just fewer than half the recruits were deemed to be in the last two categories. See Joanna Bourke, *Working-Class Cultures in Britain 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 172. See also Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, pp.290-291, and Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness*, p. 5.

²⁹In a confrontation with Rivers, Prior says, 'No. I don't seem to feel sexual guilt you know. At all really' (*TEITD*, p. 73). Prior is, however, acutely aware of the darker side of his personality and as Rivers points out, 'he might talk about being incapable of sexual guilt, but... he was deeply ashamed of his sadistic impulses, even frightened of them' (*TEITD*, p. 143).

³⁰Joanne Sharp, 'Gendering Nationhood: A feminist engagement with national identity', in Nancy Duncan, ed. *Body Space* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 99.

³¹Michel Foucault *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality:3* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 191.

³²See Scott McCracken, 'I am the lover and the loved', in Anthony Rowland, Emma Liggins and Eriks Uskalis, eds., *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 1998), p. 140. See also Lynne Segal, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (London: Virago Press, 1990), pp. 166-167.

³³McCracken, 'I am the lover and the loved', p. 146.

³⁴B. Jefferson, 'Introduction: Masculinities, social relations and crime', *British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 36 (3), 1996, p. 339, as quoted by Martha K. Huggins and Mika Hanlos-Fatouros, 'Centuries of Masculinity', in Lee H. Bowker, ed., *Masculinities and Violence* (Thousand Oaks, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), pp. 30-31.

³⁵See Michael Roper and John Tosh, 'Introduction: Historians and the politics of masculinity', in Michael Roper and John Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 18.

³⁶Siegfried Sassoon, too, was not without feelings of hatred and anger, towards men who made a living out of the death of soldiers, citing amongst other, 'the gross profiteer whom [he'd] overheard in a railway carriage remarking to an equally repulsive companion that if the war lasted another eighteen months he'd be able to retire from business.' See Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Man* (London: Faber and Faber, MCMXLIA), p. 230.

³⁷Sassoon, although very much part of an upper middle-class establishment before, during and after the war felt it necessary to say that the term "temporary gentlemen" was a 'disgusting phrase'. These 'temporary gentlemen' were only gentlemen for as long as they were needed. Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Man*, p. 264. Prior, acutely aware of this, realises the war is 'the club to end all clubs' (R, p. 135).

³⁸Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 260-261 & p. 264.

³⁹Paul Magrs is a writer who foregrounds working-class experiences in his novels *Marked For Life* (1995), *Does it Show?* (1997) and *Could it be Magic?* (1998). One of the things that impresses about Magrs' novels is the representation of working-class women. Magrs imbues working-class women with a sense of vibrancy. The assumption that the working class cannot have any sense of interiority or acknowledge an inner life is explored by Magrs with his working-class characters. Christopher Hart is one critic who has recognised that it is possible to write about the working class in a way 'that challenges the lazy clichés' often attributed to them as a whole. See Christopher Hart, 'Magical moments in ordinary lives', *Daily Telegraph*, 31 January 1998. In a short story, 'What Goes On?' (unpublished), Magrs embellishes this point and makes the working class 'vital... alive with passion, variety, interest and life'. In his story, set in the future, it is the working classes that live longer, who are the healthiest and whose inner thoughts and lives are televised to a world market.

⁴⁰Although the women in the café are amusing themselves with utterances such as, 'if a man winks at you, wink back and go with him and let him have what he wants and charge him 7/6. And go... and get yourself a new hat', in a sense, the women represent their own form of regeneration, rather than degeneration (*R*, p. 88).

⁴¹Monteith and Wheeler, 'Interview with Pat Barker'. A comparison can be made to Virginia Woolf's representation of a working-class woman in *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf's unsympathetic description of Miss Kilman, one of the few working-class characters in the novel, shows a certain amount of class antagonism. The character is used to depict two major tensions of post-war middle-class society: the fear of the elimination of class boundaries and the anxiety of female authoritarianism. Miss Kilman with her passionate convictions and her desire for change is a projection of those fears and tensions and is shown as the representation and consequences of change.

⁴²Barker states in her 'Author's Notes' at the end of *The Eye in the Door*, that in the trial of Maud Allan against Pemberton Billing for libel, Spencer was given 'free rein to his obsession with women who had hypertrophied and diseased clitorises and therefore could only be satisfied by bull elephants... [and] that Maud Allan was Asquith's wife's lover' (p. 279). The contrast to Spencer being feted by the public for saying such insane things and the fact that Sassoon was declared 'insane' for saying something sensible about the war is also pointed out by Charles Manning in the same book (*TEITD*, p. 157). Maud Allan was the actress who played the part of Salome, in Oscar Wilde's play of the same name, and the 47,000, was alleged to be a list (in the infamous black book), of many people in prominent positions who were prevented from fulfilling their roles in the war because of their sexual perversions, which made them open to blackmail. For a discussion of the Pemberton Billing Trial see Philip Hoare, *Wilde's Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy and the First World War* (New York: Arcade, 1998).

⁴³Maggie Humm, 'Landscape for a literary feminism: British women writers 1900 to present', in Helena Forsas-Scott, ed. *Textual Liberation: European Feminist Writing in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 13.

Chapter 6

Anger and Alienation: Livi Michael's Invisible Women

Without a sense of place it is hard to remember yourself.
You could be anyone at all... or... invisible (Livi Michael)

It is a mistake to homogenise writing that engages with poverty and alienation and expresses a politicised stance. To do so is to fail to see the artistic diversity in working-class writing and also, as Bea Campbell contends, to fail to see 'the dynamic differences which can describe the working class itself'.¹ Lillian S. Robinson, for example, argues that the political significance of literature by working-class writers is that it is an attempt to return to their roots, but that inevitably this act of writing does not seem to promote the formation of a working-class community, as it has among women writers of colour. The estrangement of working-class women's writing leads Robinson to determine that writing by women from/or about the working class could come into being only in the absence of collective struggle. In 'Louder than Words', Karin Aguilar-San Juan offers a critique of Robinson's discussion and deliberates on what she sees as the 'vexing question' of working-class women's writing. She tries to determine whether we can know for certain whether working-class writing represents 'the beginning of resistance' (as it is argued to be by Robinson) or the end of a class identity.² Aguilar-San Juan further questions the connection between feminist criticism and political reality and argues that although Robinson and others convey the injustices that surround women and class, they fail to offer any suggestions on how that silence might be broken. She states that 'listening to silence is a good thing... doing something to break the silence would be even better'.³ Comments such as these give credence to the argument that working-class fictions are mostly autobiographical,

often casting a nostalgic look backwards, re-imagining notions of community, and lacking in literary or artistic worth. In 'On the streets and in the tower blocks: Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) and Livi Michaels's *Under a Thin Moon* (1992)' Sharon Monteith argues that literary descriptions of working-class communities have become progressively more vague, 'articulating little more than a general sense of shared perspective, or lifestyle, or identification with a particular environment'. For Monteith, in the early 1990s, few novelists continued to express working-class experience 'unless it be via the propensity for writers to re-envision their own or their characters' childhoods in a nostalgic rites of passage novel'.⁴ Whereas this may be true of many working-class novelists, as Monteith argues Livi Michael clearly falls outside this categorisation in her exposé of working-class communities as a sham. Michael endeavours to break the silence that surrounds working-class women but visions of a working-class community of women attempting collective action against poverty and deprivation are conspicuous by their absence.

Alienation and social protest occur in many realistic and naturalistic portrayals of the working classes, from Emile Zola's *Germinal* (1885) to D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913). In *Marx and Modern Fiction* (1989), Edward Ahearn argues that cultural productions (including literature) convey elements of ideology and 'complex societal and economic systems'. Ahearn believes that realist novels are not merely 'the effort to reproduce the concrete', but that they can be inventive and innovative as well as socially and politically aware.⁵ In Fredric Jameson's famous statement literature is always a 'socially symbolic act' and 'there is nothing that is not social and historical... that everything is "in the last analysis" political'.⁶ Michael engages with issues of poverty in a political climate, where debates about deprivation and poverty

have fallen away. In 1998 The Institute for Public Policy Research published a report detailing approaches for tackling poverty but it was virtually unnoticed by the press.⁷ Poverty is not a fashionable topic in contemporary society, although perhaps ‘victim’ culture is; a particular kind of victim though, not the single mother living on a council housing estate, the working-class drug addict or the dispossessed.⁸

Karl Marx categorically ignores the position of women in his exegesis of alienation, a point Michael draws on in her examination of working-class lives. Michael’s invisible women extend the ‘political’ contingency in order for her to interrogate the psychological functions of deprivation in their lives. Michael’s economically deprived women lack a sense of themselves in that they have no means of exchange and no leisure activities which, according to Marx, are determining features of defining the self in society; they are doubly estranged. In *Under a Thin Moon* it is possible to see the beginnings of resistance; there is the acknowledgement that ‘silence... is more than the absence of noise, it is a force in itself, shaping... life’ (*UTM*, p. 217). Marx’s notion of ‘true community’ as inherent in the ‘nature of *men*’ as long as it appears ‘not through reflection but owing to the *needs* and *egoism* of individuals’, relates to the mode of exchange in a capitalist society, rather than to the estrangement of women in society. Marx argues that community is produced by the life activity of individuals. Again, community or society is estranged or alienated where ‘man is estranged from himself’ by political economy in the form of ‘*exchange and trade*’.⁹ In a society of mutual exchange, poverty (Marx’s use of private property and the loss or surrender of property because of necessity and need) leads to alienation and a displacement from society and community.

Cora Kaplan argues that ‘literary Marxism has always been somewhat nervous and tentative in its handling of the construction of social hierarchy in literary texts, as

if class were only really meaningful as a blood relation or an economic fact'.¹⁰ Michael is far from tentative in her literary exegesis and theories of alienation across *Under a Thin Moon*, *Their Angel Reach* and *All the Dark Air*.¹¹ However, Michael's take on alienation is not presented didactically through an explication of Marx's writing, but more specifically articulated through the ways in which contemporary social structures shape and forge the lives of the women in her novels. *Under a Thin Moon* and *Their Angel Reach* examine the social and sexual anxieties of a number of women. The women seek a sense of meaning and purpose in lives dominated by poverty, violence and fantasy. *All the Dark Air* tells the story of Julie and her attempt to build a life with Mike, a former homeless drug addict, whom she has loved since childhood. In all three novels Michael provides a disturbing exposé of working-class women's lack of autonomy in an economic and socially impoverished area in the north of England. She focuses on the ways in which her women characters are rendered invisible in a society that is built on capital. Through the use of multiple narrators Michael engages with and confronts the violence to which many women are subjected and like Zahavi and Barker she offers a new (and often controversial) way of writing about women's experiences. Michael's use of anger is marked but much more guarded than Zahavi's; the anger her characters express is often restrained and she may be compared with Barker in this respect. What unites the women writers under discussion is their engagement with taboo subjects and that their narratives are permeated with a dark humour and wittiness that is frequently overlooked.¹²

In *Under a Thin Moon* Michael tells the stories of four women: Wanda and her daughter Coral, and two young women, Laurie and Valerie. The narrative follows their lives as lived in poverty and isolation on a run-down Northern housing estate. The initial scene reveals Wanda in the kitchen of her council flat. She is fighting a

losing battle with her sanity and the 'ring of greyish scum around the bath' that returns whenever she tries to clean it (*UTM*, p. 1). Wanda's optimism at being allocated a 'home' in which she can bring up her daughter like in a 'proper family' eventually gives way to despair, alienation and suicide. Valerie, a talented artist has to cope with her drunken mother and Laurie seems to be living her life in total suspension, lacking the faith in herself required to move out of inertia. Michael succinctly foregrounds the theme of isolation:

So here they all are in this crumbling heap of concrete, plasterboard and cement. The walls are so thin they are aware of all the small private details of one another's lives, and in many ways their lives run on similar lines, yet they are all encased in small apartments so that *each is absolutely alone* (*UTM*, p. 29, my emphasis).

Writing such as this that makes poverty visible and that explores the economically distressed in society is destined to be invalidated by some critics. In reviewing the novel Philip MacCann asks 'Honesty and art both have their shortcomings, don't they?' He judges that 'honesty lacks grace, art lacks candour', adding that 'every Dismal Jimmie will thrill to hear these minnies moan, but Michael will not budge the impartial reader. If she has any gift for transformation it may only be as a propagandist'.¹³ And although Natasha Walter writes with approbation of Michael's style, she also contends that 'hers is a world trammelled by lost giros, broken lifts, the close walls of tiny flats, the passivity of unemployment, the sorrow of broken families, a world that figures much more in government surveys than in good literature'.¹⁴ The opposition of literature, art and a working-class voice remains problematic; in the same way that the literary canon precludes working-class fiction, literary criticism abrogates fiction such as Michael's for being monologic. Michael

has an answer for this narrow reading of working-class fictions; some of her most barbed and humorous writing is given to Laurie in *Under a Thin Moon*. She observes:

The underlying metonymic of the act of reading is in itself fundamentally phallic, says the lecturer.... Or shall we rather suppose, as has been provocatively suggested, that author, text and reader *reciprocally constitute* each other in a kind of narrative invocation? That, or the notion of passive text, awaiting phallic entry... Can't tell his phallus from his fundament, whispers Shelagh.... Listen to him... wanking himself off at our expense... (UTM, pp. 36-37).

The parodying of academic discourses in the novel underlines the working-class character's inability to assimilate that discourse which of course renders her voiceless and invisible in the academic environment of her university:

An architectural iniquity, she hisses, following Laurie around, extemporising along the parameters of its own despair.... Of course when reading a book, she says, one is actually referring to a process of entification from the intrasubjective topography... (UTM, p. 167).

The very telling over-exaggeration of critical 'literariness' in reading practices advanced by the (male) lecturer offers a humorous parody of literary and critical pretensions and, as an aside, is also an ironic, cognisant contemplation of how her own novel will be received in the academy.

In *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (1987), Chris Weedon states that 'acceptable' representatives of working-class writing were accepted into the canon only after they had undergone a process of becoming politically neutralised by the reading strategies of liberal-humanists.¹⁵ This way of under-reading substantially negates overtly politicised novels. Reading working-class novels as polemic precludes

any affirmation of their literary worth. To deny working-class fiction literariness is also to deny that realism is achieving new levels of complexity and understanding. For Livi Michael the working-class novel prevails over the boundaries of realism, denying the specificity of the 'sociological' reductive labelling. She embraces and reclaims the working-class novel, saying:

I shape my material around the sense that working-class writers have a literary tradition. They were always thought to be writing straight from life... but once you have studied working-class fiction you find out that certain figures and certain motifs recur all the time. For instance the political protest, the woman on her own with a baby, the drunkenness, the deteriorating effects on a relationship of poverty. I did not know why this could not be considered a literary tradition.¹⁶

Michael writes within a working-class tradition as she understands it *and* she uses diverse narrative strategies; like other contemporary women writers discussed in this thesis she feels the constraints of 'traditional' realism. She is, however, very much aware of the need to allow the voice of her women to be 'authentic'.¹⁷ It is difficult to articulate working-class consciousness through the pages of a novel but Michael addresses this problem (one that all working-class writers have to confront) through Laurie in *Under a Thin Moon* who feels that 'inside her head she is always carrying a hostile audience... when she tries to translate herself... she hears always the jeering laughter of people in her street'. Laurie doubts the validity of her voice and realises 'you needed money even to speak' (*UTM*, p. 64). She comes from a working-class family, has a university education, but still gradually loses a sense of herself. Her failure to incorporate a language that is not her own leads to increasing anger and frustration; she believes she is not being heard and becomes alienated -- displaced

both culturally from her working-class roots and economically by her failure to get employment:

She [Laurie] is thinking of Shelagh imitating the tutors and critics, reciting *Hamlet*, one way or another managing to acquire the language she began by despising. At first, like a clumsy comedienne she only managed to grasp its more clichéd aspects, its pretensions.... Shelagh managed to go further than Laurie with her language. Far enough thinks Laurie, to make the transition right out of her class.... And Laurie's language has also changed. She has lapsed more and more completely into silence (*UTM*, pp. 167-8).

It seems as if writing about class can fail in both ways, as Michael notes, 'when she tries to talk in the old way... she sees the resigned, dismissive faces... (when) she conscientiously copies the language of the literary critics... she is complicating the issue with opaque terminology' (*UTM*, p. 110). The attempt to find an acceptable 'voice' for working-class women is an overarching concern in this novel. Valerie, the potential artist paints 'great towering abstracts of crumbling rock with windows in them', which she calls '*voiceless*. It is council-estate life, she says, from the inside' (*UTM*, pp. 77-78). She paints the characters around her as a 'collection of incoherent fragments' and Laurie feels herself to be a 'collection of... fragments: memories, dreams, fears, desires' (*UTM*, p. 132).

Michael's fictions incorporate a strong sense of rage against the forces and experiences that shape society. Laurie becomes outraged at a publicity stunt where an MP lives for a week on the same money as the unemployed:

She imagines herself digging her fingers into the fat lard of his face and dragging them downwards leaving marks like a fork in dripping (*UTM*, p. 27).

Laurie knows, however, that she will do nothing of the sort and this leads to her weary despair. Valerie, driven to her limit by her drunken mother finally gives way to her anger:

She hauls her [mother] upright in the chair and slaps her face hard, several times. She pours hot coffee down her mother's throat and it runs down her chin and chest. She vomits suddenly down her nose and mouth, but Valerie doesn't care.

Valerie's mother thinks that 'if I could just die.... Then everything'd be alright (*UTM*, pp. 81-82). The sense of alienation that permeates everyday life is bound up in the stories of characters such as Valerie and other women in Michael's novels. The novels' fragmented structures, their disruption of time and decentred characters reinforce the feeling of isolation. Michael's use of anger as a protest against estrangement is an attempt to tackle social disaffection; the silences that surround issues of economic constraint are generated in Michael's prose style, which, as Elizabeth Baines points out, comprises a 'lack of speech marks, stream of narrative consciousness and... slipperiness'.¹⁸ Feminist critics Lee and Aguilar-San Juan who argue for feminist resistance, can find a resistant voice in Michael's first novel in Wanda, who questions her inability to function in a society that denies her existence: 'She used to think anger was the problem... now she thinks it is better to be angry than to feel nothing at all. At least if you get angry you are putting up some kind of fight against being taken apart' (*UTM*, pp. 227-8). There is a knowingness embedded in Michael's novels that understands the ways in which women feel estranged and displaced.

Michael's anger is loudest against the purveying of fantasy to women. Wanda in *Under a Thin Moon*, Julie, in *All The Dark Air* and the female protagonists of *Their*

Angel Reach such as Janice, Helen, Karen and Lizzie are all shown to be affected psychologically by projected media images that they cannot live up to. Wanda imagines she is playing a role in a film, which is the only way she can cope with her poverty and alienation. Helen, showing that fantasies for women take hold at a very early age, dreams of meeting her pop idol Ashley:

...even if it wasn't Ashley, she wanted to look her best on the night. She intended to starve herself -- in two weeks she might lose half a stone. She could imagine herself slimmer, in a new outfit with streaks in her hair... she imagined the new Helen, slimmer, trendy, going to Ashley's concert. She could see herself taking a wrong turning in the concert hall afterwards and walking right into him, his look of interest... (*TAR*, p. 75)

Julie believes she can have the family life she craves and tries to build a home for herself in a run-down, semi-derelict house that has no floor. The obvious metaphor of the house with no foundations illustrates Michael's contempt for the fantasies that are inculcated into women and their expectations of a happy, family life.

Michael shows that fantasy is a dangerous thing: a lie. But as Julie states 'if you lied well enough, people began to support your lie, and it became a kind of truth' (*ATDA*, p. 138). It is the lie about themselves that women have been forced to accept in a society that merchandises images of 'femininity' back to them in evermore seductive packages. The fantasy inevitably concerns the way women 'look' and received images of femininity are quite specifically linked to women's oppression in other areas of their lives. Freud has observed that girls develop a sense of shame and disgust with far less resistance than boys and although Freud allocates stereotypical notions of active and passive sexuality to the masculine/feminine debate, self-loathing can be linked directly to Freud's 'forsaken object', in this case the failure of women to

live up to an 'ego-ideal'.¹⁹ In Michael's writing much of this shame and disgust is turned inwards by her women protagonists. They are driven to binges of eating, self-loathing and despair, but annihilation through distorted body images is not just characterised by displaying denial or resistance. Far from having no positive features the novels also contain reinforcement of the 'female', rather than the 'feminine'.²⁰ In *Under a Thin Moon* and *All The Dark Air*, women characters have an uncanny feeling that they are being watched: they are aware of themselves heightened in alienation, while in *Their Angel Reach* there is a much clearer sense of women returning the female gaze rather than absorbing the male gaze. This is accentuated by the different ways in which the women see themselves, in both positive and negative ways, and in the way Michael allows them to explore their relationships to sexuality and pornography. In *Their Angel Reach* sexuality and violence are contiguous and the disturbing relationship Michael establishes between the two that is far from tangential. The characters are on the receiving end of violence, but they also tend to engage with violence against each other. The multi-voiced narrative with its stories of very diverse women, interrogates different facets of violence perpetrated on and by women. In 'Not Even the Rain' the active/passive polarity is subverted in many ways. Karen, a spectator at the rape of another woman appears to feel empowered in some way by watching that rape:

Why doesn't she scream, Karen thought, then felt in her own throat the kind of constriction Lou must be feeling... she felt it was all inevitable, like a scene that had to be played out, that at some level she wanted to be played out... When Mick climbed on top of Lou.... Karen felt her own attention grow to a point of absorbed concentration nothing could shake.... Karen wanted to see.

She felt the lure of what you were not supposed to see more powerfully than anything she had felt in her life (*TAR*, p. 31).

Women have traditionally been viewed as culturally determined, with images of themselves constructed outside of their own knowledge or control; being violent is not part of that constructed image, as Helen Zahavi's fiction shows. A woman watching a rape is not traditionally thought of as an acceptable subject for fiction. Karen's voyeuristic involvement in the rape could be said to disrupt male power and eliminate the passivity and silence of women regarding this subject but Karen's empowerment is clearly staged at the cost of the annihilation of another woman, Lou, the rape victim. In 'Living with Vampires' the protagonist Lizzie is subjected to a horrific sexual and violent attack by a man she has 'picked up' in a hotel bar. Lizzie feels 'the prospect of romantic excitement... taking years off her... making her feel alive', but the burning anger and misogyny of her attacker has terrible repercussions.

Michael juxtaposes the story of the attack with the painting of a portrait of a missing young woman, powerfully evoking a sense of loss and mourning. Lizzie is raped, tortured, 'tied, untied, fucked in the backside and then the mouth... burnt with his lighter' but finds a sense of herself again watching pornographic videos with her new boyfriend, Rob. She notices that 'pornography made sex easy' and that it 'left the way clear for a powerful, uncomplicated sexual response' (*TAR*, p. 307). Michael posits an incredibly disturbing representation of women's involvement with pornography: Lizzie feels sexually aroused at the very same time that she feels the need to rip the video out of the machine. Lizzie is troubled by her desire to watch a film about a young girl, tied and blindfolded, and about to be raped by two men. Like Zahavi in *Dirty Weekend*, *True Romance* and *Donna and the Fatman* and Barker in *Union Street* and *Blow Your House Down*, Michael chooses to confront some of the

most unspeakable taboos around sexuality and violence and the role of women.

Historically, containing women's sexuality has been one of the most effective methods of establishing ideological control over women. Sexuality, especially female sexuality is regarded as potentially subversive, challenging the ideology created by a dominant patriarchal society that women must be sexually passive. Women's sexuality is explicitly addressed in *Their Angel Reach* when Michael challenges the idea of what is considered 'normal' behaviour for women. She disturbs the paradigm whereby the male corrupts and the female is innocent, that implies that there is *a priori*, an essence that is predetermined. In other words men and women act as they do because that is the way they are. Pornography, it is argued, is the realisation of male power and female oppression, which leads to the mistaken belief that all feminists are anti-pornography. Michael sees that it is more important that women explore and achieve an active sexuality if they choose to do so.

In 'Lower than Angels', Janice worries about achieving orgasm and feels her desire 'welling with a simultaneous hollowness'. She fantasises about sexual encounters with strange men who will 'push her down on to boards and begin binding her down; arms stretched wide, then the legs'. She imagines 'her cunt... begins to open and flower, swelling with an energy of its own', but also feels 'a seeping shame' about her fantasy (*TAR*, p. 230). When Janice eventually has her first orgasm it is a result of violent sex characterised by rage and resentment. Janice responds to the violence of her partner 'at first with anger and outrage then with a congestion of feeling between her legs, as though her cunt were distending and the least touch would trigger something violent, uncontrollable. She arched her back'. Afterwards she sees her face 'has a shining unholy glow... as if she had been touched by angels' (*TAR*, p. 237). Janice's protestation against the violence inflicted on her is

immediately negated by the strength of her desire to achieve orgasm with a man she does not even like. The escalation of violence only makes her feel 'she might let him do anything to her, anything at all' (*TAR*, p. 239).

In her discussion of pornography Elizabeth Wilson argues that the whole discourse about pornography positions women as victims and the anti-porn campaign is a disaster, based on monolithic and over-simplified views of male and female sexuality. Women cease to exhibit any lust or desire in this debate and are 'the passive recipients of men's lusts'. Rosalind Coward believes that 'women centred novels' are a type of narrative that defines women 'through their sexual personhood.' If, as Lillian Robinson argues, what men seek in pornography is a confirmation of the virile ideal, an identification of themselves as master, then by placing women in a position where they can respond positively to it, Michael interrogates the roles of women through their sexual personae, but she also allows them their own sexual proclivities and their own sexual desires.²¹ A hugely controversial writer, Michael extends the feminist analysis of culture and society to the forms and techniques of literature.

In *Their Angel Reach* Lizzie dreams of 'a flapping noise at her window... It was a vampire, she knew... It was a woman with wild whitish hair, her face distorted with rage... mouthing words Lizzie did not understand' (*TAR*, p. 306). Lizzie wants something 'pure and transcendent' to come out of her work but 'she knew it wouldn't, that art wasn't like that' (*TAR*, p.335). Michael's fiction underlines the idea that art and artistry take many forms in working-class fictions. Michael deploys realist narrative strategies but in her forays into fantasy and her explorations of multi-voiced discourse and de-centred characters, she also draws in what are understood to be components of postmodernist narrative strategies. Michael draws upon analogous voices in *Under a Thin Moon* and *Their Angel Reach* but disseminates those voices

through the narratives of many diametrically dissimilar characters, connecting on the same level and operating in similar ways. Reality is not a matter of fact but an aesthetic and metaphysical question. As long ago as 1916 Virginia Woolf argued that ‘classical realism’ such as that by ‘Mr. Wells, Mr. Bennett and Mr. Galsworthy... has a living, breathing everyday imperfection which bids us take what liberties with (literature) we choose’.²² If Woolf encouraged writers ‘to look within’ and to ‘examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day’ then contemporary writing by women such as Michael can also be said to articulate the ‘myriad impressions -- trivial, fantastic, evanescent... engraved with the sharpness of steel’, that are determined as being of literary worth.²³ Contemporary writing by Zahavi, Barker and Michael and the young women that are discussed in the final chapter is contemporary by virtue of a changed sense of the lives of women, and that is not merely a changed awareness of society and human relations. It is dependent on a sense of life as it is experienced aesthetically, economically and in oppression.

Michael deploys the women’s childhood memories, (Coral’s and Valerie’s in *Under a Thin Moon* in particular) and reworks them making them a visible component of the cycle of working-class women’s entrapment and impoverishment. In so doing the notion of community, often seen as self-supporting and sustaining working-class culture, is questioned. Friendship between women is examined and found wanting. Episodes that speculate doubtfully on the notion of community are included in all of Michael’s novels. Women’s communities and friendships between women reflect a ‘concern with the emotional, the tangential’ and are often argued to be of superficial relevance in feminist theory.²⁴ Pat O’Connor states that for women close friendships fulfil a ‘fundamental need of self realisation or belonging’ and offer a form of self-validation and clarification of identity. While she posits these

nominally coherent hypotheses of female friendships, O'Connor allows a division between psychological and social aspects of relationships, and cites 'practical help' as one of the fundamental forms of friendship.²⁵ In *Under a Thin Moon, Their Angel Reach* and *All The Dark Air*, friendships between women are more specifically contemplated by Michael and definitions of friendship are more rigorously speculated upon. For example, Wanda has 'high levels of practical help' from Di, but it is also Di who ultimately strips Wanda's flat and pushes her to the point where she takes her life (*UTM*, p. 203). Despite tentative proclamations of friendship between several of the women characters, Michael's women are ultimately alienated and alone. Janice, who is friendless, tries to forget her alienation by cramming fistfuls of food into her mouth until 'the bursting pain in her stomach became bad' (*TAR*, p. 209). Janice's anger is internalised, an inward projection of self loathing and despair. The resulting emphasis on the alienation of women gives voice to the vulnerability of notions of friendship and community.

There is no intimate confiding between Michael's women, although she does allow some form of support for Julie, with the Mind Power group in *All The Dark Air*, altogether her most humorous book.²⁶ Here, however, Michael would seem to move some way towards O'Connor's judgement that middle-class women are more likely to have time to be supportive than working-class women. The Mind Power group is, as Julie's partner Mick opines, populated by middle-class women who 'have [money] to throw around' (*ATDA*, p.156). Michael is careful to show that middle-class women are no less isolated; Jean has a son who died aged seven of leukaemia. Her other son is an errant gambler who conned his grandmother out of her house to pay his debts. Now Jean lives in a high-rise council block, left alone to deal with her cancer; Sylvia's daughters have left home and are not really in contact with her. One daughter

is totally alienated after an argument with her son-in-law and her son who was born with cystic fibrosis has died leaving her entirely alone (*ATDA*, p. 90). Mick, a member of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) is not convinced by this middle-class angst:

I bet it's just one or two of them talking about their problems and *their* feelings. Like no one else fucking has any (*ATDA*, p. 158).

Julie reasons that the SWP probably has middle-class members, but Mick's class bias is firmly based in socialist politics. He believes you have to be aware of the class struggle, saying 'you couldn't help the class you were born in to but you could help being ignorant' (*ATDA*, p. 158). With Jean and Sylvia Michael makes the point clearly that many women (and men) can be alienated and isolated. It is not a matter of middle-class women being more supportive of each other in their isolation, rather they have the economic viability to be supportive in more visible ways. In *All The Dark Air* it is Julie who is the most isolated. The economically deprived women such as Julie and Alison do not seem able to help each other: it is the middle-class women of The Mind Power group who sustain and support Julie. However, in one sense the dispossessed *do* reach out to each other in small ways. Mick helps and supports Darren, his heroin-addicted friend and looks after his Uncle Si. Men's friendships are shown to be important. Notions of friendship are far more complex than sociological surveys such as O'Connor's allow.

All The Dark Air is set in an urban landscape and interspersed with images of popular culture, urban myth, phoney logic and sound-bite philosophy. Images of popular culture are evoked with *Thunderbirds* (in Urdu); *Good Morning with Ann and Nick*; *The Brian Conley Show*; anti-ageing cream with liposomes and collagen; Delia Smith's pepper and pesto sauce; Dorothy Perkins' clothes; Marks and Spencer food; MacDonalds and the *Big Issue*. Other cultural phenomena such as buskers also come

under Michael's ironic gaze with their repertoire of songs: *The Streets of London*, *Blowing in the Wind* and *If I Were a Carpenter*. Urban myths are also shown as when Alison recounts the adventures of 'a friend of a friend' who travelled to Equador, met sundry friendly locals in a bar, went out drinking with them and woke up the next day without a kidney. The antithetical ideological positioning of the Mind Power Group and the Socialist Worker Party are played off against a landscape of broken-down, dilapidated houses, nice middle-class bungalows, high-rise flats and shopping centres that recognisably comprise British society on the cusp of the millennium. For Julie life is lived in an age of anxiety with a 'nanny state' adopting scare tactics to prevent pregnant women going near 'dog shit' or eating soft cheeses (*ATDA*, pp. 1-2) as set against more spiritual, but no less patronising philosophy of Karma and cosmic posturing. The fears, the anger, and the sense of isolation that characterised the ends of the twentieth century eddy and flow in this powerfully persuasive novel: images of shooting-galleries (drug taking houses), glue sniffing and joy riding are mixed with rain-clouds, mountain streams, miracles of nature and the pyramid of light visualised by Julie's Mind Power Group. This novel is permeated with a dark, brooding humour that calls into question the collective need for members of society to identify themselves with one group or another.

In particular the philosophy of the New Age Mind Power Group is conveyed in cynical and ironic tones:

Medbh had also said that if you wanted something to go away you could visualise it dissolving in a pyramid of light. Julie had tried that often enough with the dog dirt, and now there seemed to be more of it than ever. Of course, it might be that she wasn't visualising it clearly enough, or not positioning it the right way inside the pyramid, or that it was all balls, as Mick had said.

He'd asked if she couldn't put the government in a pyramid so they could all sit round and watch them disappear (*ATDA*, pp. 2-3).

Michael satirises the propensity to 'buy' into new age mysticism in this novel: 'Medbh was big on gardens. She used them to demonstrate nearly every point she made... (her) speech was her answer to a question... about international socialism... look after your own garden... don't go poking your nose over someone else's hedge... Medbh was against interference of any kind in other countries.' The point is ironically made: 'Julie could see everything Medbh said very clearly, she always made perfect sense', and by juxtaposing Mick's response, 'Who's talking about gardening?... I'm talking about who owns the means of production, not who's mowing the fucking lawn' (*ATDA*, pp. 51-53), Michael provides an insight into how society formulates and controls individuals ideologically and how people 'buy' into philosophies such as Marxism or New Age mysticism. Perhaps that is why, as Michael suggests, we live in a state of crisis.

In *Under a Thin Moon* there are a number of protagonists who could have written the stories of the women who live in the tower blocks; Valerie, educated to Advanced level; Laurie with her university degree in literature for instance, but it is Coral, daughter of a single mother who commits suicide, who sits down before a typewriter. Philip MacCann argues that this suggests 'that the survivor of poverty will write about it, but like an automaton, plodding, repetitious, unself-critical' and that Michael 'neglects a literary readership'.²⁷ Coral has a voice of her own in which to write the stories of women like herself, a voice that is 'authentic', while Laurie's familiarisation with 'other' middle-class (academic) discourses clouds her ability to tell the same stories effectively. Ultimately, Michael shares the narrative between the different voices of women, but Coral carries the story:²⁸

After many moments, with an effort like waking from a dream, Coral lifts her hands and puts her fingers into position on the keys. One after another she pushes them down, printing black marks on the blank white page (*UTM*, p. 230).

Michael has stated that many critics never come out of their own narrow academic perspectives to consider other ways of conveying issues of poverty and unemployment in working classes lives in literature. She says:

When she (Coral) sat down to write I did not see her as setting out to write that book so much as just beginning to write... You can try to achieve some kind of perspective on it (poverty, alienation) or you can try to communicate it.... Ideally you have appropriated a number of different languages and literatures ... But Coral would have a stronger sense of her own voice probably even than Laurie.²⁹

Michael celebrates diversity in the form of multiple narrators and she addresses such claims by ensuring that the basis for a unifying consciousness is economic deprivation. Her stories can be best understood (to borrow Rita Felski's phrase) as 'both a product of existing social conditions and a form of critical opposition to them'.³⁰ A feminist aesthetic should offer a 'plurality and an aesthetic that refuses the traditional ideal of coherence and unity' and feminist novels should articulate 'coherence of women's shared experience'.³¹

The difference writers such as Helen Zahavi, Pat Barker and Livi Michael make is that they are not afraid to use anger and emotion in their fictions to explore the inner lives of working-class women and men, the values placed upon them and the experiences they are forced to undergo as a result of economic deprivation. For Michael there always seems to be a sense of danger, a threatening presence prowling

outside the community in which the women live. Images of violence are relayed at certain points, via the media, into the lives of the women characters: there are images of murderers, child molesters while other criminals keep women constrained, afraid and oppressed.³² Nevertheless, *Under a Thin Moon*, *Their Angel Reach* and *All The Dark Air* are also full of humour and have at their centre a profound understanding of contemporary Britain. The characters are wise and very knowing, slowly coming to consciousness of what controls them and what constrains them. Julie, in *All The Dark Air* wants everything, a nice house, a slim figure, the perfect baby, and what she sees in other people's lives punctuates her journey to self-awareness. She achieves some sort of maturation when she *stops* looking for pat answers to all her questions. If the object is to look forward, then the ending of the novel offers some sort of hope. Julie realises that 'the past had been torn down again, and rebuilt, it was still going on', and as such her own life will follow that of the urban landscape she gazes upon (*ATDA*, p. 200). In the open-ended final chapter we witness a transformation in Julie and her values.³³ Michael's invisible women do find their voices in a desolate, urban landscape and by looking forward while recollecting the past, they make visible what society has rendered invisible.

If the working-class male writers of the 1950s and 1960s used anger to articulate their dissatisfaction and alienation in a postwar society then contemporary women writers have appropriated and displaced that anger, claiming it for themselves. They use anger as an affirmation of themselves and of their recognition of the nature of their predicament in a society that determines them as 'different'. I agree that the social environments that Michael envisages do provide an inclusive social commentary but the narrative styles she evokes subverts and disrupts traditional expectations of working-class fiction. D. J. Taylor claims that Michael's writing is 'a

good example of what the past decade has done to the novel of working-class life, turning anger into inanition, resolve into battered worn down weariness'. He argues that thirty years ago Alan Sillitoe's hero 'burned with a kind of desperate vitality', which is, he believes, in direct contrast to Michael's enervated women characters.³⁴ What he fails to recognise is that the angry young men of the 1950s and 1960s and Michael's angry young women of the 1980s and 1990s are united by their battle to survive; they are all fighting to preserve their identity in a society that exploits them. They may be different societies but oppression takes similar forms. Unlike Sillitoe's Arthur Seaton Michael's women do not beat up squaddies, nor have sex with two married brothers, or fight 'every day until they die'. They *are* different in their projection of anger against those who 'grind you down'. But what comprises the 'authentic' voice of the working classes is always going to be in flux and change; the dissimilarity between working-class and proletarian literature, for example, is one of difference between a class conscious and politically committed literature. Graham Holderness believes that 'anyone writing on this subject will experience difficulty in balancing the contradictory pressures and constraints: the need to discuss these novels... and the need to reject any such privileging... as an authentic voice of a class' such concerns remain entirely relevant to Michael's writing.³⁵

Livi Michael is acutely aware of labels that are attached to literature but along with the other writers discussed in this thesis she undermines the narrow categorising of such labels. Michael's novels engage with the oppression and alienation of women in contemporary society but she is clearly able to theorise a range of political positions and is often ironic and superbly dismissive of labels for women and for literature.³⁶ Michael uses 'traditional' conventions of realism to purposefully evoke feminist political perspectives, but she has found that realism has been attenuated and

weakened by a literary culture that tends to celebrate and elevate more introspective linguistic experimentation in the forms of more 'literary' postmodernism. Michael consciously finds her writing position in an amalgamation of forms but she still finds herself castigated by reviewers who fail to look beneath the surface 'feeling' of her work. Jenny Turner argues that Michael's writing is 'completely non-appalling' and 'unexciting'.³⁷ If, as Ian Haywood also suggests, her writing contains 'bleakness, futility, nostalgia and defensiveness' then surely what he detects is a reflection of how the women she is writing about are perceived.³⁸ The anger that Michael evokes over the lot of working-class women has a much more reflective quality than Turner or Haywood allow. Anger works as art when it is used to represent circumstances that a more balanced approach cannot always communicate; Michael demonstrates both anger and art in her writing. Like Barker before her, she explores communities of working-class women in what are more complexly-coded narratives than earlier portrayals. Michael and Barker eschew a comfortable middle-class perspective and present working-class milieus with their own dominant class and gender anxieties.

Like other women writers discussed across this thesis Michael seeks to validate women's anger as part of an ongoing literary debate against essentialism in writing about women and men. There is little doubt that the theoretical and critical analysis of feminist fiction and writing by women is one of the most salient components in the re-inscription of 'woman' in contemporary feminist thought.³⁹ Each writer shows a self-conscious and knowing regard of the paradigms of the working-class novel and each writer presents narratives that interrogate long-established representations of working-class women and men. The concluding chapter explores a range of recent fictions by women who draw on anger as a narrative strategy to express ideas of difference and alienation from a number of

perspectives: against cultural, physical and ideological oppression and, most specifically, anger is used as a positive force of self-expression. Sometimes it translates into violence, extremes of expression and sexually liberating behaviour, as in Zahavi's novels. In part, feminism's ongoing fight is to examine essentialist constructions of women and to engage in debate regarding the multiplicity of female experience. Alienated, estranged or isolated protagonists, from Zahavi's Bella or Barker's Billy Prior, and Laurie and Cora in *Under a Thin Moon*, are frequently transformed by their anger. Anger is 'a vital source of intellectual energy' and its application transfigures women's literary discourse, no more so than in Anne McManus's *I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing*.⁴⁰ McManus explores a world with its own complex social order: the world of street women and bag ladies and reflects on the conditions of economic estrangement the women endure that renders them almost inhuman. McManus's images of disruptive and angry women (particularly Dr Charlie McCloud, a former academic who now lives on the streets), serve as symbols of the feminist potential within women's transgressive behaviour.

Endnotes.

¹See, for example, Bea Campbell's opening chapter 'Setting Off' in *Wigan Pier Revisited: Poverty and Politics in the 80s* (London: Virago, 1985), pp. 1-8, where she discusses this narrow-minded view of the working classes.

²See Lillian S. Robinson's discussion in "'The Great Unexamined': Silence, Speech, and Class' in Elaine Hedges & Shelley Fisher Fishkin eds., *Listening to Silences: New Essays in Feminist Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), where she argues that 'class is a critical and analytical category without a coherent voice of its own', pp. 287-294.

³Karin Aguilar-San Juan, 'Louder than words', in *Women's Review of Books*, XII (1995), pp. 24-5.

⁴See Sharon Monteith, 'On the streets and in the tower blocks: Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) and Livi Michaels's *Under a Thin Moon* (1992)', in *Critical Survey* 8:1 (1996), p. 30.

⁵E.J. Ahearn, *Marx and Modern Fiction* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 1-5.

⁶Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 20.

⁷*An Inclusive Society - Strategies for Tackling Poverty* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, June 22, 1998).

⁸Poverty and alienation are not necessarily synonymous. Michael's fictions engage with alienation and estrangement, but not always with poverty (defined in economical terms here, rather than poverty of existence).

⁹Karl Marx, 'Comments on James Mill: *Éléments d'économie politique*', translated by J.T. Parisot, Paris, 1823, in *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels, The Collected Works, Vol.3.* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1975), pp. 216-218.

¹⁰See 'The Feminist Politics of Literary Theory', in Cora Kaplan, *Sea Changes: Culture and Feminism* (London: Verso, 1986), pp. 59-60.

¹¹Livi Michael, *Under a Thin Moon* (London: Minerva, 1994), *Their Angel Reach* (London: Martin, Secker & Warburg Ltd, 1994), *All The Dark Air* (London: Martin, Secker & Warburg, 1996). All further references to these novels will be abbreviated as *UTM*; *TAR*; and *ATDA*, and will be included in the main body of the text. The edition of *Under a Thin Moon* referred to is the paperback edition published in 1994.

¹²Reviews of Michael's *Under a Thin Moon* take a conventional stereotypical reaction; the debate between realism, class and literary worth continues with comments such as those of Philip MacCann in the *Guardian* 5 March 1992, p. 23: 'Honesty and art both have their short comings, don't they? Honesty lacks grace,

art lacks candour. Livi Michael does not compromise on honesty and she has written an incensed political first novel which isn't necessarily art... but Michael will not budge the impartial reader... If she has any gift for transformation it may only be as a propagandist... writing like Michael's'; 'strong on issues and weak on the formal properties of the text'; 'Where politics has prevailed, there is no aesthetic contest. Michael neglects a literary readership...' See, also, Jenny Turner, 'Beast in women's estate', in *Guardian*, 27 December, 1994, p. 15; Josie Barnard, Chloe Walker, 'Books in brief.' *Independent on Sunday*, 16 February, 1997, p. 31; Natasha Walter, 'Stars in the dark nights of the soul', *Independent*, 13 December, 1994, p. 18; D.J. Taylor, 'What a carve-up', *Independent*, 19 April, 1997, p. 6; Michael Arditti, Carole Morin and Carol Birch, 'A bit of a do in North-eastenders', *Independent*, 25 January, 1997, p. 6.

¹³Philip MacCann 'Poverty Gets The Upper Hand', in *The Guardian*, 5 March, 1992, p. 23.

¹⁴Walter, 'Books in Brief', p.18.

¹⁵Weedon discusses feminist critical practices with regard to literature in terms of the liberal-humanist impulse to posit a fatalistic reading on many working-class novels. She refers to Walter Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* in this context, arguing that such readings silence the voice of working-class political interests. See Chris Weedon, 'Feminist Critical Practices' in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 142.

¹⁶Pat Wheeler and Sharon Monteith, 'Interview with Livi Michael', *Critical Survey*, 12:3 (2000), pp. 94-107.

¹⁷'Authenticity' is a central idea in much contemporary theory. Maggie Humm defines 'authentic relations' in relation to ideas that people who behave 'in accordance with their values are behaving genuinely'. Michael's characters fit quite categorically into this definition. See Maggie Humm, *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory: Second Edition* (Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 16. It is not my intention to discuss it in detail but in relation to Michael's novels working-class authenticity is significant. While I have argued against closed and/or reductive theorising of the novels under discussion I am aware that I am locating her within certain theoretical frameworks. I agree with Rita Felski's argument that the 'authentic self is very much a social product'. The definition of authenticity is, according to Felski, revealed to be dependent upon those symbolic constraints it seeks to free itself, 'as a means of defining a center of meaning merely serves to underscore the alienation of the subject even as it seeks to overcome it'. See also Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 104.

¹⁸Elizabeth Baines, 'Out Of The Frame', *Metropolitan: New Urban Writing* 3 (1994/5), p. 23.

¹⁹See Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Penguin, 1975), pp. 46-52. For a more detailed discussion on self-hate see Freud's essay 'Mourning and

Melancholia' in *The Standard Edition of the Complete psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by James Strachey. Volume XIV (1914-1916) (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), pp. 239-260.

²⁰In general the term feminine is problematic for feminist critical theory. The word is associated with socially constructed ideas of what women should look like, or how they should behave. Women are placed in an arbitrary system of exchange where they have little or no control on how they are determined culturally. Toril Moi has determined 'feminism' as a political position, 'femaleness' as a matter of biology and 'femininity' as a set of culturally defined characteristics. These are very broad definitions. See Toril Moi, 'Feminist, Female, Feminine', in Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore eds., *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p. 117. In arguing that Michael concentrates more on the female experience, rather than the feminine or feminist experience I am positing that Michael is attempting to negate cultural stereotyping for working-class women, and women in general, thereby allowing for diversity. She does this in a number of ways, but I particularly like the multi-layered discourses her women characters indulge in. For example, 'if identity is social and determined by language, one young woman said, what you're talking about is a kind of no-space for people who meditate- a marginalised existence. What I am talking about, Medbh said sternly, is not feeding your brain so much it starts to get loose and runny. The trouble with education is that it trains the brain to think too much of itself' (*ATDA*, p. 54). Michael allows women to debate their own thoughts and identities within the framework of the novel.

²¹See Elizabeth Wilson 'Against Feminine Fundamentalism', *New Statesman and Society*, 23 June 1989 pp. 30-33, Rosalind Coward, *Female Desire- Women's Sexuality Today* (London: Palladin, 1984), p. 185, and Lillian S. Robinson, *Sex, Class and Culture* (New York and London: Methuen, 1977), p. 131.

²²See Virginia Woolf's essay 'Modern Fiction', in *The Common Reader*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), p.185. Woolf also states that these writers have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that any gratitude shown towards them should be for them showing readers what they might have done but have not. For Woolf these novelists write about 'trivial things'.

²³Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', p. 189.

²⁴As a counter argument see R. R. Bell, *Worlds of Friendship* (London: Sage, 1981), and G. Allan, *A Sociology of Friendship and Kinship* (London: George, Allen and Unwin, 1979), both cited in Pat O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women* (Brighton: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992).

²⁵O'Connor, *Friendships Between Women*, p. 61.

²⁶Intimate confiding and high levels of practical help between women are two of O'Connor's determining features of women's friendship.

²⁷MacCann, 'Poverty get the Upper Hand', p. 28.

²⁸ Monteith 'On the streets and in the tower blocks: Ravinder Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) and Livi Michaels's *Under a Thin Moon* (1992)', p. 31.

²⁹ Wheeler and Monteith, 'Interview with Livi Michael', p. 103.

³⁰ See Rita Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), pp. 1-18.

³¹ The point that women's contemporary writing has given the relationship between literary/ aesthetic questions and political commitment new boundaries is discussed by Laura Marcus in 'Feminist Aesthetics and the New Realism' in Isabel Armstrong ed., *New Feminist Discourses* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 22-23.

³² Livi Michael has stated that in *Their Angel Reach* the serial killer is a kind of fantasy figure who never really materialises. In the novel she is trying to put into context the kind of fantasies, violence and power relationships that are in society. But also she uses these images because it is the idea that the media seems to keep us in a permanent state of insecurity and depression. See Wheeler and Monteith, 'Interview with Livi Michael', p. 104.

³³ Michael makes the point that Julie believes that if you change yourself you can change the world. Mick started from the opposite point of view; if you change the world you can change the individual. Michael has stated that 'in the end those are both just theories and they are both flawed. The only thing that is going to help you in the end is shedding your naivety and shedding your romanticism and really coming to terms with what it is you need and then you can start trying to look for it. A lot of people have asked if I am going to write a sequel to that book but I do not think I could as it was that point of transformation I was interested in'. Wheeler and Monteith, 'Interview with Livi Michael', pp. 94-107.

³⁴ DJ Taylor, *After The war: The Novel and England Since 1945* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd, 1993), p. 283.

³⁵ See Graham Holderness, 'Miners and the Novel: from Bourgeois to Proletarian Fiction', in Jeremy Hawthorn ed., *The British Working-Class Novel* (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), p.19. Although Holderness is discussing earlier 'working-class' fiction the points he makes are still relevant to writing like Livi Michael's.

³⁶ See Michèle Barrett, *Women's Oppression Today: Problems in Marxist Feminist Analysis* (London: Verso, 1984). See also, 'Patriarchy and the Relations of Production', in Annette Kuhn and Ann Marie Wolpe, eds., *Feminism and Materialism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

³⁷ Jenny Turner, 'Beast in women's estate', *Guardian* 27 December, 1994, p. 15.

³⁸ Ian Haywood, *Working-class Fiction: from Chartism to Trainspotting* (London: Northcote House, 1997), p. 141.

³⁹Second-wave feminist authors and the criticism and theory that underpin a feminist approach afford the opportunity to challenge and refute literary misrepresentations of women. In particular, Elaine Showalter, Jane Gallop, Gayle Greene, Coppélia Kahn, Pam Morris and Chris Weedon offer lively and persuasive debates on the subject, where the importance of women's writing to feminist movements is acknowledged. See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago Press, 1977), Gayle Greene, & Coppélia Kahn, eds. *Changing Subjects - The Making of Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1993), Pam Morris, *Literature and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1993), Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), Jane Gallop, *Around 1981* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).

⁴⁰Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), p. xxi.

Chapter 7

Angry Young Women: Recent Feminist Fictions

[T]he anger came back, attacking me unawares. It came from all sides, welling up and up boiling boiling spilling over and levelling out into sustained rage (Anne McManus)

Recent fiction by women falls into a number of genres, but the most prolific and influential (in media terms) is the phenomenon of ‘confessional’ or ‘singleton’ writing. Books such as Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1998) and the clones that followed offer a particularly ‘feminine’ form of representation of young women.¹ Although this form of writing could be read as a form of ‘postmodern or post-feminist irony’ in relation to late twentieth-century feminism, it also makes a serious point that feminism is an ‘empty’ discourse that does not sit comfortably with contemporary young women. Imelda Whelehan states that *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is:

in one sense offered as a ‘self-help’ manual which acknowledges the futility of aspiring to the ideal type feminine model... and yet celebrates the activity of doing so as part of daily regimes of self-affirmation.²

The category of ‘woman’ in this instance is understood to be instantly recognisable from a series of socially constructed images and values whereby the idea of femininity is intrinsically linked to the formation of women’s identity. Judith Butler argues that ‘when a category is understood as representing a set of values or dispositions, it becomes normative in character and hence, exclusionary in principal’. In other words, when the model of ‘woman’ is unrecognisable to other women, they become alienated, or, as Butler states, they are ‘left to conclude they are not women as they have perhaps previously assumed’.³ In the culturally determined images with which women are continuously confronted, the ‘gender anomaly’ of violence and aggression is invariably missing. This is not to say that women do not feel

violent or angry but that in the majority of the signifying images that abound, they do not see themselves commonly represented as reacting in this way. This absence is taken up by my chosen writers and is beginning to be the subject of feminist criticism. Chris Weedon, for example, states that ‘the textual practices employed in women’s writing are determined by the constraints and possibilities of class’ and that ‘analysis will also throw light on how texts resist and transcend accepted gender definitions’.⁴ In adopting a post-structuralist reading of contemporary feminist theory, Weedon is inherently aware of the problems in contriving generalised expressions of sameness in women’s writing as such practice makes contradictions and differences invisible. What is important is that female writers bring a multiplicity of women’s and men’s experiences to the novel. The political nature of women’s anger, in particular, provides a platform from which to focus on the hierarchical relations of power, both in relation to the women represented and also in the novels in which male protagonists figure.

Although it is acknowledged that notions of gender and ‘woman’ are historically and socially constructed, it is clear that new and resistant identities for women (and others) are formed in reaction to dominant and hegemonic groups. In ‘Identity, Difference and the Category “Woman”’, Weedon, following classic feminist principles, argues that ‘it is patriarchy... which privileges some identities over others’.⁵ In a patriarchal system woman’s anger is negated and demonised and this is internalized in women’s self-reflexive precept of femininity, as Butler argues. Helen Zahavi urges women to embrace their anger as a natural response to unreasonable demands placed on women. In this respect her novels are narratives of female self-discovery that explicitly refuse traditional depictions of women’s behaviour. This notion of non-traditional representations of women leads to my final discussion of women’s writing. A number of young women writers are beginning to use anger to categorically refute traditional depictions of women’s behaviour and they use a narrative of

female development to exemplify a plurality of experiences that include the will to violence or recourse to anger. In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Rita Felski noticed the beginnings of ‘an appropriation and reworking of established literary genres such as the *bildungsroman*’ and argues that:

the distinctive features of the feminist novel of self-discovery in turn reveal a number of illuminating parallels between the structure of recent fictions of female identity and narratives of emancipation shaping feminist ideology itself.⁶

A number of correlations can be made between recent feminist fictions of emancipation and self-discovery and the appropriation of anger as a narrative strategy.⁷ British writers like Kate Atkinson, Zadie Smith, Monica Ali and Rachel Cusk challenge the prevailing ideological representations of women by providing a multiplicity of subject positions and by doing so they call for a broader understanding of feminism and what it means to be a woman.

Smith’s protagonist Hortense in *White Teeth* (2001) is a telling example:

Steam was something Hortense had in abundance. She arrived on the doorstep (of the man who was supposed to send for her)... broke down the door in a fury... gave Darcus Bowden the tongue-whipping of his life (*WT*, p. 31).

Smith is one of a number of women writers who challenge more traditional depictions of acquiescent characters. Feminism’s dispute over identity lies within the classification of ‘woman’ and this is why contemporary feminism is frequently constrained within set paradigms and frameworks. Cyrania Johnson-Roullier believes that women are a problem precisely ‘because they themselves are *different*, and this difference causes them to experience not only different oppressions, but also to experience sexual oppression itself in many ways’.⁸ There is little doubt that women’s oppression comes in varying forms and the understanding that there is more than one response to that oppression is paramount, as this study has shown. The writers who form the focus of this discussion provide their readers

with representations of women that are specifically provocative. They are not only downtrodden victims, they are killers, and users of pornography: new images are emerging. Linda Hutcheon believes that what has evolved in contemporary fiction is, ‘something different from the unitary, closed evolutionary narratives of historiography... we now get the histories... of the losers... of the regional... and... of women.’⁹ It is clear that young women are writing of the dispossessed and their protagonists exhibit many of Hutcheon’s marginalised positions. A number of young British women writers are emerging to take up the challenge of representation and are increasingly using anger as a narrative strategy to engage with what they see as the continuing exploitation of women and marginalised others. The components of anger and class consciousness continue to provide a far-reaching and thoroughgoing contemporary narrative that is oriented towards the analysis of oppression.

British novels such as Kate Atkinson’s *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995) and *Emotionally Weird* (2000), Rachel Cusk’s *The Country Life* (1997) and *The Lucky Ones* (2003), Judith Bryan’s *Bernard and the Cloth Monkey* (1999) and Sarah Harris’s *Wasting Time* (1998) offer representations of women’s anger and disillusionment. These writers have taken a notable step in reclaiming anger as a liberating narrative device in order to debate social, sexual and political differences. Although not all of these writers explore a working-class milieu in their fictions, women such as Cusk’s home help Stella Benson (‘here’s your coffee you cunt’) and Bryan’s sexually abused An (‘Mama Africa’, she sneered... ‘I don’t see why I should forgive and forget’) express their anger. Serena Porter, one of Cusk’s characters in *The Lucky Ones* is very angry at ‘Men. Marriage. Children. I don’t know, everything’. Many protagonists in recent novels express anger at the restrictions and expectations placed upon them by childbirth and motherhood. Cusk, winner of both the Whitbread First Novel Award for *Saving Agnes* (1993) and the Somerset Maugham Prize for *The Country Life* (1997) feels ‘incredibly angry all the time’. She states:

Childbirth and motherhood are the anvil upon which sexual inequality was forged and the women in our society whose responsibilities, expectations and experience are like those of men are right to approach it with trepidation.¹⁰

Women's acknowledgement of their gendered anger must be seen as an expression of female empowerment (made powerful through forceful and creative expression in women's writing). In Jill Dawson's *Magpie* (1998), Lily feels 'vicious... anger... hatred... shame' towards her mother, and this precipitates 'a creeping curling fear trickling from her head to her toes'. She is initially afraid of this anger but learns to embrace it:

This terrible freedom. An enormous freedom, exhilarating at first... But now she has it, it is also sickening. Like being strapped into a big wheel then suspended at the highest point, about to swoop down, but dangling there at the tipover moment, dangling there suspended.¹¹

According to Melanie Kaye-Kawtowitz, women 'learn to see with the eyes of the dominant culture: male eyes' and this is one of the main causes for their reticence:

Middle-class heterosexual white women are taught to fear strong women, women with power, women with physical strength, angry women who express anger forcefully. It isn't ladylike. It isn't nice. Even those of us who have long rejected those norms (or accepted our inability to live inside them) still may fear the explosiveness of anger.¹²

She hopes women will learn to 'cherish this rage' and to direct it effectively. This is exactly what Jill Dawson's protagonist endeavours to do. In Camilla Gibb's novel *Mouthing the Words* (2001) the young protagonist, Thelma, tells a story of sexual abuse, anorexia and personality disorders that result from her suppression of anger: 'I had to do most of my screaming inside my head -- holding my breath and clenching my hands and wondering if I could push so hard my head would explode' (*MTW*, p. 99). In withholding her anger Thelma

becomes irretrievably damaged until, after counselling, she manages to speak of her experiences:

This is me speaking. Not mouthing. Not typing or twitching.... Not writing a suicide note.... But the sounds of my own private wars echoing the battles of women before me and near me. No wonder I do not make people comfortable. I am a mirror. I have far too many things to say (*MTW*, p. 238).

Thelma struggles to create a space for herself 'in a world that feels alien and hostile' (*MTW*, p. 134) and as with many of the protagonist in the novels discussed she eventually finds a voice to express her anger. It is clear that women need a place to express anger and fiction is an important forum. Recent reader responses to *Mouthing the Words* for example, reveal a number of responses by women who find a positive affirmation in the anger and humour of Gibb's writing: 'Absolutely amazing', 'Filled with imagination beyond the expected', and 'harrowing' but 'enthraling and sophisticated', and 'beautiful... with humour and honesty.... A book that will stay with me -- physically and emotionally'. Alice Ferrebe argues that Gibb's novel is a narrative 'blending painful confessions with objectivity'. It is telling that all the responses were from women readers.¹³

In her discussion of Melanie Klein, feminism and psychoanalysis, Janet Sayers states that women are 'deemed naturally unaggressive, submissive and passive'. She points out that while aggression 'inheres in the very power of the ruling class... or sex, it is disqualified as illegitimate in others'.¹⁴ The 'others' to which she refers are women -- Melanie Klein's psychoanalytical treatment of women incorporates techniques, such as roleplay and games, for undoing the internalising of women's anger, allowing free expression of rage against unjust social systems of repression and subjugation. Anne McManus's novel *I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing* (1998) takes up some of these ideas in relation to women's expression of anger.¹⁵ It is a novel that is unusual in its poetic use of language in this context. It is

intrinsically fluid and expressive. McManus chronicles the story of Dr. Charlie McCloud, a former academic, sacked for her 'outrageous' behaviour, who is living on the streets, and who is addicted to drink, drugs and outrageous sexual encounters. She is part of a group of 'outlaw' alcoholic women who she describes as:

Deformed unnatural bags.... No roguish sinnin' and adventure for us. We're slags, old bags, pathetic, poor. Just grimy old whores, a lush in a bush, a slut in a rut, what's the difference. The inference is we're weak and immoral and unfeminine too. Who's heard of a roué female? No sale, no deal or appeal (*IWMRL*, p. 7).

The first person narrative is expressive of Charlie's meandering progress through life. She says, on hearing a child talk, 'I'm listening, fascinated firstly by the way her speech rhythms emulate the way my brain functions, always this chiming rhyming. It must be that the booze has arrested my development and frozen it at about the age of six like this' (*IWMRL*, p. 123).

The erratic and frequently repetitive narrative expresses the lived reality of Charlie McCloud's downbeat existence. What is made absolutely clear throughout is that Charlie remains unrepentant and unapologetic about the manner in which she lives her life. She is distinctly aware of the nuanced ways in which men and women are positioned sexually and emotionally:

Supposing self-loathing of women were externalised and brutalised like men. Imagine just hitting someone when you're feeling inadequate and small. Growing taller and taller as they squall and squawk and cringe away and you play Punch against Judy crunch crunch her bones a stoned lullaby of thump your rump you bitch you'll pay today for me feeling this way.... Of course we don't want to be like them. But it's still not fair that men drunks are raffish romantics. I defy a man to look slutty in the gutter. It only applies to me and my torn, forlorn friends in our little female family. Slag hagbags see (*IWMRL*, pp. 7-8).

In both subject matter and mode of expression McManus refuses to allow Charlie to be forced into convenient and available modes of behaviour. She also declines to conform in terms of literary style, employing a range of poetic devices such as alliteration, assonance, rhyme, and a combination of 'high' and 'low' cultural references to produce an elaborate, excessively ornamented language. Literature such as this provides a refuge in which women characters can be safely set outside of convenient and available paradigms of representation. Fiction allows writers such as McManus (and Zahavi) to parody and subvert poetic and academic models of language. Women still frequently experience themselves and their lives in response to male-centred values (including language) and McManus writes against the idea that the feminine is, to borrow Susan Koppleman Cornillon's words, 'expressed, defined and perceived by the male as a *condition* of being female'. What McManus and the other young feminist novelists to whom I refer in this chapter articulate is ways of being female in language that speaks of difference.¹⁶

I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing engages with feminist theories of oppression and emancipation through Charlie's fight with her local authority when it threatens to close down a women's shelter and her eventual triumph by setting up a self-help centre in Camden. Charlie moves between coded signs of femininity (victim) and feminist (avenger) but never fully reconciles the different parts of herself.¹⁷ As a feminist and erstwhile academic, Charlie is aware of the socially-loaded interpretation of semiotics but she refuses to determine herself in any category:

But this is even worse, about discourse and signs, not real life whines and whimpers of mad people, which had been the scene with Reich and Foucault and Laing, before such slang and substance was passed over as naivety by these new jugglers of jargon... post structuralist and post modern jargon always sounds garbage to me... I can't even speak the language or negotiate the signs. So I give up convinced they're

only wanking. I deeply suspect it's all circular and criticism has been abolished methodologically -- there's just no way in help help you can't win if the universe is self fucking referential and closed to outsiders (*IWMRL*, p. 65).

Charlie is 'woman' in process: she is never fully determined and her gender attributes remain unfixed and capable of change. The academic language (a narrative device also used by Livi Michael in *Under a Thin Moon*) is significant. Charlie is perfectly capable of reading and understanding the signs and McManus draws a great deal of humour from this self-referential and angry mockery. According to Denise Riley in '*Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (1988), what is most important in feminism is 'the voicing of "women" from the side of "women"'. Accordingly, in feminist novels, female protagonists cannot but 'act out the full ambiguities of that category'.¹⁸

McManus's Charlie certainly acts out the 'full ambiguity' of being a woman. In often-hilarious streams of consciousness she recounts the manner in which she assuages her sexual needs with a succession of inappropriate men, including one of her former sociology students:

I'm shouting and spluttering and chewing all at once and start to come in great heaving gasps, as I see his eyes mocking me, as they'd always done in discussions, shocking and supercilious, and I know in that sickening bilious flash, who is in control after all, and feel a fool such a fool drooling spittle like this, like a randy fish wife desperate for him, and reduced to a whimpering wreck by the one who should be victim (*IWMRL*, p. 71).

The female body is culturally inscribed with sexual desire in this scene although the concomitant sense of (assimilated) shame and resistance to sexual enjoyment is present also. McManus observes how women's bodies are degraded but the physicality of the female body is also affirmed in Charlie's acknowledgement of sexual pleasure. It has been observed that

the ‘textual processes’ of feminist theory allow us to ‘re-evaluate and transform women’s relations to their own and others’ bodies.’ Avril Horner and Angela Keane, for example, argue that the challenge for feminism is not ‘simply to reconceptualise’ body matters but to ‘transform the social relations of lived bodies.’¹⁹ McManus’s reinscribing of the female body with sexual desire is accompanied by a male reaction superimposed on Charlie’s narration:

[H]e’s looking at me coldly, devouring every moment as a power trip, even as he flips and comes. It’s the same calculating look of loathing and power. Oh the hour of misogyny is here and I feel fear and frisson, and an imminent prison of passion if I don’t escape (*IWMRL*, p. 71).

In order to transform the social relations of ‘lived bodies’ there needs to be a radical shift in awareness of female desire. ‘The prison of passion’ is a masquerade that many women ‘perform’ to hide sexual desire as denied or repressed by patriarchal modes of thought. Such models of behaviour are systematically imposed on women and male power enacts to deny women their own sexuality. Charlie knows she has to break free from male discourses of power in relation to her body.

If one of the aims of feminism is to theorise the body and to access women’s repressed sexualities through literary representations of women this reinscription can begin to take place. Aguir believes that in certain feminist fictions the reclamation of ‘unsavory behavior, flaws, failings and downright nastiness’ is essential in order that women are not simply objectified as any other ‘silenced heroine.’²⁰ As Charlie says in *I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing*, men spin ‘morality tales about what’s right and wrong behaviour for a woman’ and the virtue that is prescribed for women is ‘a big handicap’ (*IWMRL*, p.53). The metamorphosis of Charlie from ‘outlaw’ to ‘avenger’ is realised through acknowledgement of her anger:

[T]he anger came back, attacking me unawares. It came from all sides, welling up and up boiling boiling spilling over and levelling out into sustained rage, and the shit I'd been blocking and holding inside exploded, blowing wide open as it splattered on the ceiling. I stared at it fascinated, a stoat gloating over entrails of her past before she sails off light airy liberated at last (*IWMRL*, p. 200).

The link between women's repression of anger is powerfully evoked in McManus's narrative here and the scatological freedom that the female protagonist feels at this moment is made manifest. Anger or the acknowledgement of anger has 'liberated' Charlie.

Many contemporary British women writers feel that it is of paramount importance for feminism's ongoing debate against essentialism to create protagonists who flout conventional or expected behaviour patterns in women, as this study has shown. It is unusual to find novels with female protagonists that draw *quite* so specifically and spectacularly on the expression of anger as *I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing*, but a number of British women writers have female protagonists who indulge in Aguir's idea of 'unsavory behavior, flaws, failings and downright nastiness'. In undertaking to write against 'popular' images of young women the women writers discussed in this chapter engage more specifically with the novel of self-discovery (through adversity) and to the female *bildungsroman* where the central protagonist is brought to 'a high level of consciousness' through a series of events and experiences or through female friendships, such as in *Jane Eyre*. According to Elaine Hoffman Baruch, however, this journey of self-discovery still usually takes place 'in or on the periphery of marriage.'²¹ While Baruch's discussion focuses specifically on eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century novels such as *Emma* (1815), or male-authored novels such as *Pamela* (1740) and *Madame Bovary* (1851), this is still a valid point when applied to contemporary British women's writing. The search for the self is very frequently carried out within 'the periphery of marriage' or at least within debates surrounding marriage. In the 1950s, 1960s

and 1970s the women in Doris Lessing's *Martha Quest* (1952), *A Proper Marriage* (1954) and *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973) and Fay Weldon's *Down Amongst The Women* (1972), *The Lives and Loves of a She Devil* (1983) and *Afflicton* (1993), all struggle with the constraints marriage has placed on them. In the 1990s the women protagonists of Julie Myerson's *Me and the Fat Man* (1998) and Lucy English's *Selfish People* (1998) and *Children of Light* (1999), for example, each flout conventional expectations by refuting the ties of marriage and family as they seek to find fulfilment in unexpected ways.²² In *Me and the Fat Man*, the central character, Amy, is a young married woman who picks up men in her lunch break and takes them to a seedy flat where she gives them oral sex in return for money, 'the most money I dare say... for the fun of seeing them react' (*MFM*, p. 3). Like Charlie McCloud, Amy is unapologetic about her behaviour. She says 'some people might be judgemental', or they 'might think it's weird' but she reasons that 'my mind doesn't have to go where my body goes' and 'her soul isn't in her mouth' (*MFM*, p. 7).

Myerson and English could possibly be influenced by older writers such as Lessing, and tend to reflect upon images of women that are formulated within their own culture's view of femininity, but they do so with sly humour and a knowing regard for essentialist notions of women's behaviour. They concentrate on the dominant tropes of constructed 'femininity', both fulfilling its demands, and subverting it at the same time. Marleen Barr believes that 'humor is a signal to [women] readers that they can relax and safely laugh at the vicissitudes of being a woman living under patriarchy'.²³ These novels are funny (although this may not be their most obvious feature) and women can and do laugh at humorous representations. In doing so they create a space in which they can be defiant but that is not to say women have to accept the vicissitudes of their lives. The young women protagonists of *Me and the Fat Man* and *Selfish People* reject the oppression they find in married life. Amy sees her marriage as a 'tragedy' and the thought of having a child with her husband only represents to her 'a human

cocktail of our grief' that would 'yoke them together' for the ongoing 'terribleness' of their lives (*MFM*, p. 108). Leah does not want to go on with her marriage and fears 'they would be dead' if they stay together (*SP*, p. 50). Charlie understands that women's biological destiny is not that easily shed. Women, she says, are 'always wired up to being mummy, consoling, comforting even her persecutors. Women's own goal of time eternal, what a role, bloody hell' (*IWMRL*, p. 52). All of these women are brought to a high level of consciousness by their experiences and by their extraordinary responses to their predicaments. Convention habitually dictates that women's destiny lies in marriage, but Anne McManus, Julie Myerson and Lucy English show this notion of essentialism to be oppressive. Charlie, Amy and Leah are angry women who consciously act against their oppressors and in their search for self-knowledge and self-identity they educate their minds and their bodies outside the confines of marriage.

Amy rejects her husband, her home and the conventions of married life to live with the 'fat man' of the novel's title. She feels sexually aroused by the warmth and size of the fat man, while her husband desires a younger, thinner woman for his own sense of self-worth. It is the very ordinary sight of her husband in his short-sleeved shirt, sitting in the kitchen drinking a can of coke that finally drives Amy to leave him:

I'm going.... I'm leaving. There's someone else I want to live with.

I knew you were going to say that, he said. I've been waiting for you to come and say it. I've been seeing someone too as a matter of fact.

...What's her name?

None of your business. But she's thinner than you.

Mine isn't, I said. I'm leaving you for a much fatter man (*MFM*, p. 141).

There is an ongoing exploration of the politics of the body throughout *Me and the Fat Man* and there is an openness and awareness of women's sexuality. The fat man is responsible for

the dramatic alteration of Amy's sexuality. She moves from an angry, accusatory woman who could 'cut the dicks off men' if she wanted (*MFM*, p. 8), to warm acceptance of her own sensual nature. She shifts from 'a skulking girl' living a 'mean life' with her husband, 'doing blow-jobs' and being 'secret and contaminated' to a life that holds the promise of 'love and happiness' (*MFM*, p. 204). According to Cornillon 'women in fiction only very rarely... experience their bodies directly'. Female bodies, she argues, 'do not belong to females they are rather accessories, either male possessions or rejections'.²⁴ The representation of the female body and its sexual needs is very different in *Me and the Fat Man*. Although it may appear that Amy experiences her body vicariously, that her sexuality is perceived only through the character of the fat man, the writing is more radical in its implications for female sexuality. Amy acknowledges that having sex with the fat man sends 'electric light bulbs snapping in my head, hot lines down my limbs, a magnet drawing my cunt to the centre of the earth' (*MFM*, p. 154).

In *Selfish People* Lucy English explores the physical and psychological violence inflicted on women via a close examination of a young woman's marriage and in *Children of Light* she portrays a society that is in danger of negating political protests inherent in alternative lifestyles by returning to old, worn-out values of the past. In *Selfish People* Leah is married with three children, works in a project on a working-class housing estate in Bristol and is unhappy with her husband (a mature student training to be a teacher). She lives a downtrodden existence, her husband mentally and physically abuses her. But it is her newly discovered anger that allows her to break free from the relationship: 'He was angry, but I didn't crumble'. Her victim status changes dramatically in that relationship although ironically she goes on to repeat the same pattern in her next. She says, 'I changed it. But into what? I'm not sure' (*SP*, p. 36). Leah finally acknowledges that she is 'fed up with [keeping] quiet. Quiet makes me fucking angry' (*SP*, p. 62). In this novel of self-discovery Leah

engages in a personal, highly politicised fight against her oppression and is finally able to live her life on her own terms. She has a disastrous affair with a young man at the project, Bailey, who ‘pushed [her] somewhere’ where she was scared, excited, somewhere she wanted to be but ‘it felt like being pulled down’ (SP, p. 230). She becomes angry at his casual betrayal of her and when it hurts so much that she has to ‘pull apart’ from him, she leaves her children and husband to live in a caravan by the coast. She realises that she cannot go back to her previous life, and by the sea she begins to ‘renew’ herself: ‘The waves empty me. They wash me out. They clean away the muck. I like this feeling. Empty and clean (SP, p. 227). When Leah returns to find her children she realises ‘I am different... strong and sad and quite clear (SP, p. 243).

The female *bildungsroman* is suited to the emergence of women from cultural conditioning and this is reflected in much of the writing discussed in this chapter. Within the generally accepted paradigms of the male-authored, 1950s British working-class novel, representations of anger provided a multiplicity of possibilities for men and in the same way a number of British women writers are bringing about new understandings of women’s lives. In the process, they subvert the stability of what was fundamentally a male-centred anger. But, as Luce Irigaray asks, ‘when difference speaks, will it be heard?’²⁵ The writers I discuss *do* speak of difference, their writing *is* political, but I do not necessarily think they are being heard. However, that does not mean they have to quietly go away. As Leah says, ‘quiet makes me fucking angry’ and in *I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing*, Charlie McCloud refuses to be ‘an ageing old fart cynic and ingrate’ and remains bound and obligated to political struggle:

I will fight will fight the urge to think global imperialism has won the day and national governments still have no say in free glorious flight of capital. No protection of the nation state or welfare or public services will interfere. The mighty dollar rules

from sea to shining sea and nothing in between will be allowed to resist. No New Labour. No, nothing (*IWMRL*, p. 227).

The link with women's anger and the working classes remains. Charlie asks, 'what will pass for the underclass in this new globe without horizons?' She believes that it 'grows and flows' out of the ghettos and 'these wannabe communities will be brutalised hell-holes instead with everyone scratching on the dole and hating the grating ceaseless lack of hope and scope of a life in the dark in the gutter' (*IWMRL*, p. 227).

While the novels discussed throughout this thesis frequently offer new representations of women (and men) in working-class milieus, representations of anger and extreme violence are not limited to new versions of working-class novels and working-class novels are not all fuelled by anger. I conclude my discussion with two very different novels, one specifically privileging the working-class experience and another that is a very dark and explicit comedy of anger and revenge but situated in the world of a young, middle-class woman. Andrea Badenoch's *Blink* (2001) combines suspense and emotion in a working-class murder mystery. She examines the narrow sensibility of women who turn against a murdered young woman because she was, 'living all alone' and creates affirming representations of class.²⁶ The murdered woman, Gloria, leaves her family home and has aspirations of owning a chain of 'unisex' hairdressing salons (rare and exotic in the 1960s pit village where she lives). According to the police inspector investigating the case:

'She was different.... She was a bit of a go-getter by all accounts. She wanted a string of salons. She had her own car, her own mortgage. She wasn't typical of the females in these parts. She was one of those...'. He hesitated. His expression became disapproving, censorious. 'She was one of these new... dollybirds. You know. A modern sort of woman' (*B*, p. 43).

Other women did not approve of her, either: ‘She’d *moved out!* What does *that* tell you’ (p. 39). Anger is again intrinsically linked to class-consciousness in this novel but the difference is that writers such as Badenoch seek to support and vindicate the working-class experience. While restricted visions of women may appear in their novels they then go on to empower them, in vibrant, expressive writing that affirms working-class existence through a multitude of experiences.²⁷ In *Blink* the young protagonist Kathleen is encouraged by her ‘Da’ to look at the moon and stars through his telescope, set up in a shed on the hillside where other men keep their pigeon coops. The incongruous juxtaposition of these images shows how previous working-class novels lack positive images of women or indeed the encouragement of girls by their fathers to ‘reach for the stars’. The compatibility of these images is an important step forward in representation: Kathleen becomes a famous scientist but Badenoch, rather ironically, begins and ends the narrative with the framing device of an interview with the adult Kathleen. A young male reporter comes to The Center for Extreme Ultraviolet Astrophysics, UCLA Astronomy Department, at the University of California to interview the professor, but he is not interested in her experiments, he wants to write about the ‘human angle’, he wants to know about her ‘hobbies ... her love life’ (p. 2). The joke is apparent in the contradiction between the ideal achievement of the working-class girl and the ‘authenticity’ of the manner in which the male reporter ‘sees’ the woman.

The ability of women to see themselves as a class (outside of socio-economics) is an important aspect of feminist discourse. Diana Fuss believes that while women’s bodily experiences ‘may seem self evident they are... always socially mediated’. She argues that as both ‘class’ and ‘women’ are political constructs they are both categories in feminist thinking. To say that all women are bound by a shared experience just because of their biology speaks of essentialism, but Fuss sees a shift from ‘class’ to a ‘coalition affinity’ as a way forward. If we need to retain the notion of women as a class for political purposes then

the ‘slippage’ that she sees is important for my discussion.²⁸ The coalition of women’s shared experiences leads me to the final novel for discussion. A class of women is formed by social, historical and political tensions inherent in women’s experience therefore expressions of anger may differ as women negotiate different class, race and sexual boundaries. I conclude my thesis with a novel that interests me in terms of the cultural models examined through the narrative and the manner in which anger is a defining force for the female protagonist. Significantly *Clever Girl* (1995) self-consciously seeks to highlight the multiplicity and diversity of female sexual desire within a specific middle-class context and with quite aggressive representations of anger and violence. The female body is used as both sign and signifier of women’s sexuality. Weedon states that while feminist politics and theories take the body as their referent ‘class as a signifier of difference is of a different order’. She argues that ‘the materiality of class in terms of health, wealth, leisure and lifestyle’ marks that difference. Weedon quotes Charlotte Bunch who writes:

The anger of working-class women toward middle-class women is justified by lifelong class oppression, and the class system will not be changed until *both* middle-class and working-class women see how oppressive it is and unite to change it.²⁹

The shift away from considerations of class is recognised by Weedon who equates it with the ‘demise of forms of working-class identification’ and the expansion of the media and ‘its ideologies of a classless society’.

Although Tania Glyde’s *Clever Girl* clearly falls outside the paradigms of the working-class novel, it evidences the sort of ‘frame-breaking’ narrative used by the writers under discussion: anger and humour are disruptive, political forces throughout. Glyde’s debut novel was nominated for the Betty Trask Novel Award and whilst critically acclaimed by many reviewers, was reviled by others. The *Daily Mail* hailed *Clever Girl* as the ‘The Most Sleazy Entrant’ in the Trask Award, a source of both amusement and scorn for its writer.

According to Glyde 'women no longer hide their shit in scented floral bags tied with ribbon' -- a pertinent comment on a form of nostalgic self-deception about women and their behaviour. *Clever Girl* is a very dark comedy about a young middle-class woman who, according to Glyde, 'goes out and gets superb, if sad revenge on the world'.³⁰ It is a very angry and supremely funny novel that does not hesitate to show how unremitting life can be for women no matter the social circumstances of their birth. The narrative is circular, beginning and ending (the first ending) with the same scene:

The woman leaned across me and touched my hair.... Her face was so kind. I felt the familiar well of tears, as always when a stranger punctured the membrane of private misery.... She had a child with her, an adorable little girl.... I reached over and slapped her so hard she fell sideways against the window and remained there, staring at me with huge terrified eyes. The mother leapt up and began screaming in my face (*CG*, pp. 1-2 & 198-199).

The response to the young woman's violence and her escape from that response through constituents of fantasy are clear to see: 'I sprang to my feet, heaved open the carriage door and jumped. Everything went dark. I flew and flew. I did not land.... I blinked and was back in the office, from where I had been sacked two weeks before' (*CG*, pp. 1-2 & 198-199). The young woman's symbolic suicide is an act of freedom that turns her into an avenging angel hunting down enemies with comic zeal and abandon. Glyde, together with the other novelists discussed, self-consciously keys into the anger that is one of the most powerful forces shaping contemporary women's writing.

Glyde represents an objective picture of what might be considered morally objective behaviour in her protagonist and offers us a narrative that looks at one of the central tenets of women's oppression: male-defined control of female sexuality. We are introduced immediately to the child Sarah: 'Nineteen eighty. Me. Sarah Clevtoe. Thirteen. Tall For My

Age. Cleverer Than You Twats... loves Thatcher, only just done Hitler (CG, p. 6). She is a middle-class, public schoolgirl with right-wing tendencies. On reading a newspaper article about Greenham Common Peace Camp she goes into a rage:

God how absolutely disgusting. I just read how this woman left her husband and two-year-old child and went off to live in a horrible sort of communal tent place with other women all because of nuclear bombs. I mean, we need nuclear bombs, don't we? I can't believe anyone would do anything like that God typical lefties making a filthy mess what's it for anyway how selfish. She's a disgrace to the name of woman! I mean who needs feminism anyway? I know I don't (CG, pp. 8-9).

Glyde uses Sarah's angry outburst as a means of resistance, partially enabling her to establish her own identity in relation to a perceived 'other' and partly as a means for her to comically ascribe to herself a feeling of social superiority.

Women and girls are acculturated into social attitudes towards expressions of anger which favour less authentic representations of their emotions. Sarah's spontaneous outburst is a natural expression of her feelings but as she grows into young adulthood her anger is turned inwards. She becomes alienated from her family as she indulges in progressively self-destructive behaviour. Her anger will not go away, however, and it becomes part of an affirming self-knowledge: 'Sometimes a fury would rear up in me that made me sweat and twitch and *react* to what seemed to others as nothing' (CG, p. 111). Her constructive self-expression is lost throughout a childhood that sees her sexually abused and she becomes a precocious young adolescent, having sex with boys from the public school whose grounds back on to her garden. As an adult she reflects on her childhood:

When I was a little girl, when my eyes could just see over tables and beds, and I had laughed... a big man came and selected parts of me for his consumption. When I was

thirteen young jackboots kicked open my eyes, my every sweet red opening. Now I was an adult cipher, an allowee, a human convenience (*CG*, p. 198).

She appears to be a victim who shares common ground with Zahavi's protagonists in many respects:

The boy next door... came round and we had some wine in the garden. He dropped on to me like a stone... his erection hurt me, pressed into me without the relief of movement... He twisted my nipple for an hour and a half... All I could think of was his saliva and how his mouth seemed to engulf mine like a slippery red oxygen mask.... I thought suddenly of the man who, when I was little, had sorted through me as though I were no more than a bag of dirty laundry. And yet this man had spoken romantic words to me, of a sort. The boy had given me none (*CG*, pp. 34-35).

Sarah's attempt to find meaning in sexual encounters such as this is a desire to be liberated from the constraints of sexual oppression. According to Michel Foucault 'it is the agency of sex that we must break away from if we aim... through a tactical reversal of the various mechanism of sexuality -- to counter the grips of power of bodies, pleasures and knowledges'.³¹

Sarah's behaviour deviates from what is considered the social order of sexuality and she becomes a victim of the boys' sexual fantasies: she becomes the object of their individual and collective sexual needs. She cannot 'break away' from the power of her sexuality; she becomes its victim. She exacts her revenge on one of the boys who calls her a whore as she is walking in the school grounds:

I twisted him onto his back. My knees on his chest, I raised the handlebars and brought them down hard on his face, four times in quick succession. I must have stunned him slightly because he did not move when I jumped up to kick him. Everywhere, not a piece of flesh spared. Then I went for his eyes, then his lips until

they bled. His floppy hair fell back and for a minute his face looked like one of the models in my old adverts, swollen, pouting lips, eyelids down, face darkened and glistening. I pointed one end of the handlebars at his shoulder and thrust my whole weight onto it.

This unleashing of anger is fundamental to the narrative in that it empowers the protagonist:

I had never felt more enormous.... I pulled back my boot with its cheap plastic pointed toe, and stung it between his legs. He whimpered and his hands flew down, curling in torture like the spider. I jumped on him, pricking him with my little plastic heels grinding and grinding at his flesh, his tracksuit tearing. I yanked down his greying underpants to reveal his genitalia, sitting like small creatures, the proportions unrelated to any other body part. I brought the metal down one more time and stood up (*CG*, pp. 95-96).

Violence is given free rein in the encounter described above. It is an essential component of the anger expressed through the novel and is an uncomfortable read because it is so explicit. Both anger and satire are conspicuously rendered throughout the novel and this is just one of a number of incidents that occur throughout the protagonist's life and which lead, eventually, to her suicide.

The novel's final section is a satire of revenge where Sarah is reborn as a successful career woman, who cannot be hurt by any form of violence, whether it is physical or psychological. The satire is the means by which the painful issues of Sarah's life are brought to the forefront of the novel. For example, as a successful journalist Sarah is sent to interview a successful novelist who had been scathingly dismissive of Sarah when they were at university together. The 'reborn' Sarah has a different way of coping with rejection:

I had hoped the interview would culminate in some smart Socratic dialogue, with Mirabelle flummoxed by my wit, charmed by my insights, and finally, resolving to

mend her absurd ways and turn to a path of unassuming sweetness and spiritual curiosity. Instead I made my delicate hand into a fist and punched her in the mouth (*CG*, p. 214).

Sarah's anger is finally embraced: 'Now I understood completely. I wish I had a bomb, and that I had thrown it at these people and that they were now rearranged floppily, some dead on the floor, the rest draped over the back of their chairs, twitching in agony' (*CG*, p. 170). The final surreal fantasy section sees the 'newly born' woman exact revenge on those she sees as responsible for her agony. The boy who was the instigator of her sexual 'fall' has a large, society wedding, where all his school friends are present:

The baron had spared no expense.... A clear pale green soup made of rare cave lichens... to be eaten with bread made from the ground bones of the white tiger... dishes of baked eyeballs of salmon, the soft humours congealed and opaque; pungent roes eaten with specially made spoons, the brains of small forest creatures lightly poached on beds of chicory (*CG*, p. 262).

The obscene description is satirically grotesque, the carnivalesque rendering of excess is a spectacle of orgiastic significance. Sarah procures enough poison to kill 'about twelve thousand people' and gains access to the kitchens. The guests 'were dead even before they had swallowed their first mouthfuls' and the deaths were pleasingly 'agonizing' (*CG*, p. 262). The liberating power of angry revenge is exhilarating and the final scene as Sarah sits down to eat a meal that cannot harm her to the accompaniment of dead bodies thudding all around her as they fall to the floor has unsettling and disruptive potential.

In conclusion, Neil Nehring believes that 'one encounters anger everywhere in women writing about their own condition', and that 'anger became guilty by association with its advocates' heavy-handed treatment of novels as direct embodiments of their authors' intentions and emotions'.³² Clearly, some writers are angry at the negation and abuse of

women but they are not angry *all* the time. Many of the novels discussed are underpinned by humour -- a fact Nehring appears to miss in his discussion of women's writing. Nehring concludes that feminists who let their anger show, precipitated the move towards *écriture féminine*, and what he calls 'disavowed anger'. Toril Moi makes a similar point, arguing that some critics assume that 'all texts written by women are feminist texts and that they may always and without exception be held to embody somehow and somewhere the author's "female rage" against patriarchal oppression'. In recognising that anger is used as a narrative strategy by contemporary British writers, I am not purporting to show that anger is the only discourse available to women. The novels discussed are not merely feminist 'rants', they are carefully constructed stories, utilising a full range of emotions and styles, and they are frequently very funny. While recognising anger as inherent in certain discourses, I eschew the kind of critical practice that relies on the author being as Moi implies, 'the transcendental signified of... her text', but I recognize the plurality and the multiplicity of the writing.³³ It is virtually impossible for all feminists to enter into a discourse based on recognisably corresponding interests because the interests of women are varied and often incompatible. Many feminist writers have attempted to re-categorise the construct 'woman' into separate and distinct constituents in order to create a sense of fragmentation, allowing 'woman' to be acknowledged as made up of many differing, often contradictory parts, which together constitute a whole. I locate the novelists I discuss within the paradigms of a feminist tradition. The definition I use defines feminist literature as encompassing novels that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position (however it is expressed) and I acknowledge that there is a unifying awareness in feminist discourses.³⁴ My selection of women writers illustrates something of the diversity of women's writing but also shows the ways in which writers share common ground. Emancipatory discourses by women offer a celebration of the diversity of women's shared experience but just because writers are female

it does not necessarily mean they *feel* themselves to have much in common. Throughout this thesis I draw on Rita Felski's argument that 'feminist literature' is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The writing serves to inform through representations of other sexualities and 'other' ways of being, rather than attempting to set standards and norms for women's and men's behaviour.

The novels all show an awareness of working-class women's subordinate position in a patriarchal society. This position is often widened to encompass other marginalised and disadvantaged groups (particularly working-class men). The writers themselves explore their anger at the fact that women still find themselves subordinated in society. How they attempt to subvert women's vulnerability varies immensely but the writers I discuss reclaim diverse and differing identities for women and men. In her discussion of transgressions and borders, Gloria Anzaldua argues that:

Whatever the ground on which one stands, whether the centre or the margin, one faces in each movement an Other/ground which is threatening -- the unknown. Only by violating the boundaries of the familiar and proper, risking conflict, can one reach toward connection.³⁵

If women writers wish to make transgressive crossings to new spaces, or new areas of representation then they must take that risk. That they encounter conflict is important as that allows a sense of awareness in which anger can be amplified and can be spoken to 'move [women] from unconscious passivity into clarity and the will to act'. Zahavi, Barker, Michael and McManus (among others) create new centres of subjectivity locating working-class women and working-class men at the centre of their narratives. My application of an aesthetic of anger is rooted quite self-consciously within the working-class novel and within a feminist critical and theoretical framework. The women writers discussed are each politically engaged and their uses of anger make it possible for them to powerfully communicate a sense of

alienation in the fiction, as well as the dissatisfaction that arises out of estrangement and social fragmentation. It has never been my intention to offer a psychological study of anger or to dismiss it as an unconscious process. Anger provides a perceptive and penetrating narrative device for women writers: its continued application is an important signifier of women's resistance. My chosen writers provide transgressive reading experiences that disavow the prescriptive nature of women's representation in working-class fiction. Helen Zahavi, Pat Barker, Livi Michael and Anne McManus create imaginative visions of the strength and intensity of women's rage that are indispensable elements of the intellectual and political potency of women's writing.

Endnotes

¹Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Viking, 1996)

²This persuasive argument was given by Imelda Whelehan in a paper entitled 'Bridget Jones-Sex and the Single Girl', at the British Women Writer's 1960 - Present Day Conference at Leicester University, 1 July 2000. The quotation is taken from the abstract for that paper.

³Judith Butler, 'Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory, and Psychoanalytic Discourse', in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), p. 325.

⁴Chris Weedon, *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p. 156.

⁵Chris Weedon, 'Identity, Difference and the Category 'Woman'', *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 105.

⁶Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 122.

⁷Writers are endeavouring to shape ideological representations of women but one of the main implications of feminist theory and practice is that there are many representations and experiences of being a woman, and it is this multiplicity that problematises feminism intrinsically.

⁸Cyrania Johnson-Roullier, 'The Singularity of Multiplicity', in Diane Elam and Robin Wuiegman, eds., *Feminism Beside Itself* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 187.

⁹Linda Hutcheon, *The Poetics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 66.

¹⁰Rachel Cusk, *The Lucky Ones* (London: Fourth Estate, 2003), quoted in Stephanie Merritt, 'Mum's the Word: Rachel Cusk Interview', *Observer Review*, 30 March, 2003, p. 19.

¹¹Jill Dawson, *Magpie* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), pp. 51-59.

¹²Melanie Kaye-Kantrowiz, 'Women, Violence and Resistance', in *The Issue of Power: Women, Jews, Violence and Resistance* (San Francisco: aunt lute books, 1992), p. 24; cited in Rachel Pinsky, 'I'm Glad I'm Pissed Off: The Revolution of Angry Women', *Contemporary Women's Issues Database* 15:1 (1995), p. 10.

¹³A similar range of opinions (from women readers) can be found in response to Rachel Cusk, Tania Glyde and Andrea Badenoch. Amazon.com accessed 5th August 2004. See also Alice Ferrebe, 'Voice in the Darkness: *Mouthing the Words*', *Scotland on Sunday*, 3 August, 2001.

¹⁴Janet Sayers, 'Melanie Klein, Psychoanalysis and Feminism', *Feminist Review*, 25 (Spring 1987), pp. 31-32.

¹⁵Anne McManus, *I Was a Mate of Ronnie Laing* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1998). All further references will be abbreviated as *IWMRL* and included in the body of the text.

¹⁶Susan Koppelman Cornillon, 'The Fiction of Fiction', in Susan Koppelman Cornillon, ed., *Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives* (Ohio: Bowling Green University Press, 1972), p. 113.

¹⁷Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape Revenge Cycle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 31. Read makes the point that feminine/feminist also correlates to victim/avenger (p. 4).

¹⁸Denise Riley, '*Am I That Name?*': *Feminism and the Category 'Woman' in History* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 112.

¹⁹Avril Horner and Angela Keane, 'Introduction', in Avril Horner and Angela Keane, eds., *Body Matters: Feminism, Textuality Corporeality* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 12-13.

²⁰Sarah Appleton Aguair, *The Bitch is Back: Wicked Women in Literature* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), p. 6.

²¹Elaine Hoffman Baruch, 'The Female *Bildungsroman*: Education through Marriage', in *Women, Love and Power: Literature and Psychoanalytic Perspectives* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1991), p. 122.

²²Julie Myerson, *Me and the Fat Man* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998). All further references will be abbreviated as *MFM* and included in the body of the text. Lucy English, *Selfish People* (London: Fourth Estate, 1998) and *Children of Light* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999). All further references will be abbreviated as *SP* and *CL* and included in the body of the text.

²³For a discussion of women's use of humour, see Marleen Barr, 'Laughing in a Liberated Defiance: *Egalia's Daughters* and Feminist Tendentious Humor', in Marleen Barr and Richard Feldstein, eds., *Distorted Discourses: Feminism/Textual Intervention/Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 95.

²⁴Cornillon, 'The Fiction of Fiction', p. 127.

²⁵See Molly Hite, *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 167.

²⁶Andrea Badenoc, *Blink* (London: Macmillan, 2001), p. 39.

²⁷The reclamation of anger is not solely the prerogative of women writers of fiction. In a study of young women and girl gangs in the United States of America, Lyn Mikel Brown ascertained that feelings of anger and indignation were prevalent in many girls and young women. Brown discovered that far from seeing themselves as victims, young women were firmly resisting their oppression. She also notes that white, middle-class young women are most forcibly expressing anger through music, with bands such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Hole and Babes in Toyland. There are a number of magazines and broadsheets that have surfaced, in relation to the girl-bands, *Germ Girls*, *Bikini Kill* and *Sister Nobody*, that give space for women to 'rage about their personal and social oppression'. Brown argues that these

young women, 'thrive on contradiction... and the reappropriation of conventional feminine images and language historically used against women'. These 'Riot Grrrls', wear baby doll dresses, but shave their heads and wear large black boots in an attempt to 'disrupt worn-out dichotomies by connecting femininity and rage'. See Lyn Mikel Brown, *Raising Their Voices: The Politics of Girls' Anger* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 5-6. See also Neil Nehring, 'Emotional Rescue: Feminist Philosophy on Anger, in *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism* (London: Sage Publications Ltd., 1997), pp. 107-127.

²⁸Fuss, *Essentially Speaking*, pp. 36- 37.

²⁹See Charlotte Bunch, *Passionate Politics: Feminist Theory in Action* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987), p. 101. Quoted in Weedon, *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference*, p. 131.

³⁰Tania Glyde, *Clever Girl* (London: Picador, 1996). All further references will be abbreviated as *CG* and included in the body of the text. See, also, Tania Glyde, 'Why I write explicitly on a woman's real desires', *Independent*, 24 May, 1996, p. 11.

³¹Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, translated by David Hurley, (New York: Pantheon, 1976), p. 157.

³²Neil Nehring, *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism* (London & New Delhi: Sage, 1997), p. 120.

³³Toril Moi, *Sexual Textual Politics* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 62 & p. 63.

³⁴See Rita Felski, 'Defining Feminist Literature', in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), p. 12.

³⁵Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Spinsters-Aunt Lute, 1987), p. 45.

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