

Matthew Crowley  
Ontologies of Conflict  
University of Brighton  
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**Amicable Young Men? or, The *Absence* of Change: The (Re)Construction of Masculine Identities in Monica Dickens's *The Happy Prisoner* (1946) and J.B. Priestley's *Three Men in New Suits* (1945).**

This paper forms part of a much larger project entitled *The Men Who Are Not There: Representations of Masculine Working-Class Identity in Post-War British Literature and Film*. Within the study 1945 is recognized as a pivotal moment for the representation of contemporary working-class identities, and for masculine identities more generally. The study utilises Raymond Williams's theory of structures of feeling – understood here in it's most literal sense as 'the culture of a period' 'the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization' (Williams, 1965:64). Within this approach the arts are key to our understanding of a period as they offer a 'recorded communication that outlives its bearers', communication in which the actual living sense, the deep community that makes communication possible is drawn upon' (Williams, 1965:65). Why then, is 1945 such an important date for representations of masculine identity? 1945 signals the beginning of what might best be described as a specific series of crises of masculinity, crises which manifest as *absences* (understood here as a transient want, lack, or need) throughout representations generated in the remainder of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and continue into representations born of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It's no coincidence of course, that the beginning of this series of crises of masculinity coincides with the end of the Second World War and its military conflicts, for, though the military conflict officially ended on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1945, the political and socio-cultural effects of the conflict were already being felt in Britain, and would be felt there for a long time to come. As Ian Haywood observes 'the Second World War was really two wars with two aims: a military campaign to defeat fascism; and a political and social campaign to

eradicate poverty and the worst forms of social inequality' (Haywood, 1997:88). A view supported by Alan Sinfield when he writes '[t]he war exemplified (though not without contest) a pattern of state intervention and popular co-operation to organize production for a common purpose. And its successful conclusion afforded a rare opportunity to recast British society' (Sinfield, 2004:1). This was an opportunity that many must have believed had been taken when the Labour Party, led by Clement Atlee, won a landslide victory on 26<sup>th</sup> July 1945, indeed Haywood goes as far as to suggest that if ever a day were to be chosen as 'a turning point in British working-class history, 26 July 1945 must be a prime candidate' (Haywood, 1997:88).

My particular interest then, is how this recasting of society is represented within contemporaneous texts, or, indeed, if recasting is represented at all, and more specifically how these social and political changes affect representations of masculinity, for, to paraphrase Deborah Philips, whilst the novel is not a barometer of social history, nor ever a simple reflection of its time, it can chart the limits and shifts of social discourse and offer insights into what can and can't be fantasized about and publically acknowledged (Philips, 2006:3).

In a slight change to the program I will focus primarily today on J.B. Priestley's *Three Men in New Suits*, with particular attention to the trope of nostalgia and its specific relation to the concept of home, and a consideration of the role of trauma / collective trauma in the formation of post-war masculine identities. Should time allow, I will also introduce Monica Dickens's *The Happy Prisoner* in order to outline certain structural regularities which point toward the formation of a tradition within representations of masculine identities from within this particular structure of feeling.

J.B. Priestley's *Three Men in New Suits*. Written and printed 'some time before the European War ended and demobilisation began in earnest' (Priestley, 1984:5) the book was first published in 1945 and provides an insight into many of the immediate tensions

experienced by those returning from the front. The text features three main protagonists, who each fall neatly into the different strata of what David Cannadine describes as 'the triadic version' of society, which consists of 'upper, middle and lower collective groups' (Cannadine, 2000:19). This model is clearly a gross oversimplification of the British class system, and the portrayal of each of the characters relies heavily on class-based stereotypes which at times verge on the offensive. Indeed, both the form (to which I'll return momentarily) and the content of the novel seem unable to break free from the rigidity of these commonly held beliefs. Critical to this stasis is nostalgia, a nostalgia which, in this particular instance, develops from a very literal etymological understanding of the term (being from the Greek *nostos*: return home, and *algia*: longing) a condition which Svetlana Boym observes is 'a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed' (Boym, 2001:xiii), and is structured upon a (slightly) more abstract nostalgia for the certainties of the masculine role within society. For all its flaws and limitations – which may, paradoxically, also be its strengths – Priestley's approach allows for the representation of diverse masculinities which exist within the same structure of feeling, framing its exploration in terms of class identities the novel binds the future of these men – each of whom, as has already been mentioned, is a totem of the class to which he belongs – and therefore the future of masculine identity, to a future of class politics, and relies upon the fact that these men are bound to each other (through their shared experiences of war) to allow this discourse to develop. The question underlying this discourse, the question which serves to drive it forward, is quite simply 'What next?' (Priestley, 1984:7). Indeed Priestley explicitly confronts the reader with it on the very first page of the narrative stating that 'everybody and everything' 'were waiting for something', what that something was, probably nobody knew, but, 'Perhaps it was the end of the war. Here it was – and now – what next? That was it. What next?' (Priestley, 1984:7). It's no accident that this question appears so early on in the text of course, the story which follows is entirely structured upon it and

the text itself becomes an allegorical response to it. The text is littered with warnings, and ultimately serves as a warning against a return to the inequalities of the inter-war periods, but there exists here a great tension between the hopes and expectations of a better future which victory in the war brings and the desire to return home, to return to a home unchanged and unchanging, the unchallenging home constructed from nostalgic memory. I will demonstrate this through a brief examination of the form of the novel itself.

The combination of knowing Priestley's political persuasion (he was a prominent name upon Orwell's list) and the almost Shavian peroration of the text leave me with no doubt that this is a book founded upon a Socialist ideal, a book which has a more egalitarian future as its aim, and yet is a book which is structured upon the very class divisions it seeks to breakdown. The book begins with the three protagonists returning home together (notably the home to which they return is rural, playing upon an Arcadian ideal which is often attributed to a collective British consciousness – this is the green and pleasant land they have been fighting for) but, from the second chapter onwards, until they are eventually reunited in the final chapter, the men are separated; what's more, not only does the form of the book separate them by class, we then proceed to hear their individual tales in descending class order.

First we join Alan Strete, the upper class gent who refused his commission to remain a sergeant and continue fighting alongside his men, upon his return to the family home Swansford Manor. Alan's engagement with the issue of 'what next?' take the form of a series of philosophical and political musings, which are triggered by his experiences in war and formed in response to the attitudes he encounters whilst reintegrating himself amongst his family and piers. As Alan's narrative develops, and he encounters more of his piers, more of the agents of power, his behaviour becomes increasingly erratic, and both he, and we the reader, are guided toward the realisation that he has returned to 'a

kind of lunacy' (Priestley, 1984:144), to an 'idiotic little party, in which everybody seemed to be playing a role for comedy' (Priestley, 1984:129). Leading eventually to a seemingly tragic situation in which Alan begins to dissociate from the egalitarian concepts which inform much of his thought throughout the text – as his Uncle Rodney, himself a 'fantastic museum piece' of unreconstructed pre-World War I Conservatism states, 'if it's a choice between gangsters and dupes, then you'd better join the gangsters' (Priestley, 1984:125). Ultimately however, this is not the path that Alan chooses, and as the novel concludes and the three eponymous men are reunited, it is he that delivers the impassioned peroration which calls for faith and compassion in people in order to 'make the round earth our home' (Priestley, 1984:152). Before the three men, and Alan's sister, retire to tea and sandwiches – I will return to this strange anticlimactic ending in a moment.

Second we join Herbert Kenford, a farmer from a well-to-do middle-class family, Sergeant Stretre's corporal, who had 'preferred to stay on with him' and so had 'worked it so [he] didn't get another stripe' (Priestley, 1984:34). Herbert's concerns with the question 'what next?' chiefly revolve around practical issues of property and profit. Despite being happy to be home and moved by the concern and consideration his family have shown for his future – his father has bought a nearby farm so that both he and his brother (who has remained on the farm and not fought in the war, and who had 'put on weight [...] so that his great red neck looked as if it would burst his collar' (Priestley, 1984:40)) will each own their own farm as their father readies himself for retirement., Herbert is disconnected, he is 'somehow not quite there' (Priestley, 1984:43). He is shocked at how his family have profited from the war, puzzled by the hatred with which his brother seems to regard the people that dwell in cities, and offended by the amount of food the family have at their disposal, whilst others live on rations. Ultimately Herbert is left feeling closer to the men he has fought alongside than to the family to which he has returned. Central to the development of Herbert's narrative is his developing

relationship with Doris Morgan – an outspoken ‘bold lively piece’ (Priestley, 1984:7) who has been moved from her job as a shop girl in Croydon to do war work in an aircraft factory which has been built in the vicinity of Herbert’s family farm – though there isn’t time here to unpack the full significance of Doris’s role within the narrative I felt it imperative to mention three key factors. First, Doris is representative of women in the workplace – a significant fact, as it is important to note that the reconstruction of masculine identities in the aftermath of World War Two was carried out against, or alongside redefining notions of femininity. Second, it is Doris, who on hearing that Herbert is having doubts about the ideas of equality with which he returned, implores ‘whatever you do, don’t go back on what you’re beginning to feel now. Don’t let ‘em make you comfortable. Don’t let ‘em stop you thinking. Don’t let ‘em persuade you that we can go on the same old way, not caring what happens to other people’ (Priestley, 1984:103), and as such provides the voice of an impassioned, politicised, but under-educated working-class. Third, Doris’s urban origin (Croydon) and her burgeoning relationship with Herbert, provide, if not an actual reconciliation between city and country, then the symbolic potential for such a reconciliation, and, as a result of these factors, becomes a key factor herself in Herbert’s considerations of ‘what next?’.

Third, we join Eddie Mold, a labourer at the local quarry before the war, who had served as private under Sergeant Strete and Corporal Kenford. We find Eddie ‘[s]till be-fogged by all the beer he had had the night before [...] wondering where he was’ (Priestley, 1984:48) and quickly discover that after the sudden death of their baby girl whilst Eddie was away at war, his wife Nellie sought comfort through affairs with numerous American G.I’s that had been stationed in and around the village, and after reading a telegram Eddie had sent to inform her of his return fled to avoid facing him. At numerous points throughout the text we are told of Eddie’s physical prowess, he is described upon introduction as ‘burly and battered’ (Priestley, 1984:8), and his short temper, this, coupled with the fact that Eddie is ‘bewildered and baffled a lot of the time’

(Priestley, 1984:63), contrive with the situation which awaits him upon his return to dictate Eddie's response to the question 'what next?'. Unable to order his thoughts satisfactorily, Eddie's responses are largely physical, he drinks heavily, and, when he remembers to eat, seeks comfort in food, becomes engaged in numerous violent rows (one which involves both the parson and the local Police Sergeant – the church and the state respectively), and eventually a punch up in a pub with a local loudmouth of whom Eddie makes 'potted meat' (Priestley, 1984:117). Eddie's violent physical responses are counterbalanced to some extent by the gentle awkwardness with which he greets the widow of a fallen comrade (a man whom had been only ten yards from Eddie when killed by a mortar shell). This encounter not only underlines the inherent decency within Eddie, but also brings attention to the fact that the reconstruction of the identities of the returning soldier is framed by the memory of those that did not return, as is the home to which they come back. It is perhaps in Eddie's narrative that we see most starkly the schisms which have come to exist between the fixed memory of home, the projection of a better home, and the reality which awaits. Unable to process this effectively Eddie finds himself 'sat there hour after hour, rocking mechanically' (Priestley, 1984:61) in a state in which he appears to occupy both past and present simultaneously as we are informed that '[s]ometimes it seemed too as if there were two Eddie Molds: the one who had been careless and happy with Nellie, and now this one, himself in the chair [...] who had come back to find it all different' (Priestley, 1984:61).

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Ultimately the men find strength, and seek the solutions to their individual problems by reuniting with each other, a symbolic gesture designed to demonstrate that a satisfactory answer to the question 'what next?' can only be found if the separate classes are to unite and work together; but even here we find an inherent class prejudice, for it seems that Priestley was a Socialist who had grave concerns about what the

consequences of a greater equality might be, particularly in relation to high culture, and is all too willing to describe working class masculinity as if describing a completely different species: 'of course they are messy and stupid and ignorant. Bound to be. [...] But on the other hand these chaps [...] have some very definite virtues of their own, some wonderfully good points that you mightn't notice at first' (Priestley, 1984:63). In the crudest terms Priestley presents a class system upper, middle, and lower classes, in which masculine identities are constructed upon brains, business, and brawn respectively. (Though this is not universal as he does also introduce us to Tubby Arncliff, aristocratic, buffoonish, Under-Secretary to the Minister of Imperial Collaboration, 'plumpish, pinkish-and-goldish' who looks 'comfortable enough at first glance but then [gives] the impression that he [is] just beginning to recover from some profound shock' (Priestley, 1984:126), and I'm sure you'll agree is painfully reminiscent of London's Mayor Boris Johnson.) Priestley adheres to a rigid form which conforms to, and consolidates the existing class hierarchy. But, and this is a very significant but, these men are drawn together because of their want, their need for change. Informing that want, that need, are their experiences of war. Common across the separate narratives are character traits which signify trauma – erratic behaviour, mechanical rocking, excessive drinking, short temperedness, dissociation, and the feeling of being two people at once – alongside this, the language employed in detailing civilian experience of the war – the stopping of time, the dislocation of experience, two separate, parallel, and seemingly irreconcilable realities – begins to describe a collective trauma which shapes the subsequent formation of masculine identity. This trauma manifests as the *absence*, or void, which develops between certainties and uncertainties of home, a place which exists as neither that which the men left, nor that to which they dreamed of returning; a place where nothing has changed, but everything and everyone is different.

It is this paradox of the traumatic condition that presents an unbridgeable gap within the text, the protagonists are unable to narrate their future, as, to borrow a phrase from



Roger Luckhurst, 'trauma is anti-narrative' (Luckhurst, 2008:79), yet, it is also a condition which proliferates narrative in an attempt to expound traumatic experience. These are the conditions under which the final chapter is constructed, the desperate need for the trauma of war to mean something that results in a peroration which states there is something in the men which 'will not rest nor find any lasting satisfaction while most human beings still exist in poverty, ignorance and despair' (Priestley, 1984:152) and an inertia, which, after such a rousing speech, sees them retire to the welcoming glow of the house for the platitudes of tea and sandwiches. It is this anti-climactic (and for me depressing – though I would venture that on its initial publication the ending was designed to give comfort in the few certainties which did remain) conclusion, an ending in which these soldiers, these men of integrity are reduced by circumstance to an inaction, a passivity which, in terms of representation, rightly or wrongly, is traditionally a feminine trait, cements the protagonists as men who are not there, a signals the onset of a series of crises of masculinity which continues throughout the Twentieth Century and beyond.

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