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Masculine Identity, Consumption, and the Ghost of Class in David Storey's *This Sporting Life* and Alan Sillitoe's *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*.

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*. The study utilises Raymond Williams's theory of structures of feeling – which is understood here in its most literal sense as ‘the culture of a period’ ‘the particular living result of all elements in the general organization’ (Williams, 1965:64). Within this approach the arts become key to an 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). The size of the survey, which spans from 1945 – 2010, means I am taking a decadist approach (with all its incumbent problems), and drawing upon a representative sample from each period in order to demonstrate the formation of a tradition within the representation of working-class masculinity. It is the contention of my work that 1945 and the end of WWII signals the beginning of a series of crises of masculinity, which evolve to reflect the structure of feeling from which they are generated and manifest as related, but distinct *absences* (understood here as a transient want, lack, or need) within literary and filmic representations.

Within the study the new literature of the industrial north of England, the writing of the so-called ‘angry young men’, which began to appear in the late 1950s (and the film adaptations which quickly followed) hold great significance. Ostensibly this significance stems from the violence with which the texts respond to what has gone

before, from the eponymous ‘anger’ in Osbourne’s *Look Back in Anger* (a play that must be mentioned, and to which I will return shortly), this reading relies, of course, on an understanding of what the texts are reacting against – a literature of resistance can only be fully understood in terms which account for that which it resists – in this case the *absence* of change, and what Deborah Philips refers to as ‘the loss of a heroic masculinity’ (Philips, 2006:22). I’ve written about this in more detail elsewhere, but hope it will suffice to say here that the texts are a reaction to the tensions which arose in the work of the ‘amicable young men’ of the immediate post-war period. Work which was largely structured upon nostalgic conceptions of home, which represented a landscape in which everything was different, but nothing had changed, which demonstrates the paradoxical and irreconcilable tension between the home fit for heroes that soldiers had been promised and hoped to return to, and their essential nostalgic desire to return to the familiarity of the home they left behind, a home which of course, no longer exists. In this respect the novels of the ‘angry young men’ can be read as anti-nostalgia, their authors children of the war (Sillitoe was eleven in 1939, Storey six), old enough to remember, but too young to join the conflict; that had grown through war and had vague memories of the dole and the hardships of the 30s before that.

However, I find the term ‘angry young men’ both limited and limiting, for whilst this anger is certainly a central theme within the texts, it is not the only theme, and to frame the texts simply in terms of anger, resistance, or rebellion is to overlook the subtleties with which the texts reflect the structure of feeling from which they are generated, and restricts the capacity to see the profound and wide reaching effect these texts had upon subsequent representations of working-class masculinity. I might demonstrate this by returning to John Osbourne’s *Look Back in Anger* and suggesting

that, whilst the anger contained within the play has a great significance, as I have already acknowledged, equally as important, if not more so, to our understanding of the culture of the period, is the play's commercial success, as it is the commercial success of *Look Back in Anger* which creates the material conditions for the cultural production of the texts which were to follow; and indeed, the commercial success of the texts which followed takes on a symbolic and cultural significance of its own – an idea to which I will return later.

It is important, and interesting, to make a brief note here on Raymond Williams's analysis of what he himself described as 'the new forms of the fifties' (Williams, 1979:272) – particularly as his work forms the spine of my methodological approach. Whilst I am yet to find any specific criticism of the texts examined here, Williams saw the work Osbourne, Braine et al, writers which fit the same pattern of representation, as a literature of escape. Stating that they 'lacked any sense of the continuity of working-class life, which does not cease just because one individual moves out of it, but which also itself changes internally' (Williams, 1979:272). This, as Alan O'Connor points out in his notes in *Raymond Williams on Television*, leads Williams to the unconventional assessment that the work of the 'angry young men' in fact represents a 'continuation of the mood of entrapment that characterizes George Orwell's writing and not the genuine breakthrough appropriate to the late 1950s and 1960s' (O'Connor in Williams, 1989:126). Though writing in 1970, Williams does acknowledge that the external evidence to suggest these were new and important works is perhaps stronger at that point than when the pattern was first formed (Williams, 1989:126). Needless to say I don't have time here to explore the relationship between Orwell and the 'angry young men', and still manage a discussion of the significance of consumption within the novels, but it is with good reason that I

mention it, as I will frame my discussion as a response to Williams's criticism, and argue that, as Williams seems to – perhaps unwittingly? – suggest, the further in time we move from the texts, the more significance they seem to hold.

Many of Williams's criticisms revolve around the subjective nature of the novels and an imbalance between the personal and the social aspects of the novels, a balance which he sees as central to the authentic realist form within literature. How then does this apply to the work of Storey and Sillitoe? *This Sporting Life* is categorically a novel of escape, written entirely in the first person, with a detached subjectivity, and a disdain for the community which surrounds him. In this respect, whilst the narrative centres on the representation of a working-class male, the novel is, in fact, an exemplar of the bourgeois model of society, for which, as Williams himself writes there is no better metaphor than the ladder – the ladder enables all men to climb, but must be climbed alone – there is no move toward, or mention of collective betterment, but only Arthur Machin's often violent struggle to climb the social hierarchy, and as such correlates with Williams's assessment.

Saturday Night and Sunday Morning does not so easily fit the mould however, as protagonist Arthur shows no desire to climb the social ladder, but rather holds the 'pretensions' of a 'semi-detached house in a posh district' (Sillitoe, 1961:34) and a car against those he feels are of equal stock, and frequently states he is 'worth as much as any other man in the world' (Sillitoe, 1961:32) whilst treating the new suburban housing estate and the thought of moving up in the world with great suspicion. Further complicating a straight reading of *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* as a self-centred novel of escape is the fact that whilst the novel may appear to be written in the first person, Sillitoe actually employs free indirect discourse, a technique which allows the voice of the narrator to shift between protagonist and the

omnipotent voice of the author. Interestingly Sillitoe uses this technique to construct a sort of free-floating, collective consciousness which allows a certain amount of objectivity in his representation of Arthur by relying upon the voices and thoughts of, the often nameless characters who encounter Arthur whilst going about their own business. So, for example, our first view of Arthur 'dead drunk', falling from the 'topmost stair to the bottom' is mediated through 'the rowdy gang of singers' (Sillitoe, 1961:5) in the bar. At the foot of the stairs we see Arthur through the eyes of the waiter who discovers him asleep, and the elderly man who steps over him thinking 'how jolly yet sinful it would be if he possessed the weakness yet strength of character to get so drunk' (Sillitoe, 1961:8). What becomes apparent within this rendering is Arthur's absolute reliance upon the community which surrounds him, he is intrinsically tied to the subtle patchwork of voices, and as such the personal form of the novel is shaped by the social form through which it is represented. Beyond this there are passages, such as Arthur's Christmas at Aunt Ada's, in which Sillitoe makes genuine attempts to capture the energy, the rich warmth, the chaos, and the occasional violence of working-class life in overcrowded conditions. Illustrated by the seemingly constant movement around the house, which itself becomes like a production line; three sittings are required for supper as not everyone can fit in the parlour at the same time, never mind round the table. This is an author who avoids sentimentality, whilst writing with genuine affection.

Perhaps there is an argument that Arthur's lack of a clear political standpoint, his lack of a formalized class-consciousness, or the failure of the book to develop a sustained engagement with contemporary political issues detracts from its ability to represent working-class life more broadly, I would suggest however, that, considered in a wider

historical context it is precisely these points that give the novel a profound significance beyond its violent reaction to previous generations.

To paraphrase Richard Hoggart – another cornerstone of the New Left – Machin is a shiny barbarian. To quote Hoggart directly he is

Surrounded by a great quantity of material goods designed to serve and amuse [...] but with little sense that these are end-products, [...] surrounded, in fact, by more available *things* than any previous generation, [...] almost inevitably inclined to take up these things just as they appear and use them in the manner of the child in the fairy-tale, who found toys hanging from the trees and lollipops by the roadside. The great weight of persuasion is in favour of the cultivation of that habit, and after all, ‘why not?’ (Hoggart, 1977:193).

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