FATHERS, DAUGHTERS AND MASCULINITY IN CRISIS

IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION

by

Áine McGlynn

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Department of English

University of Toronto

©Copyright by Áine McGlynn 2010
Abstract

This thesis engages with what has become a ubiquitous term in masculinity studies: “crisis”. I argue that the invocation of “crisis” which implies catastrophe, disaster and trauma, and the favorable reception of this invocation both in academic and popular thinking about men, has resulted in a rush to defend and reauthorize aspects of the masculine ideal. The defense of traditional masculinity risks re-entangling men with masculinity and masculinity with patriarchy. The retying of these categorical knots challenges the deconstruction of gender that feminism and early men’s studies carried out in the second half of the twentieth century in the name of equal rights and in the name of freeing both men and women from having to conform to rigid gender stereotypes – particularly in the home. In recent work by J.M. Coetzee, John Banville and Ian McEwan the male protagonists are fathers who are forced to address a crisis of authority and legitimacy. In the first three chapters I argue that fatherhood in these novels is the site wherein the masculine ideal is least likely to be deconstructed and as such, it is in the context of the relationship between father and daughter that I argue heteromasculinity is most powerfully constructed, maintained and defended. In the fourth chapter I consider Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir Fun Home which provides a queer take on male crisis and father-daughter relationships and which represents female masculinity as a counter to the pressure to reauthorize heteromasculinity for the next historical turn.
Acknowledgements

My research was made possible by funding provided by the University of Toronto Open Fellowship and by an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, for which I am very grateful.

Many, many thanks to my committee: in particular to Professor Neil ten Kortenaar who was a tremendous source of wisdom, guidance and encouragement over the course of this project. Professor Ato Quayson always pushed me to be a more diligent scholar and a better writer. Finally, Professor Sara Salih asked me difficult questions over bottomless cups of tea and plodding runs, and guided me with the kindness and honesty one could only expect of a real friend.

I dedicate this work to a number of remarkable women: Grainne, Roisin, Claire and Molly, my indomitable sisters; my lovely Beth, whose patience I have somehow yet to exhaust; and to my Mum: in memory of you, this thesis became a labor of love.
Table of Contents

Introduction ......................................................................................................................................6
One: Let Him Fret and Let Him Be: Masculinity in Ian McEwan’s Saturday ..............................34
Two: Incest, Masculinity and the Reification of Gender Categories in John Banville ...............80
Three: Sorry in the Body: Disgrace and the “Crisis” of Masculinity ........................................127
Four: Female Masculinity and Inheritance in Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home ..............................182
Conclusion ...................................................................................................................................219
Works Consulted ........................................................................................................................224
List of Figures

Figure 1  Anteros: the love of virtue overcoming the other Cupid..............................155
Figure 2  Futile effort..................................................................................................156
Figure 3  Safety should at times be bought with money.............................................157
Figure 4  Bruces.........................................................................................................184
Figure 5  Elsa.............................................................................................................187
Figure 6  Bechdels in Translation.............................................................................206
Figure 7  Alison as Bruce..........................................................................................211
INTRODUCTION

Men in Crisis and the Rise of Masculinity Studies

This thesis engages with what has become a ubiquitous term in masculinity studies: “crisis”. Fradley notes that “the notion that normative American masculinity has somehow been in turbulent states of ‘crisis’ since the end of World War II is unquestionably a prevalent discourse in popular and critical circles” (68). Though present in both circles, this discourse of crisis is characterized differently in popular and academic thinking about masculinity. In the former characterization, masculinity’s crisis is a result of feminism and LGBT equality movements which are charged with having marginalized and threatened the heterosexual man. The resulting depictions that emerge in popular culture are of men ostracized and vilified, whose vulnerability ultimately compels the sympathy of the audience. Meanwhile, academic constructions of the crisis trope exist across a range: from conservative, which, like the popular cultural, identifies women’s rights and the post-war disintegration of the traditional middle class household as the starting point of masculine crisis, to the more liberal which suggests that masculinity has always and everywhere been in crisis. I argue that the invocation of “crisis” which implies catastrophe, disaster and trauma, and the favorable reception of this invocation both in academic and popular thinking about men, has resulted in a rush to defend and reauthorize aspects of the masculine ideal. This ideal is best thought of in terms of Gilmour’s triad of Man the Protector, Provider, Procreator: “To be a man in most of the societies we have looked at, one must impregnate

---

1 The title of a recent article on the Royal College of Psychiatrists reveals the extent to which the crisis in masculinity is equated with an actual threat to the lives of men: “Crisis in Masculinity” leads to eating disorders in straight men.”
women, protect dependents from danger, and provision kith and kin. So although there may be no ‘Universal Male’, we may perhaps speak of a ‘Ubiquitous Male’” (222-3). The defence of this “Ubiquitous Male” who alone can, and must, be father, defender and earner, as an ideal model of what constitutes masculinity risks re-entangling men with masculinity and masculinity with patriarchy. The retying of these categorical knots challenges the work that feminism and early men’s studies carried out over several decades in the second half of the twentieth century in the name of equal rights and in the name of freeing both men and women from having to conform to rigid gender stereotypes – particularly in the home. The notion that masculinity is in crisis therefore plays into a conservative agenda which finds its raison d’être in managing this crisis by reinserting a traditional model of what it means to be a man into a conversation about gender and “family values” that has been radically transformed since World War II. This transformation is owing to post-structuralist feminist and queer thinking, which has deconstructed the categories of gender to the benefit of men and women, queer, straight and transgendered who were burdened by the pressure to either conform to, live under or be subordinated to the masculine ideal.

Post-structuralist theories about gender and sexuality articulated for example, in Foucault’s History of Sexuality, Butler’s Gender Trouble and Bodies That Matter, and more recently Lee Edelman’s No Future, have reframed the discussion of men and women, male and female, masculine and feminine, so that now it is, within the academy at least, commonplace and acceptable to speak of porousness between gender categories as a given, to argue for the radical potential of diverse sexual practices, and to reject biological determinism. The effects of post-structuralist feminist and queer theoretical discourse are observable not only in the way that gender has been deconstructed in the academy, but also in gay marriage rights, in queer
solidarity campaigns, in the increasing visibility of transgendered experience and many other locations of queer freedoms. My thesis employs post-structuralist feminist and queer readings as an effective means of queering gender categories (masculinity specifically), and the conservative heteronormative logic which enlists traditional masculinity for its own cause.

However I am also alert to the complexities of this moment that gender deconstruction has brought us to. Post-structuralist logic has been equally mobilized by neo-conservative thinking. As R.W. Connell, Michael Kimmel, Harry Brod and other theorists of masculinity have widely argued, the crisis of masculinity resulted from post-structuralist dismantling of traditional gender roles which displaced men from a connection to values and responsibilities that they had previously used to define themselves. Seeing as post-structuralism initiated the crisis of masculinity, which was then appropriated by conservative family values proponents, neither the crisis of masculinity, nor the post-structuralist thinking which identified it, should be accepted uncritically. As such this thesis asks via a number of texts that are focalized by men (and one that is focalized by a masculine woman) to what extent is the crisis a discursive one? And even if it is discursive, to what extent is it nonetheless experienced as a material reality in the lives of these men? How has the deconstruction of masculinity and of gender categories more broadly allowed us to think beyond gender, and how does the idea of “beyond gender” in fact usher back in the straight male as the normative subject? Related to this, how has deconstruction created a condition of anxiety, or crisis, which is allayed by a conservative, post 9/11 reconstruction of gender ideals? Is there an alternative to the apocalyptic “No Future” that Edelman argues awaits total deconstruction and abandonment of the symbolic order?

---

2 I provide a genealogy of this process and of the field of masculinity studies below.
This thesis demonstrates that the traditional heteromasculine ideal is not under threat of extinction, as crisis theories would suggest. I argue that in spite of over two decades of post-structuralist and deconstructive work on gender, which promotes the idea that subjects emerge “only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves” (*Bodies* 7), biological sex is still often considered to exist “at a prelinguistic site to which there is no direct access” (5). “Men” and “women” are still considered to have emerged as a result of their sex which is more often thought of as a “bodily given” than a “cultural norm” (*Bodies* 5). As such, gender categories remain a part of a regulatory regime. In short, though this thesis is suspicious that an actual crisis exists that threatens to destroy men, and though I note that this crisis logic was arguably brought about by post-structuralist framing of gender binaries, I nonetheless deploy deconstructive logic in thinking through how gender and sexuality operate as a means to counter a conservative trajectory which seeks to build gender back up into discrete categories.

In recent work by J.M. Coetzee, John Banville and Ian McEwan, the male protagonists are forced to address a crisis of authority and legitimacy. Within a realist mode, the novels take the crisis as a given, as a feature of being a man in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. The novels record the experience of a father who from the outset, experiences a post-feminist masculinity – that is, he experiences masculinity as fluctuating and multiple – a signal that the protagonists have absorbed the deconstruction of gender as non-deterministic. In spite of the fact that this deconstruction names what conservatives identify as the crisis of masculinity, the protagonists are somewhat at home in this moment; they have taken on post-feminist masculinity as part of their identity. However, the novels all depict a specific moment of trauma (a home invasion, a violent attack, the death of a wife), which unsettles the shaky peace that the protagonists had up until that point, made with their “new” masculinity. The novels thus
represent the crisis of masculinity in that these men, after the traumatic event occurs, appear to be undone by what, post-trauma, they only now perceive to be their increasing irrelevance and alienation from their jobs, their families, and even their bodies. Meanwhile, the popular responses to the novels, which have largely come to the rescue of the male protagonists, and which sympathize with their anxious conditions symptomatize the way in which invoking the word “crisis” to describe masculinity leads to a tendency to view the deconstruction of gender as uniquely “threatening” or “dangerous” to men. However, this is not a crisis that is unique to masculinity in spite of the fact that it has, in the context of masculinity studies, been described as such. Deconstruction has destabilized all gender categories – female, male, queer, transgender, lesbian, gay and bisexual – yet it is only men who are perceived to be actually under threat.

Fatherhood, in particular, is a complicated site where heterosexuality is readily conceptualized as a “bodily given”. In fatherhood, sex, sexuality and gender converge. In spite of the fact that popular representations of fathers today vary from the good, to the bad and the indifferent, in the current conservative climate where masculinity is perceived to be in crisis, the status of the father stabilizes masculinity. Clatterbaugh summarizes the conservative view of fatherhood thus:

A father’s role is in the masculine affirming roles of provider and protector. To try to share this with a woman or to try to take over the nurturing of the children is to abandon one’s natural role and thereby leave such a family fatherless. The historical results of the attempt at androgynous fathering in combination with the sharing of economic provider roles with women is the breakdown of civilization –

---

3 Even where it names queer fatherhood. Haywood and Mac an Ghaill argue that gay fathers achieve masculinity through fatherhood and so demonstrate that masculinity is not “an inherent individual possession”, but instead a “process of achievement, performance and enactments” (59).
youth violence, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, poverty, and teen pregnancy are the results (25-6).

From a conservative, family-first vantage point, fatherhood signals heterosexuality, nuclear families, the responsibility of work, and the domestication of what conservative theorists consider the essentially wild nature of men⁴. What does it mean then when male authors focalize their novels via male protagonists and locate the drama in a domestic space where the protagonist defines himself, at least partly, by his role as father? What does it mean that the domestic space in these novels serves as a site wherein, post-trauma, the protagonists believes he will be comforted and restored back to the relative peace he enjoyed at the outset of the novel?

The family, which Foucault describes as “a complicated network, saturated with multiple, fragmentary and mobile sexual relations,” is a space where the deconstruction of masculinity has dramatic repercussions. As Foucault describes it, from the eighteenth century onward, a system of sexuality was superimposed upon a previous “system of alliance” which had up until that point, governed the logic of the family. The family, a “locus of affects, feeling and love,” thus regulated by an economy of pleasure could be “used to support the great manoeuvres employed for the Malthusian control of the birthrate, for the populationist incitements, for the medicalization of sex and the psychiatrization of its nongenital forms” (Foucault 108, 100). Within Foucauldian logic, there is a vested interest on the part of the state and the mechanisms of power in preserving the family structure. In its hierarchical, father-headed form, the family is far more governable and predictable. Indeed, Kaja Silverman argues that contemporary “ideological ‘reality’” is constituted by a “dominant fiction” which she argues “solicits our faith above all else in the unity of the family and in the adequacy of the male subject” (15,16). With so much riding

on the coherence of the family, and on the “adequacy of the male subject,” what would it mean
to deconstruct fathers? That is to say, if the male subject has been deconstructed so as undermine
the idea of that subject as unified, what is at stake when one also deconstructs fatherhood?

In the novels I consider in this thesis, the domestic space in general, and the daughter in
particular, represent a sanctuary from the deconstruction of masculinity which the focalizers of
these novels experience, post-trauma, as a crisis of identity. There is so much at stake for these
men when they are at home. At home, or with their daughters, they are fathers first and the crisis
seems to abate. My thesis thus points out how the daughter is deployed by the novels to greater
and lesser degrees to represent the possibility of restabilizing the definition of masculinity, and is
suspicous both of that restabilization and of the demand these novels make on young female
figures to participate in that process⁵.

In each of the texts under consideration, the protagonist turns to his relationship with his
grown daughter as a means of resituating his masculinity. Fatherhood in these novels is the site
wherein the masculine ideal is least likely to be deconstructed because it is governed by affect
and love. However, it is in the context of the relationship between father and daughter that I
argue heteromasculinity is most powerfully constructed, maintained and defended and therefore
this relationship, particularly as it is represented from the point of view of the father, is most in
need of deconstruction. In the fourth chapter I consider Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir Fun
Home which provides a queer take on male crisis and father-daughter relationships and which
appears, at least at first glance, to challenge the connection between fatherhood and the
traditional masculine ideal.

⁵ In some cases she is a willing participant, in others she is resistant to the cause, but in all cases, the fathers
anxiously depend on her to perform this stabilizing function.
The father-daughter dynamic is also suggestive of intergenerational conflict more broadly, and of inheritance specifically. Coetzee, Banville and McEwan are all authors who have at one time or another been labelled modernist and yet their work expresses a vexed relationship to modernism. Each of the literary texts under consideration in this thesis refers to and invokes several modernist texts, while at the same time they also display the hallmarks of deconstructive postmodern thinking. Laura Marcus argues that while it is inaccurate to speak of a “radical break between the modernist novel and the fiction of later decades,” contemporary novelists are equally concerned with “dramatizing their distance from their modernist precursors as with their proximity” (85). Consider the constructions of masculinity in these novels in the context of this simultaneous rejection and inheritance of modernism: the protagonist who selects aspects of deconstructed masculinity simultaneously rejects the impulse at work behind poststructuralist feminism: the wholesale re-evaluation not just of sex roles, but of gender categories more broadly. The daughters’ refusal in these novels to be heirs to their father’s legacy, and their resistance to the process of “raising [the father’s] tomb” (Irigiray 54) symbolizes the rejection of the modernist inheritance, and does so in gendered terms. Insofar as that rejection also elicits sympathy for the father/protagonist, the daughter also symbolizes a threatening, radical and anxious break with the past. This break, which separates, among other things, pre- and post-feminist masculinity contributes to the crisis of masculinity and is one that the novels are ultimately not entirely comfortable or perhaps even capable of making. The discussion of literary inheritance as it relates to fathers, daughters and masculinity is most thoroughly carried

6 Jane Poyner refers to Coetzee’s “modernist aesthetic” (J.M. Coetzee ... 9). Neil Lazarus, Derek Attridge and David Attwell too, identify Coetzee as a modernist, or “late modernist” writer. Poyner argues that Coetzee “tacitly positioned himself...as a modernist writing against the grain of oppositional writing” (Positioning...11). John Kenny describes Banville’s work as a “composite of some of the more quasi-religious or hermetic strands of historical modernism”, and describes Banville’s most “tenaciously held idea on literature and art” as synonymous with the modernist conviction of the importance of the “autonomous art work”(14,17). McEwan’s work has been thoroughly described as modernist. See for example, Laura Marcus “Ian McEwan and Modernist time in Atonement and Saturday” and Sebastien Groes “Ian McEwan and the Modernist Consciousness of the City in Saturday”.
out in the final chapter when I look at Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*, but the seed of that discussion is planted in the first chapter when I discuss Ian McEwan’s *Saturday*.

However, before delving into the novels and the way in which they depict fathers, daughters and the crisis of masculinity, it will be useful to produce a genealogy of the men’s movement, the crisis of masculinity and the field of masculinity studies. The following section will identify a productive conflict in the field between, on the one hand, historiographical material analysis of the lived experience of men in relation to a heteromasculine ideal and, on the other, considerations of the discursive constitution of gender categories more broadly. The protagonists of the novels I consider in this thesis dramatize this tension. On some level they understand that their masculinity is contingent on the performance of gender, *pace* Butler’s theory of gender performativity, whereby one is “forced to negotiate” the “regulated production of hyperbolic versions of ‘man,’” (*Bodies* 237) while at the same time they cannot imagine themselves without, or figure a way to move altogether beyond gender categorization and determination.

**Don’t Look Back in Anger: Feminism and the rise of Masculinity Studies**

Over the last three decades a major change has taken place in the way we think about, write about and treat literature by and about men. This change is both the result of, and is well documented by, masculinity studies, a discipline rooted in the work of feminist critique of the 1950s and ’60s. Over the course of its maturation the field has gone through different iterations, which often occur simultaneously and in conflict with each other. The following is a brief summary of how the field came to be.
Simply put, masculinity studies represent inquiries – critical, sociological and cultural – that address what it means to be a man. The field is constituted by a global and interdisciplinary range of literature written by men and women (Kimmel et al. 2). It provides the tools and language for examining gender relations between men and women, as well as between men and men, while also directing us to consider the broad implications of the variously constituted masculine positions within a given society and/or cultural moment. But at least two decades before we could speak of masculinity studies, there were simply men; more precisely, there were women who were fed up with men (Adams and Savran 3). Masculinity studies began as the “men’s movement”, and was an offshoot of second-wave feminism. The men of this movement identified themselves as profeminists and “conceded that … society is sexist, that women are objectified sexually and excluded from many, if not most areas of power that are open to men” (Clatterbaugh 41). Acknowledging this imbalance and working towards rectifying it, meant they had to seek acceptance from the feminist movement. In order to do so, many men felt they had to radically alienate themselves from the kind of masculinity that feminist women had identified as hegemonic.

In the late 1960s among radical feminists, there was only one masculinity, and it was representative of a certain privilege, a birthright afforded exclusively to men who wielded that privilege in the interest of maintaining the authority of patriarchy. This prototypical “Man” who was often associated with something called “hegemonic masculinity,” was later identified as white, propertied and heterosexual by feminists and profeminists alike who sought to correct the idea of a singular man who stood for all men. Connell, Brod and Kaufman were among those influenced by deconstructive post-structuralist theory who later corrected the idea that “hegemonic masculinity” is a type of masculinity by suggesting instead that “hegemonic
masculinity” is a “configuration of gender practices” (Connell 77). However the feminist movement and early men’s movement identified hegemonic masculinity as the only masculinity, representative of all men, themselves included, and characterized it as aggressive, oppressive and violent.

Men who wanted to be involved in the feminist movement faced the prospect of having to rehabilitate themselves. But by the simple fact that they were men, they were automatically assumed to be brutish and threatening to women’s liberation. John Stoltenberg in 1974, hoped for a time when “genital males could share in the struggle against sexist injustice as honest allies of feminist women,”(49) but in the same breath acknowledged that that time was not yet upon him. Instead, in a conflation of patriarchy and masculinity, a conflation that the field would later successfully undo, Stoltenberg noted to the men that he addressed: “None of us can presume that we have yet done enough in our own lives to eradicate our allegiance to masculinity” (49). The response from men who were willing to address their allegiance to masculinity and their longed for relationship to feminism was to form consciousness-raising groups where they could formulate a strategy to deal with their own personal sexism and by now vilified masculinity (Clatterbaugh 43). Clatterbaugh suggests that these groups in the ’70s and early ’80s were often confronted with a sense of hopelessness among their participants because they had difficulty producing a literature that could constructively imagine a relationship between men and women that wasn’t compromised by sexism and aggressive masculinity (43). That is, in the profeminist, anti-sexism movement, ego and pride were at stake, and the extent to which men felt that they had to abandon masculinity altogether affected the direction that the field took as it matured. Harry Brod noted in the early 1990s that “what enables men to do feminism effectively is a vision of men and feminism in which their feminism is inseparably linked to their positive vision
of themselves as men” (180). Brod is clearly responding to what he perceived as a vilification of men by feminism, a marginalization of men from their own humanity. He argues that men cannot continue to be so self-effacing if the male profeminist movement is to be sustainable. Eventually, Brod argues, women and men must come to a point where they can continue to do feminist work while also being “male affirmative”. He is quick to suggest that he does not mean “affirming traditional male authority or behaviors”, but rather “affirming in some sense the actual or potential humanity and humanness of persons of the male sex” (199, 198).

In his 1991 address to the National Conference on Men and Masculinities, Brod was careful to encourage “male positivity”. Caution was needed at that point because of the effect that the “men’s rights movement” was having on the profeminist campaign. The men’s rights movements came to the defence of the deflated profeminist ego, suggesting that men had been demonized by feminism. In calling himself “pro-male”, Brod deliberately positions himself “against a dominant conception of feminism as anti-male” (200) and in so doing attempts to stem the flow of men’s energy away from the “emphasis on the personal dimensions of the political transformations” which characterized radical feminisms (200). In other words, Brod’s essay tries to find a way for men to continue to be involved in feminist politics and not have to abject or humiliate themselves.

Part of this new strategy for liberal profeminists, which had the support of liberal feminists, was to undo gender roles and hold gender categories and “social structures, not men as individuals, responsible for women’s disadvantaged positions” (Gardiner, 3). This move to hold social structures responsible for gender inequality loosens the tight knot that up to this point bound masculinity to maleness and maleness to patriarchy. As Michael Kaufman puts it in his 1987 collection Beyond Patriarchy,
What makes feminism a threat for so many men, or at least a source of confusion and struggle, is not only that we have privileges to lose, but that it appears – or at least feels – as if our very manhood is at stake. What is actually at stake... is not our biological manhood, but our historically specific, socially constructed, and personally embodied notions of masculinity. We confuse maleness (biological sex) with masculinity (gender) at our peril. (xiv)

He argues that it is our experience in “societies dominated by men,” or in other words, the experience of patriarchy, that “systematically obscures” the difference between sex and gender. Patriarchal institutions “perpetuate the ideology and the regimen of men’s domination” (xiv). Thinking about patriarchy as separate from masculinity, and separate from maleness as well, created a space for men within the feminist movement, allowing them to participate in their own rehabilitation and to work toward undoing the harmful stereotyping of women and men. Consciousness-raising groups that had seen men crippled by personal guilt over the ’70s and early ’80s now organized into the National Organization for Changing Men which in turn became the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS) (Clatterbaugh 43). Today NOMAS refers to itself as a “profeminist men’s movement,” part of the “anti-sexist feminist movement,” and suggests that “while other kinds of men's movements have appeared in the U.S. over recent years ... the anti-feminist ‘men's rights,’ the mytho-poetic, and most recently, the conservative-Christian Promise Keepers, the anti-sexist men's movement was the first” (NOMAS website).

The Limits of the Field
While early men’s movements accomplished much in the way of ushering men into profeminist campaigns for gender equality, they failed to think through the renovation of gender categories more broadly. As a result, men’s movements in the mid-nineties crystallized into a field of studies that, ironically, resituated the heteromasculine subject at the center of critical inquiry. For example, NOMAS’ effort, noted above, to distinguish itself from all other kinds of men’s movements unfortunately misses a crucial point about masculinity studies and fails to recognize the limits of the men’s movement as it is operative today. NOMAS sets itself apart and fails to recognize that most men’s advocacy movements actually operate within a similar framework and produce the same result: the reification of gender categories. Clatterbaugh identifies the similarities between the men’s rights movements, and the radical and liberal profeminist movements. All three movements suggest that there are emotional “costs” of having to play the “masculine social role” (73), yet none question the logic of gender binaries.

These movements, be they radical anti-sexist, liberal profeminist or conservative pro family and men’s rights, have a tendency to think through gender relations via a critique of sex-role theory. Sex-role theory attributes behaviors of men and women to their adoption of distinct roles – breadwinner vs. housewife, father vs. mother, chef vs. cook, athlete vs. dancer etc. Sex-role theory suggests that sex-roles are oppressive to men and women because they force people into behaviors that they might not otherwise choose. While sex-role theory has illuminated much about how men and women are compelled to act towards each other, it nonetheless is a fundamentally static way of reading masculinity and femininity in actual lived experience. Carrigan, Connell and Lee argued in 1985, at the cusp of the real boom in masculinity studies that sex-role theorists

---

7 See for example John Gray’s bestselling, *Men are From Mars, Women are from Venus.*
8 See for example, John Stoltenburg “Toward Gender Justice” or Kokopeli and Lakey “More Power Than We Want: Masculine Sexuality and Violence”.
cannot grasp [social change] as history, as the interplay of praxis and structure. Change is always something that happens to sex roles, that impinges on them – whether from the direction of the society at large (as in discussions of how technological and economic change demands a shift to a “modern” male sex role) or from the direction of the asocial “real self” inside the person, demanding more room to breathe. Sex-role theory cannot grasp change as a dialectic arising within gender relations themselves. (106-7)

Connell would reemphasize this point several years later in 1995 in *Masculinities*, suggesting that sex role theory often leads to “categoricalism” wherein “sex roles are defined as reciprocal” and “polarization is a necessary part of the concept” (26). That he continued to articulate the critique of sex role theory even five years after poststructuralist work on gender such as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was published, suggests that, despite deconstructive thinking about gender, sex role theory continued to articulate a comfortable and prevailing way of thinking about gender because it didn’t actually challenge the concept of distinct genders. In *Gender Trouble* Butler attempts a deconstruction of the “substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts” to “locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender” (45). What *Gender Trouble* strives for is the deconstruction of the categoricalism that was impeding feminist and masculinity studies from doing anything more than reifying gender performances and celebrating the transgressions of the traditional male/female roles. Butler’s work argues that power is at the heart of the relational discourse between men and women and is what ultimately sustains gender categories. Her work thus reveals the difficulty of trying to change sex roles because in the very performance of the role, whether that performance is transgressive of or supportive of traditional
sex roles, gender categories are reinscribed. Connell’s critique similarly points out the reinscription of gender categories even in the most radical reversals of sex-roles. In spite of Butler’s theory of performativity, masculinity studies continues to rely on sex role theory to articulate where and when, and in response to what crises, various masculinities are reproduced. While there is evidence in the literature that the field pays careful attention to a multiplicity of masculinities, masculinities are nonetheless always explored in an effort to define maleness, and the experience of being a man, and not to challenge gender binarisms. As Judith Halberstam notes “the work produced in [the field of masculinity studies] has largely and almost exclusively addressed men and maleness” (“The Good…” 345).

As the popular men’s movements became more organized, masculinity studies began to gain greater currency in academia. Bryce Traister comments on the volume of publications about masculinity that appeared in the 1990s and declares that “Masculinity, one might say without irony, is everywhere,” suggesting that “‘masculinity studies’ has become a discipline unto itself” (275). This “disciplinization” of masculinity may be greeted as a necessary complement to women’s studies which critically engages with gender categories from a feminist perspective. Perceived differently though, one could argue that masculinity studies are unnecessary and redundant. One could argue that there is no field or area of inquiry that isn’t already “masculinity studies”, because the straight male subject has served as the baseline, the “normal” subject around whom all studies have circulated⁹. However, Michael Kimmel argues that the maturation of the field into a discipline within gender studies more broadly, obfuscates any possible polarization between feminism on the one hand and masculinity studies on the other. Kimmel,

⁹ See “Introduction” Masculinity Studies & Feminist Theory (2) and “Introduction” International Encyclopedia of men and masculinities (viii). “Men have been studying men for a long time and calling it ‘History’, ‘Sociology’ whatever” (Hearn 49).
one of the field’s most recognizable names, suggests that masculinity studies exists “both in
dialogue with and in alliance with feminist theory” (Kimmel “Preface” ix). Yet there is a valid
suspicion that masculinity studies, though it is undeniably “a multigendered set of
conversations,” continues “to share some of the characteristics and function [associated] with
popular movements for men” (Newton 177). These popular movements, such as NOMAS, the
father’s rights movement, or the mythopoetic men’s movement\(^1\), have thus far been unable to
develop more sophisticated (read: deconstructed) concepts about gender, and so sex-role theory
continues to support the two possible strategies for representing masculinity politics outside the
realm of academic theorizing. The first is embodied by the profeminist stance and the second is
embodied by its reactive counter – “the men’s rights movement”, which is embodied by the
phenomenon called the “menz” movement (in the US) or “laddism” (in the UK) (Traister, 277).
Both strategies, be they pro- or anti feminist, assert an essential male character or way of being
that must in the logic of profeminist groups, be overcome, and in anti-feminism be
unapologetically defended. The best work in masculinity studies, the academic iteration of the
men’s movement, has been able to theorize beyond sex role theory, but often masculinity studies
stands for a way of thinking about gender that continues to reinscribe sex roles.

Traister notes that in spite of the fact that the field derives from feminist politics and
theory, with the rise of masculinity studies has come “a restoration of the representations of men—produced by men and analyzed for the most part by men—to the center of academic
cultural criticism”(276). Judith Newton calls masculinity studies “a space for men in which it is
relatively ‘safe’ to reflect upon themselves – safe that is from the overriding presence of female
and feminist critique” (178). We might read Newton and be reminded of boys’ clubs of the past

\(^1\) Typically associated with Robert Bly’s Iron John, this movement suggests that there is an essential archetypical maleness which has been squelched by feminism.
Newton’s argument that a “safe place” has been and still is necessary reiterates the idea that the challenge for men is to overcome their sex roles, for she considers the field to be vital to the profeminist movement, a movement which encourages men to “use their own and other men’s energies to be ‘born again’ as somewhat better men than they were before” (189). However, Newton never suggests that defending a distinct, discrete and safe space is a metaphor for the maintenance of gender categories more broadly. In any case, the ubiquity of masculinity studies, which Traister convincingly argues throughout “Academic Viagra” is code for “heteromasculinity studies,” has created a new kind of space in academia, one that encourages men to consider what it means to them, personally, professionally and intellectually to claim as their own a genuinely multicultural and profeminist way of thinking about research. In the meantime though, that space is legitimated by the perception that patriarchy – the uneven distribution of power in favor of the white, heterosexual, propertied male – is an organizing and insurmountable principle of social reality. Masculinity studies is a field that both continues to describe and critique patriarchal authority, while it also provides the means by which “anxious” men in “crisis” (they are anxious both because they identify with that authority and are at the same time alienated from it,) can mount a defence that ironically reinscribes the authority of the heteromasculine ideal.

Traister warns that the field, in its focus on the “instability at the base of all masculine identities,” unintentionally “returns the man to a humanity whose historicized particularity nonetheless shifts … criticism, once again, into the dominant study of malekind” (276). That the authority of patriarchal power is taken as a given in masculinity studies, means that the field
relies upon its refurbishment for its ongoing legitimacy. This clearly undercuts its implicit goal to undo inequalities based on gender categories and ultimately reinforces the very categoricalism that Butler sought to critique. As Traister points out, it was Butler’s account of gender contingency that made possible the concept of “crisis masculinity” in the first place

Ultimately masculinity studies is constituted by this tension between its focus on the material reality of socialized gender roles and the legacy of poststructuralist thinking about gender as discursively produced. Jeff Hearn addresses this tension as one that invokes and is invoked by the changing notion of Gramscian hegemony as it relates to masculinity studies (which he terms Critical Men’s Studies, or CMS). He reads the relationship between materialist and discursive critiques as symbiotic: “Contemporary materialist analysis seeks to extend its concerns to and connect with embodiment and the multiplicity of oppressions and discourses; at the same time, contemporary discourse analysis seeks to link to multiple forms of the material” (64).

Because the discursive production of gender is crucial to any reading of masculinity in a text, I don’t intend merely to identify the various masculinities that the protagonists in these novels occupy in anxious relationship to a hetereomasculine ideal. In many ways this strategy of reading the representation of multiple masculinities marks the limits of what is actually possible for the field. To investigate the possibility of operating outside of gender altogether seems to elude many critics who are nonetheless sensitive to constructions of masculinity in fiction. Brod argues that when men think sensitively about gender, or when they “do feminism” as Kimmell puts it “they do not do so as men, but as some other kind of being, perhaps as non-gendered moral agents, or perhaps as beings who have somehow managed, at least temporarily to adopt the standpoint of women” (Brod 197). Brod’s statement associates women with intrinsic morality

---

11 Kaufman’s Beyond Patriarchy is one such radical-leaning profeminist collection. Radical profeminism, as Clatterbaugh argues, has at its core, “the belief that the political and social reality in which we live is best described as ‘patriarchy’ and that it is within this structure that masculinity is culturally produced and reproduced” (45).
and men with the ability to think themselves outside gender in order to become moral. But to
examine several critical masculinity studies texts reveals the difficulty of accomplishing such an
extra-gendered agency. For example, David Rosen in *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity*
devotes a number of paragraphs to the discussion of gender binaries and then two pages later,
curiously concludes of his male subjects: “Since I too am called ‘man’ I suspect that not only am I like them, but they may be like me”(xiv-xvi). Rosen thus claims that sympathy exists between
male bodies and that this connection is unavailable to people with different kinds of bodies.

Meanwhile, Brian Baker’s *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular
Culture 1945-2000* identifies a “hegemonic masculinity” around which “subordinate masculinities” are organized and as such is fixated on a binary of dominant and submissive (ix). In spite of his attention to multiple masculinities, the construction of them is always dependent on and therefore fixated on a singular monolithic masculinity which is reinforced by the binaries that his study identifies. Baker is stuck in a contradiction, in that he must firmly establish the foundation of “hegemonic masculinity” in order to attempt to undermine it by describing subordinate masculinities. This kind of dichotomous definitional relation establishes the categories as mutually exclusive, reinforcing the hegemony of one and the subordination of the other. Finally, in *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present*, the editors are also careful about identifying the multiplicities of masculinities in opposition to “normative” masculinity. But all this attention to plurality does nothing to move away from categoricalism. Instead it creates even more categories which, united under the term “masculinity”, reinforce the gender category as a fixed point of reference. In spite of how work in the field has productively multiplied masculinity as a means of revealing the diversity of male experience, the
multiplications are limited to particularizing and historicizing an ongoing attachment between gender, sex, and a prescribed way of being a man in any given time and location.

Rosen, Baker and the editors of *Signs of Masculinity: Men in Literature 1700 to the Present*, read representations of men through time (Rosen’s study treats *Beowulf* through *Sons and Lovers*, while the other two identify their historical limits in their titles) and identify anxieties over succession, wars, colonialism, industrialization, etc as what set in motion the various upheavals that masculinities (hegemonic and not) over time have had to respond. What happens though when the upheaval facing masculinity in the novel or film is a discursive one? What happens when there is no war to go to, no unrest to negotiate; when the most disorienting thing in a man’s life is that he no longer knows how to describe himself as a man? In other words, the contemporary crisis of masculinity is produced *not only* by the fact that, according to masculinity studies, masculinity is “no longer invisible and no longer transparent” (Solomon Godeau 22), but also by the fact that the crisis itself, which Traister and Hearn have both identified as material *and* discursive, is opaque and is itself an object of inquiry.

The idea that a crisis of masculinity persists thus both creates the anxiety while it also participates fully in the deconstruction of masculinity. Traister identifies it as an “approach” that:

denies the transcendental man by replacing him with the constructed or performative male. Central to the project of critical heteromasculinity is not just the deconstruction of masculinity—that is, the analysis of masculinist ideology as constructed and historically contingent. In addition to ideological critique, heteromasculinity purports to separate actual and fictional men from their entanglements within masculinist ideological structures to show how such
individuals deviate from the normative codes of manhood they otherwise inhabit or are expected to inhabit. (Traister 284)

Traister’s examination of discussions emerging not only from the field of “men’s studies”, but in the popular media, in pop psychology, and in blockbuster films over the course of the last thirty years yields ubiquitous references to “anxiety” and “masculinity in crisis” (284-5). Therefore “Men in crisis” is no longer just an academic or intellectual idea: rather it is an entrenched and popular position behind which a defence of patriarchy often hides.

Recent popular culture abounds with representations of “men in crisis” which treat these men as objects of sympathy whose vulnerability pulls the audience on side. We witness how the representation of them as in crisis both reinforces the crisis and deconstructs masculinity at the same time, just as Traister suggests. This is not in and of itself unusual in filmic male characters. Audiences are used to seeing a male character hide behind a tough guy exterior which sometimes slips to reveal the sensitive man beneath. Clint Eastwood has made a career in performing such roles. What is unique about for instance, Mickey Rourke’s depiction of a man in crisis in the acclaimed film *The Wrestler* is the way in which the character is self-conscious about his own shortcomings. That is, the point of the film is not to have the story arrive at a great revelatory moment when the character is redeemed because the audience feels sorry for him. Instead, the audience feels sorry for him from the outset. His vulnerability is taken as a given and the film achieves a melodramatic quality as we watch him become more and more pathetic. He is a washed-up borderline alcoholic wrestler (like Hulk Hogan or Bret Hart) who is trying to make up with his long neglected and estranged daughter, Stephanie. The filmmakers bestow him with a hearing aid that the film never explains. He weeps from time to time, is friends with his favorite stripper, and tosses his long blonde hair around like a Pantene model in a shampoo commercial.

---

12 See Tania Modleski “Clint Eastwood and Male Weepies”.
His life is one disappointment after the other until finally he takes a fateful leap towards his own demise. Similarly Showtime’s popular series *Californication* stars David Duchovny as a writer - also washed up and borderline alcoholic – whose pubescent daughter is far more mature than he will ever be. He longs to be reunited with his daughter’s mother and he takes her rebuffs as excuses to sleep with a seemingly unending parade of women who throw themselves into his bed. What he craves is to be a good father and husband; in a word, what he desires is monogamy. But the woman he wants to be married to – his aforementioned daughter’s mother – refuses to give in to him and so he wanders Los Angeles completely “undomesticated”, incapable of finding a moral center outside of the home he has been cast out of. Conservative men’s movements identify women as the domesticators of men, arguing that without a wife, a man is doomed to live some kind of wild and untamed life, devoid of morals. “‘The crucial process of civilization is subordination of male sexual impulses and psychology to female behaviour…It is male behaviour that must be changed to create a civilized order’” (Gilder qtd in Clatterbaugh 21).

Also notable in this genre of self-consciously vulnerable male protagonists is the American Movie Channel’s wildly popular series *Mad Men* which is set in 1960 in the world of a New York advertising firm. It depicts an era on the cusp of civil rights and women’s lib, and the series delights in the easy misogyny that spills out of the Scotch swilling, cigarette-smoking, pencil-trousered, brylcreamed men. These were real men, the series seems to proclaim, proud of its irony. They were unapologetic, confident and yet troubled.

These representations of men point to the confluence of what were originally thought of as opposing strategies adopted by men in response to feminism: liberal and radical profeminism vs. anti-feminist men’s movements. Earlier, I argued that both strategies have at their center the
same faulty assumption of an essential male character or way of being. I argued that this maleness is met in each strategy with a different tactic. In profeminism the maleness can be overcome, and in anti-feminism it must be unapologetically defended. In the representations described above, the two strategies come together to respond to a masculinity in crisis, a crisis which is popularly considered to have been initiated by feminism. On the one hand the wrestler, the writer and the ad man are sensitive, they are capable of tears, and they are happiest when they are with their children or the women who love/hate them. On the other they are philandering, promiscuous, prone to physical violence, and unapologetic about those behaviors. They both compel affection from the viewer and repulse us all at the same time. The ubiquity of the crisis trope leads to an easy recognition of their vulnerability, and that vulnerability is then deployed by the scriptwriters towards excusing sexist and misogynistic behavior. The final result is a slew of characters who, as long as they can express contrition from time to time (usually in the form of a few tears, some pleading), are allowed to get away with almost anything, and are celebrated as heroes of a masculinity that has triumphed over feminism. These men symbolize a popular culture meme of masculinity as simultaneously in need of protection and as rock hard as ever.

Traister asks a crucial question of heteromasculinity studies and of the popular tendency to figure masculinity in “crisis”:

What do we say to the African American men still being dragged around behind pick-up trucks driven by white men? To the gay college student mercilessly beaten unconscious and left to freeze to death over the course of a cold Wyoming prairie night? To the women and children hiding in underfunded shelters? I just do not know whether the vicious masculinity behind these crimes is enduring a “crisis” in any way comparable to that of their victims, or if instead
we are dealing with a manhood smoothly coherent, frighteningly competent, and alarmedly tranquil: that is, with “men as men”. (293)

In asking this question, he is suggesting (in the vein of the radical profeminist movement of the late ’60s and ’70s), that it is in fact patriarchy that is the real problem. However by posing the question not to specific men, but rather to people working in the field of masculinity studies, he is implicitly identifying a slippery slope whereby defenders and multipliers of masculinity end up describing and producing “crisis masculinity”, which unintentionally signals a call to protect the vulnerable man and consequently defend patriarchy. That is to say, the rush to protect the anxious, vulnerable man in crisis is troubling because in spite of Connell’s, Butler’s, Foucault’s and many others’ careful description of gender as “a configuration of practice” produced by power relations, and not “a coherent system of some kind, which is destroyed or restored by the outcome of the crisis” (Connell 81), the presence in popular culture of “crisis masculinity” and the misogyny that accompanies its defence, makes it possible for contemporary heteroe masculinity studies to unintentionally reconstitute or at least conflate men with masculinity, and both of them with the “coherent system” of patriarchy, a system that seems repeatedly to survive its crisis moments.

The novelists in this study are part of the same ideological moment that has shaped the discourses about masculinity. From their early careers, which consisted of metafictional literature that treated epistemological crises, Coetzee, Banville and McEwan of late have shifted the setting of their stories into the domestic space, and adopted the voice of an aging father. Deeply personal, domestic dramas, written at the height of masculinity studies in the academy, these novels feature characters who seem to have absorbed feminism and the changing nature of
masculinity. Faced with the prospect of irrelevance as their children, and in particular their daughters, grow up and no longer need them, they find themselves somewhat adrift.

In the first chapter I point out how the novel upholds and celebrates the protagonist’s aggressive reclaiming of a masculine ideal in response to a specific threat to the family. I argue that McEwan depicts the family as having been transformed by feminist thinking about sex roles, but that this transformation is superficial, obscuring as it does the way in which traditional masculinity still represents the locus of authority and power in the novel. McEwan at once selects and celebrates feminist thinking for how it has led to a new family dynamic, characterized by equal shares of work and responsibility, while the novel rejects the more radical reformulation of gender categories. In *Saturday* we see a scenario where the protagonist and the author seem to navigate post-feminist masculinity and sublimate the crisis of masculinity by signposting superficial transformations to traditional sex roles in the novel, while ultimately reinstating masculine aggression as exclusive to men, and authorized, even exalted, when in the protection of kith and kin (but only when it is the values of the western home and family that are under threat).

While McEwan employs sociobiological reasoning to legitimate the authority of the father, the psychosexual logic at work in Banville’s novels allows him to naturalize the father’s power over the daughter. In *Eclipse* and *Shroud* by John Banville, whose work forms the focus of chapter two, the protagonists are haunted by the same woman – Cass Cleave. She is daughter to Alexander in *Eclipse* and lover to Axel Vander in *Shroud*. Her suicide (while pregnant with Axel’s child and Alex’s grandchild) instructs both of them on the hazards of desire and compels them to adopt substitute daughter figures in an attempt to be more successful fathers. The father-daughter dynamic in Banville’s novel *The Sea* suggests that daughters, whether spiritual or
consubstantial, will fail their fathers. In *The Sea*, all women are in fact suspect. The protagonist installs himself at the center of a universe of women only to find that he has completely misread them. At the conclusion of the novel, he is undone and bitter, finding himself physically and psychically dependent on his “bluestocking” daughter. This chapter addresses the incestuous undercurrents that circulate beneath, and sometimes surface, in Banville’s novels. I read the incestuous as part of the Oedipal drama that Banville deploys to signify fantasy, memory and instinct, three features that characterize his prose. I argue that Banville’s novels naturalize the psychosexual Oedipal drama, and are uncritical of either the gendered terms of that drama, or of its consequences for the regulation of sexuality. The crisis of masculinity is thus negotiated by positing the androcentric psychosexual development of the subject as natural, and inevitable.

The third chapter takes a different turn. In writing about J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*, I decided to adopt what in the context of an academic thesis, is a non-traditional form. As a whole the chapter enacts this thesis’ engagement with discourse. It demonstrates how one can either be convinced of the vulnerability of the male protagonist in crisis or alternatively be critical of the idea that a crisis is taking place. It thus expresses a central tension at the heart of masculinity in crisis theories; that is, on the one hand, the extent to which we must be willing to celebrate men who demonstrate vulnerability and, on the other, the degree to which that vulnerability can be self-serving and manipulative. The chapter is written in narrative form as a way to engage with the poststructuralist critique of theory. “Theory” may be read as “an attempt to impose a common vocabulary and set of principles in order to illegitimately control and constrain the many independent ‘language games’ that constitute discourse” (Abrams 243). In order to maintain the “playfulness” of language and to be responsible to the many different readings of *Disgrace* that are possible, the Coetzee chapter therefore consists of three sections, a justification
for not writing a straightforward critique of the novel, and two fictional narratives; the first narrative takes on the voice of a Coetzee character, Elizabeth Costello as she writes a letter to her daughter-in-law, Nora and then a journal article about Disgrace. The second narrative features a young academic giving a job talk which is critical of Costello’s reading of Disgrace.

In the final chapter I look at a different kind of work as a way to interrogate the crisis of masculinity via characters who engage in queer sexual practices. The chapter, which discusses Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir Fun Home, also points to the father-daughter relationship as a site of heteronormative engendering, but reveals the way in which perspective, form, narrator and focalizer combine to produce a narrative wherein the daughter may reject her father’s forceful engendering of her. Fun Home demonstrates the complexities of inheritance as the text simultaneously breaks away from her father while it also finds innovative ways of accommodating her father into her adult sense of self.
CHAPTER ONE

Let Him Fret and Let Him Be: Masculinity in Ian McEwan’s Saturday

“For, interestingly, far from taking up ‘moral positions’ on masculinity’s so-called crisis – which as many theorists agree is something masculinity has always been in – McEwan’s later fiction seems able to strike a balance between the structurally self-referential and the narrationally ‘unreflective’.” – David James, “‘A Boy Stepped Out’: Migrancy, Visuality, and the Mapping of Masculinities in Later Fiction of Ian McEwan”

“I wanted [Henry Perowne] to be like the rich contested west, but now troubled. I wanted him free. I wanted to free his mind…and then let him fret, and intrude into his placid routines some savage irrationality” – Ian McEwan in an NPR interview with Eleanor Wachtel

Ian McEwan’s novel Saturday is about Henry Perowne, a well-off neurosurgeon living in London in the early years of the twenty-first century. He has a lovely lawyer wife, Rosalind, and two appealing grown children – a musician son, Theo, and a poet daughter, Daisy. The novel takes place over the course of a single day. It begins in the very early hours when Henry awakes, goes to the window and spies a flaming airplane streaking across the dark sky. It concludes with Henry and Rosalind in bed, post-coitus, feeling safe and reassured after having survived a home invasion by a thug named Baxter and his accomplice. In Saturday, his “post 9/11 novel,” McEwan seems to be suggesting that the West must use traditional tactics of aggression and dominance, tactics which are carried out by the unilateralism of the United States and Britain, a pairing mirrored by Henry Perowne and son Theo who defend the domestic against the invading
threat of “savage irrationality” (represented by Baxter). The idea that Henry and Theo are guilty of any crime against Baxter is laughable to the detective on the scene (Sat 240). The novel thus reinforces a connection between the endurance of the traditional patriarchal family (the father and son defending the elderly, the women and the unborn children) and the state which authorizes that family’s protection at the expense of the wellbeing of those who might challenge it.

Though his previous novels – The Child in Time comes most immediately to mind – at least nominally challenged sex role conventions, Saturday’s is a universe where in spite of superficial transformations in sex roles, the men in the novel ultimately must “man up” and save the day. I agree with McEwan’s characterization of Perowne as a metaphor for the “rich contested west” and as such I am critical of how McEwan ultimately beatifies Perowne and surrounds him with a traditional model of family which must be preserved in order that the “rich contested west” be merely “troubled” and not fundamentally challenged or transformed in any way. The defence of Perowne and his family in Saturday can be likened to the defence of “family values” characteristic of conservative right wing political groups such as The Family Research Council whose motto is “defending faith, family and freedom”, and the Family Values proponents of the Republican Party, which, much like Perowne, fear intrusions into the domestic space (read: the nation) from “disturbed” outsiders (read: homosexuals, immigrants, non-Christians).

Equally troubling is the almost universal acclaim which greeted this portrait of heroic masculinity in the defence of both the patriarchal family and the state. The New York Times, The Guardian, The Nation (a small cross sample) all sing its praises. Ian McEwan is described by Zoe Heller in the New York Times as “the master clockmaker of novelists” and his Henry
Perowne is forgiven for being confused by the “demands of what lies outside” his happy privileged existence. Save for some harsh words written about Saturday by fellow Booker nominee John Banville, the following sums up how McEwan’s novel is widely received:\footnote{Banville notoriously wrote in the New York Review of Books that Saturday was a “dismayingly bad book”.
}

“[Saturday] is a book of great moral maturity, beautifully alive to the fragility of happiness and all forms of violence — chemical, biological, social and political — threatening it. Everyone should read Saturday, doctors definitely included” (Scurr).

In these celebratory reviews, very little mention is made of the way in which masculinity is represented in the novel. This chapter focuses on McEwan’s representation of masculinity in Saturday. I argue that situated as it is in dialogue with September 11th and the geopolitical consequences of that day, the representation of masculinity in the novel subtly reflects the shoring up of the family unit and traditional male subjectivity which has occurred since those events took place. As I argued in the introduction, this is a novel wherein the crisis of masculinity is taken as a given. Here, that crisis has been neutralized by the nonchalant way in which Perowne seems to have absorbed the feminist critiques of masculinity in order to become a sensitive family man. Far from refusing to take up a “‘moral position’ on masculinity’s so-called crisis” (James 84), McEwan’s novel celebrates the transformation of men into profeminist models of kindly masculinity. However, after his initial encounter with Baxter, Perowne’s relationship to masculinity becomes less secure. The dramatic conclusion of the novel where Perowne must defend his family, and his pregnant daughter in particular, allows him to alleviate some of that insecurity and reinstate traditional masculinity’s role in the maintenance of the family. Ultimately, the novel suggests that traditional masculinity is necessary for the maintenance of the familial ideal which depends on a patriarchal masculinity that is maintained through the reproduction of a dyadic father-daughter relationship.
McEwan, Masculinity and Feminism

In *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*, Richard Bradford locates the tension in *Saturday* “between factors that might variously be regarded as rational, logical, predictable, even inexorable and an opposing network of erratic, quixotic, arbitrary and unforeseeable elements”. He argues that “Perowne is the embodiment of the former. He spends his working life repairing and reshaping the machinery of consciousness. He is not unemotional … - but he is sanguine in his regarding anything other than mechanics as an explanation for what makes human beings feel and act” (23). This contrast between the inexorable and the quixotic is, in many respects, at the heart of the debate about gender determinacy. On the one hand studies suggest links between sex and the brain\(^{14}\), and on the other it is impossible to ignore the extent to which gender is constructed and reinforced through repetition, and the extent to which this Butlerian formulation of gender is itself reinforced through repetition. There are a number of features of the novel that suggest that it aims to resolve the debate in favor of a deterministic perspective on sex. Firstly, the figure of Perowne, who Bradford correctly describes as a consummate rationalist, cuts a powerful swath through any of the indeterminacies that the novel presents – particularly as they pertain to 9/11 and the Iraq war. Secondly, the nuclear family in the novel is so perfect it seems as though it is being deliberately set up to fail. The fact that it survives, not only unscathed but stronger than ever supports a reading of the novel as a conservative celebration of traditional and heteronormative kinship arrangements. Finally, the way the novel employs both intertexts and

\(^{14}\) For example, “Connellan and colleagues showed that among 1-day-old babies, boys look longer at a mechanical mobile, which is a system with laws of motion, than at a person’s face, and object that is next to impossible to systematize. One-day-old girls show the opposite profile (Connellan et al. 2000) … this raises the possibility that, while culture and socialization may partly determine the development of a male brain with a stronger interest in systems or a female brain with a stronger interest in empathy, biology may also partly determine this” (Baron-Cohen 86).
allusions suggests, as Clark Hillard claims, that McEwan’s novel creates scenes of “richly layered chauvinism,” exemplified by the way Perowne infantilizes his daughter and also by the objectification of the daughter’s body. Her body is made to represent “the nation – rendered concomitantly as the female body shielded by male literary heritage” while she “deflects an attack by forces rendered simultaneously as philistine, anarchist and terrorist” (187). Clark Hillard’s suggestion that Daisy deflects the attack makes her appear slightly more heroic than I think the novel intends her to be. She merely distracts the intruder, blinding his rage with poetry (which she likely would have been unable to do if Baxter wasn’t suffering from Huntington’s and therefore vulnerable to wild mood swings), while in fact it is the militarism and musculature of the men that truly prevents Baxter’s violence. The defence of the family/nation then is a two pronged and gendered affair, where the manipulation of culture, known in militaristic jargon as “winning hearts and minds,” is accomplished by the female (though she reads a man’s poem and not her own) while the actual dirty and aggressive business of suppressing the threat falls to the male. As such I read the novel as aligned with a perspective on gender that is deterministic and organized around a “norm” of patriarchal masculinity. To perform such a reading deconstructs the logic, evident in the positive reviews of the novel and in the novel itself, whereby the reinstatement of the masculine ideal does not conflict with the deconstruction of gender categories.

McEwan’s fiction has long played with the definition of masculinity, but has never sought to undertake the more complex task of troubling gender classifications. In fact, he has repeatedly set up strict oppositions between masculine and feminine ways of being, particularly in the preface to his 1983 oratorio, *Or Shall We Die?*, in which he opposes Einsteinian physics to the Newtonian physics of linear temporality. He suggests that shifting thinking to embrace a non-
linear Einsteinian “female principle” might usher in “womanly times” (qtd in McLeod 219). McEwan’s fiction holds fast to the distinction between the “feminine” and the “masculine”, and often celebrates femininity as a more ethical alternative to masculinity, holding the latter responsible for wielding patriarchal power which has brought humanity to the brink of destruction (Or... 15). McEwan’s way of supporting feminism is to somewhat patronizingly declare the “value” of the feminine for the good of humankind, and highlights what for McEwan is the unassailable truth of a clearly delimited division between the masculine as male and the feminine as female.

As McEwan suggested in an interview about his film script for The Imitation Game, in which the main character is a woman, “The problem I had in the writing was that as soon as you had a woman at the centre she stands there as a representative of her sex; a central male character, on the other hand, is understood to be talking for humankind” (Haffenden 174). At the time when the interview was conducted, (in 1983 at the beginning of the burgeoning profeminist movement. I describe profeminism in the introduction as consisting of men who supported women’s rights but nonetheless didn’t challenge binary gender categories) McEwan was trying to challenge the notion that men occupy a universal subject identity and so he wrote male characters as what he calls “stereotypes…of male behaviour” so that readers/viewers might better perceive the way in which masculinity is constructed (175). As an author who early on identified the central concerns of what would become masculinity studies, McEwan nonetheless never identified with the feminist movement. This is clear when he describes how being labelled “the male feminist” made him “shrink” (176). This word invokes a sense that, in spite of opinions that McEwan had about masculinity as a construct, feminism is an emasculating territory that he had no wish to inhabit. In the introduction I described this resistance among men
to engage with feminism as a result of their perception of feminism as an emasculating movement. This tension between how McEwan early on identified and tried to represent the constructedness of masculinity and the simultaneous unwillingness to identify with feminist politics foreshadows the depiction of Perowne in *Saturday* and reinforces the argument in this chapter; McEwan uncovers the masculine subject as multiple and yet refuses to allow that insight to complicate the regulatory regime of gender and sexuality.

There is little evidence in McEwan’s work of female masculinity, male femininity, or any other kind of disturbance to gender determination. Instead there are women who can write and manipulate language (*Saturday*’s Daisy, Bryony in *Atonement*, Clarissa in *Enduring Love*) or who can be lawyers (Rosalind in *Saturday*) and even physicists (Teresa in *The Child in Time*). Most of the time, though, they are manipulators of men (all the women in McEwan’s latest novel *Solar*, including the protagonist’s three-year-old daughter, fall into this category, as does Bryony as well as Molly Lane in *Amsterdam*, Julie Lewis in *The Child in Time* and the frigid tease Florence in *On Chesil Beach*). Almost uniformly the women in McEwan reject rationalism, are a bit too emotional, and subscribe to a view of the world as in flux; a view that is articulated in opposition to the rationalist, clinical thinking of the male protagonist/focalizer.

Countless articles and chapters have been written about McEwan’s novels and the particular brand of masculinity that his narrators and focalizers evidence. It seems however, that *Saturday* signals a departure. Until *Saturday*, it was easy to agree with the proposition that McEwan “ultimately gives the impression that the great majority of men never grow up but

---

remain boys merely playing at scientists and politicians, their actions and general behaviour orchestrated by a deep-rooted paranoid fear of never appearing quite manly enough to live up to what is expected of them by other boy-men” (Schoene-Harwood 159). In *Saturday*, Henry Perowne and son neutralize the threat to wife, aging patriarch, and pregnant daughter by violently expelling from their home the mentally ill perpetrator of that threat. Baxter, the intruder, challenges Perowne earlier in the novel and Perowne’s “manliness” is put into question. Perowne ultimately accepts the challenge at the conclusion of the novel, proving that he is indeed “manly enough”.

Why has McEwan decided now to author Perowne, a grown up “man” who embodies the qualities of the “adequate male subject” (Silverman 16)? Is it that he believes that masculinity has been so thoroughly deconstructed that one couldn’t possibly argue any longer that the masculine ideal supports patriarchal authority? Does he endorse the view that “the plot of patriarchy” has been “comprehensively rumbled” (Connor) and so we need not worry any longer about endorsing one of the most powerful mechanisms of heteronormativity – the nuclear family? Perhaps McEwan endorses a belief that we have arrived at a postgender moment. Postgenderists imagine that we have arrived at a point where biological gender binaries inaccurately reflect the way in which society has moved beyond gendered logic:

We have spent the last two hundred years in the West slowly dismantling the heritage of patriarchal power, culture and thought. Juridical equality, weapons and the police have reduced the determinative power of male physical coercion. Post-industrial production, contraception and abortion have eliminated most of the rationale for gendered social roles in work and the
family, reducing the burden of patriarchal oppression on women. (Hughes and
Dvorsky 2)

Within this overly-idealistic logic, sex roles are irrelevant and nonexistent, and the state is
abenevolent, just, and unbiased entity which polices its citizens for evidence of bigotry and
prejudice. This of course, is just not the case.

Indeed the members of the Perowne family perform sex roles in ways that embody the
fluidity of a postgenderist utopia. Rosalind, Perowne’s wife, is a successful lawyer. They live in
a London townhome that she inherited from her mother. Theo, Perowne’s son, is a consummate
artist, a blues musician with all the sensitivity and aesthetic aptitude that goes along with the
profession. And Daisy, his daughter, is a successful poet, one unafraid of using bodily, sexual
language and committed (up to a point) to standing her ground against both patriarchs in her
family – father Perowne and grandfather Grammaticus. They are a family that has, superficially
at least, transcended traditional gender roles. To the extent that the novel appears to endorse the
fantasy that gender has been thoroughly overcome, and that the burden of patriarchal oppression
on women has been lifted, Saturday is not invested in trying to undo gendered oppositions or
trying to reveal how gender is discursively constructed.

Bryce Traister explains that rather than producing “anti-foundational and alterable
accounts of gendered identity,” the confluence of post-structural deconstruction of gender
categories with historiographical criticism of masculinity has resulted in “a heteromasculinity
that is surprisingly unchanging and fixed” (277). Traister’s argument that heteromasculinity can
survive the “deconstruction of gender categories” is represented in McEwan’s depictions of
masculinity. On the surface it appears that Henry is in many ways an “evolved” man, and the
novel works hard to have us consider him as such, particularly with regards to his masculinity.
After all, his wife goes off to work in the morning leaving him in bed, it is her family’s house they live in, and he doesn’t endorse the “view that it’s shameful for a man to sit to urinate because that’s what women do” (Sat 55). Perowne has arguably absorbed profeminist masculinity and understands that gender roles are inhabited and culturally produced. Henry’s quest for the day is to buy ingredients for his fish stew, and it is Henry with whom the children have the most meaningful relationships in the novel. Though in Saturday McEwan represents the constructedness of masculinity as do such masculinity studies proponents as Harry Brod, R.W. Connell or Michael Kimmell, he does not jettison the notion of gender categories more broadly or loosen the knot that binds biological sex to gendered behaviour. In short, the combination of McEwan’s admiration for the contribution that women can make, with all their feminine gifts of non-rational thinking, and his acknowledgement of the shortcomings of stereotyping male behaviour, adds up to a “project of reinventing masculinities” that by itself is not enough to “challenge the structures of gender power” (Ashe 157).

In Saturday’s deconstructivist formulation of a superficially postgender world, there is an effacement of the fact that “gender politics … require an intervention into arena where there are clear social, economic, legal and political inequalities between pluralist communities of men and women”. Responsible thinking about gender involves not just imagining that we have moved beyond the need for categories, but rather “charting inequality and thinking through concrete responses to areas where gender relationships produce marked gender inequalities” (Ashe 159).

A reading of Saturday which is sensitive to the genealogy of masculinity studies takes note of the way that authority in the novel always finds its way back to the figure of Henry Perowne, in spite of his superficial jettisoning of traditionally gendered characteristics. This novel has received the overwhelming support as a “real life” portrait of the twenty-first century,
which suggests that masculinity studies, rather than contributing to “anti-foundational and alterable accounts of gendered identity” has in fact contributed to the maintenance of a conservative “masculine ideal”. In other words, McEwan’s novel rescues traditional masculinity from its post feminist “crisis” moment and refurbishes it to meet the conservative politics that accompanied post-9/11 anxiety. Perowne tries to ignore the way in which gender, and particularly his masculinity, shapes his reality. The novel meanwhile, suggests that Perowne and his family have evolved beyond the gender paradigms that typically regulate how a family functions, only to remind us, once the family is under threat, how powerfully operational those paradigms still are. However, the style of the novel, which as David James suggests in the epigraph to this chapter, is a “balance between the structurally self-referential and the narrationally ‘unreflective,’” makes it difficult for us to see around Perowne to infer that the novel is actually critiquing the paradigms it relies upon.

Really Real
This “unreflectiveness” that James mentions, and which I take to refer to the unambiguousness of the prose style, obscures any critique that the novel may be making about gender determinacy. Instead, the novel operates in straightforward realistic mode. James points out that as early as 1978, “McEwan defined the heritage of aesthetic innovation against which he would be differentiating himself in the interests of representing human consciousness without a constant gesturing towards the fictionality of representation itself” (James 85). Instead of favouring a prose style that gestures to experiments of form and stylistics as a means of instructing the reader on the “fictionality of representation,” McEwan insisted that he would write “a semantically accessible kind of metafictional” text that in its accessibility would develop a “capacity for a
wider audience who, like the self-analysing author, can also take ‘the artifice of fiction’ for granted” (James 85). McEwan explicitly positions himself as an inheritor of a nineteenth-century novelistic tradition. To do so allowed him to distinguish himself from the successful “postmodern” writers of the ’60s and ’70s who were for the most part American and who displayed in their playfulness a disdain for literary formalism and a refusal to succumb to the anxiety of influence. It also allowed him to position himself as unfettered by the troubling question of literary inheritance implicitly presented to any young writer in the 1970s as he or she tried to write from under the shadow of the great giants of modernism. This is not to suggest that McEwan’s fiction displays neither the hallmarks of modernism or postmodernism, but rather to argue that his writing expresses a strong determination to be experimental from within the limits of naturalistic realism. As McEwan put it in 1978, “Experimentation in its broadest and most viable sense should have less to do with formal factors like busting up your syntax and scrambling your page order, and more to do with content – the representation of states of mind and the society that forms them” (“Symposium on literature”).

*Saturday* is perhaps the apotheosis of this credo. *Saturday* is a taxonomy of the ordinary, a kind of ordinary that belongs to a middle-class London neurosurgeon who is in love with his first and only wife, has wonderful children and a gorgeous car. As such it is a realist novel, one which “is written to give the effect that it represents the life and the social world as it seems to the common reader, evoking the sense that its characters might in fact exist, and that such things may well happen” (Abrams 260). But simultaneously, Perowne’s inner dialogue suggests the degree to which the novel is rather more caught up with Henry Perowne’s “subjective concentration on personal feelings, perceptions and imagining” (Murfin and Ray 398). *Saturday*
therefore manages to be outwardly realist and rational and manifestly full of quixotic and tenuous thoughts. It experiments within a realist and traditional form.

Several critics have noted the similarities between *Saturday* and *Mrs. Dalloway*, and on a superficial level, the reference is of course plain. One person, one day, a party to give, a war protest etc. However McEwan’s novel manages not to compromise on his refusal to play with form as opposed to Woolf’s novel which enthusiastically jumps from one consciousness to the next in a dazzling and disorienting display of psychological modernism\(^\text{16}\). The superficiality of the reference to Woolf also points back to the way in which the novel superficially gestures to the deconstruction of masculinity without actually challenging the structures that keep gender categories in place. While this was certainly a concern of Woolf’s text, it is not a concern of McEwan’s.

McEwan in fact eschews the legacy of Woolf’s rejection of character in favour of mood and psychology. In a memorial piece about Saul Bellow, whose words form the epigraph to *Saturday* and to whom McEwan acknowledges a great debt, McEwan writes that Bellow “set himself, and succeeding generations, free of the formal trappings of modernism, which by the mid-20th century had begun to seem a heavy constraint. He had no time for Virginia Woolf’s assertion that in the modern novel “character is dead” (“The Master”). In spite of McEwan’s praise for writers who reject the modernist impulse to construct mood over character, Laura Marcus points out that McEwan nonetheless finds a spiritual father in Joyce – though he distinguishes Joyce from specifically Woolfian modernism “characterized only by its formal properties and its alleged rejection of ‘character’ in the novel” (88). Clark Hillard notes:

\(^\text{16}\) How *Atonement* fits into his credo with its surprise ending, doubling back, and metanarration is a question for another study.
[g]iven the novel’s movement through one London day, if we were expecting any intertext in this novel, we might be forgiven for looking for *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Yet *Saturday*’s crucial confluence of memory, nostalgia, and the urban present slips away from fiction entirely, in favor of the masculine poetic moment of the ‘Dover Beach’ recitation. Matthew Arnold is recited, and then reprised, as if to say, ‘Do you hear? This is not Woolf’ (187).

Finally then, as if to punctuate McEwan’s insistence that *Saturday* is not invoking Woolf’s aesthetic project, but rather Joyce’s, the novel concludes with an evocation of the last lines of Joyce’s “The Dead”: “And then there’s only this. And at last, faintly falling: this day is over” (289)\(^{17}\). Joyce is either a spiritual father from whom McEwan inherits the novel form, or he is to be rejected for his experiment with form, with “busting up his syntax” and such. Woolf too is simultaneously rejected and called forth by McEwan’s prose complicating his relationship to literary inheritance. This is to say nothing yet of the novel’s use of Henry James, Darwin, Jane Austen or Emily Bronte.

And yet even the suggestion the McEwan is indebted to Joyce or any modernist at all is at times a difficult premise to accept. McEwan’s direct literary inheritance may in fact have been passed on by the Victorians. Alan Hepburn remarks that the Victorian realist narrative is characterised by a “genealogical imperative”. This imperative, “the need to assert cohesion when relationships within the family are threatened by disruptive strangers and outsiders”, sounds very much like the conclusion of *Saturday*. It suggests that this novel is deeply “un”-modernist, for it reasserts filliation over affiliation, which is the opposite of the Joycean project. In the realist mode that the novel adopts, events seem to proceed from each other toward an inevitable conclusion which Patricia Dreschel Tobin argues is evidence of “Father Time”. In her

\(^{17}\) “The Dead” is also invoked by Perowne’s mother’s name: Lily.
formulation, “all possibly random events and gratuitous details are brought into an alignment of relevance, so that at the point of conclusion all possibility has been converted into necessity within a line of kinship – the subsequent having been referred to the prior, the end to the beginning, the progeny to the father” (7). Indeed when Baxter walks into the living room, Perowne thinks, “of course. It makes sense. Nearly all the elements of his day are assembled; it only needs his mother, and Jay Strauss to appear with his squash racket” (Sat 243). When the novel concludes with Perowne making peace with the fact of Daisy’s pregnancy, it achieves a closure that is typical of a novel that Tobin argues is characterised by the way it reveals time. Time is revealed in this case as linear, and proceeding from the father. Perowne’s line will predictably continue, and he is deeply reassured by this fact.

McEwan’s relationship to literary inheritance contributes to his construction of masculinity in Saturday. This is perhaps a consequence of the way in which he came to adopt a literary register. He describes how his private school education blotted out his inheritance of his mother’s “culchie” way of speaking: “During my early teens, as my education progressed, I was purged of my mother’s more obvious traits, usually by a kind of literary osmosis - when I was 14 I was an entranced reader of the handful of novels Iris Murdoch had published. I was also reading Graham Greene. Slowly, nothink, somethink, cestificate, skelington, chimley all went, as well as the double negatives and mismatched plurals” (“Mother Tongue”). In order to become a literary person he had to eschew the comfort of his mother tongue for an altogether more formalized, regulated way of speaking. In the same article, which he wrote just after September 11th, and as he was setting out to write Saturday, McEwan remarks on the anxiety of influence that affected his early writing and to which his younger self was loathe to admit: “I was joining the great conversation of literature which generally was not conducted in the language of Rose
[his mother] or my not-so-distant younger self. The voices of giants were rumbling over my head as I piped up to begin, as it were, my own conversation on the train”. The image of giants rumbling over head is contrasted with the tiny voice of the young McEwan and suggests a Bloomian anxiety of influence, oedipally charged and thus contributing to the crisis of masculinity that McEwan sublimates in Perowne’s superficial postfeminist masculinity.

Finally McEwan jettisons the idea of inheritance altogether. “This uncurious rootlessness characterises our family. I feel it myself, a complete lack of interest in family trees, or poking around in parish registers. Two or three generations back is the land, and most certainly a hard life”. When there is no one to record the past, and no property to inherit, what it seems, is the point of caring about one’s past? This is indeed different from Pound’s “make it new”, different from the modernist rejection of older forms as a means of creating a present unfettered by the past. McEwan demonstrates instead a disinterest in inheritance that is at least partly an ironic inheritance of modernism and partly a way of disinheriting modernism itself as a means of continuing its project. Considering McEwan’s personal ambivalence about inheritance and language, a picture emerges of a novelist who is at once formed by the legacy that he rejects, while he is also formed by the arrogance that must accompany such a forceful rejection. As such the invocations and allusions to texts in the novel refuse to be accommodated to singular meanings. *Mrs. Dalloway* for example, is indeed a template and yet the reader is not meant to think too deeply about connecting Woolf to McEwan. After all, according to McEwan, *Mrs. Dalloway* is far too concerned with experiments in form, displays a lack of interest in character, and is the product of a “light-headed” writer “preoccupied with the great gulf, as she puts it, that separated her generation from her parents” (“Literature...13,12). Similarly Joyce’s presence is acknowledged as a shaping influence but obscured as well by the story that *Saturday* tells (about
the vital importance of biological families and the protection of the family/nation from outsiders).

Finally, and most tellingly, “Dover Beach” is perhaps the central and most enduring literary reference that McEwan makes in the novel. The poem is in fact included in full at the end of the novel, and its inclusion here as a final and imposing paratext means that it influences the way we leave the novel. We are invited to read it and ask, “would this calm my own rage?”, and seduced into thinking that perhaps art can indeed effect behaviour-changing emotional reactions. Obviously we are also invited to draw parallels between the impending Iraq war and the “armies that clash by night”, and between the fact that it is among the best-known English poems and the novel’s theme of preserving Englishness. The use of the poem within the novel proper though, as opposed to its presentation as paratext, further alerts us to the way in which gender is figured in a discussion of literary inheritance. McEwan gives Daisy the Arnold poem to read, rather than her own poetry, in the pivotal scene of home invasion. It is unlikely, the novel thus suggests, that Daisy (her name is the very word of diminutive femininity!) would be able to come up with anything as mind-altering as Arnold. Standing in front of her family and potential attacker, naked and pregnant, it is in fact her grandfather, also a poet who signals to her to recite the Arnold poem. It is not even her idea to recite “Dover Beach”. It is a curious move, but one that allows McEwan to have the drama and anxiety of literary inheritance play out in the figure of a daughter and a granddaughter, thus highlighting another superficial challenge to gender stereotypes that the novel tries to pass off as a radical deconstruction of gender regimes. In fact the scene suggests that a young woman, naked and under threat of rape has one option: make a claim to tradition, pass it off as your own, and hope that your attacker is convinced. Daisy is
spared, not because of her own words, but because she takes the advice of one old poet (her grandfather) and deploys the words of another old poet to mount her defence.

The allusions that McEwan makes over the course of the novel are overdetermined to the point that it becomes difficult to ascribe meaning to them, and all but the most diligent of readers will likely not chase them down. It is far easier to be intoxicated by the compelling flow of the narrative events. In his review of the book Mark Lawson gestures to the novel’s ubiquitous allusion-making, noting one particularly obscure, or “curious choice”:

McEwan makes one curious choice: the quotations from Daisy Perowne's debut volume of poetry are actually published lines by Craig Raine, giving the book an additional subplot in which, beyond the plot's call on various sections of the Metropolitan police, you expect the literary cops to arrive and arrest Daisy for plagiarism. It's a matter of debate whether it's the reader or the writer who is being too clever here.

Indeed the cleverness of the writer is lost upon the reader who is unfamiliar with literary history, the modernist project, and the difference between Henry and William James. Not only is his cleverness lost, but the complications of gender categories that McEwan may be performing through the novel’s allusions to nineteenth-century domestic novels, Jamesian melodramas and high modernist experimentation all within an ostensibly conservative portrait of twenty-first century urban domesticity are obscured to all but the closest readers.

Over-determination thus becomes one of the difficulties of writing about this novel. There are so many elements that could represent so many things: While Baxter stands for the protestors who disappear into the background, he also represents the September 11th terrorists, as well as the lower class from which Perowne is alienated, and finally, also a kind of
masculinity that Perowne has, to use a phrase that Perowne would most approve of, evolved beyond. These multiple representations over-determine Baxter as Perowne’s foil. The burning plane is all at once a threat, nothing at all, and a personal annoyance to Perowne; evidence that anxiety post-9/11 is always high. The squash game between Perowne and Strauss that is described with such detail appears symbolic of America and Britain in a pissing competition. It is also a set piece about rules, laws, their suspension and who benefits from them. Finally it is a display of Perowne’s mental fortitude – he is able to carry on and (nearly) win the match in spite of having been disturbed by Baxter. This is part of the difficulty of writing about Saturday: every attempt to take the long view pulls one into the obsessive details of the text – what goes into making a fish stew, how a squash ball bounces off a wall, how Perowne descends the stairs, how the traffic lights are phased on the Marylebone Road. As Colm Tóibín describes McEwan’s writing, “his books seem to depend on plain writing and story and careful plotting, with much detail added to make the reader believe that these words on the page must be followed and believed as the reader would follow and believe a well-written piece of journalism” (29). These taxonomical details are part of how McEwan accomplishes the feat of the novel. The text carries us along in a stream of consciousness and compels our belief in its neurotic catalogue of the world it describes until we are lulled into the “fantasy of safety” (Eaglestone 21). Then with a burst of dramatic action and affective detail this fantasy wobbles as Baxter throws the full weight of all he represents against its base. This creates the effect of confusing any kind of long view we may take on the novel. That is, a critical, distanced, telescop ed view of the novel always falters as, over and over again, we zoom in on the novel’s moment of intense drama and disruption,

---

18 9/11 was the impetus for the novel. McEwan told an interviewer “I’m just finishing a novel which is written in the shadow of the event. The general tone is in part set by this new world situation we find ourselves in, a story which has hardly begun.”(Carlos) The flaming airplane that Perowne sees scorching across the sky in the opening pages obviously brings that day to mind.
willing Baxter to put down the knife and leave our hero and his family at peace. In short the novel makes it difficult to stand outside of it and meanwhile, from inside it, we are loathe to ascribe meaning to any one element which is always already determined as something else. In this way, the novel stylistically reflects the deconstruction of masculinity into multiplicities. Masculinity studies refuses to ascribe a singular meaning to masculinity, confusing any attempt to do so by naming the particularities of a diverse array of masculinities. In so far as masculinity appears to have become diffuse, we are lulled into a fantasy whereby masculinity no longer names a location of power. However, the conclusion of the novel disrupts that fantasy and demonstrates the authority that still resides in the male head of household.

David James describes McEwan’s writing as “blurring … narrational telling and showing” (82), always pulling the reader into the text to observe it from within. Perowne holds a weeping Daisy to him and wonders why she weeps. There is a shift in register: “It’s likely her mind is turning fast, faster than his can, perhaps around a broken mosaic of recent events – raised voices in rooms, flashes of Parisian streets, an open suitcase on an unmade bed, whatever is distressing her. You stare at a head, a lushness of hair, and can only guess” (Sat 211). The “you” makes the reader into the focalizer and invites us to look at Daisy and to guess.

In so far as we are drawn into Perowne’s mind and into his observations of and interactions with his small, contained world, we are privy to the contradictions that Perowne works so hard to contain. And since we cannot arrive at singular meanings within or from outside the novel, our response to Perowne’s anxiety-producing contradictions may elicit a sympathetic affective response. These contradictions are typically expressed exclusively for the reader. It is in the narration that Perowne’s uncertainties emerge, and not in the dialogue or the outward mask that Perowne reveals to the world. For instance let us consider Perowne’s position
in relation to the Iraq war: he finds that he is pro-war with his daughter Daisy but anti- with his colleague Jay Strauss, but of course only we are privy to both of these conversations. While he claims to have no taste for literature, he finds himself musing throughout the novel on the various texts that Daisy has directed him to read. Though he has doubts about his strict rationalism, he would never dream of relenting to Daisy or expressing sympathy with her far more esoteric worldview. These contradictions coalesce around gender.

On the one hand Saturday depicts a man who is arguably profeminist and as such is a good husband and father, while on the other, gender categories are clearly and unproblematically maintained in the interest of preserving the family. Like McEwan’s simultaneous inheritance and rejection of modernism, Perowne inherits feminism while ultimately the novel preserves the “adequacy of the male subject” as the crucial component in the protection and preservation of the nuclear family.

An exceptional day

Saturday is a book about being a man. About being a man trying to figure out what it means to be a man. An urban man, a “child of this mass”. The novel opens with an epigraph. It is Moses Herzog speaking, Saul Bellow’s title character. He asks, “For instance?” as though someone has asked him to further explain himself. He answers his own question “Well, for instance, what it means to be a man,” specifically for Herzog, a mid-twentieth-century urban man with all the pressures and perils, anxieties and ambiguities that he loads onto that condition. This epigraph clearly establishes that part of what is at stake for Perowne is his enduring ability to consider himself as an “adequate male subject”. Though throughout the novel, Perowne’s confidence wavers, and we could argue that he is expressing all the signs of a crisis, yet he typically returns
to self-assurance and confidence, and does so at sites that denote the masculine ideal: at the hospital, at home, and on doing battle on the squash court.

Perowne wakes in the murmur of pre-dawn light. He leaves the bed feeling like “he’s materialized out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered” (Sat 1). He convinces himself that he is a man who is purely and simply alive. As yet, he has no obligations. His wife is asleep, he has the day off, and the sun has yet to rise. Giorgio Agamben refers to the Greek term zoē to refer to “the simple fact of living common to all beings” (Homo Sacer 1), and it could be that this is the condition Perowne awakes to. Agamben quotes Aristotle’s Politics when he writes, “If there is no great difficulty as to the way of life…clearly most men will tolerate much suffering and hold onto life [zoē] as if it were a kind of serenity…and a natural sweetness”(2). For all intents and purposes, Perowne’s way of life is easy. Over the course of the novel we learn that he had a loving childhood, his wife is still beautiful and in love with him, his children respect him and will be successful, he is an exceptionally talented neurosurgeon, he lives in a large beautiful house, and he drives a nice car – the single greatest source of his pride. As a result of this ease, he is able to remain relatively disengaged from the sufferings and political disturbances that characterize the early twenty-first-century world he lives in. No wonder Perowne, waking at home, is “inexplicably elated” and feels a “sustained euphoria”(Sat 2,4). He is unencumbered (to use McEwan’s word).

Perowne looks out from his bedroom window upon a square that presumably resembles the one in the two-page frontispiece of the Anchor paperback edition of the book: a pencil illustration of an idyllic London close. A fenced-in park contains a bare but lovely old oak, the Georgian houses stand taller than the tree, a bench invites a sitter, and the undulating cobblestones have not surrendered to the smoothness of pavement. Perowne pronounces it an
“eighteenth-century dream bathed and embraced by modernity, by street light from above, and from below by fibre-optic cables, and cool fresh water coursing down pipes, and sewage borne away in an instant of forgetting” (Sat 3). In sharp contrast to the stress of Bellow’s narrator, all is calm in this urban neighbourhood. While Herzog itches at the modern anxieties and pressures of being “under organized power. Subject to tremendous control,” the pencil drawing does not express these anxieties. In fact it is the very control and organization that, for Perowne, afford the scene its degree of calm. Such spaces of privilege and seeming harmony exist exactly because the conditions of late twentieth-century capital and its infrastructure (the sewers, the electric grid, the garbage collection) created it. The fence posts are evenly spaced, the front gates are all closed, the window frames are squared, no glass is shattered. No subject enters the frame to defile it with his presence. The Georgian architecture in the image, as well as the frontispiece itself, a throwback to Victorian-era publishing, reveals a delight in orderliness that Bellow’s Herzog would be instinctively suspicious of. Suspicious because Herzog knows that it is the prevailing order, the “powers that be” that have “devalued the person,” have “made the self negligible” (epigraph). Yet by the end of the epigraph Herzog sums up the ordering project as “a beautiful supermachinery opening new life for innumerable mankind.” The pressures that render him anxious and irrelevant are a negligible price to pay for what he believes to be the beautifully ordered workings of the kind of modern society that encloses and then defends the idyllic Georgian square that Perowne surveys.

As Woody Allen put it in Deconstructing Harry, “tradition is the illusion of permanence”. Yet Perowne, fortified as he is by his faith in Darwinian evolution, that the present is the result of the survival of the fittest, takes for granted that he, fit, smart and healthy will endure any challenge that he is presented with. There is no “illusion” of permanence in
Perowne’s life, rather there are traditions that Perowne is certain will endure. His fantasy of perpetual stability, of the inevitability of an enduring legacy, is what propels him. It is evident in the pride he takes in his children, in the assurance of their success – a measure of his own – in the latitude he gives to his pregnant daughter, “a woman bearing a child has her own authority” (Sat 287). For Perowne, things as they are will continue in perpetuity along a straight line towards some eventual and ultimate truth. He expresses this in his meditation on the conglomeration of tissue and cells that constitute the brain, on how it encodes information. He is supremely confident that one day, though not in his lifetime, the mystery will be revealed:

over decades, as long as the scientist and the institutions remain in place, the explanations will refine themselves into an irrefutable truth about consciousness. It’s already happening, the work is being done in laboratories not far from this theater, and the journey will be completed. Henry’s certain of it. That’s the kind of faith he has. (Sat 263 my emphases)

The passage is worth quoting in full, for it represents the central and defining principles that motivate and shape Henry’s behaviour. This article of faith (ironically equated with certainty) that the institutions as they currently exist will continue as they “always” have, will prevail and realize their purpose, forms the basis of the fantasy which Perowne inhabits.

But as a reader living in the chaos of the early twenty-first century, I’m left wondering how he is able to maintain such an unshakeable certainty. How, when threat exists in the streets around him, and eventually erupts in his own home, can Perowne return again and again to a safe conclusion that all is right in the world? What does Perowne know that I don’t, or what does he not know that I do? All of his early morning disengagement ends when a flaming airplane interrupts his indulgent “euphoria,” forcing him to consider the possibility that this is an attack
on his “whole way of life” (36). “Something is about to give,” he notes. But what? The luxuriousness of his disengaged mood? By the end of the novel, after all the drama, when Perowne finds himself tucked cozily into bed kissing the nape of his wife’s neck, what exactly has “given”? The novel might suggest that what has given is Perowne’s naivety, and perhaps this is so. Perhaps in fact at the novel’s conclusion, Perowne knows that his life is contingent on a number of chaotic factors. He must be more aware that threats exist in the world and that those threats are not always theoretical. He describes himself as fearful, “weak and ignorant” and wonders if in the morning his “hopes for firm action” will be restored (287). Yet at the end of the novel, as he curls around his wife’s sleeping form, he thinks of Baxter’s fate as a prisoner “another certainty [he] sees before him” and remembers that there is “always this”. It is in the control that he is able to exert over Baxter’s fate and from “fitting himself around” his wife’s “beloved form” that he quickly reconstitutes his confident and assured sense of self (289).

A Crisis Without

Transformation, dynamism and change are threatening to Henry Perowne, largely because the conditions of the setting of the novel suit him very well. Perowne ponders how life is steadily improving for all 19 yet he doesn’t observe that he is among the nation’s top earners: “health professionals” whose average earning at £1019 per week is more than double the nationwide average; or that men on average still significantly out-earn women 20. His “phallicized whiteness” is unmarked, and functions as “the dominant or master signifier around which all other signifiers and practices are oriented” (Winnubst 15). His life is constructed as the norm to which

---

19 He calls the city dwellers “gods blessed by supermarket cornucopias, torrents of accessible information, warm clothes that weigh nothing, extended lifespans, wondrous machines…” (77).

20 UK Average Salaries and Expenditures.” International Average Salary Income Database.  
http://www.worlssalaries.org/uk.shtml
everything else in the novel refers. The street sweeper that he observes is engaged in “futile….underpaid urban housework”. It is perplexing to Perowne, the exalted neurosurgeon, that this man is “oddly intent on making a good job”(73). Why should a labourer be content? Perowne cannot fathom this. After all Perowne is a man who has only recently come to terms with his Mercedes Benz as “simply a sensual part of what he regards as his overgenerous share of the world’s goods”(74). Perowne is above average, yet the novel pushes the outdated possibility that his life is the standard against which all other lives ought to be measured. Even the book jacket comments promote this outlandish premise. The New York Times is quoted on the front cover: “McEwan has shown how we…live today”. What does that ellipsis omit? It omits the phrase “a privileged few of us anyway,” from Michiko Kakutani’s review. It ignores the narrowing of the inclusive “we”. The publishers therefore participate in the construction of the fantasy of Perowne’s life as exemplary of the universal.

Perowne is, no doubt, a different kind of man from the men of his father’s generation. He refuses to participate in radical anti-war politics, which are not exclusively about a resistance to war, but are more importantly about a politics of agitation that is ostensibly unlimited by race, sex, religion, and nationality, widely characterized as a “movement of movements” 21. Perowne dismisses the protestors who are advocates of the “movements of movements” – the coming together of indigenous activists, alterglobalization activists, anti-privatization campaigners as spoilt and self-absorbed, wanting nothing more than to protect their easy lives 22. Perowne

21 This is not to imply that the marchers were all radicals, but rather that in their ordinariness and their diversity, these 1.5 million people who gathered that day represented a transforming call to peace. According to Euan Ferguson in The Observer “There were, of course, the usual suspects - CND, Socialist Workers’ Party, the anarchists. But even they looked shocked at the number of their fellow marchers: it is safe to say they had never experienced such a mass of humanity. There were nuns. Toddlers. Women barristers. The Eton George Orwell Society. Archaeologists Against War. … There were country folk and lecturers, dentists and poulterers, a hairdresser from Cardiff and a poet from Cheltenham.”
22 This coming together is well documented in Mertes and Bello, A Movement of Movements: Is Another World Really Possible?
dismisses these movements perhaps because what they agitate against is the kind of power that has his particular heterosexual, white, male interests at heart. Consider, for instance, the detective who laughs when Theo asks if he and his father will get in trouble for pushing Baxter down the stairs, or the policeman who makes an exception, allowing Perowne to cut across a street closed down for the protest, or even Perowne’s insistence that he has the right not to be disturbed (from winning his squash game) by “world events, or even street events” (231, 79, 110). Though Perowne’s family is put in danger, the novel will not allow Perowne’s way of life to come to any harm. Recall once more McEwan’s statement that he wanted to “let [Perowne] fret”. Merely to fret, and never to be actually in danger of losing any freedom or privilege, was McEwan’s intention for Perowne.

When he sets the novel on February 15th 2003, the date of a massive worldwide Iraq war protest, McEwan inadvertently establishes Giorgio Agamben’s political philosophy as the background noise in the novel, operating in counterpoint to Perowne’s comfortable position safely protected by his faith in the law. On this day two million people gathered in Hyde Park to protest an “illegal” war against “enemy combatants” who inhabit the space known to readers of Agamben as a “state of exception”. Agamben’s working premise in State of Exception, the sequel to Homo Sacer, is that the state of exception which reveals the violent underpinnings of the state, originally a “provisional” measure, has, in the course of the twentieth century, become the functioning paradigm of government (2). For Perowne, who believes deeply in tradition and succession, and whose life, choices and privilege are authorized and protected by the “steady state,” it is easy to see the protesters as foolish, part of the “iPod generation” who want nothing to “come between them and their ecstasy clubbing and cheap flights and reality TV” (197). Ironically he calls the protesters “idealists”, but these protesters are not ignorant of the complex
reality of Bush and Blair’s proposed War on Terror. They are not trying to protect the status quo. Rather as Melissa Autumn White observes they, like much transnational protest of the last decade,

are making crucial connections between the production and organization of *difference* that various borders enact – borders that tirelessly make “others” through striations of sex-gender, sexuality, “race,” class, nation, ethnicity, citizenship status. That is, there is a profound and fundamental connection between the functioning of normative sex-gender regimes and that of the state’s expression of sovereignty through the management of its borders.

(White 165)

When the “not in my name” posters march past Perowne they do not belong to people who are preoccupied with “cloying self-regard” (250), rather they belong to a “proliferation of transnational practices, a nomadic politics” signified by their marching, “a becoming-minoritarian of everyone” (White 178). This proliferation, White argues, “will both require and produce a disidentification with nationalized imaginaries” (178). Perowne’s nostalgia for Darwin’s England (*Sat 5*) and the novel’s protection of a familial ideal, so crucial to the constitution of a modern democratic state, signal the disconnect between what actually happens in transnational alterglobalization protests and Perowne’s impression of them. His privilege and his scorn for the protestors suggest that he has no inclination to “disidentify” with the English imagination.

Though their politics bring out the snarling defensive conservative in him, the protesters are not a physical threat to Perowne, and so he can easily dismiss them as he navigates the city they have disrupted with their noise, singing, dancing and signage. Baxter is the real source of
threat to Perowne, his family and the way they hope to continue to live their lives. The exchange between Baxter and Perowne is figured in terms that suggest that both Perowne and the novel are aware that a certain kind of performance of masculinity takes place between the two men, one wherein the “hyperbolic status of gender norms” is central (Bodies 237): “it’s impossible not to feel that play-acting is about to begin”:

He is cast in a role, and there’s no way out. This, as people like to say, is urban drama. A century of movies and half a century of television have rendered the matter insincere. It is pure artifice. Here are the cars, and here are the owners. Here are the guys, the strangers, whose self-respect is on the line. Someone is going to have to impose his will and win, and the other is going to give way. Popular culture has worn this matter smooth with reiteration, this ancient genetic patrimony that also oils the machinations of bullfrogs and cockerels and stags. … there are rules as elaborate as the politesse of the Versailles court that no set of genes can express. (Sat 87)

Perowne is aware that this is a highly stylized encounter, even suggesting that this kind of chest-beating is part of the natural world – Darwinian even – and therefore inevitable, “ancient” and “genetic”. The way in which Perowne naturalizes this display of macho aggression suggests that he can observe Baxter’s “compulsory performance” of gender with a critical distance, and treat it with a degree of disdain, imagining himself first of all to have somehow evolved beyond the need for such base displays of gender. Secondly it suggests that Perowne need not rely on such a primitive acting out of gender because he believes he has recourse to the protection of the law of the state which has his propertied, male, educated, straight interests at heart.
If there is anything formulaic about how Perowne and Baxter meet each other it is not obvious to Baxter. Perowne, embodying a self-conscious profeminist masculinity, reads Baxter, Narc and Nigel’s behaviour as little more than immature chest thumping. He likens their actions to “an ill-rehearsed children’s ballet” and remarks that their plan to rob him has a “boyish, make-believe quality” (90). “Real Men” apparently don’t rob people. “Real Men” don’t behave aggressively towards perfect strangers. Perowne also cannot allow, nor can the novel, that Baxter’s striking him is part of simple aggression and anger towards Perowne for humiliating him. The novel at first dismisses the threat that Baxter and his cronies pose. Instead, Baxter is diagnosed as having “reduced levels of GABA,” symptoms of terminal Huntington’s disease.

Perowne wonders why the world at large cannot understand that there is “a morality, an ethics, down among the amino acid” (92). As far as Perowne is concerned, anyone, including his daughter Daisy, who believes in the idea of a “social construct” is ignoring how “much in human affairs … can be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule” (92). And perhaps this is true, but there is a dangerous and slippery slope from Perowne’s kind of biological determinism to the reinstitution of a hierarchy of races and genders. In this encounter with these three clearly aggressive men, Perowne refuses to condescend to them. He considers their behaviour predictable and biologically predetermined by the fact that they are men and yet somehow, perhaps in simply being able to name the way in which aggressive masculinity is performed in this situation, he believes that he is able to overcome this essentially instinctive masculinity. Though he doesn’t participate in the macho display of chest thumping he nonetheless measures up his opponent – he briefly considers that “he’ll be wise to protect his testicles” against the shorter Baxter, but then decides that he “simply won’t let [a fight] happen” – and he nonetheless calls upon his own version of authority and impunity to overwhelm Baxter.
Is his resorting to his “professional regard”, his “professional dignity,” Henry’s means of “imposing his will and winning” (90)? Ultimately it is a strategy that proves unsuccessful. Though he knows he has found himself “among others who live beyond the law,” faced with a masculinity that is authorized by violent aggression, Perowne strangely counters with the law, repeatedly bringing up insurance details and phone calls to the police. Is this a signal that Perowne cannot at this point muster the kind of violent defence and aggression that the situation, in the traditional terms of masculinity, seems to call for? Instead of enlisting his own aggression he instead relies upon the state, which has become the locus, the repository for masculine aggression. He knows that this will not work, that “drug dealers and pimps” with whom he equates Baxter, “are not inclined to dial nine-nine-nine for Leviathan” (88). Yet it is a move that is typical of Henry Perowne’s faith in the state; the law is the only authority that he can conjure up. With Baxter, Narc and Nigel present and because he is in the street, a street that is “closed”, Perowne has found himself outside the protection of the home, the hospital, the shops, or any other locus of the authoritative organizing structures of the state; he nonetheless continues to call upon the rule of law to protect him.

This is what leaves him feeling uneasy, guilty and ashamed. Rather than taking matters into his own hands he relies upon an absented rule of law. Perowne discovers that when the time came, he could not muster his own physical defence. He was able to get out relatively unscathed, but he shamed Baxter by diagnosing his Huntington’s disease in front of his mates, a fact of which Theo warns him. In a moment that anticipates how father and son will have to join forces to defend the hearth, Theo becomes Perowne’s only confidant. Theo warns Perowne, “You humiliated him. You should watch that…these street guys can be proud” (154). Theo distinguishes the pride of the “street guys” from himself and his father. They are apparently “at
home guys” who have evolved beyond such petty emotions as pride. Other than this conversation with Theo, Perowne refuses to talk about the incident, to his friend Strauss, to his mother, to his wife. This pent-up embarrassment is a result of his decision to point out masculinity as a charade instead of responding to the challenge Baxter presented to him in the affective and aggressive masculine terms that characterized their encounter from the outset. His reaction at the conclusion of the novel is thus a redressing of his failure to be “manly enough” earlier on in the day.

Baxter throws him for a loop, leaving his confidence and characteristic self-assurance in shambles. Perowne struggles with the possibility that this encounter with Baxter has completely transformed him. In my reading of it, the squash game against his colleague Jay Strauss reveals Perowne’s private insecurity and the effort that he must expend to restore his confidence in his position of authority and privilege. The game does not advance the plot; rather it is more like a set piece. It serves to dramatize Perowne’s diminishment and the process by which he achieves reaffirmation by overcoming his nervousness and successfully engaging in battle – and against an American no less. There is no fear here of British effeminacy being overrun by American virility.

He decides that “winning his game will be an assertion of his privacy” and that his ability to win is part of his right to “not be disturbed by world events, or even street events” (110). He goes further, declaring that “to obliterate a whole universe of public phenomena in order to concentrate is a fundamental liberty” (110). If he can win the game he can also ignore the world at large. He can ignore the guilt he feels at having “abused his power” with Baxter (114), and having failed to stand up for himself in the terms that were familiar to Baxter. In no obvious way does Perowne speak of himself as having been “unmanned” by Baxter, or of feeling “weak”, or any other adjective that might raise a flag to signal the reader to label Perowne a cocksure figure
of masculinist pride. However, if we look closely at Henry’s behaviour during the squash game and consider that the game comes immediately after the incident with Baxter, a more complete picture of Perowne’s relationship to his profeminist masculinity emerges.

Though Perowne notes to himself that he is shaken and disturbed – that “he can’t settle” (103), he refuses to admit this to Jay and thus make real the anxious state he finds himself in. Referring to what has happened out loud (he also hesitates to tell Rosalind what has happened) might put at risk the careful construction of himself as confident, assured, able to express himself, yet not likely to be overwhelmed by emotion – in short as the ideal profeminist man, sensitive but also masculine (where that term embodies all the “positive traits” of masculinity), displaying a “sense of honour and a feeling of responsibility to something greater than oneself” (Keenan np). As Fidelma Ashe puts it,

The key terms that have emerged in popular discourse about the plight of the modern man have been “crisis”, “loss”, and “change”. The ‘crisis of masculinity’ thesis implies that the old certainties surrounding men’s traditional roles in the family and the workplace have been swept away through social changes and increases in women’s equality, leaving the modern man dazed and confused about his roles and place in society. (1)

If Perowne admits his weakness he risks becoming a “man in crisis”, and might then have to think of himself as “becoming minoritarian”(White 178), of himself as a discursive construction, subject to categorization and marked not as universal. Such an admission would make it impossible for him to maintain the fantasy that he is “merely” a human being in the middle of a great “natural”, extradiscursive evolutionary process. He does not want to acknowledge that the encounter has disturbed him to the point of distraction, to the point where he fears that he will
never be able to shake himself out of it. To think of himself as “in crisis” puts at risk the fantasy that there exists a continuous and unified rule of progress, the rule which is the very fabric of Perowne’s reality. When Baxter is in his living room, Perowne notes that he “misused his authority to avoid one crisis, and his actions have steered him into another, far worse” (219). He regrets that earlier in the day, he rushed to neutralize that anxiety and with it the possibility that others might perceive him as in a crisis moment. It is not that the encounter with Baxter disturbed him that he finds most upsetting. After all, who wouldn’t be unnerved after being punched by a stranger? It is rather the idea of anyone finding out what happened: that Perowne did not defend himself with aggression, as was his right, that he chose instead to humiliate Baxter, and that he depended on the arrival of the heroic law. When he gets a second crack at Baxter, and when Baxter takes his threat straight into Perowne’s home, all of a sudden the anxieties about how to properly defend oneself disappear because in the end, when it mattered most for Perowne, he was able to display a “sense of honour” and of “responsibility” to something greater than himself. Also noticeably absent from the second encounter with Baxter are Perowne’s self-conscious thoughts about how masculinity is operative in the conflict. Instead the self-conscious language of gender performances is absorbed into a Darwinian struggle to defend one’s biological offspring, both mature and in utero, from the threat of death.

The Man of The House

*Saturday* is at heart a domestic drama. Narratives about the family are implicitly about revealing how sexual drives motivate and keep in place the alliances that hold the family, and social networks in place (Foucault108). Foucault has suggested that, since the eighteenth century, the family has ceased to be merely the site of the deployment of family alliances, but, in the interest of supporting “economic structures” and “political processes,” has had the “apparatus” of
sexuality “superimposed” upon the previous model of alliance. The superimpositions of sexuality upon alliance – the former which is played out on the sexed body (male/female), and the latter which demands adherence to specified gender roles (father/mother, husband/wife) – focuses our attention on how gender operates both socially and libidinally. Like many other families, the Perowne family evidences this sociolibidinal palimpsest. Perowne is characterized as father, husband, protector, and provider and as such fulfills the role of the traditional patriarch. His authority, though it is “soft” at best – he doesn’t rule with a heavy hand – is nevertheless clearly articulated, especially in the home invasion scenario, in order to sustain the system of alliance in which the novel is clearly invested.

Earlier in the novel the “maleness” of Perowne’s body is thoroughly described. He is a tall man, distinguished looking, with steady hands, runs marathons, has a head of brown hair; at forty-eight, the flab at his waist disappears “when he holds himself erect” and “the muscles – the pecs, the abs – though modest, keep a reasonable definition…Only on his pubes are the first scattered coils of silver” (20). The tone of masculine virility is evident in the macho abbreviations “pec”, “abs”, “pubes”. The novel tries to pass these off as mere descriptors of the character, but grouped with the domestic setting, and with Perowne’s ultimate defence of the family, they become indicators of the novel’s deployment of gender as a means to naturalize the way in which the novel supports traditional “bourgeois” patriarchy. The novel’s attention to Perowne’s sexuality, his masculine sexualized body, “an element in relations of power” (Foucault 107) gives rise to the novel’s deployment of Perowne’s aggression in the defence of the familial alliance to appear as natural or prescribed by gender specifically as it is attributable to biological sex.
Furthermore, Perowne has a deep attachment to the law of evolution: “[t]here’s grandeur in this view of life” (Sat 263). It is a phrase that appears at the beginning of the novel as well in a later passage, where it repeats over and over again in his head. He remembers it as the conclusion to the first edition of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* \(^{23}\). Early in the novel he admires Darwin for ultimately concluding that life itself is the only purpose of evolution. The second time the phrase appears however, the “view of life” that contains grandeur is the one where through science “the journey [to mapping human consciousness] will be completed” (263). It seems as though life’s grandeur for Perowne’s involves this ultimate achievement and is far more teleological than Darwin’s. Perowne reveals to his daughter Daisy his teleological view of evolution, where progress, identified in terms of enlightenment rationalism, is the ideal. If, like Larkin, Henry was “called in / To construct a religion” he’d make use of, not water, but evolution. He reasons that it is a story that is “demonstrably true,” that there is no greater creation story because it takes in an “unimaginable sweep of time” and because it features “numberless generations spawning by infinitesimal steps complex living beauty out of inert matter… and lately the wonder of minds emerging and with them morality, love, art, cities” (54). Daisy and Henry have this discussion and end up “at the junction of two streams” where it seems that the two possibilities that evolutionary theory presents us with – procreation and survival, or death and extinction – come together under the bridge upon which daughter and father stand.

The two streams that run beneath their feet also represent their divergent views upon human culture, emotion and behavior. Daisy endorses a view recognizable as social constructivism which Perowne accuses her of having picked up from “some handsome fool of a

\(^{23}\) Footnoted here in its entirety: “There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved” (396).
Perowne clearly believes that there is very little that cannot “be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule. Who would ever reckon up the damage done to love and friendships and all hopes of happiness by a surfeit or depletion of this or that neurotransmitter. And who will ever find a morality, an ethics down among the enzymes and amino acids when the general taste is for looking in the opposite direction?” (92). This “opposite direction” that Perowne refers to is one that McEwan charts in his essay “Literature, Science and Human Emotions” where he likens social constructivists to “Christian theologians” who promote “the near perfect malleability of human nature” and whose descendents “flourish today in various forms, including the political correctness movement, which holds that since the human condition is a social construct which in turn is defined by language, it is possible and desirable to reform the condition by changing the language” (14, 15-6). For McEwan and his fictional complement Perowne, the idea of reality as constituted by language is a laughable proposition. Far better to seek universals in the expressions that denote human emotion (raised eyebrows indicate surprise, a wrinkled nose indicated distaste, a smile equals happiness and so on and so forth), which McEwan argues in the above-mentioned essay with references to Darwin and sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson, are fixed and unchanging across time and space.

Perowne’s fidelity to evolution could be read as a fidelity to patriarchy, a tie (between evolutionary theory and patriarchy) that feminist scholarship has identified as forming the heart of Darwin’s theory and writings (Grosz 71). Elizabeth Grosz argues that “Darwin managed to make…[an] imperative to change, the center of his understanding of life itself” (20). She remarks that Darwin’s “concern with the possibilities of becoming, and becoming-other, inherent in culture…are also the basic concerns of feminist and other political social activists” (20). This may be true, but no such convergence of political social activism with Darwinian sociobiology
takes place in *Saturday*. After all, Darwinism “shaped constructions of masculinity [in Victorian England] by grounding humans in the natural world, identifying heterosexual and reproductive behaviors with natural explanations of normative masculinity, and justifying race, gender, and economic inequalities that privileged white middle- and upper-class men” (Dudgeon 124). In short, Darwinism continues, in the popular imagination at least, and certainly for the non-specialist, to support conservative “beliefs about the nature of white masculinity” (124) 24. The reference to Darwin in the novel surely conjures up these beliefs. Further, it is not a dynamism in Darwin’s theory of evolution that Perowne picks up on, but rather in reading about Darwin’s life, he experiences nostalgia “for a verdant, horse-drawn, affectionate England” and depression about “how easily an existence…could so entirely vanish” (5). What Perowne takes from his encounter with Darwin then is sadness for how things change, an ironic sadness (ironic because Perowne, while he is nostalgic of Darwin’s England, is simultaneously confident that thing as they are will continue on in perpetuity) which Perowne keeps in check by finding comfort in his belief that he is one of those naturally selected, that he will survive and that his heterosexual masculinity will ensure that his genetic material will be carried forward in his children. Indeed as Tobin argues, Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* revealed that “Man’s own human history, left so long to the fragmented particularizing of chaotic events, could now be written under the paternal guarantee of a single law governing permanence and change” (35).

Perowne’s description of evolution as his religion means that procreation achieves the status of foundational and moral good. Even the city itself, a “biological masterpiece – millions teeming around the accumulated and layered achievements of centuries, as though around a coral reef,” (3) is seemingly spawning. Perowne’s faith based evolution doesn’t allow for dissenters.

24 Perowne admits to not having read The Origin of Species, but has, since Daisy prescribed it to him, been struggling through the autobiography of Darwin (54, 4). It’s odd that he would formulate his religion around a theory whose sacred text he hadn’t read.
The rule is evolution and it is “demonstrably true” (54). Everything evolves, except of course the rule. Perowne’s view of evolution as a religion suggests that he believes that everything can be explained by the natural selection of superior genetic characteristics carried forward through procreative acts, and that by extension his religion too has a “holy family” - the site of (regulated) procreative energy. Only when Perowne is at home does he find that nothing matters much, Whatever’s been troubling him is benignly resolved. The pilots are harmless Russians, Lily is well cared for, Daisy is home with her book, those two million marchers are good-hearted souls, Theo and Chas have written a fine song, Rosalind will win her case on Monday and is on her way, it’s statistically improbable that terrorists will murder his family tonight, his stew, he suspects, might be his best, all the patients on next week’s list will come through, Grammaticus means well really, and tomorrow – Sunday – will deliver Henry and Rosalind into a morning of sleep and sensuality. (208)

In this passage, there is a degree of situational irony for the re-reader of the novel, as it cancels out the very possibility (terrorists invading his home) that s/he knows is about to happen. However upon a first reading of the novel, Perowne’s statement of relaxed confidence at home is to be accepted at face value. In the confines of the domestic space, a narrative about time extending behind and beyond Perowne acts as a comforting salve against the chaotic social reality that exists outside the walls of the house. At home, Perowne can indulge in his fantasy of “dissociation”.

The novel bespeaks “advocacy of the new Darwinism”, a movement that James M. Mellard characterizes as “that emerging mode of philosophy and interpretation claiming roots in cognitive science associated with brain science, evolutionary psychology, and evolutionary
social science”, with which McEwan is “overtly allied” (1). Mellard identifies what he describes as a new religion of this “new naturalism in literary theory” (7) in “the nineteenth-century novel’s social machinery” (5). Central to that novel’s “social machinery” was of course the nuclear family. So often, as Cohen notes, nineteenth century domestic novels “deal explicitly with problems of family stability and have young women as their central characters” (25). *Saturday* boils this instability down to one crucial moment threatening the family with violence, mental illness, rape and dissolution through death. Daisy meanwhile reveals her out of wedlock pregnancy and demonstrates how she is dissolving the family’s stability from within, only for the novel to conclude upon the revelation that she and baby will return home and thus restore stability once more.

It is no great revelation to suggest that the father is traditionally figured as the head of the nuclear family unit. “For the majority of the Western world *father* historically denotes a biologically fixed male status of structural authority within the nuclear group” (Boose 19). As such, the role of the father operates in *Saturday* as a site where Perowne can return to reorient his masculine sense of self – particularly on the heels of the emasculating encounter with Baxter and the squash game that he reluctantly lost. Cohen describes the nuclear family as “the unit of parents and children living under one roof, bound together by strong emotional ties and relatively detached from the surrounding community and from other blood relations” (9). Indeed the Perowne family appears to be a tight knit unit, particularly Henry, Theo and Rosalind. Daisy, meanwhile, has moved away from London and attends the rally in Hyde Park and is invigorated by the energy of the crowd. However, by the end of the novel, we learn that Daisy will be reintegrated into the family unit. She will move home to raise her soon to be born child.
Lynda Boose describes a “four-cornered nuclear enclosure that is at once the source for and the product of Western ideologies about the family” and notes that in this dynamic, “the father weighs most and the daughter least. To consider the daughter and father in relationship means juxtaposing the two figures most asymmetrically proportioned in terms of gender, age, authority and cultural privilege”(20). But nevertheless, it is Daisy in whom Perowne is most invested. It is a feature of the patriarch that he protects this “least privileged” member of the family if only for the simple reason that in her diminutiveness she signifies the importance of that role and therefore his usefulness. Though Theo and Perowne negotiate each other with a distanced, cool but affectionate interest, Perowne considers Daisy in an entirely different way, a way that signals the extent to which the novel represents the father-daughter dynamic as one which reinforces traditional masculinity.

Perowne wants very much to infantilize her, for the smaller the daughter is, the larger the father ostensibly becomes. When Daisy arrives home he embraces her and “[i]t’s the child’s body he feels as he almost lifts her clear off the floor” (186). He remembers how when she was a child, “[h]er daddy belonged to her,” but “[d]espite his fantasies, this is no child” he sees before him (187). He tries to shake himself from returning again and again to thoughts of her lovers. He reminds himself to “try harder to rid himself of this gloomy fixation. She’s bound to love a man other than himself” (188). They proceed to get into a heated argument about the Iraq war with Daisy taking the side of the protestors and Perowne arguing vehemently that Saddam has to be stopped and that terrorism is a real threat, conflating Saddam with Al Qaeda. While they are arguing, Henry becomes sad, longing for the “dispute to come to an end”, preferring it “minutes ago, when she told him she loved him” (196). His vulnerability is measurable by the extent to which he is alienated by a strong-willed daughter. Of course it is Daisy who ultimately
smoothes over the argument, finding herself back in the glowing light of her father’s infatuation with her. Later on she weeps into his shoulder and again he fantasizes about her being a child at home in bed with her stuffed toys and laments the mysteriousness that womanhood has bestowed upon her. This is the moment, highlighted earlier, when the register of the narration shifts to allow the reader to become Perowne, perhaps even positing the reader as male: “You stare at a head, a lushness of hair, and can only guess” (211). The reader is invited to become complicit in rendering women, and young beautiful daughters in particular, as sensual, mysterious objects of wonder. Perowne does not reminisce about Theo’s puberty, nor does he speculate, never mind recoil, at thoughts of his son’s sexual life. These kinds of thoughts are reserved for Daisy. Most tellingly, in the home invasion scene, McEwan sets up a fantasy of heroic masculinity, where the young woman is threatened with rape, but ultimately rescued from that fate by a heroic man. It could be argued, as Clark Hillard does, that she saves herself by reading “Dover Beach” aloud, and “deflecting” the rape. However, the novel makes clear that it is her grandfather, the “old poet” who “told Daisy what to do” (285, 275), and it is Theo’s “strong guitarist’s hands” that come to the rescue (236). Rosalind makes it clear though that Perowne was the real hero. Grammaticus “was brave all right”, she says to Henry, “but you were amazing. Right from the beginning I could see you planning and calculating” (275). In any rape rescue scenario two versions of hypermasculinity are evident: the sexually aggressive and the heroic. Shohat and Stam consider what they call the “rape and rescue trope” in terms of colonialism, noting that the “White woman” is the “desired object of both male protagonists and male antagonists” (156). In light of this trope, Daisy is the desired object of both the savage intruder and her heroic father. Perowne’s masculinity is thus shored up both by his infantilizing of Daisy (recalling a time when
she most needed his protection), and by the way that the novel sexualizes her as (near) rape victim to be rescued by her heroic and desiring father.

The novel’s preservation of the four-cornered nuclear family thus revolves around the threatened daughter. The novel reduces Daisy to a symptomatic role. Daisy, who is revealed to be pregnant when the intruders make her strip naked and demand that she recite from her new collection of poetry, becomes the object of the family’s focus – the symptom of their vulnerability – and the justification for the reconstitution of the masculine ideal. Working from within family systems therapy, Cohen explains within closed families, a symptomatic member emerges, one around whom the family must converge in order to maintain the “organism of the family” (13). In fact, Daisy occupies this role three times. Firstly the sole reason why the family is gathering on the night when the novel takes place is that Daisy is returning home with the proofs of her new book, and the family is resolved upon her and her grandfather making peace. In order for that to happen, Daisy must accommodate his pride and arrogance and swallow her legitimate anger at his dismissal of her work. Secondly and most obviously, it is Daisy who is forced to disrobe and who becomes the representative of what is at stake in the novel’s protection of the nuclear family: the pregnant female body. Finally, when it is revealed that Daisy wishes to return to London to live at home with the rest of her family when the baby arrives, she is subsumed back into the closed family system and abdicates her potential to become “the character most formed to be adaptive” and to “voyage out’ of a confining space and role into new uncharted relational configurations” (Cohen 34). Daisy’s return home calms Henry, it resolves his anxiety, fulfills a masculinist wish. With Daisy nearby he is needed in a way that uncomplicatedly reinforces his masculinity.

**What Crisis?**
Butler writes that gender norms are “continually haunted by their own inefficacy” and therefore there are constant efforts afoot (Butler doesn’t specify where, but we can infer that she means in discourse, in psychosexuality, in public media, by the state, the family etc.) “to install and augment their jurisdiction” (Bodies 237). Indeed Saturday works very hard to convince us that there is no crisis of masculinity. It rejects the idea that the “hyperbolic versions of ‘man’ and ‘woman’” are “compulsory performances” – at least in Perowne’s case. Baxter, it seems, is still caught up in a hyperbolic performance of manhood, but his illness challenges the way in which we can read that as any kind of straightforward statement about gender. Rather it is more suggestive that only the criminally ill still hold on to hyperbolic performances of gender to shore up their identities. Instead, McEwan’s characters appear to accept that the superficial transformation of sex roles has undone patriarchy. Instead of masculinity in crisis, what Saturday depicts is a masculinity that is adamant that there is no crisis. There is no threat to masculinity. Though the sex roles have been transformed and the sexes appear to share household duties, the heteromasculine norm endures as a powerful “inapproximable ideal”(14). It depicts a world where those superficial changes, though they haven’t impacted the rest of the world – there are still radical protestors, violent criminals, and flaming airplanes about – at least preserve civility, humanity, graciousness within the attractive Perowne family. What Perowne and the novel end up depicting then, is a universe where in spite of changes in who does the dishes, patriarchy continues to authorize the propertied, white, educated male who, in a trade off, defends the economic interests, the make-up, and the iconic cultural institutions – represented by Darwin’s verdant England, by the “bold and brilliant” Tate Modern conversion (Sat 144), and most obviously by Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” - that have all contributed to the constitution of the modern British state. There is a resistance to the idea that masculinity is in
crisis here. There is instead an overwhelming confidence in the fantasy of progress that underpins and continues to ensure the ongoing success of the “privileged West,” which in this novel is represented by the straight white male protagonist, that one need never reinscribe traditional masculinity, because in fact it was never erased. The novel repeatedly falls short of representing a change, a coming to consciousness that might typically accompany such a jarring series of events. Instead the novel concludes with Perowne cuddling his wife (with whom he’s just had sex to the erotic pitch of their near death experience), kissing her neck, and reassuring himself that “there is always this” (289, my emphasis). We are back where we began, and not, it must be noted, with an article of faith or hope, but with certainty. Perowne, like the Victorian novelists that Tobin names in her study, ultimately sees that even though “the center might not hold…the structure would” (36) 25. Though Perowne bears the hallmarks of having been superficially transformed by feminist thinking, the novel finally shores up traditional masculinity, demonstrating its enduring structural authority, particularly in the family. In spite of the day that it has been, Perowne is sure that what is, what has been, will always be. There is not a doubt in his mind as he drifts into the conclusion of this exceptional day.

This chapter concludes with the image of the Perownes safe in bed, Henry dreaming of Daisy’s imminent return home. It signals the way in which this thesis will progress. This chapter was largely focused, as is the novel it treats, on the male figure and his negotiation of masculinity within a domestic space. It proceeds now to a chapter which is far more attentive to the father-daughter relationship and investigates the way in which that relationship, when dramatized within an Oedipal frame, suggests an incestuous undercurrent. My next chapter, which focuses on three novels by John Banville, will demonstrate that Banville’ novels are thick with Oedipal drama. I argue that this drama has repercussions not only for how

25 Dickens, Bronte, James among others.
heteromasculinity is constructed and maintained particularly in relation to the forbidden object, the daughter, but also for how the crisis of masculinity is discursively produced.
Chapter Two

Incest, Masculinity and the Reification of Gender Categories in John Banville

“According to the psychoanalytic perspective, the normative ideal of multiplicitous genders would always be a peculiar mix of memory and fantasy to be understood in the context of an oedipally conditioned subject in an affective quarrel with the incest taboo. This is the stuff of great literature, perhaps, but not necessarily practicable in the cultural struggle to renovate gender relations as we know them.” –Judith Butler (“Variations…” 35)

“The older one gets, the more confused, and for an artist I think that is quite a good thing: you allow in more of your instinctual self; your dreams, fantasies and memories.”– John Banville in interview with Hedda Friberg

In these two excerpts Butler and Banville agree that fantasy and memory are what constitute “great” literature. John Banville’s novels are psychological dramas, fictions of interiority often criticized for being overly stylized, wordy, and even pretentious. Banville is an unabashed aesthete and has what John Kenny calls an “aesthetics first principle” (6). His novels exhibit his preference for style over function, for art as distinct from politics, and for an evocative word image over a straightforward representation of the world as it is. In spite of the psychological drama that characterizes a typical Banville novel, he has repeatedly rejected and railed against
psychoanalytic readings of his novels, preferring the “old fashioned” style of literary criticism characteristic of a time when literary criticism was practiced by ‘men of letters’ as opposed to poststructuralist academics (12). As Kenny suggests, Banville “staunchly opposes any displacement in literature of primary aesthetic concerns to make room for overt politicizing or moralizing” (5). By contrast, in the realm of academic critique, Butler’s theories of gender performativity have been mobilized to serve political critiques of heteronormativity and racial categories, and to formulate an ethics that reckons with the juridically constituted subject. And yet in Butler’s statement, which separates the “affective” from the “practicable”, it is possible to locate Banville’s insistent distinction between art-for-art’s sake and “the real world”. For Banville would agree with Butler that, “the stuff of great literature” as Butler puts it, has no instrumental value and as such should not be employed as a tool “to renovate gender relations” or any other kind of relations for that matter. Herein though lie their fundamental differences; whereas Butler, and this thesis, clearly see the “renovation” of gender hierarchies as a primary struggle that demands our energy and vigilance, in Banville’s fiction and in his public persona, not only does he eschew such political struggle, but often he does not even recognize that hierarchies of power exist.

Instead, in Banville’s work “all is psyche, but all is also world which disarms literalist critical approaches” (Coughlan 83). Coughlan remarks that his protagonists’ articulations are poised between “self-serving, self-pitying, and moving” which results in thin characters who ought to be read as part of the complicated formalism that characterises Banville’s prose. The characters are not realist in that they rarely exist in a recognizable universe (as opposed to the specific place and time of Saturday). The narration is focalized from a single perspective with other characters thus appearing to be functions of the focalizing psyche. I agree that Banville’s
allusive prose is not strictly realist, therefore it is difficult to demand that, when his novels refer to the incestuous – the focus of this chapter – they treat it as a traumatic material reality. What is more reasonable, given Banville’s style, is to pay attention to the way that the psychosexual terms in which he casts his image-heavy and dream-like unreal sequences are grounded in the material reality of gender categorization. As such, paying attention to the incestuous in Banville does not reveal perversion, but rather reveals how, unlike Butler’s argument in *Antigone’s Claim* about the radical potential of incest, incest can be and is deployed in Banville’s novels in the maintenance of gender hierarchies and the defence of masculinity in “crisis”.

### In a Foreign Country: Banville and Women

“You see, I don't regard women as different,” Banville tells Derek Hand in a 2006 interview; “I don't really see there being two genders. Certainly the women that I love and have loved, I regard as goddesses--there is no doubt about that. Different from me, originating from somewhere else” (Friberg 212). Banville uttered an even more troubling statement in 1994, a “clanger” as John Kenny calls it:

> I’ve always felt that women came from Mars! We were put here, then the spaceships came down and the women sprang out of pods and men said “my God! Look at this” and stood there with their mouths open – which is how we’ve been ever since! Forget this stuff about spare ribs, women are pods from Mars! … But they are just so absolutely ravishingly beautiful. They are everything we’re not. They have this kind of tentativeness and seem to understand how things work, whereas we spend a lifetime trying to find out the same things. (Qtd in Kenny 153)
He literally others women in these gestures, citing their origins in an extraterrestrial beyond while in the same utterance he denies the duality of gender. These are extraordinarily contradictory statements – especially the first one, because what begins as a seemingly transcendent attitude towards gender is completely undermined by the ease with which Banville others women in relation not just to himself, but to the mortal world as well – calling them goddesses from another sphere. These are careless statements which in many ways unproductively recall the antiquated liberal feminist ideal of female moral superiority that is firmly a product of first wave feminism of the nineteenth century and which can be located once again in a more aggressive, anti-patriarchal guise in the radical feminism and profeminist men’s movement of the mid- and late twentieth century (Stoper and Johnson 193). In this view of gender, women’s moral supremacy can be explained in terms of a “natural law” that supposes that because “she was uncorrupted by power”, woman “had acquired a moral perspective by being a suffering victim of immorally exercised [read: masculine] power” (Stoper and Johnson 194). Stoper and Johnson argue that the faultiness of this argument about female moral superiority lies in the fact that a superiority “based on innocence” and an innocence based on lack of power forestalls any acquisition of power which, they argue, is seen to corrupt innocence and thus woman’s claim to “superiority and … legitimacy” (203). When Banville makes women into goddesses, he exalts them, and simultaneously pats them on the head, revealing that in his worshipful attitude towards women, in the exalted mystery he imbues them with, is a refusal to allow them to be anything but flawless – or in other words he divests them of humanity, culpability, complexity26.

26 Both Banville’s and the historical pro-feminist positions are reminiscent of McEwan’s pronouncement in his 1983 Libretto that “women’s time” represents the last best hope for the future.
Banville’s 2005 Booker Prize-winning novel *The Sea* dramatizes his troubling and troubled attitude towards women. That book, narrated by Max Morden, is clearly about Max’s failed attempts to make sense of and peace with his relationships to the women in his life, past and present. The action – if one can call it that – revolves around Max, a recent widower, who is deposited at his childhood seaside vacation spot (The Cedars) by his grown daughter Claire, and who indulges in memories of his prepubescent sexual awakening at the hands of two generations of Grace women – Connie and Chloe. In typical Banvillian style, the prose is painfully self-conscious, and the narrator “subsumes” his own deconstructive tendency in a contradictory attempt to “satisfy the rage for order” (Kenny 15). The “rage for order” in *The Sea* becomes a literal rage, an anger that turns into self-destructive drunken Lear-like wandering along the intemperate seaside. Max comes to this rage as he realizes that he has been disappointed by all the women in his life: his unsophisticated mother, his dead wife, his bold daughter, the fantastic Connie Grace, her nymphet daughter Chloe, and the ineffable Rose Vavasour, a lesbian who is utterly unavailable to him. Finally his daughter, who is characterized as rather more like Goneril or Regan than Cordelia, collects him from the seaside to bring him home and look after him, a prospect that he cannot abide.

The fraught father-daughter relationship in this novel and in Banville’s other novels *Eclipse* and *Shroud*, hints at one of the points of anxiety that masculinity studies identify as producing the crisis of masculinity. Though typically associated with the sociobiological and conservative iterations of masculinity, the charge that feminism’s challenge to patriarchy results in the emasculation of the father in the domestic space and his inability to exercise authority in the home – in particular in relation to his children – is readily identifiable in some form throughout the men’s rights movement (Clatterbaugh 205). Banville’s depiction of father-
daughter relationships reifies traditional kinship arrangements whereby the daughter is figured as an object whose departure from the father’s authority compounds his crisis and directs affective sympathy towards him.

Banville “applauds those who meet ‘the challenge of apocalyptic French theory with a humanist resolve’” (Kenny 12). He prefers men of letters to theorists, and in style and tone, is associated with early mid-twentieth-century writing. Derek Hand suggests that readers ought to “consider his art as oscillating between a modernist and a postmodernist perspective” (3). Any oscillation toward postmodernity is a result of temporality and not necessarily due to an explicit faith or adherence to postmodernity. His writing, having taken place in an era of deconstruction and post-structuralism, is nonetheless “not work that views the contemporary postmodern moment where the free-play of language reigns supreme as a liberated and liberating situation” (Hand 3). Rather, as John Kenny puts it, “his work is postmodern by virtue of the era in which he writes and lives. His is postmodern by virtue of the deployment of ‘those introverted narrative tics’ which are part of a lineage of self-conscious fiction that ‘stretches back to the very origins of literary fiction’” (13).

Banville would like his difficult novels to speak for themselves, to function as art for art’s sake and to uphold his own “aesthetic first principles” (Kenny 6). He would like not to have meaning read into them, for in such readings his “determination to work independently of his immediate social and cultural location” is threatened (McMinn page). However, a reading so neglectful of the context of its creation is irresponsible. As Sean Burke puts it, “all too heavy an investment in the concept of the author as transcendental subject forbids methodological returns to the author in those more fecund areas of will, relevant biographical detail, the relations of works in an oeuvre to one another, the issues of responsibility and so on” (204). Part of that “and
so on”, is of course gender. The transformation of cultural politics, in particular in relation to gender, since the mid-twentieth century makes readings of Banville’s novels which fail to locate him in his present, and which fail to identify how he deploys gender, incomplete.

The incestuous undercurrent, which in *The Sea* emerges alongside a narrative about a specifically masculine decline, characterizes Banville’s representation of masculinity in this novel and in *Eclipse* and *Shroud*. These novels continually reinvest in the “oedipally conditioned subject” as a means of shoring up masculinity. In the introduction I suggested that the crisis of masculinity is a discursive one which has resulted in some male writers and their protagonists taking an aggressive defensive position against this deconstruction which alienates both feminism and radical gender studies more broadly. That is, studies which are alert to the representation of gender categories, and which agitate towards the renovation of those categories, fall to the wayside as masculinity studies and the men’s movement reinstall heterosexual white masculinity at the center of inquiry. As Bryce Traister puts it, lately there has “been a restoration of the representations of men—produced by men and analyzed for the most part by men—to the center of academic cultural criticism”(276). The rise of masculinity studies has initiated both an academic and a popular men’s movement which mobilizes sympathy in the defence of masculinity, a term which all too often remains a singular category in the field. Masculinity therefore problematically continues to refer to the masculine ideal.

Banville’s novels evidence a similar strategy as the men’s movement. His fiction repeatedly centers upon a male protagonist “in crisis” and plays upon his vulnerability to enlist sympathy for him. The men who narrate *Shroud*, *Eclipse* and *The Sea* are all at some anxious turning point. *The Sea’s* Max Morden is recently widowed and has taken himself off to the seaside to have a breakdown, while *Eclipse’s* Alexander Cleave retreats to the countryside to get
away from his wife after experiencing a breakdown of sorts. An actor, Alex no longer feels he can pull off the charade. While he is there, he learns of the suicide death of his daughter Cass, the same Cass who is entangled with Axel Vander in *Shroud*. Axel Vander has recently killed his wife, making himself a widow and so travels to Turin to encounter the young woman, Cass, who threatens to unmask him for the fraud he is. The crises that these three men endure can be described as crises of authority and legitimacy. Aging, and facing irrelevance, all three men exile themselves. Dreading their loneliness, Alex and Axel find a way, through the a younger daughter figure, to come to terms with a renewed sense of self, while Max appears to be a corrective to the idealistic note upon which *Shroud* and *Eclipse* end. The daughter will not ultimately save you, hints *The Sea*. Max, resentful of his independent daughter, resigns himself to indifference, and submits to the mysteries of death and the sea that he finally admits are greater than him.

In Banville’s novels, we are not privy to the daughters’ impressions of their fathers. From Cass, all we get are dreamlike sequences where her spectral father haunts her attempts at an adult, albeit perplexing, sexual awakening. Perhaps their lack of a voice in Banville is explainable by Banville’s claims that all men feel overwhelming fear with respect to women. Joseph McMinn notes a “constant fear of women felt by Banville’s narrators” (12), and Derek Hand also notes that at times Banville is more preoccupied with “venting his spleen” towards women than telling his story (86). According to Banville, men “have a deep fear of all women. They fear the power women carry. The power to cause them pain, the power to rob them of their equilibrium” (qtd in Kenny 153). In this utterance, Banville comes across as very much like the anti-feminist men’s rights advocates who argue that it is “men who were the more powerless and the more oppressed” (Clatterbaugh 205). After all, as Connell argues, it is feminism which activates the “reversals and resistances” that continue to represent “difficulties for patriarchal
power” and which “define a problem of legitimacy which has great importance for the politics of masculinity” (Connell 74). Women, particularly those that challenge Banville’s focalizers, are represented with suspicion, fear and at times even, derision.

Max’s daughter Claire particularly disturbs him. She is a daughter who refuses to submit to an authority, or more accurately, is oblivious to the authority Max claims is his by birth (his own birth and hers as well). The father-daughter relationship in The Sea is rarely commented upon in the reviews of the novel, reviews which nonetheless attend to the precarious condition of the protagonist. John Kenny calls Morden “plainly moving” and suggests that “Morden is [Banville’s] most kindly treated principal since the eponymous Kepler not least in his depicted relationship with his ‘blue stocking’ daughter Claire” (178). This is a surprising assessment considering the mixture of confusion and derision with which Max treats Claire, not to mention Kenny’s use of ‘blue stocking,’ a pejorative term that condemns Claire’s intellectualism and turns her intelligence into a point of distaste. It is a vulgar critique of her appearance which, as the term implies, has suffered because of her studiousness. “Morden's grief feels movingly real,” writes Finn Fordham in the Guardian. And in the New York Review of Books, Gabriele Annan disagrees with some of the reviews that paint the novel as pretentious and overly stylized, remarking that “Max's thoughts are original and sophisticated and they help to define the clever, neurotic, and vulnerable narrator”. These sympathetic reviewers of Max Morden are among the few who even pay attention to the characters to begin with. The majority of reviews of the novel criticize it on the level of style (too much of it) and plot (not enough), but rarely suggest that it takes any kind of position vis a vis masculinity.

It is as though Max’s self-consciousness and anxiety are enough to insulate both him and Banville against charges of misogyny and aggression. Dominic Head apologizes for Banville as
such: “While undoubtedly, Banville can be taken to task for his representation of women, in his
defence it could be said that for him, as characters, they are and remain, a foreign country and he
does not speak the language” (113). We must be aware of how our sympathies are enlisted
towards a character and an author who are unapologetic for their misogyny and
misrepresentation of women. Readings that are uncritically sympathetic of Max Morden must
necessarily be located within the process whereby masculinity studies “normalized” the idea of
masculinity in crisis,

yet failed to sufficiently recognize the historical features of … masculinity
remarkable for its satisfied ego, its imperial drive, its individual power, its sexual
aggression, and its assumption of citizenship as a matter of birth and God-given
right. While heteromasculinity may well imply a gender that is performative and
constructed, it also recalls an historical gender that was anything but hobbled by
its constructed status. (Traister 299)

The ubiquity of masculinity studies has made space for Banville’s kind of male protagonist, who
“fails to realize that [his] existence is already decided by gender” (Bodies x), who, rather than
being self conscious about how his gender determines him, chooses to locate an “I” that precedes
his gendered self. Butler points out that in de Beauvoir’s formulation, men define women as
other and in so doing “dispose of their [male] bodies,” making “the masculine ‘I’ a noncorporeal
soul” (“Variations” 28). Meanwhile, Max dreams of trying to write a will on a typewriter that is
lacking the “word I. The letter I, that is, small and large”(71). It is as though Max, now no
longer a husband and estranged from his daughter, realizes just how much his sense of self was
tied to his relationship to these women. Being aware of de Beauvoir and Butler means that we
cannot help but read the “I” that Morden dreams is missing from his typewriter as the “masculine
noncorporeal”. If he doesn’t have the “I” then he cannot write a will, he dies leaving absolutely nothing behind. His death, without a will, would prevent his lifeless body from activating an economy of inheritance. In missing the “I” he becomes merely corporeal, merely a dead body. In this dream Morden fantasizes about being purely corporeal. However, we must be aware of the false sympathy that this passage creates for Max. After all, it is not a feminist fantasy where Max embraces his bodily self, for in the previous paragraph he reveals his disgust of his body, “a crawling repugnance of my own flesh” (70). The fantasy of this “I”-less typewriter is also most powerfully undercut by the fact that the novel the reader holds in her hands is replete with Max’s narrated “I”’s.

Max’s masculinity had, until his wife’s death, depended on him othering her in relation to his masculine “I” (as Banville himself is adept at doing to women in his careless “clangers”). Anna is dead from the outset of the novel, and by extension then, so is Max’s noncorporeal masculinity. We do not arrive at a crisis moment as a kind of apotheosis of a process of self-reflection, as so many men in the first wave of masculinity studies did. The novel is founded on our acceptance of a “truth” that masculinity is under threat of extinction.

After the death of his wife Anna, Max is plagued by the realization that he has never made himself responsible for his actions, that he has been a “distinct no-one”, content to accept the fact of his powerlessness, having inherited a world sans “grand narratives” to help him define himself. He rages against this world, reinserting misogynist aggression into the void he is presented with. And then, through the interiorized voice of the narrator: “You cunt, you fucking cunt, how could you go and leave me like this…How could you” (196). It is not offered as a question. It is an accusation made against both Max’s departed mother, his dead wife and his daughter as well. This slur is bookended by his description of a scene he is watching on the TV—
the young elephants “trot contentedly between their mother’s legs” – and his observation that the living room reminds him of the “rented rooms” his mother and he lived in throughout his adolescence (196). The musing on the sweetness of the young elephants is interrupted by the violent and most misogynist epithet hurled at his wife Anna, tempering Max’s vulnerability.

What is most disturbingly revealed in the self-conscious and deliberate construction of the scene (slur sandwiched between pathos-laden images of children needing their mothers) is how misogyny is shielded from critique by accompanied expressions of vulnerability. Max can reveal his sense of loss only when that vulnerability is cushioned by aggressive anger towards the abandoning woman. Misogyny veiled in this way becomes part of the means by which a refurbished traditional masculinity has come to be constituted. His masculine “I” is insulated from both memories of and the depiction of maternal affection. He is watching a documentary about elephants which suggests that female affection is “naturalized” or essentialized on the screen in front of him. The reality of his experience with women, though, is that in death or rejection, they are “fucking cunts” who leave him. Is he accusing them of abandoning what ought to be their “natural” role of taking care of him? Or is he angrily realizing for the first time that their “role” is just that, a performance of gender that he had believed to be an essential quality of femaleness? Is he just coming to terms with the fact he has been fooled his whole life into believing that women were made to care for him? The conclusion of the novel, when he realizes that Connie Grace’s come-ons were never meant for him, that they were in fact meant for Rose, implies this realization that, over the course of his life, Max has repeatedly misread female affection for him. While Max’s outburst might be read as deep pathology, as insecurity and as a response to the grief he feels at the loss of feminine affection, “cunt”, and “fucking cunt” those most hateful words are chosen specifically to wound.
Max’s cursing of women whom he perceives to have withheld feminine attention and nurturing, is part of his wish to have been self-made, to have emerged without a burden of influence. He wishes that he could have “cancelled [his] shaming parents on the spot, would have popped them like bubbles of sea spray” (37). At one stage he recalls his mother asking about Anna, “Why does she keep calling you Max?… Your name is not Max”. Max rebukes her, telling her “It is now” and asking her, “Did you not read the things I sent you, the things that I wrote, with my name printed on them?” (210). We never come to know what his mother called him. To the reader, he is only Max, constituted in the novel we read, and self-made in the authored publications he sends his mother. In his eyes, the new name attached to publications remakes him, but, of course, this un- and re-making is a process that cannot be enacted for his mother. His choice of name recalls an attempt at a masculinity that suggests that Max considers, or would like to consider, the masculine as already “greater-than”, as a superlative that strives beyond itself to achieve the [M]ax-imum. One might call him Max-culine, or claim that he expects to be considered more- than (Mor-dan). With a Dublin accent the phrase “more than” would sound almost exactly as North Americans would pronounce Mordan, with the d as a voiceless alveolar.

This naming is an example of his attempts at self-making, and at exerting authoritative control. The five female characters who surround Max continually thwart those attempts – both individually and in collaboration with each other, making his “Maximum Morethan” masculinity in effect parodic. Chloe, the nymphet who recalls Lolita’s Annabel Leigh, both beckons and frustrates his pubescent longings. “She was never less than alarming,” notes the narrator (81). She aggressively provokes him and it is left in no doubt that Max, like Humbert Humbert, was merely a pawn in Chloe’s games. Claire is similarly depicted as a provoker. She is depicted as
an aggressive force – seeming to become exasperated with Max at the drop of a hat and ultimately undermining, and disapproving of his every decision. She refuses to let him drive one night, after he has drunk most of the contents of his hip flask, and a fight ensues. He finally decides to give her the silent treatment, drawing on his long remembered truth about women: “wait long enough and one will have one’s way” (67). By the end of the novel, after he has suffered his drunken fall by the sea, Claire is depicted as relishing his decline:

seizing the advantage offered by my temporary infirmity, [she] went on to direct, a figurative hand cocked on her hip, that I must pack up and leave the Cedars forthwith and let her take me home – home, she says! – where she will care for me, which care will include, I am given to understand, the withholding of all alcoholic stimulants, or soporifics, until such time as the Doctor, him again, declares me fit for something or other, life, I suppose. What am I to do? How am I to resist? (259).

There is a scene in *The Sea* when Max recalls accidentally walking in on his barely pubescent daughter just getting out of the shower. She had “neglected to lock” the door and he took in the sight of her, naked except for a towel wrapped around her head. Max remembers “She turned to look at me over her shoulder in a fall of calm light from the frosted window, quite unflustered, gazing at me out of the fullness of herself” (63). Ten years later he wonders, “What did I feel, seeing her there? An inner chaos, overlaid by tenderness and a kind of fright” (63). The chaos and fright that Max feels are at the perception of the brash confidence of this woman whom he is prohibited from possessing, and yet who encourages him into the room (she fails to lock the door). The fright and chaos are both the shock of desire as well as an accompanying impotence that must attend the prohibition of that desire. In response to that impotence the
daughter in this situation is capable of seizing the power that floats free from the father in this moment of thwarted sexual desire. In the seizing of that power there lies the transformative seed that in his study on Lot’s daughters, Robert Polhemus points out is every daughter’s to plant.

Connie Grace, Chloe’s mother, provokes Max’s nascent sexuality, prodding it to life. At the end of the novel, Max comes to realize that she has deceived him, her provocations were not meant for him. The largesse of her sexuality overwhems the childish Max (or whatever it is that he was called back then), turning her into something excessive, something beyond woman and terrifying him with her sublimity. “She smelled of sweat and cold cream and, faintly of cooking fat. Just another woman, in other words, and another mother, at that. Yet to me she was in all her ordinariness as remote and remotely desirable as any a painted pale lady with unicorn and book” (88). Max sees her as “wholly real, thick-meated, edible, almost” (87-8). Connie Grace occupies a place of fantastical desire while at the same time her actuality, her flesh-and-bone-ness, unravels his limited and childish capacity to deal with that desire. When he would try to evoke her in his childish fantasizing, he “broke into sobs, lavish, loud and thrillingly beyond all control” (89). The women in the novel serve as frustrations to his desire to assert himself as “a man”. The relationship between Connie Grace and Rose Vavasour that is only revealed in the last pages of the novel plays out as a conspiracy by the two women to thwart the fulfillment of his sexual desire and humiliate him in the process. When Miss Vavasour reveals that it was Mrs. and not Mr. Grace whom she loved, Max re-remembers “the day of the picnic” and of Miss V “sitting behind [him] on the grass and looking where [he] was avidly looking and seeing what was not meant for [him] at all” (263). Connie Grace’s provocations were actually meant for Rose, the governess (also known as Miss Vavasour – though their being one and the same person is not immediately obvious to the reader), whose homosexuality when it is revealed to him at the
conclusion of the novel, turns on its head everything he took to be narrative truth about his childhood, and confirms his most traumatic suspicion that women’s affection as well as the female form are not always and everywhere pointedly displayed for his pleasure. Max’s great loss in the novel is this realization that neither female affection nor the female body is exclusively arranged for his pleasure. Ultimately the fact that this registers as Max’s greatest point of crisis reveals the “intensity of his need for emotional recognition and affirmation” and his unwillingness to share this need with anyone, especially his daughter (Coughlin 86).

**Fathers and Daughters**

The masculine crises in Banville’s novels are specifically played out in relation to the daughters in these novels. Robert Polhemus’s study *Lot’s Daughters* offers a cultural and historiographical reading of the Lot myth that reveals how the family drama becomes part of the public domain and how that drama reveals that the mechanisms of power – namely inheritance and desire – are at stake in the relationship between father and daughter. Polhemus argues that daughters/daughter figures who are erotically tied up with their father/father figures are involved in a process of transforming patriarchal power into female agency. Though Polhemus attempts to address power imbalances between young men and women, his argument hinges on young women using their cunning, paired with their sexuality, in order to claim cultural inheritance and power from the older representative patriarchs. This rationalization of father-daughter incest specifically and of young female/older male relationship generally, reinforces the idea that power resides in the patriarch and that it must be claimed, and can only be claimed, by the sexually aggressive (and presumably attractive and heterosexual) younger woman. Polhemus imagines an alternative foundational myth to the Oedipal one that anchors psychoanalysis. Polhemus argues
that the incest between Lot and his daughters is as psychically powerful as Oedipus’s. Briefly; Lot, an inhabitant of Sodom, offers up his daughters (instead of his visitors – angels in disguise) to an angry mob that wants to rape the visitors. The angels stop him from sending the daughters out into the horde and reveal God’s plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. They lead Lot, his daughters, and his wife out of town telling them not to look back. Lot’s wife, though, does look back, and is transformed into a pillar of salt. Lot’s daughters, fearing they are the last people left alive, decide that they will get their father drunk and have sex with him in the hopes of being impregnated by him.

Polhemus traces responses to the Lot story over the ages, describing biblical interpretations from Talmudic scholars to Jesus, to Luther and Calvin. He notes that Luther is among the first to emphasize the Lot myth as a family tragedy. Luther “shows himself … as a pioneer of the sentimental imagination and even as author of the modern ‘family romance’” (65). Luther takes the sublimated family crisis of the myth and makes it the main cause of his concern. For Polhemus, Luther’s reading of the myth as well as Calvin’s far less sympathetic one, represent a shift in reading the myth. At the Reformation, the myth “moves beyond the margins of the bible” and begins to “dissolve into complexes and permeate the psychology of human desire”. What was a story about civic abuses and the destruction of the sinful city – becomes a story about a family under duress. And crucially, as the family drama supersedes the focus on civic breakdown it is clear that the family, with all of its erotic complications, has entered the public and political domain. Polhemus thus concludes that there are public implications to reading the Lot myth for its psychosexual moral, which are felt in all depictions of fathers and father figures and the daughters and daughter figures who love them. Polhemus finds a “Lot Complex” at work in Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*, in Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Morrison’s *Beloved*, in
Freud’s Anna O, in Dickens, Virginia Woolf, Bill Clinton, and Woody Allen, and many more. He argues that “stories about older males and younger females, about victimized people, about people living morally equivocal lives, about family crisis, as the defining crux of the human condition, about female agency, about the fluid nature of subjectivity and psychological projections have all become central to the modern imagination. Lot and Lot’s daughters are all around” (47). Certainly in Banville’s novels *Eclipse, Shroud* and *The Sea*.

Polhemus writes, “in Lot, the father-daughter relationship becomes indispensible in the making and preservation of culture, but Lot with its image of young females conspiring to take power and act also contains the seeds for transforming that patriarchal culture”(5). Like Butler in *Antigone’s Claim*, Polhemus reads in incest a radical possibility of disturbing the “logic of things”, in this case patriarchy (*Antigone* 25). Polhemus suggests that Lot and his daughters procreating in the desert, overlooking the ashes of Sodom and Gommorah and the salt pillar that was once Lot’s wife, form a narrative and psychic template for the relationship between older men and younger women more generally. He reads the myth as an embodiment of female agency at the expense of the fading patriarch while at the same time he has it represent the older man who, in his decline, seeks out the younger woman as a place to invest his “hopes” for the future. Also as in Butler, the line in Polhemus’ study between incest as material reality and as metaphor is shaky. Polhemus heralds father-daughter incest as it occurs in the Lot myth as a metaphor for women usurping traditionally masculine power. For him, the incest between Lot and his daughters can be read as the means by which Lot’s daughters (whom he reads as metonyms for all young women) “become conspiratorial, socially responsible agents”, moving from “chattel”

---

27 There would seem to be a connection here between Daisy Perowne and the Lot myth. However, Daisy is never empowered in the novel. Though she becomes the inheritor of the English poetic traditions, in order to do so she is neither cunning, nor does she act of her own free will. She is ordered to strip by Baxter, prompted to speak by her grandfather, and the words that come out of her mouth are Arnold’s.
to “become paradigmatic figures out to save the world”. In Polhemus’s formulation, the Lot story allows us to read the daughters as obliterating the rationalism that he attributes (in scare quotes) to the father as the heroic protectors of the future of humanity (11). When he reads incest as a material reality he argues that “humanity is an incest-surviving species”, similar to Butler’s argument that incest is “socially survivable” (Antigone 67). However, what Butler and Polhemus mean by socially survivable couldn’t be more divergent. Polhemus means that “civil order and society depend on the existence, control and benevolent use of incestuous affection” (9). Butler meanwhile finds that the recognition and acceptance of incestuous affection would transform “the logic of things” (Antigone 25) which refers to the civil and social order whose continuity rests upon incest, as Polhemus argues.

Katherine Rowe Karlyn would agree with Polhemus’s contention that there are figures of Lot and Lot’s daughters everywhere. She argues that “whenever a film or cultural narrative centers on a midlife male, a young girl who arouses his sexual or intense proprietary interest, and a mother who is missing or otherwise characterized as inadequate, the incest theme is likely to be lurking in the background” (71). Drawing on contemporary films, such as American Beauty, Karlyn argues, as I do in this chapter, that the incest motif is deployed as a means to direct sympathy “toward the male hero as victim”, a male hero whose “sensitivity”- Banville’s narrators are painfully self-conscious and alert to the sensuous world – “authorizes his transgression” (79, 78). Karlyn puts it succinctly: “the motif of father-daughter incest has emerged as a response to … the ‘crisis in masculinity’ evident in various men’s movements and popular expressions of nostalgia for the good old days … [and] the ‘crisis in the family’ attributed primarily but not exclusively to feminism”28. It is not clear whether she is suggesting

---

28 Karlyn doesn’t mention the threat to masculinity and the family that is posed by homosexuality, and lesbianism in particular. This is a point which will form the basis for my argument in the fourth chapter.
that the “crisis in masculinity” itself, or the transformation of traditional sex roles, has resulted in more depictions of father-daughter incest, or whether the men’s movements’ response to a discursive crisis of masculinity (which I argue is actually the deconstruction of gender categories more broadly and not a “crisis” that men are alone enduring) has allowed representations of father-daughter incest to emerge that depict the father somewhat more sympathetically.

In any case, in these narratives which fail to condemn incestuous desire, the daughters are in fact charged with manipulating the fathers. In fact it is sometimes their mere presence, or sometimes the presence of their ghosts – which call into question the legitimacy of their fathers’ /father figures’ authority. At the expense of the daughter’s death, as is the case with Cass for both Axel and Alex, the father is redeemed in his exalted grief for not only the loss of her young life, but more importantly, for the loss of her unborn child who represents both Axel and Alex’s legacy. Axel, in particular, hoped to be redeemed by the birth of his first child. Cass’s suicide leaves him once more in a limbo, in his own personal hell where he can exert control over no one or no thing. In the case of Max and his daughter Claire, her vilification directs the reader’s sympathy towards Max, turning his breakdown and increasing irrelevance into a point of pity, and making Claire’s treatment of her father an evil to which the novel continually returns in order to construct sympathy for the protagonist. While Cass is driven to suicide and Claire is reduced to a caricature of bad daughterhood, the novels refuse to hold the father responsible nor does the father betray any sense of responsibility for the fate of the daughter. In Banville’s representations of daughters they are not permitted to leave the realm of their father’s authority without either dying or being made into an outright bitch.

Lynda E. Boose considers the father-daughter relationship in terms of a traditional kinship arrangement, and notes the exchange value that the daughter represents. Boose remarks
that the daughter’s legitimacy emerges only when she departs from her father’s house for another man’s house and gives birth to a male heir. Following Lévi-Strauss, Boose notes the way that the exchange of a daughter from father to husband cements what Kosofsky Sedgwick has called a powerful “homosocial” relationship between the two men. Boose suggests that this rationale of “gift giving,” where the daughter is the object exchanged, “serves as a powerful way by which the loss of a daughter through marriage could be psychologically reconstructed as an investment. For losing one’s daughter through a transaction that the father controls, circumvents her ability ever to choose another man over him, thus allowing him to retain vestiges of his primary claim” (31). She explains further:

The bestowal design places the daughter’s departure from the father’s house and her sexual union with another male into a text defined by obedience to her father—not preference for an outside male. So long as the strategy operates, the loss of a daughter can be psychologically mitigated, and defeat by a rival male constructed into public rituals that redefine this transfer as the father’s magnanimous gift. Within this fiction, daughters do not abandon or displace their father.... Daughters leave their father’s house because their fathers decree and then enact this severance by giving them away (32).

In each of the novels that this thesis considers the father/father figure’s relationship to his daughter is put into crisis precisely because he is unable to enact this public ritual of exchanging his daughter, of bestowing her on another man and therefore maintaining authority over her and compensating for his own sense of loss. Henry Perowne’s daughter Daisy comes home pregnant and Perowne is forced to accept the idea of her being a young unmarried mother. Then he is forced to witness a thoroughly unworthy man strip her and threaten to take her, an act that

---

29 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick “Between Men” for an extended discussion of the homosocial.
Perowne decides is not meant to wound Daisy but to constitute a violent act of revenge against *Perowne*. David Lurie’s daughter Lucy is, in the first place, identified by David as a lesbian, which already forecloses the possibility of giving her away, but then she is raped and becomes pregnant. Her value as an object of exchange is further diminished for David. He refuses to condone her giving herself to her neighbour Petrus, the man who has perhaps orchestrated the rape in order that he may control Lucy and more importantly her property. In *Fun Home* Alison’s lesbianism, like Lucy’s, forecloses the possibility of this ritual occurring and throws her father’s closeted homosexuality into the light. Finally and most importantly for this chapter, Banville’s Max and Alex are both devastated by the loss of their roles as bestowers of their daughters on other men. Alex is haunted by his disappeared daughter Cass and her unborn child, or rather “the notion of a child”, and by the end of the novel goes so far as to appropriate another daughter, Lily, as a replacement. Alex does not know that Cass was involved with Axel Vander, an obvious replacement for Alex. Had he known that she had, for a brief moment before choosing death, effectively chosen her father, would he have been comforted? Meanwhile, in spite of her father Max having driven away her lover, Claire reunites with Jerome, “the chinless inamorato” that Max so despises (*The Sea*, 258). She barges into his room as he is recovering from his inebriated stumble by the sea and informs him that she and Jerome are engaged:

> For a moment, befuddled as I was, I did not know what she meant – engaged by whom, and as what? – a moment which, as it proved, was sufficient for my vanquishment. I have not managed to bring up the subject again, and every further

---

30 Because Lily’s father Quirke is not the protagonist of this novel, there is no mention made of Quirke’s trauma of losing his daughter to a man who is effectively his employer in a moment that echoes Irish big house narratives. But perhaps, Banville gives Quirke his say after all. In *Christine Falls*, Banville’s detective novel published under the name Benjamin Black, the main character, Quirke (not the same Quirke as in *Eclipse*) must deal with the trauma of realizing that the woman he thought was his rebellious niece (by marriage) is actually his daughter and has been raised by his brother-in-law. His alcoholism in the novel is an effect of the repression of that traumatic loss.
moment that passes further consolidates her victory over me. This is how, in a twinkling, these things are won and lost. (259)

This crisis of male parental authority in Banville references the controversies surrounding the changing role of fathers that enlivened the ideology of the early men’s movement. So much of the men’s rights movement focused on the rights of fathers who were deemed by anti-feminists to have been alienated from the lives of their children by feminism. Father’s rights continue to be a rallying cry for the most vehement of anti-feminist men’s movements. These novels represent fathers as having been abandoned and excluded from what has long been perceived as the father’s right to determine the terms of his daughter’s departure from his realm of authority: the home.

Foucault remarks in *A History of Sexuality* that “We must not forget that the discovery of the Oedipus complex was contemporaneous with the juridical organization of loss of parental authority” (130). He makes a connection between, on the one hand, incest as practice and pathology and, on the other, the loss of a father’s outright claim to control over his children. As the legitimacy of a father’s power over his daughters waned, incest took its powerful position as a desire which psychoanalysis set about revealing and then “alleviating– for those who suffered from the desire – the severity which repressed it.” (130). For the upper-class father who lamented the loss of authority over his daughter, the result was to reveal that in fact his desire for her was not about power, but rather about sex. In her feminine beguiling ways, the daughter could then be held (at least partly) responsible for the father’s anxious desire for her. In the meantime,

---

31 See Molly Dragiewicz “Patriarchy Reasserted: Father’s Rights and Anti-VAWA Activism”. Here Dragiewicz notes “In their quantitative content analysis of American FR groups’ Web sites, Rosen et al. (2007) identify three foci that characterize the most common lobbying activities of FR groups: representing domestic violence allegations as false; promoting presumptive joint custody/decreasing child support; and portraying women as equally violent to men” (130).
however, incest as actual conduct was busily being hunted out, exclusively among the lower class, immigrants, and the ex-slave population as Lynne Sacco has recently pointed out.

The incestuous undercurrent in Banville’s novels signifies the deeply oedipal workings of his novels and also suggests that these are novels that affirm a Freudian “psychoanalytic perspective”, rather than a Foucauldian perspective which deconstructs the Freudian psychoanalytic frame in order to represent it as a discourse and mechanism of gendered power. Following Foucault’s highlighting of the connection between the loss of paternal authority and the “discovery” of incestuous desire between the father and the daughter, we can perceive how in Banville, the father daughter relationship is pathologized as psychology and how the oedipal drama appears to be essential or inevitable. This is accomplished as a means of reconciling the father’s simple desire to maintain power over his daughter to a narrative where he experiences a trauma of loss for which his daughter is cruelly responsible.

Banville’s novels are full of sex; as John Kenny puts it, “Let’s not tame it with the more genteel synonym erotic” (152). And, seeing as the relationship between the father and daughter occupies so much of the focus in *Eclipse* and *The Sea*, the sexual tension bubbling under the surface of these three novels is tinged by more than a suggestion of the incestuous. Constructing such “oedipally conditioned subjects” and making them into sympathetic heroes, affirms a traditional psychoanalytic perspective, which according to feminist post-structuralist critiques of psychoanalysis, privileges the phallus and affirms the status quo. According to the feminist argument, such a status quo mandates heterosexuality and reinforces normative gender binaries and stereotypes about the man possessing the phallus and the woman lacking it and therefore being defined by absence. Irigaray’s critique of Freud hinges on a critique of his articulation of female “penis envy” and the lack of attention Freud pays to female desire. She argues that “in
Freud, sexual pleasure boils down to being plus or minus one sex organ: the penis. And sexual ‘otherness’ comes down to ‘not having it.’ Thus woman’s lack of penis, her envy of penis ensure the function of the negative, serve as representatives of the negative, in what could be called a phallicentric – or phallotropic – dialectic” (emphasis in original 52). Irigaray further suggests that according to this logic, the father depends on the daughter to “ward off death,” and to help him in the work of “raising his own tomb” (54). As Irigaray points out, in Freudian constructions of female sexuality as defined in relation to the family, a girl becomes a woman in the appropriation of the “instrument of sexual pleasure”, and in doing so what extra pleasure she gives to the father, the man-father, who is thus (re)assured of having the penis! He will even have the leisure to invest in such lofty pursuits as making laws since she, at least, is upholding the value of the penis, maintaining its stock rating, keeping it from overspending in different specula(riza)tions. In an emergency, should it prove necessary, she will represent the penis. Her ‘phallicized’ body will support its currency, prop it up, defend its exchange rate, guarantee its stock-holdings, while the father, the man, is busy with other investments. She is appointed to collect homage and bring it back to its rightful owner (73).

In the Freudian oedipal family romance, the father relies on the daughter as proof of his phallic authority. She becomes the repository of masculine, paternal power, and the conduit through which power external to the nuclear family can be transmitted to the center of the family – that is, to the father. Irigaray’s critique is felt in Boose’s argument that the daughter’s role in the family is to leave it (to be exchanged in marriage) in order to secure authority and legitimacy for her father in the realm outside the family’s immediate influence. In The Sea Claire fails to
legitimate her father’s idea of his own worth as an art historian: “she abandoned her studies in art history – Vaublin and the fête galante style; that’s my girl, or was – to take up the teaching of backward children in one of the city’s increasingly numerous, seething slums. What a waste of talent. I could not forgive her, cannot still. I try, but I fail” (46). The unforgiveable, abandoning of his/her “life’s work in favor of a futile social gesture” (47), means that Claire is no longer “his” girl. She turns to teaching at the suggestion of “a bookish fellow of scant chin and extreme egalitarian views” and abandons Max for this new lover, abandons the project of building Max’s tomb for him, devalues his currency and leaves him completely exposed (47).

Following Foucault’s suggestions, we see in these novels evidence of a connection between the loss of paternal authority and the “discovery” and articulation of a not-so-repressed incestuous working between the father and the daughter. Banville’s novels authorize the father’s claims to his daughter using an incestuous sexual tension that problematically locates the reader’s sympathy with the father whose desire to possess the daughter is rebuffed either by her suicide (in Cass’s case) or (in the case of Claire) by her outright refusal of her father’s attempts to control her. Banville’s novels do not always reconstruct scenes of incest (a mild exception, the kiss shared by Myles and Chloe, brother and sister in *The Sea*), yet the incestuous undercurrent permeates the texts. As I’ve noted, Max recalls stumbling into the bathroom to see his twelve-year-old daughter Claire naked, a towel wrapped around her head. While having sex with Axel, Cass imagines that her “Daddy had opened the door of the room and walked in, speaking....his chest was bare, and he has a white hand-towel draped around his neck” (*Shroud* 83). In that paragraph, Cass goes on to note her fascination with her father’s mouth, how she “likes to watch it moving while he spoke, likes to be kissed by it, those dry, warm lips, the upper one” (84). Clearly, incest here is not articulated as plot, as, for instance, in *Yellow Dog*, Martin
Amis’ novel about a man dealing with the fallout after he fondles his young daughter. Rather, I am suggesting that Banville’s novels are invested in the incest taboo because he builds his protagonist’s personalities upon the repression of the father’s desire for the daughter. I previously outlined the difference between the crisis state that the protagonists find themselves in upon the outset of the novel and the traumatic event that occurs in the novel which reveals their discomfort with postfeminist masculinity. Banville’s narrators’ traumas don’t have anything to do with their daughters. In Max’s case, he is traumatized because of the death of his wife, the person against whom he had defined his masculine sense of self, and in Alex and Axel’s cases both traumas occur because they are no longer able to sustain their performances. Though the daughters do not initiate these crises, the crises are resolved, or at the very least managed, when the fathers find a way to assert their authority over their daughter/daughter-figure. This authority is presumably lost once the daughters achieve adulthood. Here we may understand why Alex laments to his wife that “A woman can’t be a daughter” (137) and resolves to replace the grown up Cass with the more suitably adolescent Lucy. Max too preferred the infant Claire whom he used to cuddle up to and soothe to sleep. Worst of all, Cass is utterly infantilized in Shroud and for this reason raises the ancient lust of Axel Vander. Reclaiming the authority that the narrator once exerted over his young daughter represents the easiest and most convenient means by which these characters can resolve their anxiety about their crises of relevance and legitimacy. Banville’s novels attempt to elicit sympathy for a man who attempts to resolve his masculinity “in crisis” by regressing his adult daughter to her pre-sexualized identity, all the while being threatened by his proximity to her adult female sexuality. We must consider the vexed ethics of a novel which solicits compassion for fathers who display such proprietary desire for their daughters.
Banville’s investment in the incest taboo as a means of developing his narrator’s psychological depth, endorses and even celebrates a configuration of gender categories wherein men, and older men in particular, are most sympathetic when they are depicted as victims of a younger woman’s desire to leave her father’s house before he has found a way to compensate for that loss. This endorsement of traditional kinship relations and gender configurations becomes particularly vexed when considered in light of his character’s relationship to masculinity, and Banville’s expressed opinions about women, both of which I will return to. In the meantime, I must now introduce a number of perspectives on incest and on father-daughter relationships that inform my readings of Banville’s novels. These perspectives are varied but from all of them, whether they are queer, psychoanalytic, narratological or historical, we may conclude that to write critically about the father-daughter incest taboo is in fact to write about masculinity and authority.

**Considering Butler’s Incest**

In *Antigone’s Claim*, Judith Butler asks a provocative question of psychoanalysis first asked by George Steiner in his 1984 book *Antigones*: How would psychoanalysis be different if its central figure had been Antigone instead of her father/brother Oedipus? In Butler’s hands *Antigone* is a play about kinship deformed – deformed by incest and thus imbued with radical potential to overthrow the heteronormative regime of traditional kinship and the gender paradigms that underpin it.

Butler’s critique ostensibly emerges (written and delivered as it was in 2000) out of a turn to family values that characterized popular sentiment and official policy in the United States at the turn of the Millennium. Arguably, 9/11 escalated that sentiment, a point I made in the previous chapter in relation to Ian McEwan’s paranoid fantasy of domestic invasion, *Saturday*. 
In the climate in which Butler wrote *Antigone’s Claim*, a climate that in many ways is still felt as I write this, feminism and indeed the role of gender in political culture more broadly, has not matured. In fact it has arguably regressed to the pre-feminist moment of the early twentieth century. Butler cites a post-1960s “theoretical conservatism” which stormed onto the scene as a backlash to the sexual liberation strategies of that era that had “refused the reduction of kinship to family” (74-5) 32. It is precisely because of this new re- and over- investment in the heteronormative traditional family as righteous, redemptive and “natural” that Butler’s reading of Antigone seems so urgent. As a review of the book in *Feminist Review* argues, Butler’s reading is necessary precisely because she performs it at a seemingly “post-feminist” moment, where heteronormative kinship ties are lauded, protected and aggressively defended – in such travesties as the defence of Marriage Bill for instance, or the overturning of California’s Proposition 8 – from alternative non-“blood” ties. Butler is applauded for reading Antigone as representing the possibility of “developing a socio-cultural analysis of current kinship anxieties”, which are “influenced ... by, but now also forced to do without, feminism and the political” (McRobbie 134).

As I am curious that readings of Banville mostly fail to address the father-daughter relationship in the novels, so too is Butler curious about readings of Sophocles’ *Antigone* that “insist that there is no incestuous love here, and one wonders whether the reading of the play does not in those instances become the very occasion for the insistence of the rule to take place: there is no incest here, and cannot be” (17). In other words, refusing to notice incestuous undercurrents reinforces the prohibition against incest. In reinforcing this rule, and this rule in particular, which marks the very threshold between “nature” and “culture”, we continue to “live under its regime” (17). Butler argues that to acknowledge the incest in *Antigone* is to find a

32 Though Butler doesn’t suggest it, the popular men’s movement is clearly part of that backlash.
powerful metaphor of kinship deformed and that that deformation puts the “reigning regimes of representation into crisis” (24). She argues that to celebrate narratives where kinship is deformed, or at the very least to pay attention to and give a name to incest in these narratives, is to thwart “those who seek to make normative versions of kinship essential to the working of culture and the logic of things” (25). To celebrate kinship’s deformity is to interrupt “those who, from terror, savor the final authority of those taboos that stabilize social structure as timeless, without ever asking, what happened to the heirs of Oedipus [ie Antigone]” (25). In Antigone’s Claim incest is made symbolic; it is made to represent alternative kinship, and those victims of actual incest are not treated as survivors of a traumatic sexual event, but rather they symbolize deformed kinship which Butler celebrates as activating a “crisis” in the “regime of representation”. I would argue that there must be ways to theorize alternative kinship that don’t depend on incest and its power dynamics for their activation. I also argue that the incestuous desire in Banville’s narratives, whether it is expressly part of the plot or whether it functions as psychology, does little to disrupt normative kinship. In fact I would argue the opposite. The incestuous in Banville supports prevailing gender categories and constitutes a lament for the destabilization of paternal authority.

Antigone’s Claim ultimately is a critique of structuralist psychoanalysis, suggesting that if Antigone were given greater weight in psychonanalytic theory, the “assumption that the incest taboo legitimates and normalizes kinship based in biological reproduction and the heterosexualization of the family” could be faced with a serious challenge (66). 33 By this formulation we could argue that without the incest taboo, or at least, its transgression, traditional kinship arrangement would no longer be legitimated or normalized in the same way. However, Butler is careful to suggest that this isn’t what she is arguing, that it is important to “refuse the

---

33 Butler doesn’t explain what, if not the incest taboo, would perform the legitimization and normalization of traditional kinship relations.
conclusion that the incest taboo must be undone for love to freely flourish everywhere” (24). Though she argues that it is important to “refuse” this conclusion, her text isn’t itself successful at this refusal. In associating incest with all other transgressive or alternative familial organizations she likens the alleviation of the incest taboo with a freedom to love, and with a “new scheme of intelligibility” that would “make our [presumably she means queer] loves legitimate and recognizable” (24).

Butler represents Antigone as a figure with radical potential. She focuses on Antigone’s incestuous pedigree and underscores the subtext of the play which has Antigone desiring her dead brother Polyneices. To the extent that the play is a family drama, Butler reads Antigone as representative of a deformed kinship. For Butler, kinship has been determined to precede the social via a Lacanian and Hegelian structuralist argument, but Butler is suspicious of the idea of kinship existing antecedent to the social as Lacan and Hegel imply. Her critique is ultimately aimed at structuralist psychoanalytics based on Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological description of the incest taboo as the marker of culture, and her aim is to convince us that “the distinction between symbolic and social law cannot finally hold, that not only is the symbolic itself the sedimentation of social practices but that radical alterations in kinship demand a rearticulation of the structuralist presupposition of psychoanalysis and, hence, of contemporary gender and sexual theory” (19). That is to say that Butler reads Antigone as a symbol of kinship radically altered, locating her within a metric of alternative kinship arrangement (blended families, gay families, adoptions, displacements, single parent homes) and asks how these people can be Oedipally conditioned when they exist in “situations” where the “symbolic in its stasis no longer holds” (23). However, a material analysis of incest in a social and historical context highlights one pressing question in particular: what if incest itself is always already domesticated and
rationalized so that it is not the radical alteration in kinship that Butler wants it to be? How could speaking about and transgressing the incest taboo then be the radical means by which we might arrive at a reformulation of kinship and therefore of contemporary gender and sexual theory more broadly?

Butler attempts to answer the question that shapes the premise of the book by suggesting that Antigone’s failure to “produce heterosexual closure” suggests how we might imagine psychoanalysis with Antigone, rather than Oedipus as its central figure (76). Butler acknowledges that Antigone does not refuse heterosexuality – Haemon is after all her lover – but rather that she “seems to deinstitution heterosexuality by refusing to do what is necessary to stay alive for Haemon”(76). Part of this “deinstitution” means embracing death and walking into the burial chamber. The “love towards which she moves as she moves towards death is a love for her brother and thus, ambiguously, her father [who is, remember, also her brother], it is also a love that can only be consummated by its obliteration, which is no consummation at all” (76). In other words, the incestuous love that Antigone chooses over the heterosexual exogamic relationship with Haemon is life-negating. Antigone’s life-negating actions make her a sinthome, one whose refusal of life or more specifically, procreation, Lee Edelman argues in No Future, poses a challenge to the symbolic order, ushering in the possibility of the kind of “rearticulation of [kinship’s] terms” that Butler sees as fundamentally necessary to radical cultural transformations.

Yet however much radical potential Butler reads in the deformation of kinship structure that Antigone represents, and no matter how productive her argument against the dangerous pressures on and anxious defensive gestures of traditional kinship arrangements, it is an obstacle to the effectiveness of her theory that Butler chooses incest as the paradigmatic form taken by the deformation of kinship. She clarifies that “the point is not to unleash incest from its constraints”
and further states that she will neither celebrate Antigone’s death as a tragedy nor does she aim for the “celebration of incestuous practice” (30, 24). And yet it is not entirely clear that Butler is not celebrating incestuous practice, for she asks in the end if incest can “become the basis for a socially survivable aberration of kinship in which the norms that govern legitimate and illegitimate modes of kin association might be more radically redrawn” (67). Here Butler is clearly locating in incest a radical departure from kinship as regulatory and always constituted by a specific form. She invests incest with the possibility that it might undo the “curse” of “structuralist kinship” and free “contemporary critical theory” from that curse “as it tries to approach the question of sexual normativity, sociality and the status of law” (66). Butler suggests that the “horror of incest, the moral revulsion it compels in some” is not all too different from “the horror and revulsion” that some feel toward homosexual sex, and she likens opposition to gay marriage and parenting to the revulsion felt towards incest. With regards to both incest and homosexuality, Butler suggests that those who oppose them believe that “alternative kinship arrangements attempt to revise psychic structures in ways that lead to tragedy...figured as the tragedy of and for the child” (70). There are problems with associating homosexuality with incest, though. As homosexuality becomes more and more acceptable and more and more regulated by a regime of homonormativity, the connotation of pedophilia and sexual abuse is more predictably associated with incest, and more unlikely to represent homosexuality. In this instance Butler begins to sound dangerously like proponents of “Slippery Slope” arguments. Whenever the gay marriage debate comes up, conservatives argue that allowing homosexuals to marry is tantamount to legalizing other sexual perversions such as incest, bestiality, necrophilia, bigamy – the list goes on and on.
Nonetheless, John Seery finds something hopeful and radical in Butler’s “ultimate political-cultural aims, intentions, and visions”, which are, as he sees them, to strategically advocate for “any and all persons who are marginalized under the terms of heteronormativity” (20, 11). However, he sees Butler’s reading of Antigone as failing in its strategy, believing that it will alienate rather than convince those who need convincing that heteronormativity can exert a crippling and belittling pressure on those who do not conform to its terms. He argues that Butler’s “reading of Antigone's possible legacy ... requires that Butler retreat from the particularities of incest” and “that she effaces Antigone's particularity in order to use her example to map out a new future” (11). Rather than reading the play as tragedy, which it no doubt is, Butler forces a celebratory narrative on a situation that cannot support it.

What Butler fails to make clear is the difference between treating incest as sociopolitical psychology - as part of a matrix of desire and prohibition that constitutes law, and incest as an actual event. Her argument does not only refer to incest as a good metaphor for kinship deformed, but also makes incest appear as suggestive practice, particularly when she calls it “socially survivable”. Though it may be survivable, the connotations associated with the actual practice of incest are troubling to put it mildly – and repellent to many – particularly where incest pairs a parent and child, whether consensual or not. But Butler stays away from the material reality of incestuous practice to reveal how, “within the structuralist understanding of the symbolic”, the taboo protects the symbolic order, grounded at it is in kinship, and specifically in the naming of the father – my father is NOT my brother, my sister is NOT my mother, and so on and so forth (41). The undoing of the whole structuralist symbolic order is a lot to expect of re-evaluating the incest taboo. Meanwhile, there is more and more evidence that incestuous kinship groups can thrive, not just survive, but because Butler avoids a material examination of
the actual practice of incest, *Antigone’s Claim* ends up failing to explain how, if at all, incestuous
practice actually transforms gender politics, or “cultural workings” or the “logic of things”(25).

**Surviving Incest, Incest Thriving**

A 2002 article in *Science News* argues that “consanguineous couples” (second cousins and
closer) are not significantly more likely to produce children with birth defects, showing only a
rise of probability from 3-4\% to 4-7\% (Calloway). These findings mean that genetic counsellors
can no longer make recommendations against endogamic breeding based on significantly higher
risks of genetic defects. Studies, meanwhile, on some species of birds, beetles and salamanders
reveal their predilection for endogamic mating, and in one instance, the findings suggested that
brother sister pairs were more defensive of their young and ultimately produced more offspring
than their unrelated counterparts (Callaway 232-3). As one researcher on consanguineous births
put it, "We shouldn't call it inbreeding ... Inbreeding conjures all these negative things--people
with three eyes". She suggests instead that we call it “genetic complementation” (qtd in Callaway
233). The mundane prevalence of incest in these situations redefines and domesticates incest
with no suggestion that gender or heterosexuality is destabilized as a result, troubling Butler’s
use of the metaphor of incest transgressed to represent the potential of non-traditional, non-
heteronormative kinship arrangements.

Are there then degrees of incest that Butler doesn’t name, but which we might infer are
more destabilizing to gender? If so are the parent/child or sister/brother relationships the ones
that constitute the more powerful taboo? What do we do then with a call to read only the closest
of incestuous relationships as potentially destabilizing to gender categories and
heteronormativity more broadly? Surely this cannot be the only means to that end? In this light, John Seery’s argument that Butler’s “logic is awfully negative” rings true. He summarizes Butler’s argument as a call “to challenge the taboo on incest as a way of unsettling concepts of kinship as a way of opening up more possibilities for alternative family practices” and names that challenge a “circumvolutory strategy [that] not only taints virtually all heterosexuals as repressed incest-mongerers, but it likens and aligns too closely alternative practices to sexualized horror and chaos” (12). Indeed, there is something obscene about likening the experience of a gay couple who are raising a child to that of a woman raising her father’s child, and suggesting that that woman’s experience of kinship deformed is equivalent to the gay couple, or single mother, or to the grandmother raising her own and her children’s children. In likening these situations to each other, Butler is guilty of describing all “deviant” sexualities as the same, of performing the work of “slippery slope” conservatives who rail against gay rights whose gains represent for Justice Anthony Scalia the possibility of the “end of all moral legislation”34 (qtd in McDonnell 337). Indeed what Butler does not name in generalizing incest as a radical undoer of gender and heteronormativity is the particularities of incest, both its mundane appearances and as well the traumatic reality of sexual abuse, of the instances where incest is not only not consensual but is in fact a violent exercise of power.

There is a contradiction between the possibilities that Butler argues are created by incest to rearrange kinship, and the historical reality of incestuous practice. In an analysis of father-daughter incest in its legal, medical and historical context, Lynne Sacco reveals that the reality of incestuous sexual practice is characterized by sexual abuse and masculine authority exercised both within the home and in the locations outside of the home where the rights of the father are protected over those of the daughter. Secondly, Robert Polhemus’s study Lot’s Daughters argues

---

34 This is taken from Scalia’s dissent to the Supreme Court’s striking down of sodomy laws in Texas in 2003.
that the story of Lot and his daughters is a template for all relations between father and daughters and father figures and daughter figures. In neither of these examinations of incest exists the possibility that through incest, a kinship relation will emerge to challenge the regulatory framework of gender. In fact, in Polhemus’s and Sacco’s studies, gender categories, masculine authority and female submission are all reinforced.

**Incest domesticated**

Sacco’s study reveals that the incest taboo has never been as forcefully applied as Butler’s study suggests it is. In discussing the prevalence of father-daughter incest, Sacco’s study warrants the suggestion that it is only in certain locales – namely the upper class, white domestic space – that the violation of the taboo was most likely to be repressed, because of a forceful mitigation of the offense by a larger socio-political apparatus that was unwilling to find certain kinds of fathers guilty of interfering with their daughters. Sacco notes that by the end of the nineteenth century, “most men imprisoned for incest were from socially marginalized backgrounds” (40). She goes on to argue that the rise of the connection between manliness, defined by “self-restraint” and “discipline”, and masculinity, defined as white and upper class, solidified the idea that “gender was a natural function of race and class” (41). As such, “white Americans” elevated ideology over lived experience. They promoted the idea that respectable white men were intrinsically unable to engage in behaviour like incest, unlike other, less civilized, “primitive” males, who they imagined retained a natural proclivity for “beastly” conduct. As this process took hold, the credibility of allegations against respectable white males appeared increasingly improbable,
while allegations against socially marginalized men seemed not only credible but expected. And genteel Americans could nod to assumptions about the type of men who committed incest as proof that the social position of both the privileged and marginalized was deserved (41).

This does not contradict Butler’s suggestion that the protection of traditional kinship necessitates the incest taboo. Both Sacco and Butler share the premise that the incest taboo authorizes the protection of heteronormative paternalistic kinship arrangements. However, Sacco is particular and specific where Butler generalizes. Sacco identifies time and place, and specific discursive arrangements of class and race to make an argument about the results of refusing to reveal the prevalence of incest. Unlike Butler, for Sacco what protects traditional kinship is not the taboo in and of itself – the law that you shall not engage in sexual activity with members of your own family – but rather the way in which certain permutations of the transgression of that law are not merely covered up, but rather become unimaginable, or as the title of the book suggests, “unspeakable”. In making this point, she recounts how not all incest is unspeakable, noting that though the “language and intent of the laws in most states were vague”, there was in fact a language of debate surrounding incest, resulting in questions over “whether [the laws] applied only to consensual marriages between adults and not to cases of child sexual abuse”. Sacco quotes from an 1878 Louisiana Supreme Court Document which asks in exasperation “But what is incest? It has not, like murder, a fixed and definite meaning everywhere”(34). Incest is not, nor has it been, always and everywhere underground. As I mentioned, Butler argues that as far as readings of Antigone go, there is an insistence that there is no incest in the play. Such a negation of incest becomes for Butler, “the very occasion for the insistence of the rule to take place” (17). But in fact, there is a very public discourse about incest as Sacco makes clear which doesn’t
influence the power of the incest taboo or the prevalence of incestuous practice. Sacco argues that the force of the rule as negation is only occasioned in the context of upper-class white patriarchs. Elsewhere incest is projected on the non-white and the lower class as justification for their exclusion from the category of masculinity which was at this time undergoing a gentrification. In speaking about incest too broadly, Butler effaces the racial and socioeconomic particularities of where the incest taboo is most forcefully enacted, or more specifically where it does not even have to do any work, because the ideology of class and race allegedly performs the work that the taboo must elsewhere perform.

Sacco’s study moves through the nineteenth century into the twentieth, and takes in the relationship between feminism and incest. She charts the “flood of incest publications” both fictional and testimonial, in print, film and television, that came on the market in the 1980s and attributes their popularity and arrival into the “mainstream” to feminists “who worked in tandem with grassroots ‘recovery movements’ to create the theory and social context in which women could discuss incest and its impact on their lives” (219). Come the 1990s, though, Sacco credits an “absence of empirical data,” a “political environment newly interested in promoting ‘family values,’” and “a backlash against feminism” with the souring of the public taste for incest narratives (220). She quotes critics of feminism such as Columbia University psychiatrist Dr. Richard Gardner who called feminists “zealots” who used “the sex abuse scene” as the “perfect opportunity for the expression of their [anti-male] venom” (qtd in Sacco 220). Sacco describes the early 1990s inception and work of the False Memory Syndrome Foundation to discredit women who accused their fathers of sexual abuse. The group furnished accused fathers with the defence that their daughters had been manipulated by therapists to construct fictional memories of abuse. Drawing on character assassinations of the accusing daughters, as well as claims that
“contemporary women’s incest accusations are based on feminist theory” which “makes them politically motivated and inherently unreliable” (223), by the late 1990s the FMSF successfully turned the popular tide against accusing women, once again proving for Sacco that despite a profound cultural shift in social attitudes about talking about sex in general and incest in particular, the first-person acknowledgement by American women of the widespread occurrence of father-daughter incest in the late twentieth century could not overcome Americans’ reluctance to see white middle- and upper-class men as so many of their daughters did – as the type of man … capable of … behaving in ways that were horrifying, revolting and pitiless. (225)

Daddy’s Girl

The fact that the father-daughter relationship in Banville’s novels often flies under both popular and academic critical radar suggests a discomfort with the nature of the relationship. It suggests that, as readers, we are not quite sure what to make of this relationship. Unsure, that is, of how to address it without entering terrain that is pocked by the landmines of sex and family and their intersection with culture and politics. As we have seen, Polhemus suggests that the story of Lot and his daughters “permeates imaginative life” so that shades of incest plague every representation and discussion of father-daughter relationships (4). I argue that Eclipse and Shroud establish an incestuous father-daughter undercurrent in their self-conscious treatment of masculine decline, a decline which The Sea finally deploys not to point to patriarchy in decline, but rather to arouse sympathy for Max’s waning authority and to paint the women in the novel, and Claire in particular, as seductive, bold temptresses, who are not protective or loving, but
rather self-serving and condescending. The characterization of the daughter as such both further enlist and permits gestures that defend patriarchal masculinity.

I critiqued Butler for universalizing incest, for making metaphor out of incest and not accounting for cultural, social and historical particularities that inflect what incest is at any given moment. Therefore I want to be clear that when, I refer to incest in John Banville, I am concerned with its presentation as “a representational structure or motif” (Karlyn 70). In these novels incest represents the desire on the part of the father to maintain control over the daughter, to command a monopoly on her affection and attention. Sexual possession of the daughter remains the most unavailable kind of control that he can exert over her and so, as is the case with repressed desire, it is the most potent way that the novel can convey the sense of the narrator’s frustration and unfulfillment and enlist the reader’s sympathy towards what the novel portrays as his tragic impotence.

My reading of the father-daughter relationships in Shroud and Eclipse in this section is not initiated by a belief that these novels endorse incestuous behaviour between fathers and their daughters, nor does it accuse Banville, or his narrators of impropriety towards their daughters. Unlike for instance, the filmic version of The Sweet Hereafter or the aforementioned Yellow Dog, or even Lolita, there are no outright depictions of incest in the novels, nor do the narrators struggle against a desire to bed their children. Rather my reading of the fathers and daughters in Banville is motivated by a curiosity about his repeated representation of this relationship over the course of his last four novels and the lack of critical attention paid to this repetition. There are no sons to be found – and few mothers either. Fathers and daughters occupy the central dramatic space in these novels, and the characters are revisited from one novel to the next. Quirke, the groundskeeper in Eclipse whose fifteen-year-old daughter Lily is his sole companion, is reborn
as the pathologist Quirke in *Christine Falls* who unwittingly kisses his daughter Phoebe (he thinks she is his niece). Alexander Cleave in *Eclipse*, who takes on Lily as a surrogate daughter, becomes Axel Vander in *Shroud*, while Alexander’s daughter Cass Cleave is the same Cass Cleave whom Axel impregnates and later mourns in *Shroud*. Cass Cleave resounds in the names of Chloe and Claire, the two daughter figures from *The Sea*.

All these repetitions, references, and intimations of intimacies between fathers and daughters circulate in novels that are narrated by men who are deeply self-conscious about their physical “selves”. They spend a great deal of time examining themselves in mirrors, checking out their reflections, their skin, bulges, hair, eyes: they are bodily fleshed out characters and as such are characterized by the author and received by the reader from a gendered, masculine position. The novels, however, are not particularly concerned with gender categories. That is, a queering of gender categories is never ostensibly the concern of the novel, the protagonist, or evidently, the novelist. To discuss gender in relation to Banville is to impose a perspective upon the texts to which they don’t ostensibly lend themselves. But in spite of Banville’s comments that he does not perceive any difference between men and women (other than the fact that they are from different planets), these novels and their characters are a record of how middle-class heterosexual masculinity can be shaped in relation to the figure of the daughter. As such they reveal a deeply gendered universe where power, authority and legitimacy always reside with the older male figure. Coughlin remarks that even though Banville’s protagonists demonstrate that “in regard to self and other in general human terms” they have a conscience and a moral sensitivity, “with regard to gender the framework of world-understanding, together with all the philosophical predicates of these characters, is irredeemably binarist, polarized and indeed Oedipal” (84). Coughlin goes on to argue convincingly that there are triadic character set-ups
throughout Banville that often hint at the incestuous (though Coughlin often avoids naming them as such – calling them Oedipal instead). She notes the triangular relationship in *Eclipse* between Alex, his wife Lydia and their daughter Cass, who is a ghostly presence in the novel. She briefly remarks that Lydia is jealous of Alex and Cass’s closeness, fearing that Alex favours his daughter over her. Even a casual reading of the novel confirms Lydia’s fears. Alex and Lydia are in near constant conflict, while Cass the absent is also Cass the revered, the beatified. Coughlin also highlights the triangle that takes over at the conclusion of the novel: Alex, the groundskeeper Quirke and his adolescent daughter Lily. Coughlin points out that “Alex develops a connection with [Lily] which shows definite erotic affect, as does his attachment to his own daughter” (93). Indeed, Alex imagines that a paranoid Lydia interrogates Lily to find out if Alex has “interfered with her” (145). This is Alex’s paranoia, that his wife will uncover his erotic affection for Lily just as she has suspected the same of Cass and him. It is only upon reading *Shroud* that the incestuous erotic tension between Cass and Alex comes most crisply into the light. There Cass imagines her father in such sensuous terms as to leave the reader uncomfortably sure that there is an erotically tinged love between them. Axel Vander, Cass’s lover, is also of course a play on the name Alexander, her father’s full name. The obvious incestuous relationship does nothing here to renovate gender categories, in spite of Butler’s argument that these relationships are capable of accomplishing this feat.

Her father Alex considers Cass’s academic success “an elaborate pastime, like thousand-piece jigsaw puzzles” (*Eclipse*, 201). As a result, “the plot choice to represent the daughter-figure as …mentally flawed and at risk certainly makes it easier to elaborate her character in line with a stereotype of the vulnerable *ingénue*, in need of paternal (and/or sexual?) protection, ultimately a form of domination” (Coughlin 93). Both Axel and Alex treat Cass as a delicate
thing and belittle her intellect while also infantilizing her. For Alex, in fact, she ceased to be his daughter once she grew up. “‘You have a daughter’” Lydia tells him, to which he responds “‘I had,’… ‘Then she grew up. A woman can’t be a daughter’” (Eclipse, 137). Cass must ultimately be sacrificed to the novel’s task of having the men become more humane, more likeable, sympathetic figures. After Cass kills herself, Alex, now heir-less, passes his mother’s home on to his surrogate daughter Lily, while Axel devotes himself to the dying Kristina Kovacs. The mysterious Cass is offered up so as to initiate the defence of these two not altogether likeable men. This sounds like Polhemus’s use of the Lot myth to reveal that the father (figure) needs to invest in a young woman in order to ensure that his own legacy continues. But what kind of legacy is it? The example of The Sea’s Max Morden suggests that no matter the care a father gives to his daughter, she will ultimately turn against him. Max calls Claire, “Dear Claire, my sweet girl” (44), and remembers how he would “bundle her in a blanket” when she was small, trying to soothe her to sleep. But this sweet memory of father and child turns sour: “One time, later on, we even went on a motoring holiday together, just the two of us, but it was a mistake, she was an adolescent by then and grew rapidly bored with vineyards and chateaux and my company, and nagged at me stridently without let-up until I gave in and brought her home early” (45). This passage recalls Humbert Humbert’s disappointment with Lolita’s adolescent impudence and thus not only references the father figure’s selfish desires with regard to the daughter figure, but also recalls how successful Lolita is in garnering sympathy for Humbert – the most repellant and attractive of literary figures. Banville is clearly trying to accomplish a similar feat in The Sea. In describing Claire as, in no uncertain terms, out to humiliate and degrade her father, he not only turns Max into a symbol of venerable masculinity diminished at the hands of young, uppity women, but he also finally reveals that relying on daughters for one’s
legacy, as Axel and Alex eventually do at the conclusion of their dramas, will ultimately result in one’s castration. “I suppose I shall not be allowed to sell the house, either” (260), remarks Max glumly as he contemplates his end days under the thumb of Claire and her fiancé Jerome.

It is clear then that the women and, more specifically, the fraught relationship between fathers and daughters in the novels represent a frustration for Banville’s focalizers. It is not, however, that the protagonist cannot live up to a vaunted unattainable ideal of masculinity (this is the classic formula that critical masculinity studies posits as responsible for the “crisis”); rather the tension exists between these men and the absence of the ideal. The tension comes from the fact that their wives and their daughters do not demand of them that they occupy the traditional roles that the masculine ideal promotes. In other words, the tension comes from the deconstruction of traditional masculinity and gender categories more broadly that post-structuralist and queer critiques have effected.

Max Morden, in particular, sets out to measure himself against an ideal that has been so thoroughly deconstructed by feminism and queer studies as to offer him no measure of his success or failure. Recall that Banville’s prose is temporally located in the deconstructive moment of postmodernity, but that it does not celebrate postmodernity or deconstruction as liberatory. Derek Hand describes Banville’s later fiction as being inhabited by men who are best understood as “disinherited. The world they inhabit is a fallen one: an uncertain and often bleak place wherein anxieties about man’s position are paramount” (119). These are men, Hand argues, “who have inherited a modern world where absolutes and grand narratives have ceased to have any currency” (118). Far from being a triumphant post-structuralist moment where categories such as those that define gender and race are resolutely rejected, McMinn points out that “there is never the feeling in [Banville’s] work that the exposure of constructed myths about
identity and nature is a simple cause for celebration. Quite the opposite I would suggest. There may no longer be any hope of a convincing master narrative, but most of Banville’s characters wish there were” (7). Max, melancholic to the core, has inherited a world where the “grand narrative” of patriarchal masculinity which puts husbands, fathers, sons and brothers unquestionably in charge of their wives, daughters and mothers, has allegedly been overcome. Indeed the men in the novel are devastating parodies of traditional masculinity. Max’s own father is described as a man “whose body might have been made of lard” (37), and the simpering Colonel who also lodges at the Cedars is diminished far below the grandiosity of his title. And yet, Max need not lament. As R.W. Connell suggests, patriarchy as a “general structure exists despite many local reversals … It persists despite resistance of many kinds, now articulated in feminism” (74). The novel elicits sympathy for Max in the way that Lear, old and infirm, struggling through the tempest, becomes a figure of pathos. The Sea delivers a fiction that transforms the “convincing master narrative” (McMinn 7) about patriarchal masculinity evidencing the way that men have been made vulnerable by that transformation but the novel, in its vilification of the daughter who seemingly delights in her father’s vulnerability, cannot be read as evidence of the end of patriarchy.

In J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace, we encounter another vulnerable male focalizer and another daughter who is unwilling to indulge his insecurity. Perhaps because Lucy Lurie is preoccupied with her own personal safety, or perhaps because she has a hard time understanding her father David Lurie, she rarely offers him any kind of comfort or relief from his stress. And why should she? David Lurie’s character is not a particularly likeable man. He is a sexual predator, decidedly arrogant, and entirely dismissive of any agenda that doesn’t coincide with his own lofty romantic ideal of morality, truth and beauty. Nonetheless the novel draws us into
his corner, specifically through the use of his care for dying and dead animals. His actions of self-abnegation arouse sympathy for David. The consequence of that sympathy however is that Lucy, like the argumentative Daisy (before the attack), or the no-nonsense Claire, is marginalized by the novel as the difficult daughter who is unwilling to participate in feeling sorry for the father. Like Henry and Max, David attempts to enlist Lucy’s vulnerability to resolve the crisis of masculinity that ensues after he is accused of sexual impropriety and after he is attacked and disfigured. Lucy rejects this attempt, but the novel ultimately allows David to believe that he has accomplished this goal.
CHAPTER THREE

Sorry in the Body: Disgrace and the “crisis” of masculinity.

“And there’s Petrus. Petrus will keep an eye out.”
“Fatherly Petrus.”
“Yes.”
“Lucy says I can’t go on being a father for ever. I can’t imagine, in this life, not being Lucy’s father.”
She runs her fingers through the stubble of his hair “It will be all right,” she whispers. “You will see.” -- Disgrace 162

David Lurie is as self-conscious a focalizer as J.M. Coetzee has ever penned and his anxieties only grow over the course of the novel. Similar to The Sea’s Max Morden, these anxieties are intimately connected to his interactions with women, be they prostitutes, attractive young students, or his “lesbian”35 daughter Lucy. Though David begins the novel in relative confidence, there is already evidence that he is plagued by anxieties, and that the novel will be full of indeterminacies. The first line – “For a man of his age, fifty-two, divorced, he has, to his mind, solved the problem of sex rather well” (1) – sets him up as a man who appears to have it all pretty much sorted out. Sex on Thursdays with a prostitute named Soraya, a comfortable teaching job, some publications in the works: he is settled. However, he has only solved the problem of sex “rather well”, and it is only solved “to his mind”. It is a solution that is uniquely suitable to him, yet the problem belongs to the wider type of which David is exemplary—straight, ageing, divorced, white men. There are two expressions here: the first, belonging to the broad category (his type has a problem called sex), is a generalization. The second, belongs to the

---

35 I put the term in scare quotes because it is David who identifies Lucy as such. As a designation that signals a particular identitarian political position, the term may or may not apply to Lucy depending on one’s definition of it. This is a point which the following chapter will address.
particular (David Lurie solves it by visiting a prostitute) and is qualified by tentative clauses. This brief first sentence formally expresses the tension between general problems and particular solution. Solutions are possible, the sentence suggests, yet there is a careful reminder that those solutions are not available to everyone or to anyone all the time. Much of the tension in the novel comes from the characters having to choose the best way to solve their dilemmas. This is the tension that persists throughout the novel, between generalized ideas of how to solve a problem (ask the tribunal for forgiveness, report the men who raped you, etc) and the particular way the characters decide to solve those problems (refuse to ask forgiveness, say nothing to the cops). The tone of the novel is equally dialogic, characterized as it by David’s declarative statements which are later checked by the narrator’s voice.

Unlike McEwan’s *Saturday*, *Disgrace* is willing to embrace the anti-social and the negative choice as habitable. In calling their choices anti-social and negative I am referring to what Judith Halberstam identifies as a recent trend in queer theory to adopt what Lee Edelman calls a politics of “no future” in his book of the same name. This trend, which Halberstam identifies in the punk music of the Sex Pistols three decades before Edelman’s *No Future*, is characterized by an embrace of the anti-social, “anti-communitarian, self-shattering and anti-identititarian” (Halberstam 140). This is a politics of the minority, of a rejection of “the forward looking, reproductive and heteronormative politics of hope that animates all too many political projects” (Halberstam 141). As opposed to *Saturday* where Baxter, the anti-social thug is violently neutralized by the saintly Perowne, in *Disgrace* David is comfortable making choices that alienate him from the majority. Indeed the characters can live with their deliberately perverse choices, but are nonetheless traumatized by them. On the one hand the anti-social

36 I am thinking specifically of his decisions to pursue Soraya outside of their John/prostitute relationship, to seduce Melanie even though he knows she doesn’t want him, to refuse to cooperate with the tribunal. Strangely enough though, he is not comfortable with Lucy being similarly contrarian.
choice is a critique of narratives of redemption, restoration and reconstruction that accompanied the end of Apartheid South Africa. On the other hand the negative choice is masochistic and anti-communitarian. Because of this tension, it is easy to read this novel as being about deciding between generalized ideas of what is “good”, “proper” and “right” when in actual fact, complicated exceptions interrupt the reader’s, the character’s and even the novel’s faith in what those terms even mean.

The novel is a record of David’s increasing marginality from his career, his daughter, from his sexual self, and of Lucy’s radical refusal to comfort him. His move from relative comfort to painful ostracization and exile, is characteristic of the rest of the novels in this thesis. We meet Lurie at a point where he has made relative peace with postfeminist masculinity (having solved the “problem of sex), and we watch him unravel after a traumatic moment occurs. His attempt to control that unraveling involves Lurie launching himself along a road to grace that is paved with self-abuse and abnegation. The novel’s seeming obsession with rightness, goodness and moral worth, is read by many critics as evidence of a process of redemption or coming to conscience. A review in the *London Review of Books* refers to the universe of *Disgrace* as one “in which morality has been ‘erased and reborn’ and all the terms have changed” (Lowry np). This “universe”, as it is focalized by David, is of course, attuned to his desires, anxieties, needs, etc, and the reviewer laments its departure, arguing that it at least had recognizable “values – a respect for the individual, sympathy, restraint” (Lowry). Andrew O’Hehr’s review on *Salon.com* is a good example of the popular reception of Lurie as a selfless sympathetic figure in the novel:

If David actually reclaims some dignity by the end of *Disgrace* it is only because he gives up everything, gives up more than a dog ever could -- his daughter, his
ideas about justice and language, his dream of the opera on Byron and even the
dying animals he has learned to love without reservation, without thought for
himself.

There is a large body of criticism that reads Coetzee in line with the ethical and this literature in
many cases accurately represents what I read in Coetzee’s oeuvre as a deep desire, expressed in
spiritual terms, yet secular, to ask potentially traumatic ethical questions\(^\text{37}\). However, there are
instances, several of which I have pointed to above, where reading Coetzee’s characters as
transformed into more ethical beings over the course of the novels results in an elision of the way
that the essence of the “male” (and the character’s deep attachment to that essence) prevents the
character’s transformation. Given Coetzee’s poetic ability to write characters whose blood seems
to run hot over the page, it is easy to be seduced by what appears to be an embodied *desire* for
change and to believe that the desire is enough. And perhaps, in a Levinasian consideration,
where ethics comes before ontology, this desire for change that is often articulated via a bodily
abjection is enough to point towards a more ethical way of being\(^\text{38}\). What I’d like to accomplish
in my reading of *Disgrace* is to point to the ethical dilemmas that the novel presents while also
highlighting the way that the characters, as well as the novel itself, often resort to familiar
gendered knowledges to resolve those dilemmas. I believe that the novel is successful at
complicating the ethical dilemmas it presents and the solutions that would traditionally
accompany them (by proposing anti-social solutions). But I also believe that those solutions fail
to escape gendered ways of organizing the self. This tension then between what we can feel as

\(^{37}\) See Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event*. or Taylor, “The Precarious Lives of Animals; Butler, Coetzee and animal ethics” or Marais, "Little enough, less than little: nothing": ethics, engagement, and change in the fiction of J.M. Coetzee”. And many more.

\(^{38}\) Consider the Magistrate’s decline in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, Elizabeth Curren’s cancer in *Age of Iron*, Paul Rayment’s amputation in *Slow Man*. 
sympathy for David and what we know to be unjust about the way that he and the novel represent women presents a significant challenge when writing about *Disgrace*.

Part of the difficulty is the narrative style. Matt DelConte describes the narration as “four wall present tense narration” (427). The narration relates the events in real time, features a teller and a listener who are distinct from the characters. This narration, which operates in free indirect discourse, complicates the process of assigning agency to novel, character or author. The text subsequently is difficult to write about conclusively. It implicates the reader, aligning her with David and making her fill the “narratological hole” created by the absent narratee. This style interferes with any straightforward critique or judgment one might perform of the novel (435). DelConte suggests that the narrative style that Coetzee employs “exemplifies the inability to interfere, putting the narrator and narratee on the scene as the events take place” (i.e. in the house while the rape takes place) while all the time barring both parties from witnessing the events that are critical to the universe of the novel (436). We readers are bound and gagged on the sidelines, our eyes forced open, our ears keenly attuned, but ultimately impotent. The best example of this in *Disgrace* is of course the rape scene to which neither David nor the reader has access. Because Lucy deliberately bars her father and thus the reader from knowing what happened, both David and the reader are alienated from Lucy. Because we have the same perspective on events as David, our judgment of David’s reactions to Lucy is softened because we likely share David’s desire to soothe her, to help her recover from this trauma in the way that we understand recovery to take place – revelation, talking, telling.

It is characteristic of J.M. Coetzee’s work to refuse to settle on a single position. David Atwell notes that “Coetzee’s persona has been known to generate a certain impatience among readers who would prefer writers to be more amenable to public debate. The more curious and
attentive reader, however, will want to work with and through the difficulties of the text” (26). Atwell remarks that when we read Coetzee we must be aware of and accept the fact that “some discomfort will persist” (26). Indeed readers can come away with varying and often contradictory impressions of the protagonist, his politics and the politics of the novel more broadly in the context of post-Apartheid South African. The main character, David Lurie, is at once reprehensible and sympathetic. And he is not the only baffling character. His daughter Lucy is equally, if not more, mystifying. We find ourselves at any moment with our feelings enlisted toward the characters, while pages later we are alienated entirely from them. The novel refuses to comfort the reader, especially the critical reader who is compelled to come to some sort of clear and convincing conclusion about the novel. Because the politics of the novel are so shifting, (is it critical of the new South African state in its parody of the TRC or does it represent David’s pigheadedness as indicative of a cancerous cynicism that undermines any attempt to radically transform South Africa for its new age? Is Lucy a heroic feminist or a masochist? Is David really sorry or is his performance of attrition just self-abnegation meant to solicit sympathy? Is Petrus scrupulously taking advantage of the turning tides, or is he a pimp?) it invites the reader to be comfortable with alienation, and with inconclusiveness. It is not a story that is told in order that we may “learn something” or “know ourselves better,” in spite of the way some reviewers read David’s abnegation as a tale of moral instruction.

In order that I might accommodate my contradictory feelings about this novel, this chapter is not straightforward. It begins here, with a justification for its form. It begins again, in earnest, with an alternative narrative, or perhaps alternative critique would be a better description. I have used this device as a way to foreground my main difficulty with writing about Disgrace. In refusing totalizing readings, the novel maintains its own alterity, refusing to be
assimilable to any singular critical perspective. In order to try to maintain some of that alterity, I have written this chapter in fictional form so that it functions as two complementary fictional critiques. The first part features another of Coetzee’s characters, Elizabeth Costello. I imagine her writing a letter to her son John, and then penning a journal article about Disgrace. In her article, Costello argues that David is transformed through his interaction with the unwanted dogs. Throughout her letter and her article, I paraphrase and quote Elizabeth Costello as we have come to know her through Coetzee’s Lives of Animals, Elizabeth Costello, and Slow Man. Drawing from Costello’s previous articulations allows me to imagine how she would write about Disgrace. In providing references to this other Costello material, I am arguing that because of the fact that Coetzee has authored her, and has attributed to her a very strong set of political, moral and theoretical positions, Costello would be one of those readers who would seek an alignment of her critique of the novel with David’s moral universe. Ultimately the Costello that I imagine is as close a copy as I could produce to the one that Coetzee has invented. I deploy her in much the same way that Coetzee is argued to have deployed Costello: to express for me an opinion about, or perform a reading of Disgrace that I am not entirely sure I want to call my own, but one that I feel sympathetic to nonetheless. Costello enlists Disgrace for specifically Costelloan ends: to highlight respect for non-human life, and to vouch for the soul of the kind of person who believes in the worth of dogs. Most importantly, though, Costello’s analysis of the novel draws on evidence in the novel of the power of the sympathetic imagination. Costello reads the novel as a record of David Lurie’s abandonment of reasonable, rational thinking in favour of what Elleke

---

39 Direct quotations are italicized rather than indicated with quotation marks. The italics are less invasive.
40 See David Lodge in the NYRB “The effect of the fictional narrative is to generate sympathy for the main character, and to imply that she is articulating the views of the ‘real author’, Coetzee”, and Hermione Lee in The Guardian “Coetzee - notoriously wary of confessions, public author-appearances, tribunals and interviewers - has been giving Elizabeth Costello's lessons as lectures, guarding his own voice inside her "beliefs" and arguments.”
Boehmer calls “an almost involuntary, because not self-aware (and so not self-substituting), love” (140). Authoring Elizabeth Costello’s reading of the novel from her position allows me to enact a sympathetic reading of David and Lucy without having to claim it as my own. It is, admittedly, a Coetzeean tool and demonstrates how Coetzee manages to develop sympathy for a protagonist who doesn’t seem to deserve it. He is not a particularly appealing character. The recent film made from the novel demonstrates as much. With the unambiguously creepy and slithering John Malkovich playing David Lurie it was difficult to come away from the film feeling anything other than alienation from the Lurie character. The casting of Malkovich in the role suggests that the director David Jacobs was comfortable with a reading of the novel that ultimately refused to redeem David Lurie. However, I project that Costello’s response to Lurie would be entirely different.

Following the Costello section, the narrative shifts to a scene at a University. A young academic prepares to give a job talk that is critical of Costello’s *Disgrace* article. The academic, Ximena Yves, delivers a job talk that is in line with the argument that I conduct elsewhere in this thesis about masculinity in crisis, the solicitation of sympathy for the male protagonist, and the role and representation of the daughter character in bringing about his redemption. Yves refers to Lee Edelman’s concept of the *sinthomosexual* to argue that Lucy represents a disruptive force to heteronormative futurism. Rather than seeing her unborn child as a continuation, as regeneration, as representative of the future of the Lurie line, for Lucy, the child represents a contract, a means to an end. In spite of this assertion and her repeated rejection of her father’s orthodoxy, Lurie nonetheless reframes her as the mother of his grandchild while the novel’s penultimate page depicts Lucy, pregnant, digging in the garden in the sunlight, as Lurie aestheticizes the scene. It is a moment “ready-made for a Sargent or a Bonnard” that “he would wish prolonged forever”
Disgrace 218). Yves points out Costello’s prejudices in her critique of the novel and notes how these prejudices foreclose a number of other possible readings of the novel. Yves’ reading of the text enlists specific aspects of the novel, as does Costello’s but towards different ends, and ends more in line with the aims of this thesis. Yves’ critique of Disgrace is one that I articulate so that it may fit into the argument that a discursive crisis of masculinity initiates the defence of traditional masculinity. Yves is, of course, guilty of the same kind of narrowing of which she accuses Costello. In twinning these critiques and fictionalizing them, I am making a point here about writing critically about a text. While Costello attempts to persuade her readers to align their reading of Disgrace with her ideological stance on animals, on the presence of evil in the text and on the role of the writer, I use her to argue that perhaps critique ought to be about something different. Perhaps it ought to be less persuasive and more provocative. Perhaps critique ought to make one kind of reading available without making its alternative an impossibility.

The nature of an analytical argument is to seek support for a bias, to achieve a consensual reading. But I am critical of the usefulness of this process, particularly when it is applied to a novel such as Disgrace, which is so good at avoiding totalizing readings and so self-conscious about choosing between “right” and “wrong”. I offer these metacritiques as a way to express my uneasiness with performing readings that push for consensus. As J Hillis Miller points out, when we avoid reading for consensus the text imposes a “law” – which “turns out to be the undecidability of language” that “overcomes the reader’s inclination to decide among interpretations” (Lockridge 34). The fictionalized criticism in this chapter in some ways aspires to this law. It aspires to create a dialogue that would open the possibility for an understanding of multiple points of view, an openness which may work to build consensus.
Elizabeth Costello picked up the pen to begin. This letter was overdue.

“My dear Norma,

I have just finished reading a remarkable novel. It’s called Disgrace. Written by a South African – a white man. It made me weep though it comforted me as well. You will find it enclosed, along with an article for John.”

Never one to send gifts or cards, or even to call, Elizabeth Costello was more likely to communicate with her children through clippings; newspaper articles, photos torn out of magazines, excerpts from journal articles. More often than not they would go unacknowledged, these little intellectual spurs, for that is what they were: jabs at her children’s lifestyles, their opinions. Criticisms veiled as fodder for debate. The article she tucked into the novel would surely raise some hackles. Or perhaps nobody would read it. Norma might pull it out and deposit it directly into the bin. But even then she’d have to look at the photo. Elizabeth pulled out a pair of scissors and began to cut the piece out of the newspaper. If she didn’t do it in that instant, she would forget to include it. G.B. Shaw got it wrong; it is memory, not youth that is wasted on the young. She paused to take in the image one more time. A startling photo taken at a German zoo, of a polar bear and a three-year-old child. Dressed in a felt hat and warm red parka, the child looks on at the bear through the safety of a sheet of tempered glass. The bear, captured in a crazed moment, looks to be trying to gnash his way through the barrier to attack the child’s face. His eyes are wide and rolled back, his jaw gapes, his lip is snarled. One can almost hear the
sound of his teeth bumping impotently against the glass. By contrast the child’s face is utterly serene, totally expressionless. So young, and yet so utterly comfortable with this animal’s imprisonment, confident that it poses no threat to him. She hoped that John might take from the photo, not the possible threat to the child, but rather the disturbia of this imprisoned bear. Even if he did, she thought, it wouldn’t be for the right reason. He would pay attention to the bear’s condition only for the moment it took him to put himself into his mother’s odd shoes, figuring what was on her mind when she decided to send this particular photo. Then he would shake his head and...put it in a file marked “mother’s mad musings”? Tack it on the fridge? Throw it out? At least she had raised a considerate child, she thought as she slipped the folded paper inside the front cover of the book. She continued the letter.

“I am now even more fully convinced of my position, in spite of your objections. I will not sit at your table and watch your children eat meat. This letter is for you alone. John knows what I think and accepts it; perhaps merely as placations from a son to his distant mother, but accepting all the same. Nora, you treat me with the clear contempt of a bitter enemy. How have I wronged you? Is this about meat or are you, dare I suggest it, jealous? John is my squire, I his knight; he will protect me as long as he can. You, however, are not his duty, you are his choice. It would be you he would haul out of a burning building.

“I implore you to read Disgrace. In David’s love of his reticent daughter Lucy I see the three of us. I, at times, the professor, the invader who is tolerated but never really given any credit, never solicited for her insight – perhaps because it is already too willingly given. You and John are amalgamated into Lucy. At once protective and angry, or at best exasperated. But at a certain point, and you will know exactly when it happens – I don’t want to spoil it for you – I become Lucy, indignant, unreasonable, and you the professor, so unwilling to see the world through any
other lens than the one reason has fashioned for you. Yes, ultimately I think I must be Lucy. I think I know what Lucy means when she finally tells her father, “I am not minor”. Norma, I must tell you as Lucy says to David, that “I have a life of my own, just as important to me as yours is to you, and in my life I am the one who makes the decisions”\(^{41}\). I don’t mean to frustrate you Norma. As a young woman, overly ideological – a mentor – no, a lover, older than me smiled down into my hair and said ‘I can’t wait to see what you’ll sacrifice when you get older’. She was right. I softened. I forgave more. I built a career. I had children. But as those things fall away I feel I am nineteen again and the world once more pains me to be in. With growing pains, and then again with dying pains, perhaps injustice seems more stark, harder to bear.

“You’ve never asked me where my conviction of the value of the lives of animals comes from. I’m not prepared to rattle out a response to a question you won’t deign to ask, though I offer you this novel as the beginning of an answer. I can’t respond to you in any straightforward way. Lucy says to her father at one stage, “I wish I could explain…Because of who you are and who I am, I can’t. I’m sorry”. I couldn’t have said it better myself.

“Norma, pay attention to the animals in the novel. It is full of non-human life. Ducks, sheep, and of course dogs.”

Elizabeth signs her name and puts down the pen. She sighs, opens her laptop, a gift from her editor. To his surprise she took right to the digital life. Now she drafts everything on the screen. More efficient, less waste. She won’t be thought of as being left behind in a fast receding age of ink and page. There isn’t much else besides letters to John and Norma that she handwrites

\(^{41}\) *Disgrace* (198)
anymore. She has always neglected that grandmotherly duty of writing birthday cards, or stuffing Christmas cards with money.

She begins to write:

“There is not enough discomfort in literature. No more Razumovs to witness the crimes and turn the terrorists in. No more anxious portraits of artists either, for confession has become redundant too. Fashionable autistics, and precocious antidisestablishmentarians have won the day. And that’s to say nothing of the influence of talk show hosts on acquisitions editors and the bottom line of even the most discriminating publishing house. While so many drink gently frothed coffees and thumb through the latest young new author’s illustration-speckled bio-fiction, South African J.M. Coetzee’s prose offers a rankling truth: ‘I am sunk into a state of disgrace from which it will not be easy to lift myself’, David Lurie laments to a young female student’s father; he bedded the girl some weeks before – ‘not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core’. He continues to Mr. Isaacs, “It is not a punishment I have refused. I do not murmur against it. On the contrary, I am living it out from day to day, trying to accept disgrace as my state of being. Is it enough for God, do you think, that I live in disgrace without term?’ David speaks for us all. We have no right to live in any other state but shame. We are responsible for the death and suffering of millions of beings (I speak unashamedly about animals here – as readers familiar with me, with what John Banville has called the “tiresome Elizabeth Costello” will not be surprised to hear42), innocent to their core, lacking in shame, defined by their purity of being. We kill them with impunity, with a rage and a vengeance that obliterates the possibility of our redemption in this life, or any other.

It is a rare novelist today who points out our collective shame, who demands humility and self-flagellation from the reader. Recently the novels I begin to read (I rarely see one through to the end anymore. This is not an admission so much as a declaration of defiance) are clever jaunts through urban popular culture, or bathetic tragedies of life in the colonies, or worse still “historical fictions” told with all the nuance of a cable news segment. What all these novels have in common, aside from their revelation of their author’s, and the industry’s limited scope, is a playfulness, a joy in playing on words, making “fun” of language in the spirit of high postmodernity. I am aware, as these novels are, of this moment. A time where we can no longer trust the text. Words on the page no longer proclaim “I mean what I mean!” These texts delight in their lightheartedness. They are comfortable with accomplishing nothing more than double meanings, nothing more than clever ways of making metaphors out of the author’s precious process. But when a character humiliates himself as Lurie does throughout Disgrace, we are left to wonder what exactly is the double meaning? Lurie’s decline is unambiguous and earnest. In the face of such willingly debasement, can he mean anything other than what he expresses? This novel believes in the possibility of truth – as far as the only truth is that of the body, and the soul in pain. Readers and writers alike have become so comfortable with disaffecting irony and complacent with unstable languages. But I crave a novel that places faith in the possibility of representing truth. Disgrace is such a novel. The pained David Lurie desperately believes that somewhere he can find expression for his state of disgrace. And the novel believes it can arouse our sympathy. It succeeds in doing so again and again in spite of how we (might/should?) resist.

Does David not ask us to spit on his head, insist that he deserves it and ask that no pity be taken? And why won’t we participate in his total humiliation? Why, when Lurie spies on Soraya, condescends to his daughter, imagines Melanie and her sister Desiree naked together, fucks Bev
Shaw on the floor of the surgery, do we forgive him? Why do we want him to get up off the floor (he spends a great deal of time on floors) when he prostrates himself before Mrs. Isaacs and the young Desiree? Why do we lavish him with our tears of remorseful sympathy, performing the guilt work that he never seems to, yet believes he can complete?

Quite simply, it is because of the animals. The sheep, the billygoat, the cat; because of the dogs. David comes to conscience, or rather conscience arrives on the back (or inside the gangrenous testicles) of a billygoat. It arrives in the bleating of two sheep tethered to their deaths, in the doleful eyes of a dog about to be put down.

My position on what animals can “do” for us or “teach” us has never been easily defined. They are not didactic tools. “They teach therefore they are” is what I imagine Descartes might, in a pinch, allow. We think them; the argument goes, they can provide direction for our thoughts and that is their purpose. This is, of course, completely unacceptable. The animals in Disgrace, because they are animals in a novel, end up performing a similar kind of function. I would suggest, as I have before, that any poem, any written text about an animal, no matter how loving or full of respect, falls within an entirely human economy in which the animal has no share. David is transformed, and we are made sympathetic not by the animals in their pathetic states, but in the representation of the narrator’s interaction with them. It is not the animals that provoke sympathy. To suggest that they do is to reduce them to metaphor. It would be far too simple to read the poor billygoat as representative of David having been castrated by the committee. How base to compare a sexually predatory act with the pain of a goat whose stinking genitals are attacked each and every night by dogs that smell his rot. However, as a record of engagement between David and the animals, the novel is provocative. We are sympathetic to David’s

---

43 Lives of Animals, 51.
newfound sensitivity to them. As I have suggested elsewhere about Ted Hughes’ record of engagement with a jaguar, his sympathy is not for jaguars generally but for one particular jaguar. David’s “love” for animals is similarly narrow and thus redemptive. It is because there are specific animals in the novel that he develops pathos towards them, that he becomes protective of them. Our readerly eye is on the creature itself, our mind is on the system of interactions of which it is the earthy, material embodiment. His thoughts though, are on the very creature – on the specific lame dog, the driepoot – whom David carries into Bev’s extraordinary room. It is we as readers who find ourselves weighting the animal with representative meaning, when in fact no animal ought to be enlisted in such a task. The goat is a goat. The dogs are dogs. It would be too easy to read David as attempting merely to find metaphorical expression for his own debasement. This reading is what turns the animals into symbols. The more difficult reading would be to try as David does, to hold the dog, the goat, the sheep apart from reductive symbolization and to hold them in our hearts in the fullness of their being.”

If she concludes the article here, it will be sent back to her posthaste, with a note reading “less on animals, more on form”. Why do they solicit articles from her anymore? She never writes what an academic ought. Hers is an impressionistic sense. She long ago dispensed with reading theory, with taking up and defending embattled positions – except of course where animals were concerned and even then, hers was less of a defence of animals than a plea for her soul. The publication of The House on Eccles Street branded her many years ago as a “feminist writer” and she’s aware that editors are always slightly disappointed with her journal articles. “Yes, but where are the women’s issues?”, she imagines some well-meaning young editor asking at a

44 Ibid 54
45 This is the novel attributed to Costello. It is her most well-known one, where she takes on the voice of Molly Bloom.
publication meeting. But form and theory bore her these days; especially feminist theory. Uncovering how to make theory work in any given text blunts the emotional effect. Perhaps just another symptom of decay, this catharsis-seeking. She’d much rather write about Lucy and David. Much rather reckon with David’s attempts to imagine Lucy’s rape. Easier to focus on David than to think about poor Lucy. She picks up the novel, thumbs through the pages to the scene where Lucy, showered, in a bath robe, unlocks the bathroom door to her burnt up father. Elizabeth lets the tears flow freely over her wrinkled cheeks, tickling her neck as they run down her fleshy chest. Perhaps she is wrong, she thinks as she puts the book down and gazes back at the screen. Easier to think about form than to weep more tears over the Lurie family.

“Coetzee is a genius of form. His novels come together in a way that refuses simple deconstruction. There are patterns in the fiction nonetheless. Beautifully complex ones. I have read about his background. I know he was a mathematician. He programmed computers for IBM, plugging in code, calculations that he could never have known would change communication, commerce, the whole texture of cultural being. Perhaps this awareness of code, this attention to formula, to entering commands which yield a result is what informs his writing. I am no longer as naïve about process as I was in my youth. I used to believe that the circumstances of the author bore no effect on the art. For instance, I am a mother, reluctantly so. While I wrote, they whimpered outside the door. I wept for them – not for them exactly, but more for having had them. They got in the way of my ‘process’. Now, in fitful moments of what some call writer’s block (but which I prefer to call writer’s quicksand – struggling against it only sinks one further into it), I re-read my own work and the resentment, the stifling effect of children on one’s life, shouts at me from the fiction. It couldn’t not appear on those pages, in that non-place of language, those aspects of my deepest self (especially those that matured into shame) found
legitimating form. So does Coetzee’s precision, his attention to detail, his veganism, his anxiety about the world, his spiritual seeking, his suspicion that we are merely the managers of a world that has been reduced to systems of interaction.

Some have suggested that Coetzee’s mode has moved from the allegorical to the journalistic in this novel⁴⁶. I couldn’t disagree more. Disgrace does not report. It is full of refusals to tell, to explain, which as far as I can gather, is what passes (telling, simplifying, explaining) for journalism these days. The narrative is full of gaps. What happened while David was locked in the bathroom? Where did Lucy’s lover go to? Who encouraged Melanie to bring a complaint against David? What did Melanie write in the complaint? Who ransacked his apartment? Where did David’s car end up? Who were the other two intruders? Was Petrus really involved in the attack? Coetzee refuses to tell this story in a straightforward manner. The rape…”

She pauses, unsure whether she can write this paragraph. Is it time? After all these years will she write about it? Or will she, like Coetzee, whose narrative gaps she praises, keep mum? She has been, until now, proud of her silence. Does she want to know the details of Lucy’s rape? Does she want to compare it to the details of her own attack? She decides and continues.

“…is not explained. We never read about what happened to Lucy. She doesn’t snuggle up in her daddy’s arms weeping; mucus, saliva and tears mixing into a paste that binds her face to his neck. She remains silent in spite of David’s pleas to let him know what went on in those moments when he was crumpled on the bathroom floor (there’s that floor again). I admire this

⁴⁶ Dionne Brand A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging (126).
refusal. Coetzee’s unwillingness to venture into the darker territories of the soul \(^{47}\) gives me faith in his writerly soul. I’m not sure that readers or writers for that matter are improved by what they experience on the page. I have less and less faith that we as witnesses, or as creators of texts return unscathed from journeys into the dark chamber. And of David’s desire to know: it wanes, and as it does he is improved.

All these unanswered questions, these plot developments that never develop suggest (what is the opposite of the journalistic? The poetic?) a layering of impressionistic moments which, if not for the habitude or ease with which the novel treats indeterminacy, might suggest the form of the high moderns, or even, dare I say it, of the emblematic layering of Shakespeare. Yes, perhaps the terms of the poetic are the only way to discuss the mode of *Disgrace*.

Like a Borges poem, the one about the tiger, or a Hughes poem, the one about the jaguar – or maybe it’s closest to Rilke’s circling Panther\(^{48}\). In Rilke, the great cat paces behind bars, his power caged and vision weary. Still, though, images enter and move through the body to be halted in the heart. This is the progression in the novel as well. From a cage of sorts, a cage of his own shame, David observes: Bev at the clinic, Lucy among the dogs and the flowers, Melanie on the stage, Petrus on the farm. And finally, after he is made vulnerable by the attack, the image of them enters and travels through his finally stilled (read: celibate) body to end in his heart. Only then can he participate. He labours for Petrus, he approaches the Isaacs’ in sorrow, he takes up Bev’s miserable work. It is the heart’s work he performs.”

\(^{47}\) See the chapter in *Elizabeth Costello* titled “The Problem of Evil”. Costello goes to a conference and delivers a paper on evil and specifically on Paul West’s depiction of the hanging deaths of plotters against Hitler. She fears that the writer who can imagine such evil must in fact be contaminated by that evil.

\(^{48}\) Costello uses this poem, “Panther” to anchor her lecture in *Lives of Animals*. 
She saves her work and opens a new document. She’ll come back to the journal article when she has relieved herself of the fiction that is building up inside of her. It will be about the polar bear from the newspaper photo. The cub’s mother, also in captivity, abandons him at birth, refuses to feed him. It is a Medea-like moment where she decides that she’d rather see the infant die than have it grow up to a life of swimming around plastic icebergs and eating dead sardines. The baby is raised by human hand, a kind loving soul who nurtures the small cub to full size. The bear grows too strong for the man who can no longer handle the aggressive love of a full grown polar bear. The bear, abandoned now by his surrogate father as well, becomes angry and unruly until he finally and ecstatically mauls a young child. “A Trip to the Zoo”, she titles the story and begins to write.

A Job Talk

Ximena Yves thumbed through her notes. She crossed out a sentence, scribbled a star next to another one, wrote SLOW DOWN in big letters across the top of each page. A rising wave of nausea swept over her as she imagined herself at the podium at the front of a packed room. She imagined the head of the department in the front row, sitting next to him her old supervisor, behind them a group of graduate students with laptops at the ready clicking away as she read her paper. She was returning to the university where she had earned her PhD three years before. In the meantime she had been teaching several contracts at local colleges, working two days a week at an office, filing reports, answering phones, scheduling appointments, and writing when she had spare time. It wasn’t exactly how she had imagined her post-PhD life. This was a big opportunity though. A chance to come home, to prove herself in front of her former mentors, to
settle into the frantic pace of a tenure-track job. She was surprised to get a campus interview. When her thesis was nearing completion, she realized with mild horror that she had written a dissertation that ought to have been written 30 years ago. What was she thinking? Being a feminist in 2011 was decidedly old fashioned. The job talk that she was set to deliver pulled no punches, however. A phone call to her former supervisor assured her to be forthright, critical, assured. She tried the title out with him: “Disgraceful: Elizabeth Costello’s defence of masculinity”.

“Run with it. Sounds great”, came the response from the other end of the phone.

She thought back to the first time she read *Disgrace*. She wept at the end when David offers up the dog to be euthanized. A great novel, she thought. So much going on. Christian notions of forgiveness, animal rights, race…but it was Lucy who intrigued her most. Yes, the novel was about David, but Lucy’s call, her insistent “un-minor” voice drew her back to it again and again. And each time she read it, she became more incensed with David’s treatment of her, with how readily he steamrolled over her and how easily the novel assimilated her radical position to accommodate the novel’s real aim, comforting poor David. She had to write about it. And then a friend emailed her Elizabeth Costello’s article, “Sorry in the Body”. She couldn’t believe that Costello, the woman who had made her name giving such a strong and provocative voice to Molly Bloom, that sexualized, infantilized object of Joycean titillation, could miss the novel’s obvious endorsement of the masculine “ideal”. Ximena had finished reading the last sentence of the article and immediately began her response to it. The journal published her hasty response, and the response was ultimately the seed for the job talk that she was preparing to give today. Again, she flipped through her notes and pulled out the response piece that had started it all. She read a couple of paragraphs:
“In spite of the fact that the text complicates our relationship to it, Costello nonetheless tries to read the text as moral directive. She tries to pin down the author to the prose he writes. She did this at a conference when she accused Paul West of being compromised and of compromising his readers when he wrote about Nazi evil. She is guilty of the same critical sin in her review of *Disgrace*. She wonders at Coetzee’s veganism. She attributes the attention to animal welfare in the novel to a goodheartedness in Coetzee. Her reading attempts to align author, novel and character with her own moral universe. What she misses in her reading then are the particularities – those details which point to the novel as an allegory of the nascent Rainbow Nation, to the strategic and manipulative use of violence, to its Christian ethic, to David’s arrogance. Costello is overly concerned with Coetzee’s quality of being, with making connections between his text and his real life self and aligning both to her moralising universalism. Coetzee was plain in a 1991 interview with David Attwell that making connections between the details of his life and his work is unfair:

> I ask myself, should I be hospitable to every plausible idea I hear about myself, on the grounds that what has not occurred to me is likely to be what I have been hiding from myself. Perhaps not: rather than giving in so easily, maybe I owe it to myself to offer a decent resistance and live with the consequences. (*Doubling the Point* 144)

Costello operates from her rigid ideological stance and in so doing performs the type of critique that Coetzee refuses.

This is not to say that I believe Costello’s reading to be a misreading. I appreciate her attention to what I believe to be a profoundly human condition revealed in the novel. Costello
identifies in herself, and in the novel, a desire to speak from an ethical position – particularly with regards to animals. She nonetheless understands the hypocritical nature of this desire. Her anxiety comes from the fact that she cannot align her ethics with the way that she actually lives in the world. In *Disgrace* she picks up on this deeply human tragedy – the desire to be good, to do good, to cause no harm, as it contradicts with something else, something less easily identifiable, yet equally powerful, equally motivated by desire. This condition is obviously Costello’s condition. Then again, she may well have merely become susceptible to David’s faith in a Romantic sensibility. Costello thus reads in David a deep desire to be improved and agrees to be the kind of reader who believes that he is and that she can be improved by reading the novel. After all in her lectures several years ago at Appleton College, she expressed her faith in the power of the sympathetic imagination, and she is someone who is well able, as *The House on Eccles Street* demonstrated, to enact this kind of sympathetic identification. The sympathetic imagination, as employed by the Romantics, allows for a ‘de-centering of self’ and a transformation of the self into a ‘moral agent’ (Lockridge 18). This sounds very much like the process that Costello advocates in her lectures; it is also reminiscent of the mode in which David tries to improve himself.

Costello’s reading of the characters in the light of this Romantic ethics is sound, and further justified by the narrative thread of David as Romantics professor that runs through the text. However, her review leaves out the way in which the novel undercuts this Romantic moralizing. A reading of David through Lucy’s eyes reveals that, David, in his attempt to become a moral agent, is never convincingly de-centered. David never relinquishes, nor does the novel ever take from him the centrality, authority or legitimacy that seem to belong to him unambiguously and merely because he is straight, white and male.”

49 Costello explores this concept throughout *The Lives of Animals*. 
Not bad, Ximena thought. Scattered, but the seed was there. David was not to be trusted. The novel is always in his corner. This she still believed. Good thing too, because there was no going back now. The door of the little office that was serving as her holding pen opened and a grad student poked her head in to tell Ximena that it was time. They were ready for her.

Ximena arranged her papers on the lectern and took a small sip of water, surprised in fact that it went down, so tight was her throat. She began:

“My graduate work was about masculinity and the ‘crisis’ trope that has come to dominate both academic and professional assessments of male novelists and characters. I grouped together a number of novels which figured male protagonists who were fathers – a fact central to each novel’s conceit. I identified that the protagonists evidenced at the outset of the novel a relative peace and comfort with masculinity as it has been transformed by feminist and queer deconstructions of gendered identities. I argued that this state of mind suggested that while superficial transformations in sex-roles have become assimiliable into the postfeminist culture at large, they obscure the fact that feminist and queer deconstruction of gender is an ongoing process. The trope of masculinity in crisis has emerged as a cautionary tale to counter aggressive and radical reassertions of deconstructive practice. In the novels I studied, I identified a traumatic moment in each novel which upsets the male protagonist’s uneasy comfort with postfeminist masculinity and launches him into an identity crisis which I argue is articulated in the now widely available language of masculinity in crisis. I found that the anxious men who focalized these novels were often offset by a daughter or daughter figure who in the novel would often do
little to assuage the father’s fear that he might be facing irrelevance. It would seem to be that *Disgrace* is the novel that was written for my thesis, or perhaps, the other way around – that my thesis was written for or because of this novel. Unfortunately I came to Coetzee late in the game, so it was only recently that I realized that *Disgrace* beautifully exemplifies the argument that I made in my dissertation. Oh well, too late I thought. I’ll move on with my academic life. But then, upon reading Elizabeth Costello’s article ‘Sorry in the Body’ in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, I was compelled to revisit the themes of my dissertation and to answer what I argue is an egregious misreading of David Lurie on her part.

“My reading of the novel is critical of David Lurie in a way that Costello is not. Sam Durrant notes that Costello has repeatedly claimed that ‘there are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination’. Durrant describes Coetzee’s fiction as ‘acts of sympathetic imagination that continually encounter their own bounds’ (119). Durrant is right to note the difference between Costello and Coetzee and allows me to suggest that Costello’s faculty of sympathetic imagination is more powerful than *Disgrace* actually permits. The novel continually undermines David’s attempts at transformation, and allows readers to see around David’s attempt at atonement to recognize the impossibility of him actually becoming the redeemed person that Elizabeth Costello thinks he has become. Without careful attention to some of the finer formal elements of the novel, it is easy to find oneself closely aligned with David primarily because he is the focalizer, but also because the novel is a record of his constant second-guessing, self-abnegation and rejection of sympathy.

“Perhaps because of David’s painful self-consciousness, but also largely because of the narratological style and strategic use of imagery and metaphor, the reader’s ‘sympathetic imagination’ is often enlisted in Lurie’s cause. David’s heightened self-consciousness is evident
in the novel’s palpably stressful mood which brings David’s anxious thoughts into alignment with our own. David’s moodiness, particularly when considered in light of how he behaves towards the women in the novel is, I argue, both affectation and manipulation. Though it appears to Costello as the sign of a transformation, his painful self-flagellation merely obfuscates the challenges levelled at him by the university tribunal and later in the novel, by his daughter. David’s shift in tone, from assured to questioning and unsure, is mediated through the third-person omniscient narrator, and is not, despite Costello’s insistence, proof of a radical change in behavior. Rather it is indicative of a man for whom transformation is at once a heartfelt desire and an acknowledged impossibility.

“The lack of pleasure attendant in reading *Disgrace*, the palpable anxiety, the descriptive horror (on self castration: ‘with a steady hand and a modicum of phlegm’ … ‘A man on a chair snipping away at himself’[Coetzee 9]) more than David’s relationship with the dogs, is what turns our attention to the ethical in spite of the affective response we have to the plight of the animals. The novel is always at a crisis pitch; it offers no comfort, no realignment of truth with speech, and no happiness either. One particular technique, the literalization of metaphor is particularly effective in creating powerful and disturbing images. When image or thought become literal, the ‘like’-ness that functions as protection in any metaphorical gesture is obliterated. Figurative image is turned into the literal (on the level of the narrative events) with the result that the reader begins to suspect that the worst can and probably will happen. Terror becomes actual. A few examples of this: on the first page, David says of his relation to the prostitute Soraya: ‘he is old enough to be her father; but then technically, one can be a father at twelve’. This musing is then made literal by the boy rapist, Pollux, who is the potential father to Lucy’s child. Another example: the only thing hanging in Helen’s closet is a pair of blue overalls. Helen, we infer from David’s
observations, was Lucy’s lover but has now left the farm. The overalls (Helens?) are filled out two pages later by the dubious Petrus, the man who is to become Lucy’s husband, ‘a tall man in blue overalls’ (63). Apologies for mentioning it again, but the image of the man castrating himself is made manifest by the billygoat’s gangrenous testicles that are attacked by dogs every night (not to mention the connection between Pollux and bollocks/bollox). The reader is subject to the repetition of these images of disaster, pain and humiliation – and more importantly the literalization, the transformation of these images into reality on the level of narrative events.

“There is a relationship between the attempts at Christian notions of forgiveness that David is so quick to reject and some formal elements of the novel. The novel approaches the theme of forgiveness from a number of different angles. The tribunal that Lurie faces readily brings to mind the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a tribunal that provided South Africans on both sides of the Apartheid divide a forum to tell their stories. Instead of a judicial process whereby criminals were identified, charged and imprisoned, the TRC was about forgiveness and moving forward. Spearheaded by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the commission endorsed a New Testament notion of turning the other cheek. David’s refusal to buy into the university tribunal’s process, a process that, like the TRC, demanded confession and a demonstration of remorse, allows David and the novel to perform a critique of both Christian moralizing and of the nation-making efforts of the post-Apartheid Republic of South Africa.

“As I mentioned, given the context of sin, redemption and forgiveness, a number of images throughout the novel achieve an emblematic quality. These emblematic moments consist of prostration, fire, castration and of course the presence of animals. Correlating images are readily found in Alciato’s 1531 Book of Emblems. According to Peter Maurice Daly, books of emblems have a long tradition in Christian teaching as moral instruction guides. Does the novel bring
these emblems to mind to signal a similar didacticism? Or is the notion of moral instruction deconstructed by the fact that David, though he tries to atone, never really abandons his narcissism? He never really believes that women aren’t there for his amusement and so never in fact accomplishes the kind of moral transformations that a devotional volume like The Book of Emblems was designed to achieve.

“Let us examine the emblematic references in the novel. A point that Elizabeth Costello makes in her article is that David is repeatedly prostrate on the floor. He has sex with Melanie on the floor; he has sex with Bev on the floor. He is burnt up on the floor of the bathroom; he prostrates himself in front of Mrs. Isaacs and Desiree. It is clear that we are to take his laying himself out as evidence of his genuine attrition. Sex with Bev is a deflated counterpoint to sex with Melanie. The attack on the bathroom floor is the karmic punishment for the sex he has with Melanie, while his prostration before Mrs. Isaacs and Desiree is a performance of atonement that is not altogether convincing.

“The novel is also full of fire; of ruminations on burning (with desire), of actual burning (with mentholated spirits), of incineration. Burning becomes a symbol for David’s desire, for the punishment of that desire and for his failed attempt to obliterate from his life all evidence of and capacity for desire. The association between fire and desire suggests the emblem ‘Anteros: the love of virtue overcoming the other Cupid’ in Alciato.

Ximena clicked a button and the screen behind her filled with the crude drawing of the curbed cherub.
Fig. 3 “Anteros: the love of virtue overcoming the other Cupid” from Alciato. *Book of Emblems.* (1531); rpt in *The Memorial Web Edition in Latin and English.* mun.ca.ca/alciato. Web.

In the image, Cupid’s wings are clipped and his bow and arrows burn in the background. The text that accompanies the emblem reads:

> Nemesis has painted the winged enemy of winged Love, overcoming bow with bow, and fire with fire, so that he suffers what he’s done to others. But this boy who once bore his arrows undaunted now weeps wretchedly. Three times he spits in the innermost part of his bosom. A marvelous thing, fire is burned by fire, and Love hates the madness of Love.

“We are to suppose that David’s enslavement to Eros, which he suggests motivated him in his pursuing of Melanie, is replaced by virtue. He spits three times in the ‘innermost part of his bosom’ (having sex with Bev, going to Melanie’s father, caring for the dog’s bodies). I don’t mean to suggest that he didn’t ‘repent’, but rather that Lurie hasn’t been fundamentally transformed. Even while seeking forgiveness from Melanie’s father, he imagines what it would
be like to have both Melanie and her younger sister in bed together (*Disgrace* 164). When he has sex with Bev he paints it as a magnanimous gesture on his part. Though David is scorched, and love does for a time seem to ‘hate the madness of love’, ultimately the flames do not destroy his tools of seduction.

“The richest and most prolific associations between the novel and Alciato’s emblems occur with respect to the animals. Alciato’s emblems are replete with animals. Dogs in particular appear several times in *The Book of Emblems* as companions, and on one occasion a dog appears by itself howling at the moon, in an emblem called ‘Futile effort’.

Ximena clicked the button again

![“Futile effort” from Alciato.](image)

**Fig. 4. “Futile effort” from Alciato. Book of Emblems. (1531); rpt in The Memorial Web Edition in Latin and English. mun.ca.ca/alciato. Web.**

“Similarly, in *Disgrace* Lurie finds himself writing his futile opera while a dog howls the chorus beside him. He decides that his opera is indeed futile, that no one will ever hear it and that his
writing it is an exercise in folly. Nonetheless, David secretly harbours a fantasy that somewhere in the piece will emerge a “single authentic note of immortal longing” (*Disgrace* 214). Like the emblematic dog behind me who howls at the moon because he believes he sees another dog in the moon’s face, David endeavours for recognition by ‘the scholars of the future’ who are as unlikely to recognize David’s unpublished opera as is the dog to get a response back from the man in the moon. The futility of the effort, in other words, does nothing to curb the behaviour.

“Images of castration and its metaphorical equivalent – impotence – also recur pathologically in the novel. This notion of being divested of virility, authority, power etc constitutes the most prevalent theme in the novel. Castration is David’s biggest fear, and as the novel progresses and he becomes increasingly irrelevant, the nightmare fantasy achieves the texture of reality. ‘Safety should at times be bought with money’ is the *inscription* above emblem number 153.

Click, and the beleaguered beaver appeared on the screen behind her.
Though limping, its swollen underbelly sagging, the beaver nonetheless escapes the trap by this strategy. With its teeth, it rips off its healing genitals, and casts them away, knowing it is being hunted for them. By the example of this animal, learn not to spare your possessions but to give money to your enemies, in order to preserve your life.

“The emblem depicts a beaver who knows that he is being hunted for his ‘healing genitals’ and so in order to spare his life, ‘with his teeth’ removes them and leaves them for the hunter and his dog. The beaver buys his safety with his valuable genitals. Bear in mind the billygoat in Bev’s clinic, attacked nightly by wild dogs. His testicles have become infected and the infection threatens to kill him. Bev offers to put the poor beast out of its misery because she knows that it will not survive to see the vet arrive to perform the castration. She is aware that once it is sterilized, the goat will be useless to the woman who has brought him into the clinic, and also, she likely will not be able to afford antibiotics (Disgrace 82-3). His use-value and therefore his life, is dependent on his ability to impregnate. The testicles have worth only as long as they are functioning and attached to the goat to whom they belong. Once they no longer have any use value the whole goat is also worthless. In both cases castration is equal to preservation, but only in the beaver’s case do the testicles in and of themselves have value.

“Because the goat is only worth as much as his reproductive ability and because his owner cannot absorb the cost of post-operative antibiotics, he will be put to slaughter. Coetzee’s version of the emblem thus complicates the simple dictum: ‘give money to your enemies in order to save your life’. The goat, being the property of his enemies and having only his healthy reproducing
self to offer as money, cannot save his own life. This is the difference of course between wild
and owned animals and between the instructive morality of the early Renaissance and the
complicated relationship between life, value and property that refutes the simplicity of such an
imperative in the late capitalist era. In Coetzee’s use of the goat, what appears to be moral
instruction (one should humanely euthanize an animal in pain) appears, when considered in light
of the emblem, to be a more complicated parable about life, use value and masculinity. The
moral is not so simply arrived at as it is in the emblem: rather the moral, that a male is only as
valuable as his functioning testicles, is complicated by Bev’s presence, by her affection for the
animal. Bev’s sympathy for the animal suggests that the goat’s virility is not his only value and
thus she complicates the moral.

“However, because the novel is focalized through David, we can also read the goat as most
obviously suggestive of the novel’s preoccupation with masculinity under threat. We are to read
the goat’s fate as the fate that Lurie himself suggests several pages later that he would choose.
Speaking with Lucy, he reminds her of a neighbour’s dog who was beaten every time it got
excited when it smelled a ‘bitch in the vicinity’ (90). David decides that the creature would have
preferred to be shot than to be ‘fixed’ and ‘spend the rest of its days padding about the living
room, sighing and sniffing the cat and getting portly’ (90). This is clearly David projecting onto
the dog his own feelings of diminished masculinity after the tribunal clipped his wings and set
his arrows on fire.

“The moral pulse of the novel beats strongly and is articulated in these beautiful emblematic
poetics. But while Costello valorizes David Lurie and reads his coming to conscience as a result
of his interactions with the animals in the text, my reading sees Lurie as far more manipulative;

50 Emblem 153 is later revisited when Lucy offers to be domesticated to Petrus as a means of self-preservation.
he seeks sympathy and claims not to deserve it – a tactic that further compels sympathy. My reading is critical of any claim to change undergone by Lurie. He is ultimately not convincing. He cannot ever fully divest himself of the privilege he was born with. His terms are forever those of a specifically white male heterosexual, and those terms refuse his entry into any other but his own particular world. Costello reads the novel as a narrative of transformation, whereas my reading establishes Lurie as a typical Coetzeean focalizer who is paralyzed by the power he cannot divest himself of.”

Ximena paused. Turned the page and looked out at her audience. She looked out at a sea of faces, each one locatable on a spectrum that ranged from asleep to ambivalent. There in the back though, an older woman craned her neck around the head in front of her, trying to maintain a clear sight line. “At least someone’s interested,” Ximena thought, sipping from the water next to her. She began the next section.

**Mad Bad and Dangerous to Know**

“While Costello does not read Lurie within his geopolitical context, and instead reads the novel as a tale of moral improvement, my reading is based on the assumption that, like other Coetzeean focalizers, he is never actually transformed and that this failure to be transformed is intimately tied up with context – both the South African context, and the Romantic academic one that he fits into so neatly at the start of the novel. This is not to suggest that the context – South Africa immediately following the collapse of the Apartheid system – justifies the calcification of his ideas about women, or the bad behaviour of any other character in the novel, but rather to suggest that paying attention to context renders a particular kind of reading of the novel
unavoidable. As Ato Quayson suggests about reading historical and anthropological details into *Things Fall Apart*, ‘the text is meaningful partly in relation to the culture from which it borrows its materials and with which it establishes varying relationships’ (230). There are several points in the novel where the South African context looms large, and where we experience David’s mistrust of the new South Africa. When David is brought before a university committee after Melanie levels a complaint against him, the allegorical relationship between the committee and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is, as I mentioned, plain. David is asked, not only to admit to his sins and accept the punishment, but to ask forgiveness. He can admit and accept, he will say the words, but he will not go to any effort to demonstrate sincerity. The members of the committee push and push, but they cannot get him to express remorse in the way that they want to see it expressed. Under the TRC, the Apartheid criminal deferred his responsibility to the evil of the system, while in a typically Romantic move, Lurie defers his to Eros. At the defence Lurie becomes a character who as Lucy puts it is, ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’ (76). His refusal to participate in the tribunal’s process results in his exile, yet this is not enough to disrupt what Lucy calls his determination ‘to go on being bad’ (76).

“For David, if an act is motivated by desire it cannot be an entirely wrong action. In fact, in his mind, desire, especially as it relates to the beautiful, may even be equated with morality. Slavoj Zizek’s recent *In Defence of Lost Causes* confirms David’s belief, making the point, after Lacan, ‘that the ego ideal, this seemingly benevolent agency which leads us to moral growth and maturity, forces us to betray the ‘law of desire’ by adopting the ‘reasonable’ demands of the existing socio-symbolic order’ (89). Zizek suggests further that ‘the superego with its excessive feeling of guilt, is merely the necessary obverse of the ego ideal: it exerts its unbearable pressure upon us on behalf of our betrayal to the ‘law of desire’’ (90). According to Zizek, ‘the guilt we
Experience under the superego’s pressure is not illusory but actual – the only thing of which one can be guilty is of having given ground relative to one’s desire’ (90). Indeed David says to the committee that his ‘impulse’ to sleep with Melanie was not ‘ungovernable’, and that he is ‘ashamed to say’ that he has ‘denied similar impulses in the past’ (52). In other words, his guilt, if he in fact did feel guilty, is that he refused to follow his desire.

“Lurie is not interested in placating gestures. When in front of the tribunal it is as though he believes that to summon up a decent performance of regret is to be dishonest to some kind of essential character that he must protect. It would be unfaithful to desire. Yet, he is not wrong in saying to his colleague Mathabane that ‘repentance belongs to another world, to another universe of discourse’ (58). Who can judge the point at which someone becomes ‘truly sorry’? Mathabane insists that this is not what the committee wants, but that they want more from David than he’s given them, ‘not a great deal more, but more’ (58). The novel doesn’t immediately name this ‘more’ and so I read it as a measurable expression of remorse, say tears or at the very least, a wobbling chin. Give them something to work with man!”

A chuckle from the audience enlivens the room.

“David visits the Isaacs, and a ‘more’ is eventually named, though still not the ‘more’ the tribunal wanted. He prostrates himself on the floor and wonders, ‘Will that do? If not, what more?’ (173). The ‘more’ he performs at the Isaacs is far too melodramatic and intrusive. It is a romantic and highly overwrought gesture which confuses and threatens the Isaacs. The tribunal wants him to abandon his romantic sense of right and wrong, as that sense is mediated by desire. They would prefer if he would come on board the rainbow nation-making train and, to put it bluntly, that he would submit to a process of public humiliation from which, having been a white
man during Apartheid, he had been protected. In the interest of upholding a social contract, of demonstrating that in the Republic of South Africa, nobody is above the law, and of participating in the procedures of the governing body, Lurie ought to momentarily suspend what he believes to be this honourable protection of his right to desire and his right to act on that desire in spite of the consequences. Let me return to the tension initially expressed in the opening line of the novel between a generalized solution and the particularity that makes that solution inadequate. Here the tribunal offers him a solution, yet it does not address his particular circumstances or his specific quality of being, and so he rejects it. His ego is offended by the idea of accepting a solution that does not allow him to remain true to himself, however true that self is to predatory sexual impulses. Remember after all, that Soraya is the precedent to Melanie. After she refused to see him anymore, he stalked her, unconcerned for her feelings of safety or privacy. David refuses the possibility that there may be compromises that a person has to make in order to be able to participate in a polite society. Crucially, the novel, especially in its second half, makes that society seem such an unpleasant place in which to seek membership that we can uncomfortably agree, but agree nonetheless, with David’s pigheadedness.

“He goes off to the Eastern Cape to Lucy’s farm. Once there, the doubts that presented themselves to him during the Melanie affair, and that he refused to demonstrate to the committee, seem to disappear. His confidence is restored in direct relationship to his assumption of fatherly gravitas. He sermonizes to Lucy, offers his approval, or conversely, judges her on her clothing, her weight, her sexuality, her lack of passion. With Lucy in his life his introspection turns outward. She is after all, for David, the ultimate evidence that he has lived a ‘good’ life: ‘If this is to be what he leaves behind – this daughter, this woman – then he does not have to be ashamed’ (62). A paragraph later he tells her that ‘a man wants to leave something behind,‘
referring to his opera and to the fact that women leave behind children, while men produce something altogether different. Irigaray suggests that the daughter is the keeper of her father’s phallus so that he may become invested in other projects. In David’s private thoughts, she is enough, she performs the work of the phallicized body who helps him “raise his tomb”, as Irigaray puts it (54). When he speaks to Lucy though, he makes it seem as though she is inadequate and secondary to intellectual labour.

“Though secondary, she is integral to his intellectual labour because she allows him the freedom to pursue it. She is a guaranteed investment that proves his masculinity should his intellectual pursuits fail to prove his worth. Because she performs such a vital role in the protection and ongoing legitimacy of his masculinity, he must perceive her as a character in a text that he is authoring. She is part of his story, but only as long as he can narrativize her. In a poignant, metatextual moment, Lucy declares to her father, ‘I am not minor’, telling him that he behaves ‘as if everything I do is part of the story of your life. You are the main character, I am a minor character who doesn’t make an appearance until halfway through’ (198). What Lurie ought to do is to disinvest himself of her and not only remove her from the story that he is writing but in fact cease to author it. Of course he cannot do this though. As he laments to Bev, he ‘can’t imagine in this life, not being Lucy’s father’ (165). For Lurie, fatherhood is inevitably about the authoring of the daughter into his own narrative. In ‘No More Fathers: The Family Subtext in J.M. Coetzee’s Novels’, Paola Splendore argues that ‘Coetzee’s emphasis on the idea of parents expresses, on a more symbolical level, the need to accept one’s responsibilities’(150). However, it is clear that Lucy rejects the repeated attempts that David makes to assume responsibility for her. These gestures on his part to comfort her, to sort out her problems, are controlling efforts that seek to consume her ‘minority’ status into his more ‘central’ life. Again and again, Lucy
reminds David that he is being arrogant and self-serving when he tries to convince her that he knows how she feels, that he can imagine what she went through. If there is any expression, on a symbolic level, of the idea of parents it is quite the opposite of what Splendore suggests. She argues that the parent-child relationship in Coetzee teaches us to behave ‘toward the other, any other, as family’. (150) It is not correct to suggest that the family teaches the protagonist how to behave towards the other. Instead the radical alterity that characterizes the relationship between protagonist and other (between say, Petrus and David, two men who do not see eye to eye) reveals how he ought to behave towards the family. Let me explain: David owes it to Lucy to not assume, merely because she is his daughter, that she is not other. He treats everyone but her with radical suspicion and alterity, and in so doing does not enact the same kind of presumptive overprotection that Lucy must strenuously reject time and again. Lucy, though she is at times affectionate and sympathetic towards her father, tries to remind her father of the unbridgeable space between them. Lurie nonetheless continually reasserts her into his life story, a story that is in many respects about the relationship between his masculinity and the women who play a part in its construction and maintenance.

“The simplicity of the golden rule, to love thy neighbour, is debunked in Lucy’s rejection of her father. The novel’s relationship to this rule is complex. Exploring the role of the neighbour would demand a separate study wherein Lucy’s relationship to Petrus and David’s relationship to Petrus are taken into account: ‘It’s hard to say what Petrus is, strictly speaking. The word that seems to serve best, however, is neighbor’ [emphasis in text] (Disgrace, 116). Zizek reads the injunction to love thy neighbour as Freud and Lacan do; it is an injunction to ‘‘domesticate’ the non-human, the monstrous thing, the impenetrable alterity of the other’ (Zizek 16). Lucy would
rather maintain a distance between herself and her father, and not for the sake of simply being separate from him, but precisely because he attempts to subsume her.

“Her queerness is easily, perhaps a bit too easily, read as the monstrous alterity that David attempts to domesticate. And the novel participates in this domestication. Her queerness is utterly latent in the novel. She never identifies herself as gay; no one does. In fact one could make the point that David imagines her homosexuality. Helen had her own room. She is merely described as Lucy’s friend. The word lesbian is used once; ‘worse to rape a lesbian than a virgin, more of a blow’ (105), David wonders, but otherwise Lucy’s homosexuality is part of David’s musing characterization of her. However, unlike Lucy’s decision to return to the farm after the attack, not to report the rape, to keep her pregnancy, to marry Petrus – all things that are incomprehensible to David – her being queer is something that he does not discuss with her. Lucy’s queerness is clearly as baffling to David as anything else that Lucy does, yet it is not a topic of conversation. In fact, Lucy is baffling to most readers of the novel. On the one hand, the novel relies on the reader’s ‘recognition of a fairly stable and legible ‘lesbian’ and ‘gay’ identity’ (Munro 189). After all Lucy is described as earthy, dowdy and capable, stereotypical markers of the queer woman. This is a non-threatening, non-sexual, latent homosexuality that David, just like the probable reader, is comfortable with. Initially, Disgrace paints just the kind of portrait of the queer against which Lee Edelman argues in No Future. Edelman suggests that queers ought to embrace the anti-social qualities that right-wing conservatives already believe are essential to the gay lifestyle. However, after the attack, Lucy’s decision to keep the child and to marry Petrus sees her adopt a radical position evocative of the antisocial position that No Future describes. Lucy’s choice is one that neither the reader, the novel, nor David is entirely comfortable with or even knows how to represent. She calls to mind Edelman’s radical figure who ‘resists
enslavement to futurity in order to have a life’ (“Post Partum” 184). The futurity she resists is the well-adjusted one – the one that operates in conjunction with what the liberal state condones as the ‘right’ course of action - where she prosecutes the men who raped her, reveals Petrus’ relationship to those men, aborts the child she is pregnant with and hopefully one day signs up for a homonormative, or even better, a heterosexual life. Lucy’s ‘queerness names the other possibilities, the other potential outcomes, the non-linear and noninevitable trajectories that fan out from any given event and lead to unpredictable futures’ (“Anti-Social...” 154) Her decision not to pursue a line of justice and retribution is radical. It challenges Lurie’s sense of right and wrong.

“David’s position in relationship to Lucy’s queerness is consistent with the liberal humanism that he typically inhabits. David exemplifies ‘a liberal cognitive aesthetic, for, in the face of a disorienting and alien external world that fundamentally challenges individual autonomy, the liberal subject constructs through purposeful thought himself as a feat of humane beauty’ (Hadley 94). In short, in this liberal formulation, his mere thinking about right and wrong and his aesthetic sensibility make him an ethical being. However, he never seems to register how insufficient the contemplation of right versus wrong is, and how the real choice to be made is between reproducing the symbolic order or registering it as fantasy and welcoming the negativity that accompanies that fantasy’s refusal. Through Lucy, the novel presents this refusal of the fantasy of the future as an option, but David, as far as Lucy is concerned at least, chooses instead to imbue Lucy’s choice to keep her child with meaning, namely-hope for the future. While he can give up the dogs and acknowledge their lack of a future, he cannot abide Lucy’s decision to surrender herself to the violence of the Eastern Cape. The future that Lucy chooses is not the one
that David wants for her, and though it is somewhat like the apocalyptic future that Edelman signals in *No Future*, it names a different state of being. She chooses to have the child and so it is not an outright rejection of procreation as Edelman suggests is characteristic of radical queer politics.

“Edelman goes on to call the politics of the left and right (or in David’s moral universe – right and wrong) a politics of futurity, one which employs the figure of the Child to assure its continuation. He remarks that the Child has come “to serve as the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications, the Child has come to embody for us the telos of the social order and come to be seen as the one for whom that order is held in perpetual trust” (*No Future* 11). The “other side” of politics then, the one that refuses to reproduce the fantasy of the Symbolic order, and which thus, in its non-procreation, threatens that order, is a politics that Edelman associates with the death drive. This choice, between reproduction and refusal, is the one that Edelman’s text offers us.

“It is a short step from a politics that refuses to reproduce the fantasy of politics as such to queer sexuality. The queer, in her non-procreative thrust, threatens the process of reproduction and disrupts the politics of futurity. Edelman encourages queers to adopt the radical potential that right-wing conservatives already attribute to the queer\(^51\), and to inhabit the nonproductive side of political morality: the side that resists being beholden to the Child who falsely promises the realization of desire, but whose perpetually anticipated arrival, always defers it. Edelman pushes the figure of the queer further with the neologism *sinthomosexual* which describes a figure who, driven by the negation of futurity, denies the ‘appeal of fantasy’(35). The disruption by the *sinthomosexual* necessarily means a disruption of the fantasy of perpetuation which drives future

---

\(^51\) “The right should be read less as rant and more for the possibility of what queer sexualities should be” (16).
politics. It also means that, as figure of threat, the *sinthomosexual* is typically neutralized in literature and film, either through death or through some kind of revolutionary turn around to the ‘right side’, to the fantastic promise of the future.

“Lucy does seem to embody some of the characteristics of the sinthome that Edelman describes; however, her desire to keep the child signals her embodiment of a different kind of anti-social politics of negativity. Halberstam charts a movement of ‘radical passivity’ in work by Yoko Ono, Marina Abromovicz and others which is characterised by masochism and intentional vulnerability. Halberstam argues that we ‘can we think about the refusal of self as an anti-liberal act, a revolutionary statement of pure opposition’ (150). She argues that in a feminist anti-social act ‘we witness the willingness of the subject to actually come undone, to dramatize unbecoming’ (152). Lucy makes a series of masochistic choices: to marry Petrus, to keep the baby and to not seek justice against her rapists. These are choices that facilitate her own undoing, but not in an apocalyptic way. They are choices that David cannot imagine making because they are to him, completely self-annihilating. Lucy’s radical passivity is different from the self-abnegation that David chooses and different from Edelman’s no future because, according to Halberstam’s logic, it is neither ‘oriented to a liberal notion of progressive entitlement’ nor is it tied to a ‘nihilism which always lines up against women, domesticity and reproduction’ (154) Halberstam argues that radical passivity signals a different kind of queer politics, one that is not defined by the ‘fatigue, ennui, boredom, indifference, ironic distancing, indirectness, arch dismissal, insincerity’ that she argues is typical of gay male politics. Instead she suggests that an anti-social politics be defined by

- rage, rudeness, anger, spite, impatience, intensity, mania, sincerity, earnestness,
- over-investment, incivility, brutal honesty and so on. The first archive is a camp
archive, a repertoire of formalized and often formulaic responses to the banality of straight culture and the repetitiveness and unimaginativeness of heteronormativity. The second archive, however, is far more in keeping with the undisciplined kinds of responses that [are associated] with sex and queer culture and it is here that the promise of self-shattering, loss of mastery and meaning, unregulated speech and desire are unloosed. Dyke anger, anti-colonial despair, racial rage, counter-hegemonic violences, punk pugilism, these are the bleak and angry territories of the antisocial turn. (152)

“If there is promise in Lucy’s ‘self-shattering’, David is not compelled to discover it. A liberal humanist position such as David inhabits ensures that the elasticity of the social fabric can accommodate queer sexualities, but not this more nihilistic turn towards gestures that are more difficult to accommodate. In accommodating gestures, the queer comes to represent ‘nothing more than a sexual practice of demystification’ (No Future 28). In refusing to represent Lucy as gay, or to allow her to represent herself as gay, the novel participates in a process of neutralizing the radical potential of queer politics. David can’t, or won’t, imagine Lucy as passionate or sexualized, preferring instead to imagine that she and Helen ‘sleep together merely as children do, cuddling, touching, giggling, reliving girlhood – sisters more than lovers (Disgrace 86). This attempt at ‘demystification’ satisfies him, but renders her sexuality impotent and passionless. He has, in effect, already in his mind domesticated the ‘monstrousness’ of her homosexuality. Another reading of this scene suggests that casting her as homosexual alleviates an incestuous pressure that is latently exerted on David. After all he is ‘old enough to be [Soraya’s] father’ (1), and after Soraya he chooses Melanie, a twenty-year-old girl who piques his fatherly care. One night she arrives distraught at his door. ‘He makes up a bed for her in his daughter’s room, kisses
her goodnight, and leaves her to herself’. The following morning, ‘he draws her to him. In his
arms she begins to sob miserably. Despite all, he feels a tingling of desire. ‘There, there,’ he
whispers, trying to comfort her. ‘Tell me what is wrong.’ Almost he says, ‘Tell Daddy what is
wrong’(26). Later, on the farm, he sits on Lucy’s bed and ‘fondles her bare foot’ noting that she
shares her mother’s wit and that he has always been ‘drawn to women of wit. Wit and
beauty’(78). Just then, Melanie comes to mind and a ‘shudder of voluptuousness’ runs through
him. He notes with interest that Lucy observes this shudder, yet he cannot conceal it. The novel
is clearly making connections between David’s lust and the sense of masculinity with which
fulfilling a fatherly role provides him. For David the fragile, dependant young daughter figure
enlivens his feelings of protectiveness, which in the terms of David Gilmour’s ‘ubiquitous male’
signals the ‘masculine ideal’. David laments that as a child Lucy had not judged him as she does
as an adult. He remarks that ‘Now, in her middle twenties, she has begun to separate. The dogs,
the gardening, the astrology books, the asexual clothes: in each he recognizes a statement of
independence, considered purposeful. The turn away from men too. Making her own life.
Coming out of his shadow’ (89). For David, framing Lucy as lesbian serves to explain her
distance from him. If she was straight, his logic seems to imply, then her turn away from him
would not occur in the same way. A straight daughter would not ‘come out of his shadow’
because she would be far more vulnerable to his incestuous impulses. When Lucy decides to
marry Petrus and to keep the pregnancy that resulted from the rape, David reads it partly as a
rejection and a punishment of him. It never occurs to him that the decisions that Lucy makes are
the sum total not of an impulse to distance herself from him, but rather to create her own
narrative.
“She acts in a manner that is wholly destructive to herself, to her way of life – but that will at least preserve her ‘pure life’. Edelman argues that the queer ‘can only figure the loss of mastery, the political self-destruction, the radical force of the disappropriation,’ and that the queer is not a figure upon which ‘building blocks’ are placed. This is true of Lucy who is determined to have ‘no cards, no weapons, no property, no rights, no dignity’ (Disgrace 205). Though she will keep the child, she does so not for the child, not for an idea of a fantastic future that the child will usher in. She keeps the child and marries Petrus so that she might continue to be alive in the place that she wants to live. In thinking aloud about the deal she will strike with Petrus she says, ‘I accept his protection…But then the child becomes his too. The child becomes part of his family’ (204). She uses the pregnancy as a means towards an end. It will allow her to ‘start at ground level. With nothing’ (205). Lucy’s foetus therefore does not ‘serve as the repository of variously sentimentalized cultural identifications’, this is not ‘the child for whom [the telos of the social] order is held in perpetual trust’ (No Future 11).

“The child here is part of a contract. It is one of the terms by which she is able to negotiate her present; its future is irrelevant. Yet David continues to invest it with import and weight far beyond what Lucy intends. He observes Lucy digging in the dirt and muses:

With luck she will last a long time, long beyond him. When he is dead she will, with luck, still be here doing ordinary tasks among the flowerbeds. And from within her will have issued another existence, that with luck will be just as solid, just as long-lasting. So it will go on, a line of existences in which his share, his gift, will grow inexorably less and less, till it may as well be forgotten. (217)
For David the child is still representative of a future; his own. In spite of the fact that he recognizes his own eventual irrelevance he is still using the child ‘as a prop’ on which ‘the secular theology’ of his ‘social reality rests’ (No Future 12).

A stir at the back of the room. Ximena looked up. The woman she had noticed craning her neck to see Ximena as she spoke pulled on her coat, gathered her things and tsked and muttered as she did so. Ximena knew this reading of Disgrace wasn’t for everyone. That was the point really. Edelman’s theory was alienating. When she had first read him she ranted to all who would listen about the tyranny of The Child, even as she held her brand new nephew in her arms and whispered love and good fortune down onto his downy head. Ximena expected some dissent.

“Post-Apartheid, exiled from the university, disfigured, and in Lucy’s refusal to listen to him, reminded that his role as father actually carries no authoritative weight, David is significantly diminished by the end of the novel. He is divested of power. And yet, his arrogance remains: ‘If I were to stand back,’ he says to Bev, and some new disaster were to take place on the farm, how would I be able to live with myself?’(210). He cannot come to terms with his own marginality. He continues to install himself as the protector, provider or what Gilmour called the ‘ubiquitous male’, absorbing what happens to those around him into his own narrative.

“The attack completes a process of alienation between Lucy and David that was already well under way. Lucy’s sour relationships to David and to the liberal South African state (the micro and the macro ‘fathers’) don’t so much change after the attack as they become more articulable given the provocation of violence. She will be subsumed by neither father, refusing as she does to abort the mixed race child, conceived in violence, whom both David and the state would prefer not to acknowledge as their legitimate heir, yet onto whose small back they load all their
hopes for the future. Her reaction to the attack disrupts David’s comfortable rationalizations and compels David to attempt, superficially at least, to redress his previous behaviour (and only as it relates to women). Costello suggests that David’s redress is successful, that in his interactions with the animals we witness the growth of a new David. I remain suspicious of this reading, though I acknowledge its legitimacy. I am moved every time I read about him coming to sympathise with the dogs in Bev’s clinic. He is brought to tears for them. He lovingly brings their bodies to the incinerator, not liking them to get stiff and have to be beaten into the chute. He seems to genuinely feel sympathy towards them and yet, there is no end to my suspicion of David Lurie. The novel enlists our feelings of good will towards Lurie the ‘dog man’ until they become active assertions that we silently voice to the text, trying somehow to communicate to him that we think he is not that bad, that poor David ought not second-guess himself. He ought not to call himself ‘stupid, daft [and] wrongheaded’, though at numerous points in the novel that is exactly what he is. As these narratological double-backs become so common to the reader, we begin to wonder if they are merely affectations. Are they simply part of the way he invents justifications for ultimately doing exactly what he wants to do, in spite of the fact that he knows he is not behaving well? The narratological voice does all the confessing. It speculates, wonders, asks silent questions about David’s actions, his motivations, yet as Coetzee remarked of Dostoyevsky’s narrator in “Confession and Double Thoughts: Tolstoy, Rousseau, Dostoevsky”, ‘a confession made via a process of relentless self-unmasking...might yet be not the truth but a self-serving fiction, because the...principle behind it may be not a desire for the truth but a desire to be a particular way’ (280). The particular way that David wants to be is clearly associated with the Romantic heroes who author and feature in the texts he teaches and after which he models himself.
“He styles himself as a Byronic hero because Byron’s is a reluctant heroism. It is a heroism, an act of self-abasement that allows him to see sleeping with Bev as generosity; the benevolent bestowal of his sexual attention on her. If ‘paying attention’ is a central component to the ethical as Arthur Danto in *The Abuse of Beauty* has argued, then Lurie’s attentiveness to her is what passes for an ethical act. This is David at his most supremely arrogant. But it shouldn’t come as a surprise to the reader. The passage that he reads to the class from ‘Lara’, invoking Lucifer, and thus the other kind of Byronic heroism, a kind of posturing misanthropy, justifies one who acts according to impulse, and provides the template for Lurie’s own defences. In her review, Costello never wonders where David’s sympathy for the dogs comes from. She merely cites it as an ethical education, even though what is actually going on is an aesthetic education where Lurie is taught by the Romantic aesthetic how to behave. Lurie unconsciously takes on the Byronic sympathy for animals that is made explicit in Byron’s elegy to his beloved dog Boatswain. Though the tribute is never mentioned in the novel, Professor Lurie would undoubtedly be aware of it, and as he absorbs the ideas of Romantic moralism, so too would Byron’s moving tribute have been absorbed. In the memorial, the poet compares the humility of the dog who ‘[u]nhonour’d falls, unnoticed all his worth’ to the arrogance of man, referring to the latter as a ‘degraded mass of animated dust’. Man is unworthy of the memorialization that keeps his memory alive, unworthy of having his grace marked, unworthy of forgiveness. The dog, by contrast, offers unconditional love and service, yet is not offered the same respect in death. The poet tells those who happen to notice Boatswain’s grave to pass by because it ‘honours none you wish to mourn’. Byron also points to the false self that man presents to the world – ‘whose love is lust’ and whose ‘friendship [is] all a cheat’. The applicability to David, who insists on putting the corpses of the dogs into the incinerator himself is evident. He is the Byronic focalizer who is
trying to honour these beings who are simply without malice, while at the same time he is the very type of individual the poem criticizes. Byron’s poem does not attempt to persuade people to treat dogs better or to change the way that they are callously disposed of. Rather his tribute disparages mankind and therefore suggests how he wishes the world might be. Lurie too, doesn’t actually become the dog man for the sake of the dogs. Just as Byron’s tribute directs, Lurie takes care of the dogs’ bodies ‘for [the sake of] his idea of the world’ (*Disgrace* 146). There is a contradiction too, in David’s reasoning. In the same sentence he calls himself both a ‘dog psychopomp’ and a ‘harijan’. The first term refers to the deity who escorts souls from this world to the next, while the latter is Gandhi’s term for Untouchables. They are the debased, and so closer to God. Lurie deliberately constructs himself as companion to these souls, and as closer to God because he has taken on this role. He calls himself saintly in his debased humility and a deity and in so doing enacts a paradox whereby the ethical act exalts him rather than helping him achieve this state of disgrace to which he feels he ought to bring himself.

“If I may imagine Byron speaking to David for a moment, I think he might say, ‘David, thy words deceive!, and yet your actions try to redeem you’. Indeed, David’s attention to the dogs is not a pointed attempt at reform, nor is it some kind of expression of a ‘true animal loving self’ that he had to keep hidden. Consider the sheep that he feels such sympathy for – he moves them out of the sun that Petrus has them tied up in. He later eats the mutton stew, of which they are the main ingredient, telling himself that he ‘is going to eat it and ask forgiveness afterwards’ (131). Moving the sheep in light of this consideration becomes less of an act of kindness and more a deliberate demonstration to Petrus that he is a superior moral being – a kind man who hates to hear anything suffer. In truth, though, ‘their bleating, steady and monotonous’ began ‘to annoy
him,’ prompting him to take action (123). Similarly, helping the dogs die and disposing of them honourably is an expression of a ‘self-serving fiction’.

All the time Ximena was reading the paper, a silent internal responder criticized her every point. “Do you really want to come down on Lurie so hard? Oh, c’mon there’s no way that Coetzee is thinking about emblems when he’s writing the book,” and worst of all: “Lucy is clearly just deeply traumatized and is acting out that trauma – using defensive anger to prevent her from completely dissolving in grief and self-pity. Her father is just trying to help”. She tried to silence these demonic critics – “the fraud squad” as she has come to call them – but they were insistent. She told herself to keep a sane pace, to be confident; she knew this novel, she knew how father-daughter relationships played out in these kinds of novels – Lurie was not to be trusted. She went on.

“Costello’s review fails to note the constructedness of the alleged process of recovery that David undergoes. She reads his sympathetic imagination (a concept dear to her own heart) as redemptive potential and fails to see the untenability of his position given the context he finds himself in. This is to say that, in a different time, Lurie’s Romantic humanism might have adequately directed his course; yet here, ‘in this place, at this time’ – “[t]his place being what?’ David asks Lucy obtusely – ‘this place being South Africa’, the time being post-Apartheid, I would add, his position cannot hold (112). What does hold though, as is the case for Henry Perowne in Saturday is the structure of masculine authority that resides with the father.

“Elleke Boehmer’s article ‘Sorry, Sorrier, Sorriest: The Gendering of Contrition in J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace’ confirms my suspicion that David’s acts of contrition should not be taken at face value and should in fact be read in the gendered terms in which they take place. She refers
to what she reads in the novel as a ‘calibrated display of contrition, in which traditionally objectified bodies, of women and dogs, are made to act as the bearers or carriers…of a community’s sin’ (136). Boehmer also quotes Costello on sympathy, reminding us that Costello often makes appeals to love that Boehmer, and Costello, find operative in *Disgrace* as well, and which replace reason with the ‘self-dissolving heart’ (Boehmer 141). I agree that Lurie ultimately is able to imagine himself into different kinds of beings and that he was able to do so at the outset of the novel, but I’m not sure that he is ever able to ‘self-dissolve’. This is precisely because of the gendered terms by which the dissolution is alleged to take place. For instance, the focus of his chamber opera shifts from the exalted, virile Byron to the bemoaned Theresa. But bear in mind that this opera is for him alone. David spends his days plucking away on an old banjo well aware that ‘the truth is that *Byron in Italy* is going nowhere’ (*Disgrace* 214). It is something to consume his attention ‘until the child is born, [writing the opera] will be his life’ (212). Lurie clearly believes that he will have no more need for useless dabbling in music once he is a grandfather. The child represents a new beginning for him in spite of the fact Lucy is quite clear that it will mean something other than the promise of a redeemed future for her. The piece merely serves the purpose of passing time, of distracting him while he, in effect, gestates. He cannot imagine it as heroic, or triumphant. Boehmer correctly argues that by the time we arrive at this banjo-plucking Lurie he has undergone a ‘traditionally feminine’, ‘emasculating physical abjection’ (137), which suggests that Lurie’s opera represented, at one time, his virility, his ability to produce ‘a note of immortal longing’ that would carry on into the future and allow that in Lucy’s lifetime she might think of her father as having some productive worth (*Disgrace* 241). Lurie’s ‘self-dissolving’ is therefore a process that is always gendered so that David, who may well arrive at something like grace, and the novel which, like many other Coetzee novels
concludes on a note of absence, is nonetheless caught up in a language of masculine and feminine which is never ultimately dissolved. In the end, it is a male dog that Lurie gives up, a young male dog who loves music. This sacrifice is the conclusion of a process of small sacrifices which all bear the metaphorical weight of David’s youth, relevance and finally, his masculinity. Think back once more to the goat in Bev’s clinic. This scene, which we may consider a central set piece of the novel, consists of a ‘brave, straight, and confident’ goat who symbolically represents sacrifice (Boehmer 142). It is clear that we are to lament this goat’s fate, and the dogs’ and ultimately David’s loss of masculine authority as well. Ultimately the novel mourns the loss of masculinity, replaces masculinity with the ‘traditionally feminine’ voice of Theresa and arrives at such a substitution via ‘emasculating physical abjection’. It is clear that *Disgrace* comes out of the same moment as men’s movements which similarly suggest that men are being emasculated, humiliated and abjected. The novel responds to that humiliation by offering up the idea of a grandchild to be born into a pastoral setting who represents for David the possibility of masculinity reborn as ‘grandfatherhood’ (218).

“What is the novel suggesting then about emasculation, the ‘traditionally feminine’, and the role of the father and his child? As Boehmer argues, ‘while a feminizing or animalizing atonement may represent a meaningful recompense for a man, for a woman … it is a matter of no change; a continuation of subjection that it would be preposterous to propose as redemptive’ (146). Indeed while Lurie chooses self-dissolution as the means by which he will be abjected and thus atone for his private crimes, Lucy has abjection violently forced upon her. In spite of Halberstam’s strenuous argument about the radical potential of passivity and the women who perform it as representative of a non-masculinitist anti-social politics, even she admits that a ‘truly political negativity’ promises to ‘make a mess, fuck shit up, to be loud, unruly, impolite, to breed
resentment, to bash back, to speak up and out, to disrupt, assassinate, shock and annihilate (“Anti-Social…” 154). This politics is a stark contrast to the passivity of the woman who agrees to marry the man responsible for her rape. And in spite of the fact that Lucy is read, by David and by other critics of the novel, as taking on the sins of the South African past\textsuperscript{52}, she is adamant that the attack is a ‘purely private matter’ (112). Even Edelman’s figure, whose rejection of futurism is described as a public declaration of queer political rights, cannot be accommodated to Lucy’s choice. Nothing about what happens to Lucy, or the representation of Lucy, is redemptive. She is the object of the novel, in spite of her claims that she is not minor. She is minor – this is clearly a feature of David’s story. She serves to underscore David’s piteousness. She is his daughter who was raped, (‘My child, my child!’ he says holding out his arms to her’ [99]). She does not speak as a victim of rape, partly because she refuses to do so – she refuses to embellish Lurie’s already pathetic image of her – but also because Coetzee typically resists representing violence, resists entering ‘the dark chamber’\textsuperscript{53}. The novel frames her attack as the source of Lurie’s deep regret for how he behaved towards Melanie. In spite of the fact that Lucy tells her father that ‘Guilt and salvation are abstractions’ and that she “doesn’t act in terms of abstractions’, David nonetheless abstracts her attack to represent his own abuse of Melanie, to salve his own crippling guilt. Ultimately David is not sure what he wants for Lucy. The only thing he and the novel can be sure of is that ‘as a father grows older he turns more and more – it cannot be helped – toward his daughter. She becomes his second salvation, the bride of his youth reborn’. This is a fate that neither David, nor the novel, in spite of Lucy’s objections is willing to challenge. Thank you.”

\textsuperscript{52} David says to her “Do you hope you can expiate the crimes of the past by suffering in the present?” (112), and Boehmer argues that Lucy “physically, if not verbally, accepts a burden of accountability for the past”(144).

\textsuperscript{53} See Coetzee’s 1986 \textit{New York Times} article “Into the Dark Chamber”.

With that final damning moral judgment of David Lurie, Ximena Yves reached for her water glass and took a deep swig. The applause was disaffected and short-lived. Several people reached down for their bags as the chair of the search committee stood up to solicit questions. There was much commotion as the door at the back opened to let the fleeing out and let the echoing noise from the hallway seep into the upholstered timbre of the conference room.

The question period went on for several minutes with Ximena fielding a few softballs from her former supervisor and addressing some of the finer points of Edelman’s argument. The head of the department shook her hand, full of stirring words. Ximena was heartened. She was led out of the room and into the hallway where the woman who had stormed out approached her.

“Ms. Yves. You’ve completely misrepresented my argument” A look of sadness crossed old Costello’s face. “If only you knew me better,” she said, briefly squeezing Ximena’s arm before turning and moving off away from the little clutch of academics that surrounded Ximena and ushered her off to dinner.
CHAPTER FOUR

Female Masculinity and Inheritance in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*

“When I recreate myself in my father’s image, I am what I wanted him to be – and I am the man of my dreams” – Jenni Olson (qtd in *Female Masculinities* 273)

Unlike the other chapters of this thesis, which focus on literary fiction written by heterosexual men, this chapter focuses on Alison Bechdel’s graphic memoir *Fun Home*. Best known for her comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For*, which she has inked since 1983, Bechdel is an established figure on the queer cultural scene. *Fun Home*, though, has garnered her attention far beyond her traditional fan base. It is a book-length comic about Bechdel’s conflicted relationship with her closeted father, Bruce, who died when she was nineteen, and coming to terms with her own homosexuality. It is undoubtedly a different kind of text than the novels that I have treated thus far. For one, it is a memoir, not fiction. Second, it is a graphic novel. Third, it is written by a queer woman. Finally, it takes the perspective of the daughter, rather than the father. I employ *Fun Home* to theorize an inheritance that can be both affiliative and filiative (and not oppressively so), to suggest how masculinity can be female, and to suggest a way in which daughters and female masculinity can highlight the discursive nature of the crisis of masculinity.

In every obvious way *Fun Home* is an inversion of the texts that have come before it in this thesis. I purposely use the term “inversion” because it is an outdated and psychoclinical way of describing homosexuality which Bechdel herself admits a fondness for. This in spite of the fact that she writes that it is “imprecise and insufficient, defining the homosexual as a person whose gender expression is at odds with her sex” (*Fun Home* 97-8). The term “invert” is guilty
of just that kind of imprecision with regard to gender and sexuality. “Inversion” as I use it expresses the reversal of almost every superficial characteristic of the novels previously discussed in this thesis, while also suggesting how “imprecise and insufficient” it is to identify *Fun Home* as completely “at odds” with Coetzee’s, Banville’s or McEwan’s work. Indeed in spite of the generic, formal, perspectival, and subject inversions, there is much in *Fun Home* that reinforces my argument that the protection of traditional masculinity in the wake of gender deconstruction is most forcefully carried out in the context of father-daughter relationships. Like the other texts in this thesis, *Fun Home* clearly also represents a daughter who is drawn into performing a heteromasculine fantasy of daughterhood: femininity, vulnerability and acquiescence. *Fun Home* illustrates the way in which ideal masculinity is constructed and maintained, specifically where the father, queer or not, represents an authoritative and oppressive weight which is then experienced by the daughter as a pressure to conform to his expectations of what defines the feminine. The daughter, to various degrees in each novel, struggles to get out from under this expectation. In other words, in spite of the inversions that *Fun Home* performs of the type of novels heretofore examined in this thesis, they all represent the way in which a discursive crisis of masculinity becomes an actual crisis that the father believes will be resolved by an exertion of authority over the daughter.

**Graphic Content.**

*Fun Home*, like the novels this thesis considers, narrates a tense relationship between fathers, daughter and masculinity, and yet it remains a very different work. A brief discussion of the features of the graphic novel will serve to orient Bechdel within that tradition and identify what
graphic novels can specifically bring to a discussion of gender. Partly because of the way the text provokes a queer resolution to the “crisis” of masculinity, and mostly because it can only do so through the graphic medium, *Fun Home* neatly articulates Chute and DeKoven’s assertion that “graphic narratives, on the whole, have the potential to be powerful precisely because they intervene against a culture of invisibility by taking the risk of representation” (772). In place of the novel’s abstract, and invisible focalizer or narrator, Bechdel can illustrate not only herself into the text, but also our readerly perspective as well, so that at times we, not only Bechdel or Alison, are the focalizers. Our participation in focalizing the narrative and the way in which we see the characters, means that we must direct our attention to what Butler calls the specular conditions by which “the body… gains its sexed contours” (*Bodies* 17). We watch Alison’s discomfort when her father literally forces a dress, pearl, a barrette and other markers of femininity upon her. We also can observe Bruce’s slippages between queer and straight, feminine and masculine – most notably in the first image of the book: a reproduced photograph of Bruce looking boldly over his bare shoulder, hands on hips, lips parted seductively, eyes provocatively heavy.54 While Bruce struggles to contain the femininity which seeps out in Bechdel’s drawings of him, we watch Alison weep at the strand of pearls her father holds up to

---

54 On the right: the original photograph. Note the closed eyes. Bechdel has drawn them open. She has also turned his open mouth into a more provocative pout.

Fig. 4. Bruces. On the left, Bruce from *Fun Home* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 2007; print; 2) next to a Bechdel family photo downloaded from [http://psychlit.blogspot.com/](http://psychlit.blogspot.com/).
her. Witnessing these events as images demonstrates the visual cues of heteronormative culture that “are crucial to the forming of sexed materiality” (Bodies 17).

The form of the graphic memoir, or the “autographic” as Gillian Whitlock terms it, is what Claire Lynch calls trans-generic in that it calls on fiction, biography, travel writing, history etc, and deliberately directs our attention to form, to the identity of the author and away from “telling”. The trans-generic “autographic” must be considered as more than “a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction but an experience of interpretation” (Whitlock). Indeed in the narrative we witness the characters struggle with gender categories, meaning that the graphic novel is about interpretation which allows the content to bleed into the form and vice versa.

*Fun Home* and other texts like it are characterized as graphic memoir, though the generic designation is often a source of confusion. Monica B. Pearl suggests this genre confusion is typical of graphic novels which are often composed of a number of graphic and textual grammars, including “images, writing inside and outside of the panels, writing in narrative boxes within (and sometimes even obscuring) the images, and thought and speech bubbles” (288). Ariela Freedman meanwhile points to the unique and added difficulty of genre classification when graphic narrative and memoir are combined. Bechdel herself acknowledges that she is “a complete shelving conundrum” and that *Fun Home* “could be anywhere from the LGBT shelf to ‘Lesbian Fiction’ (even though it’s all true) to ‘Memoir’ to ‘Biography’ to ‘Graphic Novels’”. She remarks that ultimately “It’s gratifying to see it outside both the queer and comics ghettos, mingling with other memoirs like a regular book” (qtd in Freedman 127). This shelving conundrum in which *Fun Home* results further reinforces the text’s deconstruction of gender categories. The comics artists Lynda Barry refers to her 2002 graphic narrative *One! Hundred!*

---

55 Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* comics and Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* are often brought into conversation with *Fun Home*. 
Demons! as a work of “autofictionalography”. She has never specifically explained what she means by this, but we can infer that Barry’s admittedly clumsy term refers to a work that is “trans-generic”, that is autobiographical and therefore has elements of truth, and at the same time uses devices of fiction to shape and direct those autobiographical elements towards a specific set of meanings. In Barry’s term, “fiction” is inserted where “bio” ought to be and the result is a generic classification that allows the author to tell her story autobiographically, to assert that the story is “true”, while also jettisoning any kind of faithfulness to the historical body – the bio. The term critiques the idea that representing the truth of a person’s past necessitates physically locating the person in a faithful re-creation of historical time and place. It further highlights the fiction of the body, specifically of “sexed materiality” (Bodies 17).

We can observe autofictionalography at work in Fun Home and examine how Bechdel escapes the limits of both fiction and historical accuracy in order to illustrate the tension between contemporary “lesbian” identity and queer historiographies more broadly. On page 74, Alison “realizes” that she is gay (see fig. 5). No doubt Bechdel remembers that this moment happened in a book store. Or maybe it didn’t, but within the universe of Fun Home’s play of canonical literature on queer writing it makes sense to illustrate this event in the context of a bookstore. The bookstore setting suggests that lesbianism is not “innate” or “essential” and that it is a historical construction which Halberstam effectively deconstructs in Female Masculinity, and which one is more likely to discover in the covers of a book than from “within”. Behdel may even remember what she was wearing or what haircut she had at the time. She may remember that it was reading an interview with 77-year-old “Elsa” in The Word Is Out that switched on the light. But then we regard the image of Alison in the bookstore closely. Across the top of the long

Beck is a narrative which is composed of collage, watercolor paintings, cartoon and ink and begins with an image that points to “The Author” sitting at her desk, pen in hand and then muses on the next page “Is it autobiography if parts of it are not true? Is it fiction if parts of it are?”
horizontal panel we read: “This is in fact what came to pass, but not in the way any of us had expected” and in the background of the panel, the silhouette of a curly haired boy walks past. We immediately think back to Roy, the babysitter/yard hand who was also Bruce’s lover and who features in a recreation of a provocative photo that Bruce took of him and which Bechdel discovers after Bruce’s death. His and Roy’s relationship was conducted in secret.

Fig. 5. Elsa. *Fun Home* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007; print; 74)
Subtly, Bechdel is layering the moment when she discovers that “lesbian” might apply to her, with a reference to her father’s failure to be openly “gay”\(^\text{57}\). In the same panel we see Alison with a speech bubble that contains an oversized exclamation point indicating a specific moment in which she realizes that she is “a lesbian”. This is autofictionalography to be sure. An image is created that reproduces a memory but which is composed of details that fictionalize it and that uses creative, “unreal” elements to link the scene with other parts of the text in an effort to contribute to the overall meaning of the text.

Bechdel takes up two forms (comics and autobiography) that have typically been the domain of straight white men, and within those frames reinterprets modernist literary inheritance. In the process Bechdel reveals how Alison can inherit from her father an affinity for the modernist greats without having to be beholden to his interpretation of them. Within two typically male-dominated genres, Bechdel stages a break from and then a selection of that which her father passes on to her. That she does so as a masculine woman and in the context of a narrative about gender and sexuality compels us to consider the connection between gender and literary inheritance. Rather than experiencing literary inheritance as an anxiety of influence as does McEwan in his overdetermined rejection and selection of literary referents, Bechdel’s text is a collage of author images and excerpts from texts which makes literary influence a subject of the story rather than a feature of sublimated masculinity. Because of the debauched nature of the comic book form and of the anarchist spirit of queer politics, as a graphic artist and a queer woman Bechdel’s claims on literary modernism are experienced less as anxiety or a symptom of masculinity in crisis than as “intertextual touchstones” which orient Alison’s process of making

\(^{57}\) The scene is recreated again on page 203 and this time “Roy’s” profile occupies more of the frame.
peace with her memory of her father within a modernist intellectual history about the self, the past and how to choose one’s alliances.\textsuperscript{58}

*Fun Home* references many giants of modernist literature – Joyce, Proust, Fitzgerald, Camus – as well as a range of lesbian and queer historiographies, narratives and theories. Bechdel’s incessant peppering of the text with literary references makes us consider a number of possibilities. Firstly, it fleshes out the characterization of what happens when a child is a product of two English teachers: she cannot help but represent her experiences in terms of literary precedent. Secondly, it suggests that operating from within the genre of the graphic novel, a genre often considered low-brow and too popular for real critical attention, Bechdel is making a play for legitimacy and literary authority by putting her work in conversation with canonical modernist giants. Finally, and most interestingly for the concerns of this thesis, it suggests that a modernist literary inheritance can coexist parallel to a historiography, theory and narration of queer lives.

As Allan Hepburn suggests in *Troubled Legacies: Narrative and Inheritance*, writers “choose their literary forebears as a way of declaring affinities and asserting authority” (3). *Fun Home* demonstrates that canonical modernism, queer writing and the graphic form are not mutually exclusive. Bechdel declares multiple affinities as queer lives and modernist texts exist side by side within the graphic idiom. Bechdel illustrates the way in which one’s inheritances can in fact be selected. What I am therefore examining here is the way in which Bechdel performs a modernist choosing of cultural models based on affinity, while at the same time that choosing necessarily critiques, and in many ways rejects modernist impulses. When Alison breaks with and performs rejections of modernism she also points to the anxieties within modernism itself.

Contemporary writers, as Cynthia Quarrie puts it, “are caught in a kind of double-bind with

\textsuperscript{58} David Foster Wallace uses “intertextual touchstone” to describe David Lynch’s style of referencing (158).
regards to their modernist inheritance: to reject it is to repeat its strategy of renouncing the past, and therefore is effectively to inherit it, while to choose to inherit it, one must reject it as the burden of history it defined itself against” (np). Therefore Fun Home depicts a rejection of the moderns on Alison’s part, while the way that Bechdel builds the story upon modernist lives and texts, remakes the connection, and establishes a two-pronged inheritance – on the one hand of canonical modernism and on the other of feminist and queer writing and historiography. Fun Home documents the failed attempt to reject the first strand of inheritance and to replace it with the second – to establish a kind of single, maternal parenthood. Composed as it is of references to modernist texts (which far outweigh those to queer texts) Fun Home instead demonstrates how Bechdel makes the interesting move of claiming a paternal lineage for a generation of lesbian feminism more commonly known for its embrace of a matriarchy and also connects it to a version of homosexuality that might seem the anathema of her generation. She joins a cluster of lesbian artists who have claimed their fathers’ stories, sometimes in order to explore butch identities but also in ways that go well beyond this obvious connection in order to rewrite queer generational histories (Cvetkovich 124).

Alison’s, and Bechdel’s, complicated relationships to modernist inheritance are, of course, paralleled by their relationships to and representations of the father, Bruce. They at once reject him and criticize him both for his life choices and for his shortcomings as a father, while also acknowledging a deep desire to be connected to him, both in life and in death. Bechdel narrates that this connection may have taken the form of her desire “to claim him as ‘gay’ in the way I am ‘gay’”(230), while for Alison the connection between her and her father exists because of their

---

59 I use “Alison” to refer to the character in the text and “Bechdel” to refer to the narrator, focalizer, writer.
shared love of reading. Bruce is “elated” to perform the role of literary expert and Joycean scholar with Alison, and Bechdel, though she finds his enthusiasm about her taking a *Ulysses* class “a bit galling,” remarks that it was nonetheless “nice to have his attention” (204).

Hepburn claims that “modernists prefer affiliation rather than filiation” and that modernists “prefer to disrupt genealogy and defy the claims of family over individual identities” (19). Alison confirms this reading of modernism to her teacher, telling him in her oral exam on *Ulysses* that “Bloom is like his spiritual father, y’know?” (210). It is clear though that Alison is not entirely convinced of the usefulness of identifying “spiritual fathers”. Bechdel later narrates this suspicion as well, noting that, though *Ulysses’s* theme is that “spiritual, not consubstantial, paternity is the important thing, is it so unusual for the two things to coincide?” (231). Once again, *Fun Home* declares that for Bechdel the affiliative is not mutually exclusive of the filiative. In contrast to the other novels in this study which identify filiative allegiance largely for the purposes of maintaining the traditional masculinity of the father, Bechdel’s text presents the possibility of horizontal models of caring over vertical structures of parenthood. The comment about the coincidence of spiritual and consubstantial fathers occurs on the penultimate page of the book over a panel that depicts young Alison’s legs from behind. She is standing on a diving board as Bruce treads water, looking up at her from the swimming pool below. A text box runs under Alison’s feet: “What if Icarus hadn’t hurtled into the sea? What if he’d inherited his father’s inventive bent? What might he have wrought?” The implication of this image text pairing allows us to perform two simultaneous acts of interpretation. In the first place we see Bruce waiting to catch his young daughter – he is Daedalus, all love and concern and desire to

---

60 Bruce tells Alison that she is the only student worth teaching while she responds that his English class is the only class worth taking (198).

61 This vertical vs horizontal modes of caring is how Juliet Mitchell discusses parenting in “Procreative Mothers and Child-Free Sisters”. I return to Mitchell’s paradigm in more detail later on.
protect his child; he is the father with the “inventive bent”, and Alison is the son who inherited the “creative bent” who didn’t tumble into the sea, but instead has produced Fun Home. But in the second act of interpretation Bruce, swimming below Alison is Icarus who has already tumbled into the sea. Alison is the father, Daedalus observing him from on high. The “inventive bent” Bruce/Icarus fails to inherit from his “father” – who is Alison in this interpretation – is tied to the performance of queer sexuality that exceeds sexual practice and which would have allowed him to reinvent a post-marriage, openly gay identity. Finally on the last page we see two panels. On the top, the grill of a truck with the text, “He did hurtle into the sea, of course”. And on the bottom, Alison in midair having jumped from the diving board, Bruce arms outstretched towards her with the text “But in the tricky reverse narration that impels our entwined stories he was there to catch me when I leapt.” In this sequence of panels, Bruce is the spiritual father whose history of deviant sexual practice Alison selects and reinvents as her own far more politicized lesbian identity. He is also the “consubstantial” father who caught her as a child, who played with her, cared for her in his own way. Alison meanwhile occupies a fatherly role as well, though hers, by the nature of being Bruce’s daughter, is exclusively spiritual. Bechdel becoming Bruce’s spiritual father translates heteronormative logic about filiation and gender into a queer and affiliative relationship between Bruce and Alison, and between male and female masculinity.

**Female Masculinity**

When we look at Fun Home’s representation of Alison, and Bechdel’s construction of the text, we do not necessarily witness masculinity “in crisis” (though there are those that would argue that it is just these kinds of representations of masculinity as female that initiate the crisis in the first place), but rather we witness an illustration of the point that masculinity need not be
conflated with men, a point that Judith Halberstam makes throughout *Female Masculinity*. Not only is biological maleness not equivalent to masculinity, but female masculinity is not an inversion of “normal”, i.e. male masculinity, but is rather “a specific gender with its own cultural history rather than simply derivative of male identity” (*FM* 77). Indeed as Halberstam further argues, to “imagine,” as I argue *Fun Home* does, “a plethora of new masculinities that do not simply feed back into the static loop that makes maleness plus power into the formula for abuse”, results instead in the possibility of rethinking masculinity not in terms of its demise, or crisis, but of a new masculinity, one influenced by “the model of female masculinity” (276). Undoing a compulsory and essentialist connection between men and masculinity and acknowledging a distinct female masculinity that is not necessarily queer, or male, may alleviate the pressure on men to be the sole bearers of a masculinity that both conservative and liberal proponents of masculinity studies have argued is oppressive and anxiety producing. Like the novels in this thesis, Bechdel’s *Fun Home* is a text that reveals how masculinity is constructed, then troubled and finally preserved (in female form) through the father-daughter relationship. The difference with this graphic memoir is that it represents the inscription of masculinity on both the body of the daughter and the father. Unlike the other novels, the masculinity that is constructed in *Fun Home* – whether I am referring to Bruce’s gay masculinity or Alison’s butch masculinity – is queer and therefore, according at least to Butler’s logic, transgressive. Bechdel subtly implies that what Bruce considered the nightmare of her homosexuality contributed to his crisis and eventual suicide. As the scene on pages 118-119 featuring the “truck-driving bulldyke” unfolds at the luncheonette, Bechdel narrates that even though her father expressed his disgust as a warning to Alison not to become like this woman, “the vision of” the dyke “sustained [her] 62 Queer is broadly and effectively defined by Eng et al as “a term that challenge[s] the normalizing mechanisms of state power to name its sexual subjects: male or female, married or single, heterosexual or homosexual, natural or perverse”(1).
through the years…”. Over the top of the subsequent panel, which is filled with the Bechdel hearse and the four-year-old Alison being ushered into the front seat, Bechdel narrates, “…as perhaps [the vision of the bulldyke] haunted my father”. The connection between the dyke and death is made clear in this panel. The implication is that Bruce is haunted (into the grave) by both the spectre of “women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts” and the possibility that Alison would become such a woman. In this instance we witness a moment whereby Bruce defines for the young Alison an “exclusionary matrix” in order to separate Alison from the “abject” dyke. As Butler argues, the subject is constituted by this “force of exclusion and abjection,” but Butler also suggests that this “abjected outside” is also “inside’ the subject as its own founding repudiation” (Bodies 3). According to this logic then, as Bruce defines the limits between the abject and the subject for Alison, he inadvertently helps her to internalize the abject and finally to identify with it. When Alison finally reveals herself as a lesbian, the ghostly presence of female masculinity makes itself felt in far too intimate a way for Bruce. Not only has he failed to initiate his daughter into feminine heterosexuality but now he risks his masculinity being exposed as fraudulent and inadequate in the face of the dyke’s far more insistent and convincing masculinity.

Bruce chooses pink flowers for Alison’s bedroom wallpaper. “But I hate pink! I hate flowers” (7). This is the first of many resistances that Alison offers against her father’s attempts at gendering her as female and enlisting her towards “compulsory heterosexuality”63. Alison rejects her father’s imposition of heterosexuality and eventually grows into her butch lesbian identity. In her comfort in expressing queer female masculinity, Alison fills in a gap that she believes her father’s homosexuality leaves wide open. Alison craves masculine expression

63 For a definition of this term, see Adrienne Rich’s 1980 essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”.

because, as she suggests, she has picked up on how much masculinity her father didn’t express. “Where he fell short I stepped in” Bechdel writes above an image of Alison slinking away from her father who demands to know where her barrette is (96).

What Bechdel reveals here, and what the memoir doesn’t challenge, are how traditional Alison’s ideas are of what constitutes legitimate masculine expression. What the memoir further suggests, though later critiques, in the representation of the butch truck-driving lesbian who walks into the diner where Bruce and Alison are eating, is the extent to which lesbianism is equated with the expression of masculinity. Conversely, at points it seems as though Bechdel is suggesting that gay men have access only to a half-hearted or overly aestheticized and therefore insufficient masculinity. It is clear from the way in which Alison scorns all expressions of femininity, either as they are inscribed on her own body or manifested in her father, that the masculinity of the “truck driving bulldyke”, the “grimy deer hunters at the gas station”, or the strip mine shovel operator (119, 96, 112) is the legitimate and superior expression of self. “Butch” which Bechdel describes as “cropped, curt, percussive…at any rate the opposite of sissy” is everything that Alison wants to embody. Her aspiring to “butch” is ultimately a way to thwart the “tyrannical power” which Bruce wields over Alison and which Bechdel contrasts with the fact that Bruce “was a big sissy” (97). “Butch” is thus a rejection of her father’s attempt at gendering her as female and also a rejection of the feminine in her father.

Bruce is drawn as a maven of interior décor, design and home restoration. It is in fact less his fine aesthetic sensitivity or his ability to carry out complex restoration projects that mark him out as queer, but rather Bechdel’s language to describe what he does: her father has a “remarkable legerdemain” or lightness of hand (the association here is plainly with a light touch, with a limp wrist, a lightness in the loafers etc). He transforms “a room with the smallest
offhand flourish” (5-6). As a hairy-armed, double-chinned workman puffing a cigar looks on, Bruce, in tiny cut-off denim shorts exclaims “Jesus! This must be the pattern for the original bargeboard” (9). We can imagine the campy lisping s’s in “Jesus”. We see him again nearly naked on a scaffold erecting a cornice with the text across the image describing his “dazzling displays of artfulness”. Bechdel is clear that she is not encoding the restoration of the house as queer, for she writes in an inset “It could have been a romantic story, like in It’s A Wonderful Life, when Jimmy Stewart [that icon of heterosexual masculinity] and Donna Reed fix up that big old house and raise their family there”(10). Rather she encodes the way her father goes about it, with an obsessive attentiveness to aesthetic perfection and fussiness that the reader, brought up on stereotypical portrayals of queer men as decorators, prissy fusspots who have delicate aesthetic sensibilities and who are offended by the smallest divergence from their superior sense of style, could easily spot as “gay” 64. Bechdel concludes that “It was like being raised not by Jimmy but Martha Stewart”. The anachronistic comparison with Martha, an icon of gay male do-it-yourself creativity and homemaking ingenuity, accompanied by the depiction of Bruce in his cutoffs, and the use of “dazzle”, “legerdemain”, “flourish” as descriptors all serve to code Bruce as queer for a reader versed in contemporary pop cultural queer symbology, a symbology that postdates the late 1960’s Pennsylvania setting of the narrative by some 30 years.

And yet in spite of the fact that we are forcefully directed to read Bruce as unambiguously gay, he displays a patriarchal, aggressive, authority that the young Alison fears. This aggressive and authoritarian streak constitutes one of the strategies that Bechdel uses to confuse the stereotype of the non-aggressive, passive gay male. There are so few studies done on

64 See the ABC reality show Queer Eye for the Straight Guy; Martin Short’s wedding planner character in the Father of the Bride movies; all the male characters in The Birdcage; CBC’s Steven and Chris – formerly The Designer Guys whose website declares “It’s the story of two heroes fighting to make the world a better place. They have more in common with Butch and Sundance, Starsky and Hutch, or Batman and Robin, than they do with the Furniture Guys, or Bob Vila”, saving the world, they insist, one sconce at a time.
aggression and gay men that one is led to believe that aggression belongs exclusively to the heterosexual man. Along with this goes the popular and ill-founded conclusion that gay men do not or rather cannot be competitive in sports – figure skating and gymnastics being of course the oft-cited exceptions. There is however evidence of a connection between aggression, closeted gay men and suicide. This pathologizing of aggression in gay men suggests that it is alleviated once the man is “outed”. However, aggression is far more identifiable as an integral part of “female masculinity” which is in turn contemporarily and, as Halberstam points out, too simply associated with lesbianism. There is no place it seems for the aggressive heterosexual woman or the aggressive homosexual man that is not pathologized as evidence of aberrant or latent suppression of “true” sexual identity. It is clear from Fun Home that aggression belongs to masculinity – be it heterosexually male or homosexually female. Bechdel’s representation of Bruce’s aggression both constructs Bruce as the angry closeted male and at the same time marks his aggression as part of the veil of heterosexuality which conceals his queer sexual practice. Indeed the text refers to Alison’s “father’s fully developed self-loathing” while on the opposing page we see him throwing a plate on the floor in a furious rage (20-1). Bechdel insists that the meticulous and tyrannical way he kept order in the house was meant to conceal his shame, but I think it is productive to read his aggression as a way to direct attention towards his butch-ness and away from his “dazzling displays of artfulness” (9). Bechdel’s deconstruction of what constitutes gay male expression, female masculinity, or lesbianism contributes to Fun Home’s larger interrogation of gender categories more broadly.

Indeed, there are several instances where Bruce is simultaneously represented as stereotypically gay, and at the same time as typically, traditionally, masculine. In two side-by-

---

65 For discussions of suicide, anger and gay men, see: Schneider et al “Suicidal behavior in adolescent and young adult gay men.” or Judith M. Saunders and S.M. Valente. “Suicide Risk Among Gay Men and Lesbians: A Review.”
side panels we see Bruce on the left, shirtless, in those ever-present denim cutoffs (the graphic form can reinforce the association between Bruce and homosexuality by repeating the image of him dressed only in these shorts. This is a trick of the visual idiom that Coetzee attempts by using emblematic moments in Disgrace) levering “flagstones that weighed half a ton”. In the panel directly to the right, we see him applying “the thinnest quivering layers of gold leaf”, but this time we see only Bruce’s stubbled chin in profile. Taken together as a diptych, the panels represent him as both stereotypically masculine (strong, stubbled) and stereotypically effeminate and queer (dressed only in short, low-riding denim cut-offs, holding a paint brush, pinkie extended) (10). A final instance of Bruce’s queer masculinity at work: Bechdel comments that “when things were going well, I think my father actually enjoyed having a family” but then checks this remark about her father’s heteronormativity with the undercutting – “or at least, the air of authenticity we lent his exhibit. A sort of still life with children” (13). This panel features the children sitting around the glowing Christmas tree while Bruce, in dark relief, observes from the edge of the frame, sherry glass in hand, pinkie once again extended. Bechdel suggests in this moment that her father acceded to a compulsory heterosexuality but did so in the queerest way possible. That is, in a neurotically aestheticized way. “What a fag!” these depictions of Bruce seem to scream. There is an indictment of him taking place, as though Bechdel is outing him as loudly as possible, making it clear to even the most unobservant reader that this man was a hypocrite. It’s as though Bechdel is trying to say, “How did I not know. How did everyone else not know? How did we all let it go on so long?”

The way in which Bechdel forcefully outs, resents, and even ridicules her father’s effeminacy constitutes the ambivalence in Fun Home’s representation of masculinity. Masculinity is figured in Bruce as patriarchal aggression which serves to mask what Bechdel
codes as feminine and weak. But when masculinity in *Fun Home* is rendered as female (as opposed to feminine) we recognize it as a challenge to gender conformity and as a site of empowered subjectivity. From this we could conclude that it is the feminine woman or man in *Fun Home* which is a significant source of anxiety. The coding of femininity as such puts it into conversation with a discourse of conservative men’s rights groups who represent female agency, along with gay male effeminacy as the two greatest threats and initiators of the crisis of masculinity. However, the text’s refusal of the feminine is different from this conservative viewpoint. Instead the refusal of femininity in the text is assimilable to the text’s larger project of deconstructing genders into their constitutive and performative parts.

Alison’s refusal of her father’s imposition of femininity upon her is revealed in her near-constant glum half-lidded expressions of boredom and frustration. In response to his death she remarks that the first emotion that she can muster is “irritation” at the funeral director whose attempt at a consoling touch she throws off with a violent and satisfying shrug. Then, faced with her father’s tombstone and an American flag left there as decoration, she is consoled by the “sheer violence” of chucking the flag into an adjacent field (53). Her “stone butch” identity is helped along by her atypical responses to grief and loss, but is compromised in the moments where she cannot live up to an aggressive masculinity that both she and the graphic narrative associate with “real” men. For instance on page 114, we see Alison with a .22 caliber handgun in hand being taught by a family friend how to shoot. The friend, Bill, sees that she is struggling and says “That’s weird. I could do it fine when I was your age”. Though Alison’s younger brothers are not able to pull the trigger either, on the ride home on the following page, we see the brothers in the background teasing her about her growing breasts to the caption “I had failed some unspoken initiation rite, and life’s possibilities were no longer infinite” (109). These two
events, her budding breasts and her failure to pull the trigger, are put side by side to suggest that her body becoming sexually female betrays her and demands that certain avenues – gunshooting, strip-mining, looking at pictures of naked women – are closed down. In response she glumly helps her father hang the mirror she hates in the bedroom that she despises. She changes her clothes when her father demands that she does so, all the while hating his imposition of femininity. In addition to Alison hating that imposition, Bechdel adds the layer of retrospective contempt for what Bechdel perceives as his attempt to thwart her gender-crossing in the same way that he closeted his own sexuality. This retrospective contempt for his hypocrisy and for all processes of gendering, rather than a rejection of feminine qualities wholesale, is part of what constitutes Bechdel’s position with regard to the feminine.

Without knowing that Bechdel is a gay woman and that *Fun Home* is a memoir, could Alison be mistaken for a girl who, growing up with two brothers, understandably hates pink and flowers and would prefer to play the “Spartan” instead of dusting the nooks and crannies of her father’s baroque furniture? We see Alison holding a toy gun and she is contrasted to her father in reclined profile reading Kenneth Clark’s *The Nude*, the cover of which is graced by the picture of a naked male torso (presumably that of Michelangelo’s David to judge from the angle and bend of the body). In a single frame, Alison dons the guise of militarized masculinity while the father indulges in admiration for the aestheticized male nude. Though Alison will never have a biomale body like her father, which would allow her to take up arms and fight on the front line, and which, in its aestheticized perfection, is the source of his libidinous desire (here operative under the guise of objective aesthetic enjoyment), she is nonetheless the traditionally masculine figure in the frame (an aggressive authoritative version of masculinity). Alison’s embodiment of

66 At the strip mine she asks her brother to call her Albert, sure for some reason that “it seemed imperative that [the shovel operator] not know that I was a girl” (113).
masculinity in these early pages is unambiguously read as pre-lesbianism by both the reader who knows that Alison Bechdel is the well–known author of the comic strip “Dykes To Watch Out For” but also by the reader unfamiliar with Bechdel and unfamiliar with the subtle range of queer subject positions. For the reader unfamiliar with queer theory or representation67, young Alison’s tomboyishness as it is expressed early on in the text comes across as aberrant masculine identification which will inevitably correspond with homosexuality. This is not necessarily an oversimplification or a misreading. However, locating the text as simply a coming out story, or a story about family dynamics, produces a superficial reading of gender in the text which results in an equivocal relationship between homosexuality and gender ambiguity.

Such an oversimplified reading speaks to Halberstam’s critique of historiography that attempts to absorb all expressions of female masculinity into the category “lesbian”. Halberstam makes the case for historicizing female masculinity in all its forms and points to the fact that assuming that expressions of female masculinity are lesbian marginalizes heterosexual women who are more than capable of masculine self-expression, as well as lesbians who don’t identify with masculinity. A careful intentionality in the performance of the semiotics of masculinity are recognizable in the aesthetic of butch at which Fun Home’s Alison arrives over the course of her childhood, adolescence and young adulthood. Alison arrives at “lesbian” through masculinity, and not the other way around. Bechdel depicts Alison’s masculinity as inherent (she sees the bulldyke at the diner when she is no more than four and immediately recognizes herself in her masculine expression of self, not in the sexual practice that supposedly goes with that self-expression), but nonetheless points out how deliberate and willful it was, revealing it as a tactic

---

67 And there were many of such readers. The novel was widely reviewed to great fanfare in almost every major mainstream publication. Asked what she makes of this new “mainstream success” Bechdel responds that she had been knocking on the “mainstream” – read hetero – door for so long that when it finally opened she found herself tumbling through and remains sprawled there on the floor unsure of how to take up her new “non-outsider” status (Alison Bechdel’s Big Kiss).
of resistance against her father’s femininity and his attempts to feminize her. Indeed in many instances she makes the “masculine” choice just to annoy her father. She refuses to wear a barrette in her hair and he jams it back in, threatening to “wale” her if she disobeys again (97). She describes herself has having been “wrestled” into a dress by her father for a school photo (35). Alison’s hair is never long at any point in the narrative – she has a rat tail at one point, a mullet at others, a short bob as a very small child. Only after she comes out, only after her father dies, is Alison drawn with a short, butch haircut.

The way Bechdel has drawn this book, Alison’s butch identity was always already present, but Bechdel is careful to represent the fact that “lesbian” came later. We might then argue that by depicting Alison’s taking up lesbianism as a deliberate choice and as a “stable” identity, and contrasting that with her father’s ambiguous sexuality, Bechdel is offering a glimpse into the range of divergent sexualities, and not necessarily a narrative about a “gay” daughter and her “gay” father. *Fun Home* demonstrates the breadth and width of the range of queer sexualities, but it does not offer that range as an uncomplicated reason for celebration. It troubles the idea of celebrating divergent sexualities because the range of queer sexualities are represented in conjunction with the narrative of how a daughter craved a straightforward and conventional masculinity from her father, in the same way that Bruce would have liked Alison to take up and express traditional femininity. The pressure that each puts on the other to conform to heterosexual logic complicates the text’s representation of queer engendering as celebratory, at least within the logic of a family drama.

Bechdel narrates that she was trying to “compensate for something unmanly” in her father “while he was attempting to express something feminine through” her (98). Because their relationship, until the very end, took place from their respective closets we might argue that from
that constricted place all they had available was each other’s genders to relieve the pressure that they felt to conform to the strict gender requirements imposed upon them. When we see Bruce trying to put pearls on an adolescent Alison, asking her “What are you afraid of? Being beautiful?” (99), the narrative asks us to read the imposition of the pearls as an aggressive engendering of Alison and a sublimated desire on Bruce’s part to wear the pearls himself. In this moment they are both traumatized by the stress of gender conformity and we are left to consider the shattering effect that queer genders can have on an individual within the conventions of the traditional family. However, Bechdel’s memoir attempts to undo this trauma. It asks us to consider the confluence of Bruce’s aggressive and stereotypical patriarchal masculinity and his stereotypical “faggyness” not as a representation of inadequate masculinity, but rather as one of the alternative masculinities to which Halberstam refers, albeit in a slightly different form. Bruce is never represented as picking up hints from the butch as to be how to be masculine. Instead he is repulsed by the “truck driving bull dyke”. Rather we could read Bechdel’s representation of Bruce’s simultaneous aggressive masculinity and creative femininity as an expression of the uneasy way that masculinity and femininity seep into each other in spite of the lengths Bruce goes to behave like a “normal” heterosexual man. And because Alison later grows into a butch identity which she incubates throughout her childhood, it is clear that masculinity and femininity in *Fun Home* are not assimilated to sex. Instead, it evidences the way in which gender ought to be considered as a term “in a continued relationship of opposition to sex” (*Bodies 5*).

However, we can read in *Fun Home* something more complicated than a simple reversal of gender and sex stereotypes and a celebration of that reversal. Indeed part of Bechdel’s task in writing this memoir is to reconcile her ambivalent feelings toward her father’s sexuality and towards her father’s role in engendering her. There are four panels near the end of the book that
suggest this tension. Driving to a movie with her father after she has come out, Alison begins to open up a dialogue about their respective queer experiences. Bruce reveals, “When I was little, I really wanted to be a girl. I’d dress up in girl’s clothes”. Alison replies excitedly “I wanted to be a boy! I dressed up in boy’s clothes!(221)”. A gap. “Remember?” she says timidly. There is no response from Bruce. It is the end of the conversation. Bruce plainly ignores Alison’s realization of her early female masculinity. It recalls Halberstam’s series of questions that suggest how “completely we have ignored female masculinity” (269). She asks us to consider:

Why is there no word for the opposite of “emasculcation”? Why is there no parallel concept to “effeminacy”?...Why shouldn’t a woman get in touch with her masculinity? Why does female masculinity remain so much a stigma that many women, even lesbians, will do almost anything to avoid the label “butch”? Why are we comfortable thinking about men as mothers, but we never consider women as fathers? Gender, it seems, is reversible only in one direction, and this must surely have to do with the immense social power that accumulates around masculinity. Masculinity, one must conclude, has been reserved for people with male bodies and has been actively denied to people with female bodies. And this is not to say that all things being equal all female-bodied people would desire masculinity, only that the protection of masculinity from women bears examination. (269-70)

Halberstam’s provocations are far more forceful then the ones that Alison, either as a child, a teenager or a young and openly gay woman could put to her father. Nonetheless in “drawing”68 Fun Home Bechdel manages to initiate some of these challenges to male masculinity.

---

68 See “Creating Fun Home” where Bechdel refers to “writing and drawing” Fun Home.
In a single page we can examine Bechdel’s task of initiating this challenge and how it is only through this specific graphic form that she is able to accomplish it (see fig.6) The final page of chapter four features two photographs of Alison and Bruce that Bechdel has reproduced in meticulous detail. On the left, Bruce, shirtless, reclines easily, relaxed, smiling widely in the bright sunshine. On the right, Alison leans against a brick wall, coffee cup in hand, wearing a bathrobe, hair cropped short smiling in the sunshine. In contrast to the cartoon Alison and Bruce, this Alison and this Bruce are different, more nuanced, their features more intricate, the shading more precise, the dense crosshatching of ink lines fill every aspect of negative space. In short the whole effect is rather more mimetic than suggestive, unlike the rest of the comic. At face value we are invited to consider this photographic Bruce and Alison, but we are also invited, via the comic hands which are holding the photographs, to consider the process whereby Alison (or Bechdel – the line between narrator and Alison becomes blurred here) comes to recognize herself in/as her father, and her father in/as herself in the process of writing Fun Home. The page calls to mind when Roland Barthes in Camera Lucida describes looking at photos of his recently deceased mother. He moves quickly through snapshots to finally land on one: The Winter Garden Photograph. In this photo he does “much more than recognize her”; he remarks, “I discover her…In this veracious photograph, the being I love, whom I have loved, is not separated from itself: at last it coincides”(109). Bechdel only reproduces three photos of her father in the whole text and I suspect that in them she “discovers him”. In the one that she compares to herself she finds “a genetic feature…the truth of lineage” which points to the way in which the “thought of origins soothes us” (Barthes 104-5). Though he reproduces many of the images to which he refers in Camera Lucida, Barthes pointedly refuses to reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. He writes “I cannot reproduce the Winter Garden Photograph. It exists only for me. For you, it
would be nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the ‘ordinary’; it cannot in any way constitute the visible object of science; it cannot establish an objectivity, in the positive sense of the term; at most it would interest your *studium*: period, clothes, photogeny; but in it, for you, no wound” (73).

Fig. 6. Bechdels in Translation. *Fun Home* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007; print; 120).
Bechdel’s drawings of the photographs allow her to reproduce them without exactly doing so. She can still use photography as a tool which “authenticates the existence of a certain being”, but she is not beholden to what Barthes calls the painful platitude of the photograph (107) – that is, the way that the photograph cannot be penetrated. Bechdel’s drawing of the photograph allows her to punctuate its flatness. See, as well the image in footnote 54. Here Bechdel has changed the photo of her father just enough that it becomes her drawing rather than a photo of him. In drawing the photos, as opposed to including them in the text – as Spiegelman does in Maus – we are spared the awkward lack of recognition that would alienate us from Alison’s recognition of her father in the images of him that she reproduces. This moment in the text then does not rely on an affective response from the reader, but rather signals the way in which Alison both recognizes (literally) her inheritance as linear and filiative. In penetrating the flatness of the photo with her chosen medium of self-expression she is able to create an affiliative relationship to her father. In this photo she recognizes and recreates herself as her father’s peer.

Bechdel narrates, “The exterior setting, the pained grin, the flexible wrists, even the angle of shadow falling across our faces – it’s about as close as translation can get”. As readers we are invited to participate in evaluating just how much Bruce and Alison, as their recreated photographic selves, actually look like each other. The page not only features the reproduced photographs, but also features, back in the cartoon idiom that characterizes the rest of the narrative, what we assume to be Bechdel’s hands holding the two photos side by side. As a reader one holds the book and finds one’s thumbs naturally transposed with Bechdel’s, suggesting that one look closely and perform one’s own comparison. In this respect, the panel confirms what Gillian Whitlock suggests about comics, that they "are not a mere hybrid of graphic arts and prose fiction but an experience of interpretation” (qtd in Chute and DeKoven,
The reader in this situation becomes the focalizer, the looker, and is explicitly invited to interpret as well. There is indeed a similarity in the smile, but the rest of the similarities that Bechdel points out between them seem forced and particular to her experience of viewing the photos. Perhaps they are the effect of longing, of seeking a source for her own butch lesbian identity, of wanting to find in her father the “original” of which she is a precise translation. Depending on how one defines “translation” Bechdel’s characterization of Alison’s relationship to her father in these photos as a translation is either a liberatory comment on sex, gender and queer politics, or else conforms to a narrative of fatherly authority over the daughter. As Linda Hutcheon points out, “in most concepts of translation, the source text is granted an axiomatic primacy and authority” (16). To this end, Bechdel desperately seeking equivalence between her and her father is an attempt posthumously to imbue him with the authority that she was always so loath to grant him when he was alive. By drawing him back to life, as it were, and translating her memories into the text, Bechdel invents Bruce’s authority and defers to that authority as an originary point. As the author of this graphic Bruce though, it is she who subordinates Bruce. The text also suggests however, through Alison’s anxiety about her own masculinity, that Bruce’s male masculinity is granted “axiomatic primacy” over female masculinity - which Alison is clearly expressing in the photo and that Bechdel is, ironically, trying to legitimize by pointing how like this man she is – a man whom she decries as overly feminine, and as lacking in masculinity.

However, what if we consider this translation in a more Benjaminian way, as “an engagement with the original text that makes us see that text in different ways”, or as an act of “inter-temporal communication” (Hutcheon 16)? Hutcheon argues that these latter definitions of translation are more like adaptations because what is involved is “a recoding into a new set of
conventions as well as signs” (16). To consider the Bruce-Alison diptych in this way is to suggest that Alison’s openly gay identity and her comfortable inhabiting of a gender position that is alternative or subversive to heteronormative logic is a recoding of queer as more than a set of homosexual desires. In other words, Bruce is queer only in so far as he has homosexual desires that he occasionally acts out, but Alison is queer in a way that refers to far more than her sexual desire for members of her own sex. For Alison, and indeed for Bechdel, being queer means extending those homosexual desires into a politics of identity, a rejection of hetero-logic, and a challenge to gender categories. As Ann Cvetokovich argues, recently “public discourses about LGBTQ politics…are increasingly homonormative and dedicated to family values” (111). Bruce’s queer but heteronormative identity is a strange kind of closeted pre-Stonewall echoing of this discourse. As such Alison’s growth into a butch, politically engaged woman, an advocate of the queer community, suggests that homosexual desire is not all there is to being queer.

But if we are to really consider the issue of translation from Bruce to Alison we must do so in a more Benjaminian way and consider the way in which a translation is an “after-life”; it “issues from the original – not so much from its life as from its afterlife” (Benjamin 71). This Alison we consider in the recreated photograph, and her comic equivalent whom we consider throughout Fun Home, both exist as an “after-life” of Bruce’s. She is less an “issue” from Bruce, but rather an entity that exists independently of the original Bruce, transformed into something else entirely, and yet still, a signifier of the original’s meaning. Benjamin explains that translation is less about faithfully copying then it is about communicating “the original’s mode of signification” (78). As an act of translation, from Bruce to Alison, Fun Home is Bechdel’s attempt to understand how Bruce signified (through modernist literature, through Victorian domesticity, through a subverted homosexuality) and to “incorporate” those modes of
signification into her own new “original”. *Fun Home* translates Bruce’s love of modernist literature into the comic form. Meanwhile, the frenetic detail of each page, obsessively composed and decorated, is his fussy, cluttered Victorian aesthetic represented in another language. As for the way in which gender is translated from Bruce to Alison, the issue is far more complex.

Consider the third photograph in the frame—Bruce dressed in a woman’s bathing suit. It is a photo that is reproduced both in the panel above the frame I’m discussing and also in the title page for the chapter. In this panel, however, it is not given primacy of place because it is obscured behind the other two photos and behind a text box as well. Bechdel speculates that he donned the bathing suit as a fraternity prank but notes that “the pose he strikes is not mincing or silly at all. He’s lissome, elegant”. Bechdel purposely chooses to leave it in the panel, in the backdrop of the two other portraits and as such we must consider how its presence complicates the close translation from Bruce to Alison that Bechdel suggests has taken place. This image of Bruce in drag is a tool which translates Bruce into Alison and allows the translation to work the other way as well: from Alison to Bruce. The photo depicts a biomale who by all the conventions operative in the 1950s (when the photo was taken) is *supposed* to be essentially masculine, and who nonetheless comfortably, even stylishly inhabits a marker of femaleness. Meanwhile, Alison’s female masculinity is coded in *Fun Home* as an essential masculinity, one that is not attributable in any way to sex. Bruce nonetheless attempts to put Alison in drag and to make her into this cross-dressed image of himself – an image he clearly cherished. It is not therefore his repressed homosexual desire that is translated into Alison’s proud lesbianism, nor is the father an authoritative original and the daughter a derivative copy. Rather in this gathering of photos the instability of the connection between masculinity and sex is translated from father to daughter and vice versa (both by what is depicted in the photos and by the act of recreating them as a
group in the text). This translation occurs

![Fig. 7. Alison as Bruce. On the left a cropped screen capture from a youtube video that Bechdel made about the process of creating Fun Home. See “Alison Bechdel's Big Kiss pt 2”. On the right, a panel from Fun Home (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2007; print; 197).](image)

also in the way that Bechdel drew the text. She describes dressing up as all the characters in the text and photographing herself as them (fig 7).

We might consider the way in which Bruce in a woman’s bathing suit is “Bruce revealed” or imagine that Alison in a similar get-up would be betraying herself. When Alison comes out we see her in men’s shirts and with a typically boyish haircut, finally becoming one of those whom her father warned her about: “women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts” (Fun Home 118). I suspect that Fun Home could support this consideration of clothing as revelation and clothing as obfuscation. Butler’s position in Gender Trouble with regard to drag being an example of performativity might also help to support this reading. However, in a corrective moment, Butler argues in Bodies that Matter that she “never did think that gender was like clothes, or that clothes make the woman” (231). She clarifies that gender performativity does not occur in one moment, is not a single act that a person performs (as in Bruce donning the bathing suit for the photo), but rather occurs over time and through repetition (Bodies 231). This explains why Bruce repeatedly attempts to engender Alison as female. His effort was directed
towards the “forcible production” via repetition of a feminine, female daughter. Bruce fails though, in part because as the book depicts, Alison’s masculinity was always already established, and also because of a forceful spirit of contradiction that the young Alison seemed to embody towards her father (Bodies 231). Meanwhile, Bechdel is responsible for engendering her father posthumously, and in death, he is unable to mount a defence or rejection. She reveals a femininity in Bruce after his death that he himself was unwilling to perform, except in jest in the bathing suit photo. Bechdel takes that single moment to prove that “the clothes make the (wo)man” and reinforces it through repetition – publication. Paired with her repeated highlighting of aspects of Bruce’s behaviours that she deemed feminine, Bruce is represented as ambiguously gendered, but only within the limits of the text.

**Compulsory Lesbianism**

Though Alison’s masculinity is undoubtedly one a masculinity ultimately “annexed indisputably to lesbianism” (FM 54) we might read Fun Home a little more closely to reveal the method and the location of this annexation. Halberstam writes that “we have come to see same-sex desire between biological females as a coherent set of terms” in spite of the fact that, as she points out, quoting Butler, “it is permanently unclear what [lesbian] signifies” (FM 54). Bechdel inserts lesbianism into the narrative as a corrective or alternative to the heterosexual nightmare that characterizes her parent’s loveless and fraudulent marriage. This is, along with a courageous and politically engaged identity position which contrasts what she depicts as her father’s passivity, is what lesbian signifies within the context of the story that Bechdel is telling.
To return to the moment in the bookstore where Alison realizes she is a lesbian (fig 2). Roy’s presence and the dictionary definition of “lesbian” in the next panel makes it clear that this is a moment of identification with a term, a moment when she gives a name to what she experienced previously as a feeling. In the sequence that leads up to this panel, we read on the previous page that the family vacations to Switzerland and to France led Alison to conclude that she “would never get married, and … would carry on to live the artist’s life [her parents] had each abdicated”. She rejects the heteronormative symbolic order wherein one is compelled to marry, have children, go on family vacations, maintain a stable income, abandon any kind of artistic – and potentially radical – expressions of self. This sequence of panels leads us to conclude that in her rejection of this symbolic logic, she realizes that there is a different set of symbols available to her and they all fall under the heading “lesbian”. However, Elsa’s narrative troubles Alison’s identification with this term. Elsa is a 77-year-old whose narrative we can only read snatches of because the panel does not present us with the whole page. Unlike the passages from Proust (92) or Camus (48) or Joyce (230) which get their own text boxes and have sentences in them highlighted for us to notice, we read only some of Elsa’s story and we read it over Alison’s shoulder. In the leftmost side of the panel at the bottom of page 74, we see Alison’s profile as she reads about Elsa and we read about Elsa over Alison’s shoulder, as though she is showing us the very text that made her call herself a lesbian. It is of course a great irony that Elsa does not inhabit the term “lesbian”. But according to the excerpt, she never felt that she had to “have some kind of indoctrination or trauma or coming out ritual”. Unlike Alison who we observe devouring every book she can find about homosexuality and working hard to establish it as an objective reality with its own set of rules, conventions, theories, roles etc, Elsa maintained throughout her life (which straddles the nineteenth and twentieth century) an
ignorance of the “meaning” of lesbian. Instead she “just knew”… she was “different in many ways from what was…” The way that the panel cuts out her words reinforces Elsa’s experience of homosexuality as not discursively constructed as “lesbian”. The ellipses in Elsa’s narrative refer to the historiography of queer sexualities that, Halberstam argues, often try to fill in the ambiguities in older queer narratives by anachronistically describing them as lesbian narratives. In fact, Halberstam argues, “many contemporary lesbian historians cannot extricate themselves from contemporary understandings of lesbian identity long enough to interpret the vagaries of same-sex desire” (FM 50). Halberstam instead suggests that we think about the “multiple forms of female masculinity” both now and then and question where and when it is appropriate to agree that those masculinities are “annexed indisputably to lesbianism” (FM 54).

Later we revisit Alison’s encounter with Elsa and we are told that this moment in the bookstore occurred on the day she went to buy *Ulysses* for a class. Bechdel then uses the moment of “annexation” to subvert the heterosexual fantasy while Alison uses it as a distraction from reading *Ulysses*, which is her father’s favourite book. The semester when she is supposed to be reading Joyce is instead given over to reading everything she can get her hands on that refers to, describes, theorizes, defines, or contributes to her new identity. Bechdel narrates that the semester found Alison between Scylla and Charybdis, but that she finally chooses Scylla (which represents her peers) because it “seemed the safer route”. After making the choice, or “navigating the passage”, Bechdel narrates that Alison “washed up, a bit stunned, on a new shore” (214). What is interesting about this moment is that it clearly figures “lesbianism” as a choice and not an inevitability. Knowing that Alison doesn’t immediately identify with lesbianism - all her friends are activists, committed to the gay community, whereas Alison is suspicious of them: “these people are weird” she thinks, “maybe I’m not a homo after all” (213).
means that we need to go back and look for signs where *Fun Home* might confirm Halberstam’s argument that we “note the pitfalls of a rigid insistence that some form or another of female masculinity indicates prelesbianism”. This brings us instantly back to the moment where Alison discovers masturbation by “shifting about” in her chair while she draws at her desk (170). This occurs right after she gets her first period, an event that she encodes as “‘N’ing” in her diary, a practice she’d “learned in Algebra of denoting complex or unknown quantities with letters” (169). It is clear from Alison’s expressions in these panels that menstruating is met with melancholy. She refers to it as “incontrovertible evidence.” Though she doesn’t say of what, we can infer that it is the tragic evidence of her femaleness which she can no longer ignore. To return then to her masturbation, one could assume, based on a simplistic association of female masculinity with lesbianism, and the naïve consideration of lesbianism as butch-femme, that when Alison refers with delight to the fact that she can “illustrate [her] own fantasies” the next panel will feature a buxom blonde staring coyly out at the boyish Alison. In fact though, while she wriggles around in her chair, she draws a man, a basketball player. Bechdel narrates that “in the flat chests and slim hips of my surrogates, I found release from my own increasing burden of flesh” (170). Alison’s erotic fantasy is not of a woman, but rather it is a representation of the body she would like to have, a body that she thinks belongs exclusively to masculinity. It has not yet occurred to her that she too embodies masculinity. After she comes out she begins to appear more and more masculine in the way that Bechdel draws her. In this respect, lesbianism, rather than being the starting point represents a set of tools which allow her to come back around to the masculinity she so comfortably inhabited in her prepubescent years.

*Father’s Rules*
Queer or not, though, masculinity in *Fun Home* still operates, as it does in the novels, as an ideal, as a gender expression coded as legitimating and authoritative. *Fun Home*, like the novels in this thesis, depicts the father, Bruce, repeatedly turning to his daughter, Alison to exert a paternalistic authority over her in order that he might reinstate order and authority over his life which the narrative reveals is always torn between his “true” queer and his “false” hetero identities. Like David, Henry, Max and Alex, Bruce is experiencing a crisis which he seeks to resolve with the forceful assertion and maintenance of hetero-logic. This takes the form of his aggressive attempts to make Alison behave “like a girl” and it is also more obviously articulated throughout the memoir as Bruce “living a lie”: marrying, taking over the family business, having children and attempting to enforce on his own life – at least by outward appearances – a heteromasculine ideal. *Fun Home* graphically illustrates the anxious father/ oppressed daughter dynamics that are operative in Coetzee, McEwan and Banville.

When Alison comes out to her parents in a letter, her mother writes her a letter in reply implying that she ought not to decide upon her sexuality in such a “final” way (“I am a lesbian,” say the words, ever so bluntly, on the page in the typewriter on page 58). Her father writes her a letter as well, cryptically revealing why he never could come out and referring to coming out as “taking a stand,” a stand that he finds it difficult to see as advantageous (211). In spite of her parents’ cold and tense marriage, they present a united front in seeing her lesbianism as a threat to the way they chose to live their lives (78). Bruce sees “taking a stand” as “heroic” and clearly does not want Alison to have to attempt to live up to that pressure. “I am not a hero,” he writes to her, but in fact it is with the kind of force and strength typically reserved for heroes and their herculean tasks, that Bruce suppresses his homosexuality. From time to time he is not altogether successful at this feat, particularly when he is remanded by the court to seek counselling after he
is apprehended buying beer for two young men. Bruce’s human weakness for young attractive men is revealed.

This could easily have been a book about Bechdel’s father’s crisis of identity which ultimately destroys him. It could have been a story about how Alison forgives him because she empathizes with a traumatic disassociation from his “true” homosexual self, in spite of how she was alienated by his aggressive displays of what the text codes as heteromascullinity. To some degree, that is the story that *Fun Home* tells. However Bechdel is reluctant to blame a pre-Stonewall society for her father’s closeted homosexuality. On page 196 Bechdel narrates that “there’s a certain emotional expedience to claiming him as a tragic victim of homophobia. But that’s a problematic line of thought”. The next page features a panel where Bruce is drawn from below casting an intimidating presence. Bechdel narrates, “In my earliest memories, Dad is a lowering, malevolent presence”. Her acknowledgement of his rule by intimidation leads her to demand that Bruce take responsibility for his disconnectedness, his anger, his lack of affection or empathy for his daughter, and his forceful demand that she suppress what are obviously the “tommy” aspects of her identity. Rather than representing him as he may have wanted to be and eliciting sympathy for Bruce “the victim”, Bechdel instead sticks to representing him as he actually appeared to be.

Bechdel’s text successfully reimagines the father-daughter relationship on the daughter’s terms. It also reimagines masculinity as female and goes some lengths towards deconstructing sexual orientation (both queer and straight) as essential, revealing it, alongside gender categories, as a construction which effaces specific historiographies. As opposed to the male protagonists in this study who attempt to fold their daughters back into a filiative structure precisely because that

---

69 Halberstam points out that “tommy” connotes “boyishness within women and some disruptive form of unconventional masculinity”(51).
structure benefits traditional masculinity, Bechdel’s text is about transforming, and not destroying, filiative obligations into far more liberatory affiliative connections. Over the course of the book, we see her reject her father’s affinity for Fitzgerald, Proust and Joyce in particular, yet *Fun Home* itself is a testament to Alison having in fact accepted her father’s desire to pass his love of books to her. *Fun Home* also implies that sexuality is a second strand of inheritance. Though Bruce is deep in the closet, and is traumatized by what the narrative figures as his alienation from some kind of “true” self, *Fun Home* also suggests that Alison inherits queer sexuality from him as well, though she does so in a way that reveals the performance and constructedness of gender categories. Sexuality and literary inheritance are thus figured as two inheritances from her father that Alison nonetheless selects as affiliations and makes her own.
CONCLUSION

*Fun Home* provokes ever more questions about gender, crisis and fathers and daughters though it does, however, resolve one of the central concerns of my thesis: how to be both sympathetic of men who feel the deconstruction of gender as a crisis of masculinity without defending the traditional masculine ideal at the same time. As do all the novels in this thesis, it depicts the father in crisis. Through the text, Bechdel accuses him of being weak and fearful and reveals to her readers his own admission, typed by his own hand, that he is incapable of the heroic adoption of a gay lifestyle and identity position. But Bechdel doesn’t do so in defence of Bruce’s choice to adhere to a traditional or heteronormative masculinity. She could easily have suggested that, in the early fifties, coming out was more difficult, that he was a product of his time and place and therefore not to be blamed. But in her depiction of her father she reveals a man who brought the crisis on himself, a man who could not adhere to either one or the other choice, and instead ended up alienating himself from his family and from a community that he could have helped shape and define. It is not only that *Fun Home* represents a daughter’s refusal to be held in rapturous sympathy to her father’s anxiety about his masculinity that makes it unique in the context of this thesis. The same can be said of Claire in *The Sea* or Lucy in *Disgrace*. Rather it is that instead of being reduced to a site of negative and contrarian opposition, Alison Bechdel builds something new out of Bruce’s anxiety. This is not, mind you, Alison “raising his tomb” as Irigaray puts it, for in this text, she refuses to absolve or beatify him. Rather Alison’s female and queer masculinity signifies a liveable alternative to Bruce’s self-annihilating, anxious masculinity. She signifies the location of a masculinity still troubled by anxiety about
fatherhood, and family but one that uses this anxiety in a productive troubling of gender and inheritance more broadly.

What Bruce wants for Alison is a heterosexual life – it is the same as what David wants for Lucy, Henry wants for Daisy, Max wants for Claire and Alex wants for Cass. These fathers want to see their daughters take up a “normal” life – to marry, to have children, to be mothers, to inhabit the feminine ideal which gives structure and counterbalancing weight to their masculinity. The very fact of being fathers to these daughters initiates them into what Juliet Mitchell calls “the vertical process of parenting” (187) which subverts horizontal patterns of affection or kinship which are typically non-procreative. For Mitchell between parent and child there is always a vertical relationship. Mitchell refers to the vertical processes of kinship as “monolithically welded to procreation”(187). She notes that

The paradigms of meta-narratives, Darwin, Marx, Freud, were stories of descent: the origin of species necessitated the descent of man; history read forwards for Marx, backwards for Freud, was a vertical line: feudalism to capitalism to socialism to communism, adulthood to childhood to infancy – father to child, mother to infant. Within this vertical paradigm, the horizontal was suppressed.

(emphases in original 177)

Mitchell argues that caretaking more generally can happen effectively along a “horizontal axis” and is only “secondarily gendered” because “it has been assimilated to the vertical process of parenting…to the exclusion or relegation of the many forms of non-reproductive child caretaking” (187). Against this model Mitchell suggests horizontal, lateral relations where “caring takes precedence over procreation” (187). The novels in my study don’t do very well at imagining non-procreative caretaking arrangements. They depict non-traditional procreative
arrangements (a child out of wedlock in *Saturday*, a fatherless child in *Disgrace*), which are figured as disruptions in the father’s sense of what he wants for his daughter. Imagine if they were faced with their complete irrelevance as parents and the caretaking of their daughters was left to a community of their daughter’s choosing? Imagining this is not a task they are up to. Instead, the fathers display a stubborn faithfulness to their role in the vertical process of parenting. Wishing that their daughters and indeed the women who populate the texts would be straight, or would be feminine, or would get married, is arguably a desire on the father’s part that these women accept a traditional procreative fate wherein “sexual division pertains, and difference is a modality on which inequality comfortably rests” (Mitchell 187). This attachment to the vertical is indicative of the filiative at work in these novels, whose protagonists privilege this arrangement for how it benefits them over a horizontal, affiliative network of caretaking which may better suit their daughters.

In all except *Fun Home*, the father protagonists ultimately succeed, imaginatively at least, in initiating their daughters to this fate. Perowne magnanimously decrees that if Daisy wants the baby, he will “let it happen”\(^\text{70}\). Lurie meanwhile finds a way to think about Lucy’s baby not as a contract, as she does, but rather as part of pastoral romance where he becomes the doting grandfather, meanwhile Alex Cleave replaces the daughter who was lost to him and who chose to have sex with his double, Axel. In place of Cass he installs the young Lily as his surrogate daughter, grooming her to take up the role of ideal daughter, going as far as to name her his heir. By contrast, in *Fun Home*, Bruce, who dies just a few months after Alison comes out, and just two weeks after Helen, his wife, decides to divorce him, is suspected of committing suicide because, we infer, he could not accept the total collapse of the hetero-logic that had protected

\(^{70}\) “He’s king, he’s vast, accommodating, immune, he’ll say yes to any plan that has kindness and warmth at its heart. Let the baby take its first steps and speak its first steps here, in this palace” (*Saturday* 269-70).
him from complete self-annihilation. Bruce, instead of being able to contain his “crisis” by realizing the heterosexual fantasy he had imagined for his daughter, completely falls apart.

If Alison and the daughters in the novels discussed earlier can accomplish the heroic feats of heteronormativity their fathers set out for them, then they will enter into the symbolic procreative logic of the future that Lee Edelman condemns in *No Future*. For the daughters to take up the mantle of heterosexual, procreative logic would mean that they could help to resolve the crises that their fathers endure throughout these texts. In my previous chapters, I argue that in each novel the protagonist faces two choices: he could choose to reproduce the symbolic order (embodied by his daughter submitting to him, marrying and producing heirs) and the “logic of things” or he could refuse the symbolic order and risk a traumatic self-dissolution that would necessarily involve an abandonment and a complete disavowal of masculine authority and privilege. In each case, and to varying degrees, the protagonists choose the symbolic. The choice doesn’t itself initiate the crisis – I’ve argued that these novels depict a masculinity enduring a crisis that is initiated by a traumatic moment in the novel–rather the crisis is represented as a choice between, on the one hand, resolving and reinstating masculine authority and the logic of the oedipally determined symbolic order, or, on the other hand, refusing that symbolic logic and allowing the traumatic prospect of self-dissolution to proceed. The fathers choose to stave off that prospect by relying on their daughter to represent the future for them.

Ignoring that Lucy perceives her unborn child as a contract, Lurie incorporates her pregnancy into a pastoral romance where he is the ideal doting grandfather. In this narrative, Lurie’s sexual adventures become not the lurid lust of an old man, but rather part and parcel of the procreative drive that brought Lucy into the world, that will bring his grandchild into the world, and their children and so on and so forth. In McEwan’s most recent novel *Solar*, the
loathsome protagonist is finally redeemed by the birth of his daughter, while in *Saturday*, Daisy’s pregnancy and return to the family home signals the end of the traumatic day for Henry. Max Morden, in *The Sea*, believes that Claire’s assertion of her independence from him, her choice to work with disadvantaged children instead of pursuing more serious scholarship, and her choice of Jerome as a partner, are all digs specifically meant to wound him. He installs himself at the center of her universe, and his disgruntlement towards her betrays his fear that he is facing irrelevance, loneliness and finally, because his wife is gone, an unmourned death. The anxiety that these men experience about their own relevance and the threat to their legacies is displaced onto their daughters. *Fun Home*’s daughterly narration reveals the way in which daughters are aware of this pressure, feel its oppressive weight, and in Alison’s case at least, express it as ambivalence towards home, tradition and influence. In Bechdel’s case though, the pressure is productive, resulting in a work that represents female masculinity in terms of its unique multi-pronged inheritance. Perhaps exploring female masculinity suggests an avenue by way of which compulsory and essentialist connections between men and masculinity may be undone, and we may alleviate the pressure on queer, straight, and transgendered men alike to be the sole bearers of masculinity, that both conservative and liberal proponents of masculinity studies have argued is oppressive and anxiety producing.
WORKS CONSULTED


“‘Crisis in Masculinity’ leads to eating disorders in young men.” Royal College of Psychiatrists.  


