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## Rivalry in Toyer: The Impact of the Male Gaze and the Final Girl on Theatrical Conflict

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**Rivalry in *Toyer*: The Impact of the Male Gaze and the Final Girl on Theatrical Conflict**

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## Abstract

Although much progress has been made in recent years, traditional gender roles still permeate society. This project investigated gender constructs in relation to choreographed violence and found that females are often victims unless they adopt masculine survival styles, while males are usually aggressors – particularly towards females. Analysis of the characters in the play *Toyer* by Gardner McKay supported this conclusion.

An actor with a background in stage combat can identify the need for awareness of inner-workings of theatre with the addition of information posed by gender and diversity studies. Combat in theatrical presentations manifests in particular ways depending on the actors and characters involved, something in great need of further exploration. Extensive research in the fields of gender and diversity as well as sociology lends to the realization that gender is definitively a factor in some of the polarization in theatrical combat. With the rise of diversity councils in some stage combat organizations, as well as in other arenas, issues with skewed gender representation have become clearer to the general public. The original intention of this research was simple: direct, physical altercations between members of the same gender in comparison to members of the opposite gender, in relation to how these confrontations might be interpreted by audiences. Existing scholarship lent to a more narrow and focused approach, however: how gender impacts the way that choreographed theatrical conflict is represented in the media, through analysis of both media resources and acting methods. Violence is a popular theme in our current culture, which is reflected in our entertainment, which makes this research very pertinent, especially in terms of marginalized groups and a newly multi-gendered world.

### Selective Perceptions Influenced by Gender Norms

Social constructs impact the way we interpret our world. From both a microsocial (individuals and their peers) and a macrosocial (communities and society as a whole) standpoint, the way in which we interpret the various cultural, political, and economic variables around us is sculpted by our perceptions. Since popular culture media manifest current standards and beliefs, it stands to reason that media can be used to analyze society's views on itself, in regards to

personal variables such as gender and sexuality. Violence, as it is used in the media, is one method of representing sets of beliefs and also ways of interpreting the causes of conflict and violence as they are portrayed in the media.

The gendering of violence is especially clear in film and on the stage. Violent acts are gendered in theatrical media, such as stage combat, and common perceptions of real-world, physical violence affects direction and characterization of stage combat. The operational definition of stage combat is theatrical choreographed conflict. Gender, unless otherwise indicated, adheres to binary masculine and feminine presentations based upon social stereotypes of the male and female biological sexes. Current literature that addresses gendered violence, particularly regarding stage combat in film and theatre, supports a hypothesis that females are typically written and portrayed as victims – with the exception of final girl type characters – and males are the aggressors of females more often than not – and often without consequences.

Heightened awareness of gendered violence is very important in our society. Masculine and feminine tropes prevail to various levels of acceptance with different audiences. We are latent manifestations of gendered ideology, and need informed discussion about the true effects of gender on perceptions of theatrical violence. One method of awareness is through research.

### Phallogentrism, *Iron Man 2*, and Acting Method

The term “male gaze” was coined by Laura Mulvey in her article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” to refer to the active viewing role that men have over the passive female. According to Mulvey, “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly... (i)n their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously

looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact” (62).

Mulvey notes that these roles cannot be easily reversed within the boundaries of current societal

constructs because “(a)ccording to the principles of the ruling ideology and the physical

structures which back it up, the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification”

(63). Mulvey contributes to the discourse of gender in regard to media as a whole: “(t)he paradox

of phallocentrism in all its manifestations is that it depends on the image of the castrated woman

to give order and meaning to its world” (57). In summary, she believes that females are largely

used for aesthetics in media, and when they present deviance from male control, they are a threat

to masculinity itself.

### *Iron Man 2.*

In the 2010 film *Iron Man 2*, the character Natasha Romanoff aka Black Widow, who

uses the alias “Natalie Rushman” here, meets the titular character Iron Man, Anthony “Tony”

Stark, through a business transaction. Throughout the scene, Tony is watching Natasha in a

manner noted as inappropriate by the other woman present, Tony’s assistant Virginia “Pepper”

Potts, and is considered by Pepper as the foundations for a sexual harassment case. Tony is, in

the Marvel comics, a notorious womanizer who views most females as chances for conquest, and

expects and accepts nothing but victory. When Tony acknowledges Natasha’s professional skills,

it is clearly an attempt to encourage attraction. Since nearly everyone in the world of this film is

familiar with Tony and his social habits, as well as his economic prestige through the Stark

legacy, this knowledge contributes to a common audience acceptance of Tony’s hypersexual

behavior. This type of sequence, and the characters involved, are good representations of how

females are commonly objectified in media about superhumans and superheroes without consequences to the males around them.

From the simple fact of how combat and violence are used to perpetuate gendered concepts in this scene, no clear victor is perceived. While Tony appears to be put on the spot for his expectations that all women want to be objects of his affection, he sees no consequences for his actions. On the other side, Natasha is aware of Tony's behavior and allows it, encouraging him to underestimate her capabilities and using Tony's attraction to her as a distraction to her advantage. In short, Natasha is using gender stereotypes and social expectations that she ignores Tony's inappropriate behavior as a means to put herself in a position of power. She sets up the situation for Tony to drop his guard, which is likely related to her moniker, "Black Widow," a type of spider which disables from a close proximity and also devours sexual partners. As stated in an article in National Geographic, "the large females will often devour the smaller males during sex—hence the 'widow' in their names" (Yong, 2016). This kind of subtle power-trip by Natasha is not only abnormal in both life and in the media, but is also seen as more immoral than the objectifying behavior of males like Tony. Maude in *Toy* also uses similar methods to reverse the power between her and Peter, which will be analyzed later on in this paper when the play is addressed in full. Behavior like Tony's is why an analysis of gender and violence in media is necessary: we need to recognize what sort of message films such as *Iron Man 2* are sending with these types of interactions, for females as well as males.

The actions of characters of the stage and screen can perpetuate inequality and real world violence. It is necessary to examine the ways that actors invest themselves in characters of various types, and various methods that actors use to define a role which involves physical



conflict. A means for analyzing actors and character development can be found in the methods of Constantin Stanislavski (also spelled Stanislavsky) and his concept of organic unity.

“Create for me the sequence of external, physical action. Let me feel the truth in it” (Stanislavski, 1936, 136). Stanislavski’s theory of organic unity, in how it applies to later developments, and the struggle of an actor to maintain the natural pattern of human movement in relationship to violent choreographed movement (127) is useful in understanding the physical manifestation of a fight, such as the physical reactions to pain, as an important part of how a stage combat scene is presented (223-224). Stanislavski wrote to actors: “plan your role consciously at first, then play it truthfully. At this point, realism and even naturalism in the inner preparation of a part is essential” (15). Approaching a scene with a suspension of disbelief which allows the actors, from the very first, to convey the situation as honestly as possible, can be difficult without a human perspective.

Stanislavski’s approach to improving the connection between an actor and their work, as a means for improving actor performance, is very useful when addressing how inner monologue – subtexts; subconscious beliefs about the fundamentals of a character’s perspective as it interacts with an actor’s conscious thought and actions – affects portrayals of violence. “You may play well or you may play badly; the important thing is that you should play truly... To play truly means to be right, logical, coherent, to think, strive, feel and act in unison with your role” (14). An actor’s well-developed inner monologue leads to the creation of characters whose actions are more relevant to the lives of the audience because of its inherent truthfulness.

When it comes to the subconscious in the realm of theatre, actor motivations are important. The formulations for characters and their action towards one another are not simply found within the script and stage directions, but must also transfer from the mind of the director and choreographer into the mind of the actors involved in a scene. In a carefully constructed scene of stage combat, the character is kept in check by the actor's emotional memories as much as their body: "living human emotions, feelings which the actor himself has experienced" (51). Every movement and reaction of an actor must reflect the character just as much as a sullen monologue, because even "(a) small, physical act acquires an enormous inner meaning; the great inner struggle seeks an outlet such as an external act" (149) in order to fulfil its purpose. This phrase is related to Sir Isaac Newton's Third Law of Motion in his book *Principia*, which was written in Latin in 1687 – as was common practice in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century – so it is commonly paraphrased as "for every action (force) in nature there is an equal and opposite reaction" (Glenn Research Center, 2015). Newton's Third Law is relevant here not only because it is easily accessible as a trope, but also because it pertains to the physics of motion, which comprise the foundations of theatrical conflict and all violence. Additionally, Newton's Third Law describes the naturally occurring environment of rivalry, in terms of equal and opposing forces, which can be compared to gender.

Stanislavski's acting method is one of many which focuses on the environment of an actor. A related scholar in the field of acting methods is Sanford Meisner – a student of Lee Strasberg, who constructed his concept of method acting based upon the Stanislavski System. One author on the Camp Broadway website describes the difference between the two methods by stating, that Stanislavski "believes in finding a situation in actors' lives that can compare to what

the character might be going through in the scene” Meisner “believes in finding a situation in actors’ lives that can compare to what the character might be going through in the scene” (Sami 2013). Stanislavski’s method focuses more on internal variables, that is, the actor’s thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and Meisner’s focuses more on external variables, the script, the way that a lead-in line is delivered, the physical actions of the other actor (Sami 2013).

Meisner believes that “an ounce of behavior is worth a pound of words” (Meisner, Longwell, and Pollack 1990: 4). Meisner’s acting method focuses on reactivity. In Meisner’s method, an actor’s core, natural reaction to a scene brings a character to life (13-15). The Meisner technique should not be confused with method acting, which is a modern technique developed by Lee Strasberg from the work of Stanislavski. A website about method acting based on Strasberg’s work defines method acting as “the creative play of the affective memory in the actor’s imagination as the foundation for (re)experiencing on stage” (The Lee Strasberg, Theatre, and Film Institute, 2015). This website quotes Aristotle: “the secret to moving the passions in others is to be moved oneself, and that moving oneself is made possible by bringing to the fore ‘visions’ of experiences from life that are no longer present,” which shows the fundamental difference between method acting and the Meisner acting method: method acting is a form which draws from experiences, while Meisner’s method is based on reacting based on instinctive perceptions of the environment.

Both acting methods have their strengths and weaknesses, and they are strongest when combined to serve the particular needs of each actor and piece. Sometimes the environment is very intense and feeding off of that environment and other actors can propel an actor further into

character, but if the environment is lacking, then it is more difficult to use what is happening to fuel a performance. Method acting uses the experiences of an actor: any given encounter or scene could contain something that the actor either knows well and can portray with great intensity or has absolutely no personal knowledge of (and may be lacking in ability to convey). Both methods have an element in common: their reliance on the intuitive ability of an actor to either anticipate or naturally understand the way that their character would react to their environment and other actors in the scene.

A notable book which relates to Meisner's method of relying on perceptions and reactivity, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), is an analysis of the socialized perspectives through which we interact with and interpret our world (8). Berger's book uses sociological terms such as "status" and "privileged minority," which are useful in developing discourse about gender representations displayed in various forms of media (10-11). This text, which has been very important in the field of sociology, is useful in the analysis of acting in theatre and film as well. The first sentence of this book, "(s)eeing comes before words" (7) draws attention to how we interpret our world, and that our visual perceptions are strongly related to all human interaction. From the moment we begin to process our world, we are taught by our experiences and those around us what meaning to assign to the things we see (7). Socialized meanings are applied to complex thought and especially to identity – which includes gender and sex (11). By the time we are old enough to clearly process it, we have already been indoctrinated on how to view the general category of males and females, and what expectations or actions to connect to them. Berger wrote "when a painting is reproduced by a film camera it inevitably becomes material for the film-maker's argument" (26) and the same could be said of any visual element in

media, from color schemes, to diversity in gender or sexuality or skin color, and even to expressions put on by each actor in reaction to plot. Each part of a scene, film, and character is composed with care by the director and actors to properly frame their own concepts and beliefs. The actor's goal of soliciting a particular reaction from the audience moderates the method that the actor uses to obtain this reaction, just as the lighting and intended mood of a scene impacts the equipment a director chooses to create the correct atmosphere. Media, whether film or theatre, is a popular form of audience manipulation, and a shift of a camera lens or a facial expression can influence an audience member's perception of a scene.

## Selective Perception and Gender Roles in “The Legends of Tomorrow”

### Selective Perception.

A sociological term for a phenomenon of human memory, selective perception refers to the way that we tend to only pay attention to and remember what aligns with our previously held beliefs, rather than contradicting information (Plous, 1993, 15). Since “it is nearly impossible for people to avoid biases in perception... people selectively perceive what they expect and hope to see,” which creates an internal echo chamber of ideas (15). This terminology is useful for describing a particular way of viewing elements of characters or portrayals in the media, especially when it comes to gender and violence. People have been acculturated to see violent interactions through biased lenses, and to interpret physical conflict along the lines of gender and behavior they have previously known. As noted by Linda Mulvey regarding narrative cinema, “the function of film is to reproduce as accurately as possible the so-called natural conditions of human perception. Camera technology (as exemplified by deep focus in particular)... blur the

limits of screen” (Mulvey, 1990, 63). Filmmakers utilize the limits of the human eye to their advantage in order to manipulate perspective for the necessary suspension of disbelief.

A 2016 article about the recently-broadcast pilot of the Marvel TV series “Legends of Tomorrow” describes main cast members in turn. The male and female characters are summarized in very different ways – the costume-focused descriptions of Sara Lance (White Canary) and Ray Palmer (Atom) and the suggestion of their motivations based on the wording. The article describes Sara in terms of her costume change – “she’s finally shedding her black leather jacket from *Arrow* for some new white duds” – and her relationship to Laurel Lance aka Black Canary – “her fellow butt-kicking blonde sister” (Bui 2016). Her story and character – which are arguably more important for a new audience – seem to be addendums which present her as a confused child, using such phrases “an aggressive attitude,” “reeling from her resurrection,” and “left Star City on a bit of a walkabout.” Her strength of character and personal struggles are all but removed.

Pictured, from left to right: Sara Lance (White Canary, Black Canary), Ray Palmer (Atom), and Kendra Vaughn (Hawkgirl).



(Images courtesy of Pinterest users victor’s and fractured-simplicity.net, respectively)

Ray Palmer, on the other hand is described as “a businessman and tech company CEO who moonlights as a[n] exosuit-wearing vigilante” (Bui 2016). His costume is mentioned only for its relevance to his story and capabilities – “originally his suit flew and fired energy blasts, but after an explosion at Palmer Technologies supposedly left Ray dead, he discovered that his suit had shrinking abilities.” Bui again uses the word “walkabout” but the representations can be interpreted differently – he is not “reeling” but instead is “enjoying the anonymity” lent to him by being believed dead. While both Sara and Ray have proven themselves in “Arrow” as formidable in combat, the two characters are depicted with very different qualifications. Bui glossed over Sara’s strength of character and survival skills in favor of a description of her “new white duds” and describing her as if she is confused and lost and in need of guidance, which are more typical traits of the traditional helpless female than Sara Lance. Bui mentions Ray’s business and that his suit’s original abilities to fly and fire “energy blasts,” which favor the traditional masculine characterization of men as being more professionally successful and adept in combat than women by default. For these reasons, this type of scholarship creates a biased perspective about the intentions and priorities of males and females in a combat-heavy story such as “Arrow” and “Legends of Tomorrow” and encourages a more segregated media environment.

Shows and movies about super-humans are easily accessible examples of stage combat in popular media and are useful when analyzing the way society regards violence for males and females respectively. The traditional costumes of comic-based superheroes are not known for their believability but rather for their misrepresentation of the human body with extremely tight fabrics that emphasize curves in ways that defy gravity and physics. A distinct difference can be noted between the costumes of female characters, which are often unnecessarily revealing and

form-fitting to the point where the outfits would likely be a hindrance in combat, and male characters, which normally hug hypermuscular bodies but also are more likely to have useful additions or suggest a sense of extra combative capability. The sexual objectification of female heroes does little for assisting with understanding their characters compared to the dominance of male heroes, and feminine superheroes are often reduced to their aesthetics while their masculine counterparts are often given useful additions such as new gadgets or more weather-hardy gear.

The superhuman genre of media is also useful as a vehicle for comparison of male and female characterization by way of their histories and actions. Since the comic-to-TV adaptations are following comic book and graphic novel traditions, they borrow methods of characterization which set up female characters at a disadvantage though they are as dynamic and relatable characters as their male counterparts. A *USA Today* article about “The Legends of Tomorrow,” “Superhero Crossover Sets up 'Legends' Spinoff,” describes Kendra Saunders, also known as Hawkgirl, and Vandal Savage, who is the primary villain of the show. In the article, Kendra is categorized by her weaknesses and how “lost” she is – the actress herself is quoted calling Kendra “a pretty lost human” who “didn’t really have a plan.” The romantic conflict between her and two male characters is made pertinent to her character – “creates a love triangle of sorts since Kendra is starting to like Cisco romantically, she dislikes Carter and thinks he’s an oaf, and Carter is set in getting her up to speed... Kendra doesn’t obviously reciprocate those feelings, and he’s trying to be patient.” She is also portrayed here as emotionally reliant on her male counterpart, Carter – “she’s starting to suspect there’s this disconnect” and “it’s up to Carter to get her up to speed,” as well as “getting involved with Carter and her new hero friends ‘ignites a



fire' ” in her, and Carter “doesn’t really have time to be an encyclopedia” for Kendra as she uses him as a mentor to understand their long-time struggle against Vandal Savage.

Vandal, on the other hand, is given a list of talents and prowess by which the audience knows him – citing his immortality and his ability to “adapt to whatever period he’s in” and that he “doesn’t need gadgets and cool suits and spaceships” but instead can work with just “a coat, some knives and time.” Vandal’s descriptors indicate actions and accomplishments – he “has 4,000 years of experience dealing with all great evils” and “learned from really the best and quite frankly the worst history has to offer.” The stereotypes used in this article reflect the stereotypes of gender discussed above in regards to Sara Lance and Ray Palmer as well.

Female characters such as Kendra (Hawkgirl) and Sara (White Canary) are popular in modern society because of their inner strength, as many superheroes are. They are survivors. Female characters have recently begun to evolve, like Sara, who has been developed to have a quite forward and dominant demeanor, and has been established as very capable. Kendra and Sara often use physical force and aggressive fighting styles in order to combat their opponents, both of which are often coded as a more masculine method to overcome obstacles. A more decisive approach to feminism in the media is necessary, which can be accomplished through further education and mature dialogue regarding feminist literature and ideology among writers, directors, actors, audiences, journalists, scholars, and readers alike.

## Feminism and Superheroes

### The Final Girl.

In “The Final Girl versus Wes Craven's ‘A Nightmare on Elm Street’: Proposing a Stronger Feminism in Slasher Horror Cinema” (2011), Kyle Christensen focuses on two opposing images of women in horror films: a woman who is a pawn in the story of a male main character, and a woman utilizes masculine combat and social expectations in order to achieve success in a violent world (41-42). To summarize Christensen’s overall approach, a Final Girl character reacts to the conflict of the story through an escalation of necessary action by becoming a Final Girl based on her intrinsic traits. Female characters that Christensen categorizes as Final Girls are those who are virginal in nature but more masculine in presentation and interaction, and eventually are the last females standing seemingly due to their masculine fighting and survival style (25). Christensen’s analysis is feminist, but reinforces gendered stereotypes in the way that he describes females and males in polarized terms such as “unman,” “feminine male,” and in writing about “the Final Girl’s need to become masculine and abandon her femininity in order to survive” (25-26).

One character analyzed by Christensen is Buffy, of the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* film, and her position within vampire hunter media as a female – one which utilizes weapons which have been interpreted as phallic as a means of combat (26). While the movie itself is farcical in nature, the portrayal of Buffy as the hero of a film in which combat and violence are important plot events helps us to examine the Final Girl trope. So often, female characters are viewed by how well their bodies hold up against male bodies, but not how their mental stamina matches up. As noted by another scholar who spoke about Buffy in regards to the Final Girl concept, “Buffy would be the stereotypical last girl except that her friends are always left standing as well” (Karras, 2002). The character of Buffy began as a girl in high school, chosen as a slayer at the

young age of sixteen – as is the slayer tradition – and is given a huge responsibility, which requires her to mature rapidly in order to survive (Karras, 2002). She rises to the occasion of being a slayer; “she saves not only herself at the end of each show, but all of humanity” (Karras, 2002). Through the course of Buffy’s storyline in the TV series, she graduates both high school and the title of Final Girl, becoming more of a Final Woman, much as the character Laurie does between the movies *Halloween* and *Halloween H2O* (Connelly, 2007, 18). The journey of a teenager maturing into an adult, combined with masculine survival techniques, is the basis of the Final Girl concept: “It is through the adoption of the gaze of the male monster, in addition to his other masculine characteristics, that the female is able both to empower herself and to survive” (Connelly, 2007, 14). This type of progression is also seen in Maude of the play *Toyler*, and how she steadily embraces the victimizing, masculine killing method of Peter in order to psychologically and physically overpower him at the end of the play. This connection between Maude and the Final Girl will be analyzed in more depth later on in the paper.

#### Batman v. Superman.

In the 2016 film *Batman v. Superman*, Wonder Woman is introduced simply as a warrior, rather than as a female. She moves into the action naturally, unusual for a female character within the superhero genre, as she charges in to fight alongside Batman and Superman during a pivotal confrontation in the movie’s climax. Without hesitation, she takes control of the battle, commanding the scene with a side comment regarding her experience fighting their current type of foe –which neither of the other characters have encountered before, much less beaten. We see very different reactions from the two titular males: Superman registers her in an unsure manner, hesitating and wondering whether he should in fact fight alongside her and risk her getting

caught in the crossfire at some point; Batman falls into line with her quickly and lets her take the lead. Their reaction makes sense within their canonical relationships. Batman commonly works alongside and against females and males alike, while Superman has a more masculine-focused cast of allies and enemies. Wonder Woman fights in a masculine-typical style that is comparable to and possibly based on that of Roman gladiators. An important moment to note is Batman's and Superman's first encounter with Wonder Woman. Their exchange is one of surprise, assuming that she must be on the side of one or the other. It could be argued that this reaction is similar to a male seeing a young female without a chaperone. Their dialogue takes place while Wonder Woman is fighting their foe singlehandedly. Wonder Woman proves herself throughout the course of the battle, earning the respect of both Batman and Superman for her superior fighting capabilities and her level-headed, mature personality. This represents the changes taking place within superhero media: female characters are taking places alongside male characters as both heroes and villains. Wonder Woman herself is an icon for feminism throughout the world as of October 2016, when she was officially given the position of Honorary Ambassador for the Empowerment of Women and Girls by the United Nations (UN News Centre, 2016).

#### Advertisement for X-Men: Apocalypse.

Pictured left to right: Raven Darkhölme (Mystique) held in a chokehold by En Sabah Nur (Apocalypse)



(Image courtesy of INDEPENDENT)

Radhika Sanghani, in the article “Here's What's Terribly Wrong with This X-Men: Apocalypse Poster” (2016) addresses a controversial poster for the since-released film *X-Men: Apocalypse*, one that has been widely debated and criticized as a stereotypical representation of male aggressors and female victims. Critics argue that the advertisement conveys subliminal messages which validate the trope that male aggression towards females is acceptable, and thus promotes behaviors including domestic violence. Sanghani suggests that this advertisement substantiates societal constructs which support and enable violent behavior in males. Such advertisements, according to Sanghani, perpetuate assumptions that males are aggressors despite individual circumstances. Sanghani’s observation represents the way that gender stereotypes permeate popular culture and infiltrate the way that we interpret literature and advertisements.

## Relevance of Current Literature to Stage Combat

The types of theatrical violence that are typically assigned to males and females can look very different from one another. Male character reactions to females entering a battle (such as in *Batman v. Superman*) and popular images of strength versus weakness using male and female characters respectively (such as in the *X-Men: Apocalypse* poster) can be very telling of how we, as a society, view gender roles. Social constructs regarding gender have reinforced gendered expectations and limitations throughout history and, in turn, have perpetuated a distorted perception of gender and behavior. Some within the media industry use these assumptions and stereotypes to challenge these assumptions. Gardener McKay, in his play *Toyler*, accurately describes traditional values still in place, and juxtaposes them with moral dilemmas that result from gender stereotypes prevalent in our culture.

## Introduction to *Toyler*

The script for the play, *Toyler*, written by Gardener McKay, was adapted from the novel motion picture of the same name. The play incorporates violence perpetrated by the singular male, Peter, and the singular female, Maude. The play is a psychological thriller which assumes the stereotypes of gender and morality to emphasize the limitations of these stereotypes in interpersonal conflicts. The audience must keep track of information as the play progresses, and willingly suspend disbelief. Throughout *Toyler*, the main characters are unreliable narrators, and the audience must contend with conflicting information. Both dramatic irony and suspension of disbelief are integral for a psychological play which depends upon its audience to convey its critique of gender stereotypes.

## Peter

The main male character in *Toyler*, Peter, can be categorized by masculine dominance and a sense of entitlement, which leads to his aggressive and manipulative actions towards Maude.

Peter is described as follows in the script:

### Peter Matson.

Lithe. Strong, not muscular. In his early or late twenties. Light or blond haired, pale eye-brows. Neither handsome nor ugly. Striking yet indistinct. An apparent innocent; easily written on, easily erased. A tabula raza [sic]. (McKay 1992: vii)

John Locke, who addressed the phrase “tabula rasa,” claimed that “that the mind is like a tabula rasa (a blank slate) prior to sense experience” (Connolly, 2016). According to Locke, “the

mind has any number of inherent capacities, predispositions, and inclinations prior to receiving any ideas from sensation... none of these is triggered or exercised until the mind receives ideas from sensation” (Connolly, 2016). Peter is capable of being manipulated. However, Peter also calls himself an actor nine times throughout the course of the play, often as an excuse for his behavior, such as calling what he is doing “a stupid actor’s game” once Maude decides that he is dangerous and injures him. He considers the interaction with Maude a game, thus his title of “Toyer” in his previous exploits: “Just kidding around, Maude. Game’s over!” and “I lose. Maude, please. You win” and “It’s just a game, promise” (47-48). He only calls it a “game” when he says that he has lost: the audience knows that. Peter is gas-lighting, lying to Maude to make her vulnerable.

Throughout the play, Peter pushes Maude to doubt her perceptions and memories in favor of what he wants her to believe or remember. This is gas-lighting. Robin Stern says, “it is possible over time to get so beaten down and so sure you might be at fault” and “you allow him [the abuser] to define your reality” and “your ego functioning has been compromised” (Stern 2009). Stern describes the pattern of gas-lighting in two main stages: the stage of disbelief, in which the gas-lighting is being justified or ignored, then the stage of depression, which is largely characterized by feeling “cut off from friends” and that “your behavior feels truly alien” (Stern 2009). The act of gas-lighting can be seen clearly in the early scenes of the play, as well as in some of the final scenes, such as when he is first introduced. Simply called “Biker” at first, he is established as harmless: Maude says she is being rude to not let him into her apartment (14). He leads her to believe that he is gay – he says that he frequents a gay bar (15) and mentions “pretty males” when scopophilia is introduced by Maude (27) – thus suggesting that he is no threat to

her. Peter later denies saying that he was gay – and seems to deny even suggesting it – which leads Maude to doubt herself (57). He initially tells her that he has one profession, then contradicts himself; Peter says that he is a palmist/palm reader (17) but later tells Maude he’s an actor, to account for his aggressive actions towards her (40). This behavior was clearly meant to make Maude question her perceptions and blame herself for misunderstanding.

When “the Toyer” is mentioned on the radio after Peter is inside Maude’s apartment, Peter makes a point of trying to separate himself from the title – “This Toyer jerk. He’s killed someone else” (18) – while still having the opportunity to talk about himself and his actions. It is also a chance for Peter to examine Maude’s feelings towards the Toyer – Peter. However, while Maude minimizes how dangerous the Toyer is and Peter does not, Peter suggests – not much later – that Maude is hyperbolic being about the danger that the Toyer poses: “This Toyer thing’s got all you women paranoid” (20). While Peter wants to hear Maude talk about him, he also wants her to be afraid of “the Toyer,” even if she doesn’t yet know that he is “the Toyer.” This action suggests Peter’s desire for power.

Peter identifies women as objects to be possessed and used according to his sexual whims or desires. He says that will manipulate his victims so they bend to his will without any qualms. The “male gaze” is a means by which masculinity “projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 1990: 62). These behaviors and ideals, according to Mulvey, are supported by “principles of the ruling ideology and the physical structures” of society because “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” (63): women, Mulvey says, are “simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for



strong visual and erotic impact” (62). Peter’s criminal history of kidnapping, drugging, and lobotomizing women for his own pleasure and the experience of being in control reflects Mulvey’s “male gaze” theory and reinforces gender stereotypes in the development of the Peter-Maude conflict.

The initial violence Peter perpetrates against Maude is largely psychological: he waits until she is trying to get him to leave, then tells her who he is – the Toyer – and that he’s cut her phone line and never called the police. Here, Peter reveals his plan to her and exposes himself as a villain: “I couldn’t call the cops because I cut your phone line, out there, around ten thirty, after I ran into you at the tennis courts and after I disconnected your throttle linkage” (McKay 1992: 35). He prides himself on his ability to make sure she doesn’t get away: “Don’t. I’m quick. God, I’m quick” (35). Peter boasts about his last victim as a way of telling Maude not to test him: “Don’t do it again. It’s what happened with Lydia Cooke— a chase. The paper called it a blood-storm, OK? Let’s not have another blood-storm, Maude” (37). He believes that everything that happens is because he chooses it, by his design – “I’m always touched by someone I can completely control” (37) – and that Maude will eventually decide that he is right and concede – “When we make love it will be because you want to” – because he believes he’s doing her a favor (38).

In the particularly violent scene between Peter and Maude in which she cuts him with a knife, Peter backs up and puts himself in the position of a victim. He recounts everything he has said about the situation – “I didn’t do anything to you. I didn’t touch you. I’m not your fucking Toyer. I may be, on the other hand, an asshole for getting myself into this” – and pretends to fall

into panic from the sight of his wound (49). Peter intends to make Maude doubt how necessary her aggressive actions were. Through his performance, Peter manipulates Maude into apologizing for trying to kill him (53) though, after a few drinks, he returns to his predator manner and boasts about his crimes (55).

The final scene presents Peter lulled into a false sense of security by what he is made to believe is a drunk and medicated Maude. His confidence has returned and he prepares to make her his next victim, but is stopped when Maude takes control, he panics, and Maude ignores it. The end of the play suggests that Maude either kills Peter or performs a lobotomy on him. The play closes with the male antagonist as the victim of the female protagonist.

## Maude

Maude is described as follows in the script:

### Maude Christopher

Bright. In her mid or late thirties. Athletic body, attractive face. Hair; short.

Clear-eyed, she looks at people, studies them. Definite, focused, alienated. Not easily revolved. (McKay 1992: vii)

Maude is presented as detached, as can be seen in how she first reacts to believing Peter is her voyeur, coolly trying to appease him so that he will leave (31). Maude treated one of the Toyer's victims as her patient, and in a voicemail she leaves for someone named Paul, her ex-boyfriend, she describes the experience as having "looked into the eyes of another dead girl" (10). When

she encounters Peter, she is coldly polite and falls into habits learned in her trade, and she only resorts to violence once she fears for her life.

Maude, at first, is duped and Peter gas-lights her. However, Maude begins to recognize that Peter is manipulating her after she has injured him. Maude feigns being drunk, sleeps with Peter, and lures him into a false sense of security as he plans to drug her and lobotomize her like he's done with his other victims. Maude thwarts this plan by not drinking the drugged juice, pouring it down the toilet (61) and instead drugging Peter's coffee while he is in the shower (62). She pretends to be feeling the effects of the drug, a development that makes sense to the audience because she's familiar with them through her profession in psychiatry, and she fools him. Peter does not recognize what has happened until he exhibits effects of the drug. The play ends in medias res with Maude standing over Peter, planning to kill or lobotomize him. The female victim is now the aggressor, the Final Girl.

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological term that describes the effects of "conflicting attitudes, beliefs or behaviors" which "produces a feeling of discomfort leading to an alteration in one of the attitudes, beliefs or behaviors to reduce the discomfort and restore balance" (McLeod 2014). Saul McLeod posits that our human "inner drive to hold all our attitudes and beliefs in harmony" leads us to change either what we think about something or how we interact with something in order to make our related thought processes line up (McLeod 2014). A very common coping mechanism for those who have been gas-lighted or victim-blamed, cognitive dissonance is the result of trying to resolve inner stress. This reaction is the tool that Maude uses to her advantage when taking the power from Peter at the end of the play.

A Final Girl is a female character who survives a psychological thriller or horror. A Final Girl is usually presented as “a virtuous character distinguishable from the rest of the film cast” because of her “her avoidance of sexual activity, her watchful ‘paranoia’ which allows her to be ‘resourceful in a pinch’ and her ‘boyish’ nature” (Christensen 2011: 25). Christensen infers that, at least in the horror genre, women are portrayed as either weak characters manipulated by men or as overtly masculine women who use male behaviors as a means of survival (41-42). Maude exhibits a strength of character, especially in the final scene when she must combat her moral dilemma regarding killing Peter, which leads to a power shift in her favor because of a change in her mannerisms. The moment she draws blood from Peter’s forehead and contemplates her decision (Gardner 1992, 70) shows the self-awareness that is characteristic of a Final Girl.

Importantly, Maude, in the last lines of the play, analyzes her position. She has gone from being brought back into her house slung over Peter’s shoulder after trying to escape (37) to having his life, and knife, in her hands (70). At first, Maude seems content with the sense of power that she has, toying with the Toyler, detailing different types of lobotomies that she could perform on him. She draws blood, making a line with Peter’s scalpel across his forehead (69). Then Maude pauses and wonders aloud how much is too much, how much makes her actions just as bad as the ones she is seeking vengeance for with them: “I think I may not do this, Peter. Maybe I can’t. I thought I could, after last night. I’m a healer. I’m not anything else” (70). In these final moments of *Toyler*, Maude questions the right action: “Maybe you’re right, maybe I should call the police, quick, before I change my mind ... I’m still on the edge Peter, so while I’m deciding ... don’t tell me you love me” (70). Peter’s gas-lighting affects her: “I wonder, maybe you’ve snapped something in me. Maybe I *am* insane” (70). She recalls the victims that

she has known in order to ground herself – “I knew a girl named Lydia Cooke for a short time, Melissa Jones, Felicity ... but I never got to know them well ...” (70). The curtain closes after her last line: “I’m sorry for you, Peter, dreadfully sorry for what I’m about to do” – the audience is unsure what she will do, though Maude’s last stage direction is to pick up the scalpel again (70).

Maude has made up her mind to do something to Peter but Maude’s thoughts just before that are lingering and powerful: “How does it go? The real crime is not that it happens, the real crime is that we know about it and we turn the page? I think you’ve made me you” (70). Maude has accepted that, in order to survive, she has become the Final Girl of her story; she has taken on the methods of a gas-lighting serial killer in order to save her life. For her, attacking him makes them equals. As a Final Girl, she has made her choice to do what is necessary, which is a heavy weight on her emotionally, despite the fact that she believes it to be justified.

## The Male Gaze versus the Final Girl

The character Peter has characteristics of the stereotypical violent male who victimizes females for his own personal sexual fulfillment and who claims that feminine behaviors prompt him to act on his male birthright to dominate women: “Women love it, what can I tell you?” (55) and “Strange, isn’t it, your feeling of pre-destiny? All women have it, don’t feel bad” (39). The assumption that males act this way as part of a genetic predisposition, rather than socialization, cannot excuse their actions. A need for increased scrutiny of the characterization of male aggressors in popular media is implied in *Toyer*. Peter’s sexual violence towards Maude and the women, his desire for complete control over his victims, are critiqued throughout the play. As with so many acts of sexual assault, it was not about sexual gratification, but rather about having

power over someone else. His feeling of entitlement are depicted as narcissistic and misogynistic. Peter thinks very little of women, making fun of Maude after he's gotten her upset about her voyeur, saying "This Toyer thing's got all you women paranoid" (20) and telling Maude that his aggressive approach is intended to arouse her: "Women love it, what can I tell you?" (55). He belittles Maude's intelligence for defending herself -- "You couldn't grasp that this was a game... I was using my brain. I thought you were smart" (50). He groups all women as deserving their fate as victims: "Strange, isn't it, your feeling of pre-destiny? All women have it, don't feel bad" (39). His title, "the Toyer," reflects how he thinks of women as playthings that submit to male birthright.

Maude is characterized at first by the way Peter treats her, chiefly gas-lighting and cognitive dissonance. In act two, Maude asserts power and acts outside of the conventions of stereotypical victim behaviors in popular media, where females are important in stories only for how they react to, complement, or are acted on by a male (Mulvey 1990). These tropes change in act two, and Maude adapts social power structures by luring Peter. As a Final Girl – or rather, the Final Woman (Connelly 2007) – Maude complicates the depiction of female victims in the media in act one, scene two; when discussing "the Toyer" with Peter, Maude says "The real crime is not that it happens, it's that we know about it" (24). This trope of awareness is echoed at the end of the play when Maude attacks Peter (70).

Maude takes on the behaviors of her enemy in order to fight him as an equal, leaving him crying as she slices a line on his forehead (69-70). Maude evaluates her morality: "I wonder, maybe you've snapped something in me. Maybe I *am* insane" (70). Maude is not a hero or a

villain, but a dynamic character who exhibits stereotypical characteristics of both genders. Maude's self-doubt makes her unusual within the Final Girl trope, but stronger as an icon for feminism and the breakdown of gender stereotypes, because she is presented as a human capable of both stereotypically female and male actions and emotions.

*Toy* is an important play to examine as a study of gendered violence because it shows a process of change, which is precisely what our society is experiencing in recent decades. The process of changing culture is not unlike the adaptation of a single person at its core: in order to alter an old way of thinking, it has to be proven unavoidably necessary. For Maude, becoming a Final Girl and someone who could enact violence upon someone else was found through fighting for her life. For society, it is about the stories not so different from Maude's, some with happier endings and some with much darker. To examine our societal influences, works of fiction can open up a dialogue that is more comfortable and approachable, to begin the changes that are needed in the beliefs and representations of females and males alike.

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