

# **From Chicken Soup to Denial and Beyond: Fifty Years of Arnold**

**Wesker.**

Kelly McCloy, B.A. (Hons), MRes.

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*I can confirm that the word count of the thesis is less than 100,000 words*

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## Abstract

This thesis is a reevaluation of Sir Arnold Wesker's body of work. The aim of this thesis is to recognise that Wesker's contribution to the literary canon, did not begin and end as one of the so-called kitchen sink playwrights of the 1950s and 1960s. Rather, that Wesker was a prolific writer for fifty years since first gaining public recognition with *The Trilogy*. One of the main objectives of this thesis is to demonstrate how Wesker was a fluid, progressive, writer of multiple genres who through the years continually reinvented what the term 'kitchen sink' drama means.

The thesis begins with an analysis on what role food plays within Wesker's *oeuvre*. Ultimately the diversity of food within his writing reflects the ever-evolving nature of a post-World War Two Britain in which the boundaries between culture, ideology and religion were starting to become more plural and less simple to categorise.

Chapters two and three of the thesis study Wesker's representation of women within his written work and also the 2000 play *Denial*. One of the objectives across these two chapters is to convey how at every juncture of his career Wesker used the domestic to contradict the monotony which is associated with the term 'kitchen sink' thereby making it relevant to every decade of the twentieth century. This is also reflected in the transformation that his female characters undergo, as in his early works women are associated with the domestic sphere and motherhood, whilst in his later works women have gained financial independence as well as freedom from the constraints of the household.

Family strength is a dominant feature of *The Trilogy* as Wesker uses the unwavering strength of a family to contrast the futility of a political ideology. The broken family of *Denial* is an emblem of the fractured society now entering into the "great Millennium" as speculated by Ronnie Kahn.

The final chapter is an exploration of how Wesker rewrote William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* with the vision of creating a legacy. Wesker felt that the theatrical establishment lacked liberal, progressive thinking due to the praise bestowed upon brand Shakespeare. However, it is vital to remember that sixteenth century English society was not the society which we have today in 2020, in that racial tolerance and gender equality were not given the same importance within the social agenda. Therefore, I will also interrogate how Wesker is passively anachronistic towards Shakespeare.

This thesis will also examine Wesker's contribution to other genres of writing. Therefore, his short story writing including works from the collections *Six Sundays in January* and *Love Letters on Blue Paper* are examined in detail. In my analysis of *Love Letters on Blue Paper* I also refer to the cookery book written by Dusty Wesker, this is the first thesis in which this source is recognised therefore conveying the originality of this ground breaking insight into Wesker's body of work.

This thesis seeks to change the commonly accepted notion that Wesker was first and foremost a dramatist whose career held no merit post 1960s after the supposed heyday of the 'kitchen sink' genre. However, what this longitudinal study will prove is that even though Wesker's style appeared to change from the loftiness of political ideology to the intricacies of human sexuality which it did do, he also never ceased to use the domestic or personal to evolve in perfect synchronisation with the times in which he was living.

## Introduction

In the House of Commons on Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> April 2016, the leader of the Labour party Jeremy Corbyn encouraged the Prime Minister David Cameron to pay his condolences to Sir Arnold Wesker, whom Corbyn said was “one of the great playwrights of this country.”<sup>1</sup> However, this interaction between Cameron and the leader of the opposition came to prominence not because of Cameron’s harrowing tribute to Wesker but because of his being unable to recall who Wesker even was. This was despite the fact that Corbyn was referring to one of the most prolific writers within the British literary canon. The aim of this thesis is to analyse how Wesker has become a marginalised figure and to recognise that he was a proactive writer who was continually reinventing both himself and what is meant by the term ‘kitchen sink.’ To do this my thesis will be separated into four different chapters which will cover the following topics: Food, Women in Wesker’s Body of Work, his controversial play *Denial* (2000) and finally an analysis of his rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice: Shylock* (1976). These topics were selected because they provide us with a broad cross-section of Wesker as a writer of multiple genres and as an evolutionary figure. However, he was also a figure who sadly gained a reputation of being unruly to work with predominantly due to the fall out that ensued between himself and the Royal Shakespeare Company, due to their refusal to perform his 1972 play *The Journalists*. The conflict arose due to the actors’ refusal to perform this play for fear that it was perhaps too authentic a depiction of certain members of the Conservative party. In an interview with Matthew Sweet from *The Telegraph* Wesker himself said that “I had my time in the wilderness.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, his work being trapped in a critical “wilderness”<sup>3</sup> is a key motivation for my decision to produce this thesis. I want to encourage

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Deacon, “David Cameron had to pay tribute to a famous playwright. Only trouble was... he’d never heard of him,” *The Telegraph*, 13<sup>th</sup> April (2016).

<sup>2</sup> Matthew Sweet, “Arnold Wesker: Did Trotskyists kill off the best Seventies play?” *The Telegraph*, 16<sup>th</sup> May (2012).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

the literary world to pay tribute to Wesker as a writer for the modern world in general, not a writer who should only be looked upon as being relevant for an early-mid twentieth century society. A writer who evolved in direct proportion to the society in which he lived. A writer who was driven to provide his audience or reader with an authentic depiction of the working-class members of society, who chose to go against the creation of caricatured depictions of them as his bourgeois predecessors such as Agatha Christie and Noel Coward chose to. A writer who did not insult the British people's intelligence by writing drama which was light-hearted escapism, instead giving the British audience complex drama which was not only entertaining but also thought provoking.

The majority of criticism written about Wesker's *oeuvre* is preoccupied by his early work as an alleged member of the anti-establishment group of writers known as The Angry Young Men. My view is that it currently fails to acknowledge his work as a writer of prose and wholly ignores his later work from the 1970s onwards. The first chapter of my thesis is an exploration on what role food has to play within Wesker's body of work. The topic of food is a fitting place to commence my research because it represents the multi-faceted nature of Wesker as a writer and also how he had an understanding for the different roles which people play within society. In his play *The Kitchen* (1957) the setting of a kitchen can be interpreted as a microcosm of the hierarchal nature of society. It is also a suitable play to analyse at the beginning of the thesis because of how Wesker himself described the atmosphere of the kitchen and the preparation of food as a "theatrical event."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, Wesker conveys how the routine motions of everyday working life are what should be the building blocks of any play. This counters the opinion of Christopher Innes who makes the condescending assertion that "opening as *Roots* does with a woman at the sink washing dishes in two out of three Acts

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<sup>4</sup> "The Chef's Room," BBC World Service, 6<sup>th</sup> August (1992), link as follows: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0376kdx>.



and progressing through bread-baking, potato peeling and table-laying, folding laundry and heating buckets of water for a bath.”<sup>5</sup> Innes concludes the point by writing that it is “hardly surprising the new wave represented by Wesker, Bernard Kops or Shelagh Delaney was labelled ‘kitchen-sink drama.’”<sup>6</sup> Innes’s assumption fails to recognise that Wesker chose to have his characters so active in order to represent how they really live life on the stage. Therefore, I view the kitchen sink as a symbol of the lives of his characters which are ever changing within *The Trilogy* series of plays and not as a label that solely judges *The Trilogy* by the class of people that are being depicted. After all, a kitchen sink will have a tap which is a source of water which maintains human survival, ultimately leading to progression and social change, a very obvious interpretation which critics such as Innes are failing to recognise.

The second chapter of the thesis is separated into two parts. The first is an exploration of how Wesker presents his female characters within his early body of work specifically between the 1950s-1970s. The matriarchal figure of *The Trilogy* Sarah Kahn will be a focal point in this chapter due to her unwavering dedication in both her duty as a wife and mother, in addition to her belief in socialism. Sarah is also a character who can be used as a benchmark because at the conclusion of this chapter of the thesis a comparison is made between her and Samantha Milner of *The Mistress* (1988) in order to convey how Wesker’s construction of women evolved from being dutiful and subservient as wives to being “amoral”<sup>7</sup> career women. The character of Sonia Marsden of the short story and play *Love Letters on Blue Paper* (1976) will be another primary character of chapter two. Since “Love Letters on Blue Paper” is a short story, this allows me to explore how Wesker writes in the genre of prose and to compare the Sonia of the play with the Sonia of the short story version.

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama 1890-1990* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992), p. 115.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Chiara Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 41.

Sonia is an enigmatic character who once again is highly physical, she spends the entirety of both the play and the short story attending to her terminally ill husband's needs. I explore a variety of themes which I believe permeate his work, such as control within a marriage and also an allusion to why Wesker's Centre 42 failed in 1970, six years before this play was published. The fact that aspects of Victor Marsden's character are indeed based on "Vic Feather,"<sup>8</sup> who was a trade union leader, is significant because of how Wesker's Victor treats Sonia, what is seen repeatedly in this play and in the short story is how Victor associates Sonia with domestic duty and not with intellectual pursuits or politics. It is ironic that the primary aim of Centre 42 was to encourage greater participation from the working class in society within the artistic and cultural world, to "promote cultural enrichment as well as the material prosperity of the working people."<sup>9</sup> However, Victor, who was a trade union official, does not even encourage his wife Sonia to discuss art with him, instead discussing it with Maurice Stapleton, a colleague of Victor's. My argument therefore is that the breakdown in communication between Victor and Sonia reflects the failure of Centre 42 because it ended up relocating back to London. One of the most artistically affluent places in the world despite the fact that Centre 42 wanted to make the arts and provincial towns synonymous with each other. This section of the second chapter is to counter the accepted opinion of current criticism which is that this play is primarily about "impassioned declarations of love,"<sup>10</sup> a "celebration of married love"<sup>11</sup> and "undying love."<sup>12</sup> Instead I believe that this is also a social play in which after Victor's death Sonia finally has freedom from the oppression she

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<sup>8</sup> Irving Wardle, "Love Letters on Blue Paper," *The Times*, Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> February (1978).

<sup>9</sup> Robert Wilcher, "Arnold Wesker," Taken from *British Playwrights, 1956-1995: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, Edited by William W. Demastes (Greenwood Press, Westport, 1996), p. 417.

<sup>10</sup> Wardle, "Love Letters on Blue Paper."

<sup>11</sup> Wilcher, "Arnold Wesker," p. 422.

<sup>12</sup> Mel Gussow, "The Stage: 'Love Letters' to life Drama of Tenderness Gets Its Premiere in Syracuse," *The New York Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> November (1977).

faced because of him, just as those who don't follow a specific political doctrine are free to believe whatever they choose.

In regard to Sarah, much of the criticism that currently exists on her character is that she is an admirable, heroic housewife whose belief in an ideology should be applauded. Rajesh Tiwari asserts that Sarah: “the presiding deity of the house is preparing for a demonstration against Fascist march of the Moseley men.”<sup>13</sup> This summarises how Sarah can become vulnerable to parody when critics interpret the representation of her character. Stage directions that contribute to this include “*throws a saucer at him*”<sup>14</sup> and after sourcing “*a rolling pin, and, waving it in the air, dashes into the front room,*”<sup>15</sup> causing hyperbolic interpretations of her character to escalate and turn her domesticity into a mockery. Max Levitas who was the last remaining survivor of the Battle of Cable Street died in November of 2018. He had said in an interview that during the altercation between Oswald Moseley's Black-Shirts and the Jewish People that “all of the working-class were throwing marbles and stuff.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, by instructing the actor who is depicting Sarah to use her rolling pin as a weapon conveys how Wesker wanted the depiction of this harrowing event to be as authentic as possible and not something for comic effect. Tiwari's use of the term “deity”<sup>17</sup> inaccurately portrays Sarah as an untouchable, god-like figure which is untrue when a close reading of *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958) is done. In his review of the play at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2011, Michael Billington describes Sarah as being “indomitable”<sup>18</sup> and “feisty,”<sup>19</sup> two adjectives which also fail to recognise the contrasts in

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<sup>13</sup> Rajesh Tiwari, “Women in Arnold Wesker's Plays with Special Reference to his Six One-Woman Plays,” Gauhati University, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing (2009), p. 141.

<sup>14</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 35.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> From Max Levitas' interview with Channel Four News, Posted on 4<sup>th</sup> November (2018).

<sup>17</sup> Tiwari, “Women in Arnold Wesker's Plays with Special Reference to his Six One-Woman Plays,” p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Billington, “Chicken Soup with Barley-Review,” *The Guardian*, Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> July (2011).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Wesker's construction of her. In my interpretation yes, she is "indomitable"<sup>20</sup> and "feisty"<sup>21</sup> but she is also frustrated and lonely by the end of the play due to Harry's decrepitating illness and her family's disillusion with the ideology that she places such store by.

In the second chapter of the thesis, I refer to Sarah and Sonia as invisible women because they are both treated in this manner by their fellow characters. Sarah is denounced by her children and becomes a carer for Harry, her own mental health appears to suffer as she also begins to talk to herself. Whilst the silence we associate with Sonia conveys how she has lost a part of her identity as a result of the bullish control of Victor. The overall endeavour of the first part of this pivotal chapter is to convey how these two female characters from Wesker's early body of work are both part of conventional family frameworks but yet are conveyed as being confined by this framework. Therefore, they are two female characters whose passions are smothered by patriarchy and the conventions of society, so much so that their own individual identities become compromised.

The second part of this chapter delves into the female characters of his later work specifically from the 1970s onwards. In this chapter the plays of: *Four Portraits: Of Mothers* (1982), *Groupie* (2011), *Lady Othello* (1987), *The Mistress, Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* (1986) and *Yardsale* (1983) are all analysed in order to show how his representation of women was influenced by a society making the transition from the twentieth century into the twenty-first century. A significant feature of this part of the second chapter is to show how in his later work women become more sexualised and aware of their bodies, reflecting how post 1970s the feminist movement gained momentum. This awareness of sexuality is personified by the character of Rosie Swanson of *Lady Othello*, a free-spirited, New Woman who is associated with physicality and who leads a life which goes against convention and

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

tradition. Wesker shows that he is very in tune with the modern woman, due to his construction of female characters such as Samantha of *The Mistress* and Stephanie of *Yardsale* who are financially independent and also have complexities in their love lives, something which is entirely absent from his early work. Post 1970s, Wesker noticeably deviates from representing the uniformity of the nuclear family and how social ideologies affect the domestic sphere, instead he closes in on how human relationships function. However, he never loses his grasp of the domestic setting as all of the above take place within a form of household whether this is a cosmopolitan apartment or an office, the setting will always mean home for some one of his characters.

The rhetorical title *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* is significant to Wesker's construction of the main female character in this work: the cynical widow of a socialist MP. It highlights the shallow nature of society because the titular character of this play is shown to be isolated from both her family and her friends. Stephen Holden of *The New York Times* claims that the "writing"<sup>22</sup> in this one-woman play "fails to get under the skin of the character."<sup>23</sup> Holden's assertion is unfair in my opinion because this is a female character who will naturally remain detached due to the fact that she has had to adhere by the rules that naturally arise from being the wife of an MP.

In this part of the second chapter I will show how I see the character of Betty Lemon as an embodiment of a past generation of women and their unfulfilled aspirations, women such as Sarah and Sonia who were unable to achieve what they wanted due to the supposed superiority of men within society "Your problem, Betty Lemon, is you never had any ambition."<sup>24</sup> Therefore, I do not agree with the critics who write that Betty comes across as

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Holden, "Stage: *Yardsale* and *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?*" *New York Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> February (1988).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* Taken from *One Woman Plays* (Penguin Books, London, 1989), p. 27.

“sentimental”<sup>25</sup> “dull”<sup>26</sup> or that the “emotions”<sup>27</sup> created in this play do not “shape themselves into a satisfying form.”<sup>28</sup> I disagree with this because the alienation and poverty Betty is synonymous with in this play is like food, a universal theme which cannot be made into something “satisfying”<sup>29</sup> or exciting for the audience to watch because there is no closure or happy-ending with issues such as loneliness or destitution. In reference back to the title of the play I want to conclude that I believe the title really means what has happened to the formidable Betty that we once knew that she has ended up like this, a woman who passionately exclaims at the close of the play that “My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen. We are given but one life, and... My Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen...I didn’t fuckin plan it this way.”<sup>30</sup> Something which can also be said of Sarah and Sonia in chapter two due to the fact that these two female characters are also shown to have their personalities altered due to the circumstance of their lives.

In chapter two I will conclude with a comparison between Samantha and Sarah. This is done in order to prove the point that Wesker was firmly a writer who progressed with the times in which he lived. Sarah moves from her “*house in the East End of London*”<sup>31</sup> to an “*L.C.C. block of flats in Hackney*”<sup>32</sup> yet Wesker’s characterisation of Sarah evokes the sense that she can make anywhere feel like home regardless of whether it’s a grade listed mansion or a council flat. Staging and language such as the following are instrumental to Sarah’s aura “[*takes off coat and unpacks shopping bag*]: The place closed down! But you only started there on Monday.”<sup>33</sup> The fact that Sarah places down both her coat and her shopping bags

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<sup>25</sup> Andrew Rissik, “Very Shallow Roots: Wesker Double Bill,” *The Independent*, 19<sup>th</sup> February (1987).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Jeremy Kingston, “Wesker Double Bill,” *The Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> February (1987).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* p. 36.

<sup>31</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

symbolise how the main foundations of any home are food and warmth regardless of where that home may be. On the other hand, in Wesker's 1989 one-woman play *The Mistress*, Samantha's "dress designer atelier"<sup>34</sup> is her nearest place to call home. Signifying how the capitalist-driven society that Sarah fears in *The Trilogy* will become a reality as women veer further away from the home and into what is portrayed as a lonely career world.

Chapter three of the thesis is an exploration of Wesker's controversial millennial play *Denial*, a play in which Wesker's representation of the family is a stark contrast to earlier depictions of the same subject. Wesker says that "a major regional theatre"<sup>35</sup> wanted to read *Denial* and yet when they did they never said "anything about it for years."<sup>36</sup> Therefore, Wesker implies that there is a cowardliness that exists within the theatrical establishment due to the fact that they did not want to give an opinion of a play such as *Denial*, fearing that it would do damage to their reputation due to the subject matter that dominates this play. In an interview with Brigitte Axelrad from 2008, Wesker says that "I have contempt for all sorts of manipulators: priests, politicians, army officers,"<sup>37</sup> through this comment Wesker is critical of figures who are in positions of authority but who exploit these positions. This is clearly alluding to the character of Valerie in the play whose conspiracy-like theories surrounding psychiatry are paramount to the following assertion that "There are those who say psychiatry is a patriarchal conspiracy to deprive women of power."<sup>38</sup> Wesker's view of characters such as Valerie is that they disrupt the social structure of society with their unsettling ideas. Billington ascertains in his review of the play that as Wesker "has increasingly focused on

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<sup>34</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 59.

<sup>35</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 80.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Brigitte Axelrad, "False Memories and Mental Manipulation-Interview of Arnold Wesker," Originally Published in French, Link as Follows:

<https://www.microsofttranslator.com/bv.aspx?from=fr&to=en&ref=SERP&rr=UC&a=https%3a%2f%2fbrigitte-axelrad.fr%2fobs-zetetique%2ffaux-souvenirs-et-manipulation-mentale-18%2ffaux-souvenirs-et-manipulation-mentale-interview-darnold-wesker-78%2f%3fbr%3dro#>, December 7<sup>th</sup> (2008).

<sup>38</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Denial*, Taken from *Wesker's Social Plays*, Oberon Books, London (2009), p. 184.

ideas or moral dilemmas, he has scaled down dramatic action.”<sup>39</sup> However, I fail to see the meaning of this assertion from Billington because I believe that Billington is attempting to compare the Wesker of the 1950s/60s with the Wesker of the 1990s/00s; an unfair and impossible comparison to make. This is unfair to Wesker because he had to evolve with the society around him and whilst in an early-mid twentieth century British society it would have been taboo for a family to breakdown, in a 1990s British society it was starting to become the norm. Therefore, the so-called “dramatic action”<sup>40</sup> which Billington is referring to is no less harrowing than the Kahn household amidst the Battle of Cable Street, it is just that it is now occurring within the four walls of the home.

In chapter three, I present a close analysis of all of the characters of *Denial* in order to show how Wesker’s representation of a society moving into the twenty-first century is ultimately one of doubt and sadness. Kate Bassett astutely writes that “If John Osborne's Jimmy Porter epitomised the Angry Young Man of the 1950s, Jenny is Wesker's Angry Young Woman 2000.”<sup>41</sup> Bassett’s comment succinctly says how Wesker is a writer who is at one with contemporary society, Jenny is the female equivalent to Porter, a woman disillusioned and frustrated with her life. Unhappiness and separation are themes which permeate through the play, a stark contrast to the family unity and togetherness which is associated so much with *Chicken Soup with Barley*. The structure of this play is also a notable contrast from some of his earlier work as it is not linear, but instead he refers to it as a “mosaic”<sup>42</sup> of scenes. The structure of the play reflects the illogical nature of the main female character of Jenny who accuses her father of sexually abusing her as a child. Jenny’s mosaic is created from coloured and enhanced fragments of her childhood she feels have contributed

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Billington, “Never Trust a Therapist,” *The Guardian*, Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> May (2000).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Kate Bassett, “Angry Young Woman 2000 seduced by a psychological vandal,” *The Telegraph*, 23<sup>rd</sup> May (2000).

<sup>42</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 137.



to her failings as an adult. Misandry is therefore an important theme examined in this chapter, specifically through the interpretation of conversations shared between Jenny and her therapist Valerie, in which men are conveyed as being brusque and simplistic. I want to convey how Wesker shows misandry in his writing in order to balance chapter two which will obviously explore misogyny within his plays. I also believe that it is important to show how Wesker's writing is fair in regard to gender as he does not represent one gender as being superior to the other. Instead he has said of *Denial* that it is a play which "challenges the Status Quo,"<sup>43</sup> therefore the currently accepted, conventional rules within society. He alludes to what he means by this "status-quo"<sup>44</sup> in his interview with Axelrad when he says that "the child, and especially the girl, must always be right"<sup>45</sup> which he sees as being "related to the feminine emancipation of an alleged patriarchal society."<sup>46</sup> Or as Jenny puts it in scene twenty-one "There is nothing more important than woman's self-esteem. For centuries we've lived in a patriarchal society dictated to by men taught by men living by men's rules and laws and so women have been conditioned to accept and obey and be silent."<sup>47</sup> By using the word "alleged"<sup>48</sup> Wesker is implying that a society is only considered "patriarchal"<sup>49</sup> due to characters such as Valerie who without evidence manipulate others into a disrupted state of mind, an assertion which I agree with in relation to *Denial*. It is also important to note that aside from *Denial* another working title for the play was "Ghost Memories."<sup>50</sup> A title which inevitably alludes to a lack of reliability due to the fact that one woman's mind forms the template of this play, yet Wesker is critical of the witch hunt nature prevalent in society against men. Therefore, this play in my view is supposed to be as misandrist as it is

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<sup>43</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 16.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Axelrad, "False Memories and Mental Manipulation: Interview with Arnold Wesker."

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 197.

<sup>48</sup> Axelrad, "False Memories and Mental Manipulation."

<sup>49</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 197.

<sup>50</sup> Axelrad, "False Memories and Mental Manipulation."

misogynistic. Additionally, he says that one “reporter”<sup>51</sup> after a performance of *Denial* in Paris wrote that “it was a dangerous play and that Wesker was a dangerous writer.”<sup>52</sup> The fact that the adjective “dangerous”<sup>53</sup> is repeated in this comment implies that this play has the potential to cause harm. However, in my view Wesker is showing how lies and “manipulation”<sup>54</sup> are what cause most harm in any family, regardless of what gender the person who is doing the accusing belongs to. The fact that Wesker chooses to base a play around a controversial topic such as child abuse portrays why critics deliberately choose to focus on his work pre-1980; because of the fact that Wesker admittedly takes a complex stance of topics such as abuse which are not considered to be “politically correct.”<sup>55</sup> He concludes the interview with Axelrad by saying that “the theatre is supposed to be, like all the arts, the home of courage and truth,”<sup>56</sup> conveying how though his subjects evolved within the space of his writing career his passion for bringing to the stage what would have been considered taboo did not waver or weaken despite this evolution. Wesker has become a marginalised outsider in my view because he deliberately chose subjects for his writing other writers deliberately shied away from because of how they believed that it would do damage to their commercial brand or reputation.

In *I’m Talking About Jerusalem* Ronnie is cynical about the “great Millennium”<sup>57</sup> and he is right to be as is seen in Wesker’s play from 2000, *Denial*. In *Chicken Soup with Barley* the character of Sarah epitomises how regardless of millennium, war, year or month, life should be relished and made the most of. Sarah is the matriarchal figure who represents all that is good whilst Jenny from *Denial* is a manifestation of all that is negative and wrong with a

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Wesker, *I’m Talking About Jerusalem*, p. 211.

society that is now about to enter this new “Millennium.”<sup>58</sup> Jenny appears refuses to accept the reality of her personal life and attempt to rebuild it. Instead she wallows in a mire of depression, jealousy and unhappiness, accusing others in her path. After viewing the 2000 production of *Denial* which was staged at the Old Vic Theatre, it is clear that the cynicism which Ronnie possesses in *Chicken Soup with Barley* is fully justifiable, due to this play acting as a troublesome catalogue of events that ultimately shows the disintegration of a family. This is a sad contrast from the infinite beacon of familial love that radiates from Sarah who “can always make”<sup>59</sup> tea.

In Matt Trueman’s review of a performance of the play in 2012, he claims that “Wesker tracks down the culture of blame that scoffs at personal responsibility with ferocious determination, avoiding simplistic distinctions of victim and violator,”<sup>60</sup> a comment which is also applicable to my own interpretation of Wesker’s play, but a comment which will contrast that of Anna Rosalind Harpin whose article provides an important contextual backdrop of this third chapter. This is the “culture of blame”<sup>61</sup> which ultimately distorts and fractures family life within society due to a parent being unable to show their child affection without being viewed as a criminal with “suspicion.”<sup>62</sup> *Denial* in comparison to *The Kitchen* is a microcosmic portrayal of a British society experiencing social decay due to people failing to take responsibility for their actions. In contrast to *The Kitchen* where every individual was obliged to fulfil the specific role they had to play, in *Denial* familial roles are not being fulfilled due to the structure of the family disintegrating.

In *Denial*, roles within the family become blurred and boundaries are shown to cross over, a contrast to Wesker’s earlier depictions of family life. Jenny accuses both her father

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Wesker, *I’m Talking about Jerusalem*, p. 209.

<sup>60</sup> Matt Trueman, Review of *Denial* from *Time Out London*, 24<sup>th</sup> May (2012).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Michael Billington, Review of *Denial* from *The Guardian*, 22<sup>nd</sup> May (2012).

and grandfather of sexually abusing her “And then when I was four you took me to that fucking meeting where you watched, you and grandad, you stood at the back watching other men bugger me?”<sup>63</sup> This is a disturbing allegation for an audience in 2020 to hear, however not as disturbing or shocking as it would have been for an audience in the year 2000. Now, in 2020 with knowledge of movements such as #MeToo it is not surprising to learn that a figure of authority is being accused of misconduct or abusing their position. Yet two decades ago when this play first came to prominence it would still have been a taboo subject, epitomised through the remark made by Karen who says in scene seventeen to her husband and the accused Matthew that “We have blood-ties and love-ties and looking-after-her-through-illness ties.”<sup>64</sup> The fact that Karen repeats the term tie can be interpreted in two different ways, first, it can be viewed as Karen attempting to show how they can reunite with their estranged daughter, second, it can be recognised as Karen’s attempt to trap her daughter by compiling a list of items which she can use as leverage to make Jenny feel guilty. It wouldn’t be an unreasonable assertion to say that because of this, the allegations which Jenny ardently makes would have automatically been doubted because a different, greater level of patriarchy and sense of duty to one’s family was automatically still accepted in society. Jenny acts as an embodiment of the disillusionment experienced by young women in the latter stages of the twentieth century due to sexism and gender inequality. Hence her frustration stems from an oppressive relationship with her parents in comparison to Jessica in *Shylock* which will be referred to later in this introduction. In the thesis a comparison is made between Karen and the archetypal matriarch of Weskerian drama: Sarah. Karen in my view is constructed to be the antithesis of Sarah because of the fact that she is portrayed as mercenary and concerned for reputation “Oh, dear! Can I sit? *VALERIE points to a chair. (To Jenny)*. I don’t suppose

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<sup>63</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 140.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

she'll charge extra for that.”<sup>65</sup> Whilst in *Chicken Soup with Barley* Sarah is critical of this money-mindedness prevalent in Wesker's characterisation of Karen “Is that what you want me to be satisfied with- a television set?”<sup>66</sup> It is ironic that Wesker has become marginalised within the theatre world, because generally speaking he has not changed, he himself has always striven to depict those who are marginalised themselves in society. Whether this is the working-class, a housewife unsure of her true identity, a father accused of abuse or a talented individual ostracised by society due to their religious denomination. One of my main assertions throughout this thesis is that marginalisation is a foundational element of any work written by Wesker.

Within chapter three there is also an analysis of his novel *The King's Daughters* (1998) a novel described as a “mental torture chamber”<sup>67</sup> and “claustrophobic,”<sup>68</sup> by Emma Tristram of *The Times Literary Supplement*. Tristram's comments arise from the fact that she believes that this novel conveys that the main way women gain both control and gratification is through sex. Natasha Fairweather makes the condescending claim that *The King's Daughters* “is as far removed from the East End Jewish, Marxist Creator of kitchen sink dramas as is possible to get,”<sup>69</sup> a comment which epitomises the preconceptions which have continually plagued Wesker's career, implying that because he began his career by interrogating certain themes within his drama that he should have continued in this manner. She also asserts that kitchen sink drama began and ended within the 1960s and that it would be considered an outdated genre of writing, she fails to recognise that the domestic still plays an important part of contemporary drama. Fairweather is also preoccupied with where Wesker came from and what religion he belonged to within society, it really said nothing about the novel itself. A

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 194.

<sup>66</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 73.

<sup>67</sup> Emma Tristram, “Princess Amissia and her Sisters,” *Times Literary Supplement*, December 18<sup>th</sup> (1998).

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> Natasha Fairweather, “Beastly Girls,” *The Times*, Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> November (1998).

novel which yes, could be seen as pornographic but a collection of short stories not ashamed to present sex with authenticity, and now well into the twenty-first century this has now become more important to us as a society. Fairweather's tone also implies that it is impossible to compare *The King's Daughters* with *The Trilogy* in terms of quality, in other words how can you compare the political and social loftiness of *The Trilogy* with the sexually graphic nature of *The King's Daughters*. At the start of each chapter or short story within the novel we see how Wesker first highlights what the Princesses do during the daytime, we learn that they are highly accomplished individuals. When day turns into night, we see how this is when they adhere to what their bodies desire. A comparison is made between Wesker's female characters and the female characters of Christina Rossetti's poem from 1862 "The Goblin Market," because we see how they too are depicted as being beyond reproach but yet once the temptations of the Goblin Men appear Laura gives into temptation symbolised by the succulent fruit which they sell. In "The Goblin Market" giving into longing and temptation is evidently frowned upon by the moral Rossetti who wanted to uphold the values of Christianity. However, in Wesker's novel the Princesses gain control over their father who leaves after learning of their nightly escapades. Therefore, although critics such as Fairweather and Tristram find that it is not politically correct to say that this novel is good, it is important to note that it is a novel which appears to entirely be at ease with woman's relationship to the archetype of female transgression: Eve. This is something which is more important than ever to women in 2020 because in today's society patriarchy and the "status-quo"<sup>70</sup> are being challenged more than ever. The importance of this is because behaviour deemed suitable for men should also be behaviour recognised as acceptable for women, double-standards should not exist and I feel that this is one of the reasons why Wesker chose to write a novel such as this, it also represents how forward thinking he was. The final part of

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<sup>70</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 16.

*The King's Daughters* reads that the King “was never seen again by any living soul. He left behind him no note, no message, only a vast space that his magnificent regal presence had once occupied and which, now, twelve fine and worthy daughters filled.”<sup>71</sup> Wesker’s choice of language in the final short story accentuates how the daughters deserve to take hold of the mantle from their father, there is no suggestion from our author that these twelve princesses should not take over from their father because of their overtly risqué behaviour. After all, when studying the definition of what a Princess is we read that it is simply the “the daughter of a Monarch,”<sup>72</sup> a definition which does not allude to how a Princess is expected to behave. It is only through the commercialisation of fairy-tale stories such as those written by the “Brothers Grimm”<sup>73</sup> that are part of the reason why we associate Princess characters as being insipid, passive and wholesome, unrealistically abstaining from any sexual intimacy before they marry their chivalrous Prince Charming figure. The ominous nature of Prince Charming is emphasised by Wesker in both *Groupie* and in the scene dedicated to Naomi in *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, two female characters who use the Prince Charming figure to comfort them from loneliness and their sense of dormant physicality. Angela Smith insinuates that Charles Perrault based his “heroines”<sup>74</sup> on the “*femme civilisé* of upper-class society. They were therefore beautiful, polite, graceful, well-groomed and in control of themselves at all times.”<sup>75</sup> A mould none of Wesker’s Princesses fit, as is exemplified through phrases such as “she had satisfied one urge and wished for another to be indulged.”<sup>76</sup> His use of the word “urge”<sup>77</sup> implies that this Princess wants to act on impulse rather than be concerned with regal duty, female impulse is also a theme in *Denial* as Jenny discloses her sexual preferences

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<sup>71</sup> Arnold Wesker, *The King's Daughters*, Quartet Books, London (1998), p. 238.

<sup>72</sup> Link as follows: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/princess>.

<sup>73</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 54.

<sup>74</sup> Angela Smith, “Letting Down Rapunzel: Feminism’s Effects on Fairy-Tales,” *Children's Literature in Education*, Volume 46 (2015), p. 427.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Wesker, *The King's Daughters*, p. 45.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

to Valerie. She admits of how she desires to be treated like a slab of meat by her sexual partners, an admission which a socially conservative audience would still find difficult to hear because society still does not view women as sexually dominant. Wesker writes that “the progress from the youngest to the oldest daughter is the progress from innocent to more complex love-making, so it’s also a collection of stories about aging.”<sup>78</sup> The fact that Wesker makes this comment about this work is reflective of how the bildungsroman of the Princesses is related to his bildungsroman as a writer. Vanessa Thorpe of *The Independent* writes that “one of the original Angry Young Men of British Theatre is about to astonish the literary establishment by publishing a collection of 12 highly explicit, erotic tales.”<sup>79</sup> A comment which in comparison to Fairweather fails to give this novel a fair, unbiased reading due to the reviewer’s preconceived ideas surrounding what sort of material our author should be writing. Therefore, the fact that Wesker says the sexual encounters of the Princesses become more experimental reflects how the author himself perhaps wanted to also experiment with his writing. This point really sums up another aspect to this thesis which is to study works by Wesker which have failed to be noticed by both critics and the public alike, as Wesker himself says astutely in his interview with Montenero that *The King’s Daughters* was “ignored”<sup>80</sup> and therefore “could not be a success,”<sup>81</sup> he then says that “their time is yet to come. When I’m dead perhaps.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, he was right as this is the first thesis truly dealing with them as a serious piece of writing rather than escapist “erotica”<sup>83</sup> and nothing more than that, it is also unfortunately being written after his death on the 12<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

A theme which permeates through the entirety of Wesker’s work is the idea that class should not hinder or prevent you being successful as an individual. Indeed, Wesker’s vested

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<sup>78</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 54.

<sup>79</sup> Vanessa Thorpe, “Wesker Re-Writes Grimm as erotica,” *The Independent*, Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> October (1998).

<sup>80</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 56.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Thorpe, “Wesker Re-Writes Grimm as erotica.”



interest in this was epitomised through his role as the creative director for Centre 42, a role which he occupied from 1960-1970 until financial limitations were adhered to and he did not continue the role.

In the fourth and final chapter of the thesis *Shylock* will be analysed because I feel that this work is fitting in order to convey how Wesker was a genuine writer because he wrote about subjects which were close to his heart. Wesker says in his interview with Montenero that if *Shylock* ever is “a success”<sup>84</sup> then it “would be my legacy to the world of theatre.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore, through this comment Wesker shares his hope that his *Shylock* will become the portrayal of Judaism that audiences will associate with and not Shakespeare’s outdated depiction exaggerating stereotypical mannerisms that surround the Jewish heritage; in terms of appearance and behaviour. However, in the interview Wesker then goes on to say that “The British theatre establishment seems to be fighting shy of this play as though they only want Shakespeare’s portrait of the Jew to be allowed on the world stage.”<sup>86</sup> This damning insinuation accuses the establishment of purposely not evolving with society in order to protect the universally accepted superiority of brand Shakespeare within the theatre, something which Wesker refers to as the “sneer.”<sup>87</sup> At the initial stage of researching this play, I wanted to see how *Shylock* was outwardly presented and what I repeatedly found was that he is often depicted as bearded, shifty and small. A clear precursor to F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Meyer Wolfshiem whom our narrator of *The Great Gatsby* (1925) Nick Caraway introduces the reader to through the following excerpt “a small, flat-nosed Jew raised his large head and regarded me with two fine growths of hair which luxuriated in either nostril. After a moment I discovered his eyes in the half-darkness.”<sup>88</sup> A description that accentuates

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<sup>84</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 34.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>88</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (Penguin Popular Classics, 1994), p. 75.

the supposedly shady, unpleasant appearance of Wolfshiem who also happens to be the only Jewish character of the novel-a gangster renowned for fixing the World Series. *Shylock* is a play commonly interpreted as Wesker's enraged response to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (circa 1596) and the caricatures that engulf the Jewish way of life. In this thesis a close reading is carried out on the character of Shylock and also the main female characters of this play alongside how Shakespeare presents both his Shylock and his female characters. This is done in order to show how far it is possible to compare the two plays, or indeed if it is possible to carry out a fair comparison of the two plays. In contrast to the criticism which I have read in preparation for this chapter I endeavour to show how Shakespeare's play was a sixteenth century play for a sixteenth century audience. Shakespeare never could have foreseen that his Shylock was going to be "utilised by Hitler to confirm his Holocaust,"<sup>89</sup> or that it was going to become an image advocating anti-Semitism. Therefore, in this fourth chapter I suggest that Wesker has an anachronistic attitude towards Shakespeare which is perhaps a manifestation of his own frustration against the British literary world. A literary world infinitely lauding Shakespeare, unlike Wesker who evolved with society yet feels haunted by the ghostliness of his "frozen"<sup>90</sup> image which is still stuck in the 1960s. Critics appear to not fully accept that Wesker wanted his writing to reflect society as he saw it. Therefore, the majority of criticism currently based around Wesker's *Shylock* repeatedly treats Shakespeare as anti-Semitic, such as Sicher who writes that "far more sinister than Scrooge, Shylock was incorporated in a series of demonic stock types such as that other merry old gentleman Fagin..."<sup>91</sup> Hence Sicher is conveying how Shakespeare's depiction of

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<sup>89</sup> Anne Etienne and Estelle Rivier, "Topsy-Turvyng *The Merchant of Venice*: Shylock as Wesker's Response to the Renaissance Jew," Taken from *Rewriting Shakespeare's Plays for and By the Contemporary Stage* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, 2017), p. 143.

<sup>90</sup> Julia Pascal, "Sir Arnold Wesker Obituary," *The Guardian*, 13<sup>th</sup> April (2016).

<sup>91</sup> Efraim Sicher, "Recasting Shakespeare's Jew in Wesker's *Shylock*," *Wrestling with Shylock: Jewish Responses to The Merchant of Venice*, Edited by Edna Nahshon and Michael Shapiro (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017), p. 275.

the Jew influenced and tarnished other depictions of the Jew by other writers throughout the literary canon.

Wesker's *Shylock* works well as a play because of how it tackles contemporary issues within a Renaissance setting, issues such as class divide and racism. The image of the ghetto is a vital one within this play because it also biographically relates to our writer who himself came from a ghetto in the East End of London. The definition of ghetto reads as "An isolated or segregated group or area,"<sup>92</sup> two key words that are relevant both to our author and to his *Shylock* emerge from this definition and they are "isolated"<sup>93</sup> and "segregated"<sup>94</sup> words which accentuate marginalisation and separation. Sicher sweepingly states that "by refusing to break his bond *Shylock* establishes his freedom as an individual; unlike the failed idealists of the Trilogy,"<sup>95</sup> however this comment is cavalier in its assertion as it implies that Wesker's play has a happy ending but that in my opinion is not true. Yes, *Shylock* refuses to "break his bond"<sup>96</sup> but at the expense of what he enjoys most in life which is the written word. Therefore, to say that he gains "freedom"<sup>97</sup> is inaccurate in relation to the character of *Shylock*, because it implies that he gains happiness along with independence at the conclusion of the play. In this chapter, I in contrast to Sicher do not suggest that *Shylock* is happy at the end of this play. Pascal also writes that Wesker's *Shylock* has a "two-dimensional"<sup>98</sup> personality, which suggests that Wesker's *Shylock* lacks depth. However, I don't share Pascal's opinion on Wesker's construction of *Shylock* because I believe that Wesker's *Shylock* attempts to make his own luck within the world and hence his extrovert persona. I also feel that we cannot say that *Shylock* has a two-dimensional personality

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<sup>92</sup> Link as follows: <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ghetto>.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> Efraim Sicher, "The Jewing of *Shylock*: Wesker's "The Merchant," *Modern Language Studies* Spring (1991), p. 66.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> Julia Pascal, "Re-Revisiting *Shylock*," *Jewish Quarterly*, Taylor and Francis (2007), p. 50.

because of how we see that when he is pushed to the limit his character does change. He sadly however does decide that he will take a pound of flesh from Antonio which ultimately leads to the confiscation of his books.

The character of Shylock is condemned from the start of the play due to the fact that he is seen as the Other within Venetian society; an “alien.” This is mainly illustrated in the thesis by an exploration of the symbolism associated with the “*yellow hat*”<sup>99</sup> worn by Shylock as a marker of his religion, a piece of clothing which appears insignificant to Shylock himself but not to his fellow Venetian citizens as the following excerpt shows “Shylock: Ah! Time to return to the Ghetto. *Lorenzo gives Shylock his yellow hat.* Lorenzo: And don’t forget your yellow hat, Signor Shylock. Shylock: Thank you, young man. *Shylock looks at Antonio and shrugs sadly, as though the hat is evidence to refute all he’s said.*”<sup>100</sup> The word “refute”<sup>101</sup> which is included in the staging in the above example portrays how the actor depicting Shylock should make evident his sense of defeat. This is due to the realisation that his dream for a free and equal society for all is allusive, as Lorenzo’s words bring him back into the present day, into a society which is very hierarchal and segregated.

*Shylock* was selected for the final chapter of this thesis due it illustrating a key point which Wesker himself makes about his work during an interview with Robert Skloot. In this interview Wesker reveals his frustration with the critics who have written that “Wesker is a man who doesn’t write about human beings, he writes about ideas.”<sup>102</sup> Therefore, making the implication that Wesker is an abstract writer who is irrelevant to people. He then goes onto say that “the plays were very much about human beings, but they were human beings who are

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<sup>99</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Shylock*, Taken from *Wesker’s Historical Plays* (Oberon Books, London, 2008), p. 54.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Robert Skloot and Arnold Wesker, “Interview: On Playwrighting,” *Performing Arts Journal*, Volume 2, Winter (1978), p. 40.

animated by ideas.”<sup>103</sup> Therefore, Wesker definitively says that you cannot have one without the other, you cannot bring the importance of a concept to the forefront without the emotions of a human being as the idea would become meaningless. Wesker’s Shylock is the embodiment of an infinite, hopeful passion for equality however he is fully aware that this is unlikely to be attained amidst the ignorance of a Venetian society plagued by self-debilitating segregation, an invisible disease that corrupts people’s minds without them even realising.

The criticism which exists at present continually makes an issue of Shylock being a Jew and suggests that it is because he is a Jew that he faces the persecution that he does. In this thesis I attempt to show how Wesker’s *Shylock* is a play which yes still shows the humiliation and persecution of a man who is a Jew, but how it is also a play which simply depicts the cruelty of society and corruption within hierarchal systems regardless of what religious denomination that one belongs to. I employ from Peter Holland’s introduction to Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* numerous times and specifically home in on why he feels the need to emphasise that Wesker himself was Anglo-Jewish and that if it hadn’t been for this then Wesker would have not felt the need to rewrite Shakespeare’s play. Holland’s assertion is one I disagree with because I view Shakespeare’s play as one which advocates indiscriminate prejudice and requires a challenge regardless of what section of society one belongs to. Additionally, I also believe that the numerous articles written by Wesker himself on *Shylock* were perhaps unwise of our author. For example, in 1993 he writes that the “Jew in Shakespeare’s play is meant to embody what he wishes to despise.”<sup>104</sup> A comment which I myself believe is perhaps rather harsh on Shakespeare due to the fact that Shakespeare perhaps did indeed create the character of Shylock “from hearsay and mere brushes with Jewish shadows.”<sup>105</sup> In the same article Wesker also sensationally claims that Shylock is “no

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>104</sup> Arnold Wesker, “A Nasty Piece of Work,” *The Sunday Times*, June 6<sup>th</sup> (1993).

<sup>105</sup> Arnold Wesker, “Shame on you Shakespeare,” *The Independent*, Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> July (1999).

ordinary legend resonant with dark foreboding or heroic inspiration, not a legend that has fed the spirit,”<sup>106</sup> but one that “begun with calumny and ended in a gas chamber.”<sup>107</sup> A comment saturated with accusation, the fact that our author uses the term “calumny”<sup>108</sup> conveys how he blames Shakespeare for irretrievably damaging the Jewish heritage so much so that *The Merchant of Venice* was one of the sole reasons for the Holocaust and the gassing of millions of Jews in the concentration camps run by the Nazis. A deeply anachronistic accusation to make towards Shakespeare in 1993 because it is only with hindsight that Wesker is able to blame Shakespeare. In 1999 Wesker claimed in another article that “Actors and Directors worldwide seem thrilled by it as some old men are thrilled by a brazen whore whose reputation for wickedness promises delicious fear,”<sup>109</sup> a distasteful, sexist comment from our author which implies that the majority of audiences secretly enjoy watching a Jew being exploited and made vulnerable in this way. In the section of the comment in which he compares the pleasure of the theatrical establishment with that of a man with his sexually promiscuous female partner, Wesker also unfortunately shows himself to be slightly misandrist.

The role of women is another aspect to the fourth chapter of the thesis. The female characters of Jessica and Portia are predominantly analysed alongside Shakespeare’s play to again see how far a comparison can be made between them. In Wesker’s play clear allusions are made to Queen Elizabeth I by his Portia in order to highlight her frustration at having her husband chosen for her by a request made in her father’s will. However, a key difference between the two plays is seen through the character of Jessica who is the daughter of Shylock. The main difference is that in Wesker’s play Jessica abandons her father not out of

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<sup>106</sup> Wesker, “A Nasty Piece of Work.”

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> Wesker, “Shame on you Shakespeare.”

hatred or shame of her Jewish heritage but of frustration at his oppressive love for her and at her inability to use the high standard of education which he ironically has provided her with. Interestingly, the conclusion of Wesker's *Shylock* is not any better than *The Merchant of Venice*, in fact I would say that it is worse. Despite every good intention of the author Shylock is banished from the society he loves most and Jessica desires to end her relationship with Lorenzo who is a Christian, this does not happen in Shakespeare's play as instead Jessica has a happy-ending with prospective husband Lorenzo. At the end of Wesker's play however, neither Jessica nor Shylock are happy as she ultimately decides to stand by her persecuted father and leave Venice to go to Jerusalem.

In interviews with Wesker about *Shylock* language which repeatedly occurs include "they refused to perform it,"<sup>110</sup> and "the play has never had a professional production in the UK."<sup>111</sup> Therefore, his marginalisation within the theatre world has been partly due to a blatant lack of his work being exposed to audiences. This is a contrast to his fellow Angry Young Men such as John Osborne and Harold Pinter whom endless revivals of their work are being regularly produced and seen in British theatres. However, his expulsion from the inner sanctum of the British literary canon is also thought to be due to his suing of the Royal Shakespeare Company due to the actors refusing to perform *The Journalists* due to Wesker's belief that it depicted members of the Conservative party. Wesker firmly believed that the theatre was under the thumb of the "Trotskyist Workers' Revolutionary Party."<sup>112</sup> The fact that Wesker views the character of Shylock as his legacy to the theatre world suggests that he hopes that his Shylock will become the norm when studying Judaism; a man invigorated by learning and infinitely wishing social change, not a man driven by greed and a desire to gain power over others. Therefore, my statement on Wesker's Shylock really does apply to the author himself,

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<sup>110</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 25.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

a playwright who desired to completely change what the British audience saw as quintessentially “British”<sup>113</sup> drama. The Royal Shakespeare Company wouldn’t think twice about showing a production of *The Merchant of Venice*, a depiction of a society which any liberal, western twenty-first century society should be afraid to watch due to it reinforcing prejudice and racism which has encouraged some of the worst dictatorial cruelty which has occurred in the past and that also still exists in society today. Yet Wesker believes that the establishment fights “shy”<sup>114</sup> of his *Shylock* as if it is a play unsuitable or taboo for a modern audience. What an irony this is due to the fact that *The Merchant of Venice* is a play which depicts every taboo there is: anti-Semitism, racism, religious discrimination and sexism, yet it is still studied in classrooms all over Britain. I believe that Wesker’s *Shylock* would be more fitting, a play which advocates knowledge and mutual respect, but a play which also illustrates how people should not be judged or defined by their religion but by their nature and how they treat others.

This thesis seeks to convey how Wesker was an evolutionary writer who over the space of fifty years tackled an infinite spectrum of themes and tropes. However, he never chose to be safe by adhering to what the critics praised him for, thereby refusing to create a secure brand for his work that would have led to it being labelled something which he detested due to his theory that this limited writers as you were clearly allowing commercial success to dictate what and how you should be writing. However, what he cleverly did do as this thesis will convey is use fundamental elements of the domestic such as food, women and the structure of the family and moved with the times in which he was living to present what was important and current to those times. Therefore, continually reinventing what it meant to be a kitchen sink dramatist.

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.



## **Chapter One: Food**

### (i) Wesker's depiction of food in the Anglo-Jewish domestic space.

“Sarah: Tea I can always make.”<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter I will examine Wesker's depiction of food and how its preparation within his work emphasises key themes such as: the depiction of class, eroticism and women, the hybridity of the English identity and Jewishness. In regard to my thesis as a whole this first chapter is of detrimental importance due to all of the above themes playing key roles in my analysis of Wesker's *oeuvre*. In this chapter I have chosen a variety of texts from different periods in Wesker's career in order to accentuate the multiple genres that he made a contribution to. Taken from the 1950s-1990s these texts have been selected due to the fact that food has a significant meaning within each one.

In terms of the contextual material that will be used in this chapter it will include criticism from Helen Iball and specifically her article “Melting Moments: Bodies upstaged by the foodie gaze,”<sup>2</sup> this will be analysed in order to explore how certain foods and their presence on the stage make the audience both pre-empt and react to what happens throughout the duration of a play. I will also convey how specific foods reflect the ambience that Wesker desired to create through that particular scene, this will be specifically related to the uneaten spread of food in the second play of *The Wesker Trilogy: Roots*. Another important aspect that I want to include in this chapter is how in the popular drama of the pre-Angry Young Men era food is mostly seen as something which is mainly consumed but its preparation is at best skimmed over if it isn't wholly ignored altogether. What Wesker brought to the stage

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<sup>1</sup> Arnold Wesker, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, Taken from *The Trilogy* (London, Penguin Books, 1979), p. 209.

<sup>2</sup> Helen Iball, “Melting Moments: Bodies upstaged by the foodie gaze,” *A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Volume 4, 1999, Issue 1.

was priceless due to his transforming those who “lived simply”<sup>3</sup> into a form of domestic idealism that audiences wanted to immerse themselves into as he brought the familiar to the stage, turning the ordinary into the extraordinary. A segment will be taken from Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None* to convey how food highlights class divide between servants and those whom they are serving in drama written by members of the Shaftesbury Avenue set which dominated theatre in the early part of the twentieth century. Whereas in Wesker’s *oeuvre* food is used as an equaliser between one section of society and another, however it can also be representative of how good someone’s standard of living is. Other critics which will inform my interpretation of this aspect of Wesker’s work will include Lori Hope Lefkowitz, I.E. Roden and Susan Starr, their critical opinion will be utilised in order to prove how some foods such as chicken soup with barley occupy a bespoke place within the Jewish psyche as they are more than just used to satisfy someone’s appetite. The element of this chapter which explores Anglo-Jewishness is related to Wesker’s presentation of food due to food and its ability to amalgamate itself into a certain region in comparison to the way in which a person can do this also. The final aspect of food which is a paramount feature of this first chapter is how food and sexuality correlate with one another within Wesker’s *oeuvre*. Criticism will be taken from Susan Honeyman in order to show how I believe that food reflects how a character feels, the character of Samantha Milner from Wesker’s *The Mistress* is evocative of this, where in her case chocolate with its malleability mirrors both her career and her personality due to her being a fashion designer and the need for a flexible attitude within her colourful personal life.

We can assume that his use of food on the stage contributes to his reputation as one of the so-called “kitchen-sink” dramatists. Dramatists who are affiliated with “working-class”<sup>4</sup> and

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (London, Transaction Publishers, 1957), p. 22.

<sup>4</sup> *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Edited by Dinah Birch and Katy Hooper (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2012).

“lower-middle-class life,”<sup>5</sup> placing “emphasis on domestic realism,”<sup>6</sup> as was explained in the introduction to the thesis. However, I am examining how food within Wesker’s work is not solely about enhancing the domestic setting of the characters’ lives but to highlight and pinpoint social issues to the audience and reader. Specifically, I will challenge the assumption that food is there with the sole purpose of adding to the authenticity of the domestic situation and does not possess any symbolic meaning within the texts. I refer to the “Anglo-Jewish” space in my subtitle above to show how the multi-cultural nature of British society is also paramount to Wesker’s writing.

Emphasising the aesthetic, presentational value of food particularly in his staging has the effect of recognising that the exhibition of food within the domestic sphere can be compared to a stage performance in the theatre. The attractive, stimulating nature of food on the stage can “like the naked body”<sup>7</sup> provoke “a response that, in the first instance is uncontrollable.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, a mutual, sensory experience that is a form of social cohesion within the auditorium that is indiscriminate in terms of background, class or education, something which has universal appeal. I will analyse the plays of the *Wesker Trilogy*, the character of Mrs Hyams from the short story “Pools” (1971) *The Kitchen* and the novel entitled *The King’s Daughters* in order to examine what role food plays in each of these works. By choosing a short story along with plays and a novel represents how this thesis will examine the corpus of Wesker’s work and will not be limited to his contribution to the theatre.

A focus on the preparation rather than on the eating of food adds originality to his writing because what is made blindingly obvious is how his characters are physically carrying out

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Helen Iball, “Melting Moments: Bodies upstaged by the foodie gaze,” *A Journal of the Performing Arts*, Volume 4 (1999), p. 71.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

normal activities such as cooking. The significance of this is a contrast to characters that feature in plays by Agatha Christie among others who often have servants who cook for them as is evident in the following section taken from Christie's 1943 play *And Then There Were None*: "Blore. Rodgers, do you think you could put some sandwiches and a bottle of beer in my room at night? I get an ell of an appetite with this sea air. Rodgers. I'll see what I can do, sir."<sup>9</sup> The use of the title "sir"<sup>10</sup> in this section whilst both Blore and Christie herself condescendingly refer to Rodgers by his surname emphasise how the running of the household was seen as a menial, subservient occupation. Prior to the emergence of Wesker and fellow Angry Young Man John Osborne, domestic activities such as cooking and ironing would have evoked criticism from those audiences who desired to be immersed in the escapism of a murder mystery within the confines of a luxurious mansion house. In Wesker's writing, it is rare to see the same recipe repeated and this authenticates his broad knowledge about cookery enhancing the informative aspect of his body of work also. In his play *Chicken Soup with Barley* the main themes associated with food include: the relationship between Judaism and food, women and food and the role that real food plays on the stage. *Chicken Soup with Barley* follows the Kahn family who are a Jewish working-class family who live in the East End of London. The play is set from 1936-1956 and catalogues how the domestic situation of the Kahn's is directly affected by English politics such as the Battle of Cable Street which was against the British fascists in 1936, the aftermath of the Second World War which saw the Labour politician Clement Atlee taking over the Prime-ministership from Winston Churchill in 1945 and finally the Conservative party forming a majority government again in 1955 with the appointment of Anthony Eden. Each act of the play is set in a decade in which the political backdrop is always changing and as a result we see how their domestic

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<sup>9</sup> Agatha Christie, *And Then There Were None*, from *The Mousetrap and Selected Plays* (Harper Collins Publishers, London, 1994), p. 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

sphere changes too. The family are Jewish East Enders and as the title of the play suggests food is of tantamount importance, it is an aspect of the play which cannot be ignored. However, in my view Wesker chooses to name this play *Chicken Soup with Barley* because of how food is about nourishing the human body just as eating together is about nurturing bonds in a family. Ada Kahn who suffered from “diphtheria”<sup>11</sup> as a baby was saved by “Mrs Bernstein’s soup,”<sup>12</sup> identifying “Chicken Soup with Barley”<sup>13</sup> as a “friendly taste.”<sup>14</sup> Diphtheria is an infectious disease that can lead to asphyxiation due to a “membrane”<sup>15</sup> forming in the “throat.”<sup>16</sup> The fact that Ada identifies chicken soup as a food which holds warm nostalgia for her, shows that how by eating the chicken soup she was giving her body a chance to fight this dangerous disease. Ada finds comfort through the taste of chicken soup as she links the taste with her overcoming diphtheria. Wesker’s referral to this specific dish for the title of his play clearly implicates what the meaning of the dish is within the context of the play’s setting. In the case of *Chicken Soup with Barley* it symbolises the importance of family strength and unity amidst a changing, hostile political environment and this is what Wesker desired his audience to engage with. The symbolic value which chicken soup has within Wesker’s play relates to an interpretation of the dish by Lori Hope Lefkowitz who ascertains that “chicken soup is a symbol of therapeutic Judaism: maternal love; the kitchen’s warmth; a broth with infinite potential to cure whatever ails your body.”<sup>17</sup> Chicken soup epitomises the stabilizing consistency of Sarah Kahn’s maternal and spousal devotion to her family and it is this constancy that contrasts the destabilization and uncertainty of British Politics. This ambience of uncertainty is primarily symbolised by Wesker through the family’s change of

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<sup>11</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Taken from *The Trilogy* (London, Penguin Books, 1979), p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *World Encyclopaedia*, Philips (2004).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Lori Hope Lefkowitz, “Judaism, Body image and Food,” Taken from *Body: Jewish Choices, Jewish Voices*, Edited by Elliott N. Dorff and Louise E. Newman, Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia (2008), p. 67.

living arrangements, in comparison to the taste and comfort that chicken soup always has, in this play a family's care for one another remains constant and unwavering. In terms of chicken soup and its role within Jewish culture, Claudia Roden claims that "local regional food becomes Jewish when it travels with Jews to new homelands."<sup>18</sup> Roden's comment informs us that when food travels along with migrating Jews it becomes Jewish, so there is no such thing as food which is originally Jewish in its classification. Though the Kahn family now view East End life as the norm their ancestry is of "*European origin*,"<sup>19</sup> therefore their ancestors were the ones who would migrate and subsequently bring what is now seen as Jewish cuisine to the East End of London, and as a result making a contribution to the evermore culturally plural Britain.

Sarah is the embodiment of female strength amidst adversity for herself and her family. She is a character who will feature greatly in the second chapter of this thesis based on the representation of women in Wesker's early work. One of the ways in which Wesker characterises Sarah as resilient is through her unwavering dedication to provide food for her family. "Barley soup. I left it on a small light all day while I was at work..."<sup>20</sup> it is phrasing such as this example which highlights the effort that Sarah goes to when cooking for others, the fact that the soup simmers "all day"<sup>21</sup> is representative of how even though this character does a job she still takes time to ensure that her family are getting a homemade meal. In terms of the relationship between Judaism and cooking, Susan Starr comments that "women treat food preparation as a quintessentially religious pursuit,"<sup>22</sup> also adding that Jewish women "opt to prepare foods in particularly time-consuming manners."<sup>23</sup> The amount of time which

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<sup>18</sup> Claudia Roden, *The Book of Jewish Food: An Odyssey from Samarkand to New York* (Knopf Publishing, New York, 1996), p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Susan Starr, "Food and Holiness: Cooking as a Sacred Act among Middle-Eastern Jewish Women," *Anthropological Quarterly*, Volume 61 (1988), p. 129.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

is spent preparing a dish is related to the strength of bond which the family has to the “Jewish people,”<sup>24</sup> cooking is viewed as a means of caring for the family’s “physical, cultural and spiritual needs.”<sup>25</sup> The fact that Sarah chooses to prepare soup which requires all of the hours of the day would act as a verification that Sarah follows the traditional template of a Jewish homemaker as her character resonates the care and focus which is placed on the family’s well-being and how this is a measure of religious sanctity. The marriage between Harry and Sarah is ironic according to the traditions of Jewish culture, mainly because Sarah is depicted as the dominant, more industrious partner in the marriage in terms of striving to provide for her family. However, the fact that Sarah is in control in terms of her relationship with Harry shows that Wesker’s construction of Sarah goes against how a stereotypical, inferior Jewish woman would have been presented. On one hand our examination of Sarah’s character shows the traditional aspects of a Jewish matriarch with the commitment she shows to cooking food for her family and on the other hand the headstrong characteristics that are exhibited in her interactions with Harry convey her confidence away from the domestic sphere. The preparation of food is shown to be engrained within Sarah’s psyche in *Chicken Soup with Barley* one stage direction reads that Sarah “goes to the cupboard and cuts up bread ready for cheese sandwiches,”<sup>26</sup> this phrase signifies how Sarah is always preparing in advance as it represents how she is organised and always planning a meal. It is demonstrative of the level of Sarah’s dedication and effort in terms of providing for her family, this stage direction is preceded by Sarah saying with an imperative tone “Eat. Always eat. You don’t know what time you’ll be back,”<sup>27</sup> the repetition of “eat” in this instance should be delivered by the actor

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>26</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 31.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

depicting Sarah with a purposeful tone yet not wholly absent of consideration as that is what makes Sarah a complex female character.

Food is also symbolic of the security and comfort of home amidst the “*distant sound of people chanting*”<sup>28</sup> in anger towards Oswald Mosley’s Black Shirts. The overall effect of this style of staging is that there is a communal ambience of emotions and experiences of these characters who are on the stage, a historical snapshot is being observed through the kitchen window of the Kahn family. However, whilst conveying how positive a thing making food for her family is, what is also made apparent is the dull, mundane existence which the character of Sarah has because of the endless demands that domesticity places on her. We see how Harry by Act Three has had “two strokes”<sup>29</sup> and is “paralysed down one side”<sup>30</sup> as well as becoming unable to control his bowels, therefore he loses control of his own body. In Act Three, scene one Harry suffers from a bout of “*incontinence*”<sup>31</sup> meaning that Sarah has to drag him towards the toilet, so although aspects of Sarah’s character show how domesticity can be related to pride, in other examples we see how she exclaims that “a housekeeper wouldn’t do what I do for you, Harry-washing all those sheets.”<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the home can also be a setting which is humbling and raw, as no amount of preparation or formality can disguise the hardship of caring for a person who is now an invalid. In Act Three, scene one she says in a conversation with Bessie that “I make his food and I buy him cigarettes and he’s happy,”<sup>33</sup> which suggests that making food has become purely habitual, Sarah no longer sees herself as Harry’s wife but as his minder. The lack of sympathy that Sarah shows Harry may correspond to a point made by De Lima who writes that this reminds us of the “absurd

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.



scream expressed by Munch or of a solitary human figure before existence,”<sup>34</sup> Sarah can be compared to the primary figure of the painting by Munch: a person in a state of infinite torment. The loss of control which Harry has over his body reflects the unpredictability and lack of choices which the working class ultimately has within society, reinforcing a mood of humility and realism amidst the idealised, unattainable nature of a socialist society which Julia Pascal writes this play is “steeped”<sup>35</sup> in. The ideals of a utopian English society are epitomised through Wesker’s inclusion of the song written by the gay rights and socialist activist Edward Carpenter in 1886 called *England Arise: A Socialist Marching Song*. Through lyrics such as “Mighty in faith of Freedom your great Mother,”<sup>36</sup> these lines illustrate how English socialist hopes for a classless and indiscriminate society are compared to Sarah’s unrelenting belief in people and in comradeship, “there will always be human beings and as long as there are there will always be the idea of the brotherhood,”<sup>37</sup> which Wesker contrasts through the character of Ronnie who says that nothing really means “a thing.”<sup>38</sup> On examination of Ronnie during this interaction we see that he exhibits nihilistic aspects to his personality. Ronnie says to Sarah that “my thoughts keep going pop, like bubbles. That’s my life now- you know? –a lot of bubbles going pop.”<sup>39</sup> This imagery which compares human existence to bubbles is evocative of how Ronnie now views his life as fragile and hollow, he also says that “it was strawberries and cream for everyone-whether they liked it or not,”<sup>40</sup> which implies that Sarah’s pipe dream of a socialist run society has started to agitate him. In this example, strawberries and cream symbolise a utopian society in

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<sup>34</sup> Geraldo De Lima, “Wesker: A Cook preparing the meal of human despair,” *Revista da Area de Língua Inglesa e Literaturas Inglesa e Norte-Americana*, Departamento de Letras Modernas, Universidade de São Paulo (1:) (1994).

<sup>35</sup> Julia Pascal, “Sir Arnold Wesker Obituary,” *The Guardian*, Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> April (2016).

<sup>36</sup> Chushichi Tsuzuki, *Edward Carpenter 1844-1929: Prophet of Human Fellowship* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 75.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

which summer will never come to an end, a society which Ronnie views as allusive and unattainable. However, Sarah's infinite faith in the socialist ideology is driven by her revulsion towards capitalism. This is evoked through the following phrase "You give them a few shillings in the bank and they can buy a television so they think it's all over, there's nothing more to be got, they don't have to think any more!"<sup>41</sup> However, Ronnie sees that the communist ideology in the England of 1955 is unattainable.

Whenever Sarah prepares the cheese sandwiches, bread is cut up finely, this is representative of how Sarah who would perceive herself as an outsider within English society because of her Jewishness has adopted what Oscar Wilde saw as "a staple of afternoon tea in Polite English society,"<sup>42</sup> that is finely sliced bread for sandwiches. This relates to the comment which was made earlier in this chapter by Claudia Roden, who ascertained that regional food which originates from a specific place can become Jewish when it travels with them elsewhere. Therefore, the Englishness of tea and sandwiches becomes a Jewish dish within this example of staging. To elaborate and develop Roden's comment further it can be assumed that the integration of English dishes into the Kahn household show how food symbolises the "shifting, hybrid and plural nature of the English identity itself."<sup>43</sup> Therefore, there is a proportional link between "food preference"<sup>44</sup> and the "extent of integration"<sup>45</sup> within society. In terms of our society today the fast-food chain McDonalds in 1974 brought a slice of the commercial, mass-consumerism associated American culture into Britain, for his article from *The Telegraph* Harry Wallop writes that "Alan Cashin, a bus driver, remembers McDonald's opening: 'It was a novelty back then. Anything to do with America

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>42</sup> *Broadview Anthology of British Literature, The Concise Edition, Volume B*, Broadview Press (2006), p. 903.

<sup>43</sup> Njeri Githire, "The Empire bites back: Food politics and the making of a nation in Andrea Levy's works," *Callaloo*, Volume 33 No. 3, 2010, p. 860.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 869.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

was cool in those days.”<sup>46</sup> In comparison to food being regional and related to a particular characteristic or origin, the arts which are traditionally seen as upper-class pursuits can become universal if they are adopted and nurtured by lower and working-class areas of society. Afternoon tea is traditionally seen as a meal for the “rich and privileged,”<sup>47</sup> in English society, it is therefore ironic that Wesker who was a pioneering socialist when he wrote this play repeatedly creates spreads of food such as this throughout his writing. This was highlighting how a mandatory element of upper-class culture such as a sandwich served during Afternoon Tea can and does become a basic, staple dish to any part of society. This adoption of a specific dish by a different section of society may also be reflective of the socialist working-class desire to have the same rights as those who belong to the upper-echelons of that society. However, a false class consciousness may also exist due to the fact that they desire to distinguish themselves from the upper-class and yet are still able to have the same rights as those in the upper-class of society. Karl Marx writes that the working man’s “natural wants”<sup>48</sup> include “food, clothing, fuel and housing,”<sup>49</sup> which will “vary according to the climactic and other physical conditions of his country.”<sup>50</sup> Marx’s writing is extremely clinical in this excerpt as he refers to food as a mere necessity of maintaining a capitalist motivated society. Therefore, Marx denounces the importance of enjoying food as he depicts food at its most basic i.e. a means of sustenance. Hence Marx’s writing is an evocation of the false class consciousness that exists.

Tea plays a vital role in *Chicken Soup with Barley*, the characters share cups of tea amidst dialogue about political matters such as the atomic bomb. In Act Three, scene one of the play

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<sup>46</sup> Harry Wallop, “How McDonald’s Changed the Way We Eat in Britain,” *The Telegraph*, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2014.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: A Critique of Political Economy*, accessed through Google Books: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=qqF2DUEnsZgC&printsec=frontcover&dq=karl+marx+das+kapital&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwin7LPo0q\\_jAhUQTsAKHX99BUUQ6AEILjAB#v=onepage&q=food&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=qqF2DUEnsZgC&printsec=frontcover&dq=karl+marx+das+kapital&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwin7LPo0q_jAhUQTsAKHX99BUUQ6AEILjAB#v=onepage&q=food&f=false).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

Sarah introduces the topic of nuclear weaponry whilst also making tea, “And when someone drops an atom bomb on your family...The kettle’s boiling-I’ll make some tea. [*Goes to the Kitchen*].”<sup>51</sup> The simplicity of making tea is therefore juxtaposed with the complexities of political discussion. The beverage of tea will be associated with the English identity, Githire Njeri writes that it is a “national totemic emblem for English traditions,”<sup>52</sup> therefore Njeri insinuates that tea is far more than a mere drink to quench the thirst within the context of national identity. By combining the simplicity of food with the heated nature of politics, Wesker perhaps unintentionally creates a comical ambience because he repeatedly brings the forceful, meaningful tone of dialogue spoken by his characters back down to the security of the home; “It was a slum, there was misery, but we were going somewhere. The East End was a big mother. [*Sarah comes in with the tea*]”<sup>53</sup> In this example of staging Sarah enters directly after the phrase that refers to the East End as a mother, so this conveys that Sarah is synonymous with hope and the fact that she is carrying in tea resonates that food and strength complement each other. Characters on stage drinking tea reinforces the authenticity of the domestic setting, as the presence of tea always brings the scene back to domestic sanctuary which is a contrast to the chaos of outside conflicts. Therefore, the calm ambience that Wesker creates by having his characters consume tea together on the stage subsequently constructs a mood of transient utopia. However, in Act One, scene one the frayed relationship between Harry and Sarah is symbolised by an interaction which has tea at its core, Sarah says “I know you had tea there and *you* know you had tea there- so what harm is it if you tell me?”<sup>54</sup> A phrase in Act One, scene one which implies that the debate over the tea is perhaps a metaphor for the bad communication between Harry and Sarah. It is symbolic of how two people sharing tea holds a significant emotional connection. It is more than a hot beverage,

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<sup>51</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 62.

<sup>52</sup> Githire, “The Empire bites back: Food politics and the making of a nation in Andrea Levy’s works,” p. 870.

<sup>53</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 63.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

instead it is a means to generate a bond between two people. The italic font when writing the word “you”<sup>55</sup> suggests to the actor depicting Sarah that the “you”<sup>56</sup> should be said with an emphatic tone to heighten the character’s sense of frustration towards what she feels is Harry’s blatant dishonesty. Additionally, the inquisitive tone that Sarah uses is intriguing because it is the only time in *Chicken Soup with Barley* that a word is said with heightened emphasis. Her insinuation therefore has greater meaning in regard to her relationship with Harry as it suggests that tea is really symbolic of clandestine relations between Harry and his female friend Lottie. We should also note that the name “Lottie” is a variation on the name Charlotte, meaning womanly, we will never see this character on the stage which adds to the intrigue that she may be outwardly attractive and feminine. In Christina Reid’s 1983 play *Tea in a China Cup*, tea’s role is to “show and comment on the social relationships between characters,”<sup>57</sup> in comparison to the tense interaction between Sarah and Harry when she interrogates him over his relationship with Lottie. Another similarity between Reid and Wesker is how they both link the “feminine order of the home”<sup>58</sup> with political organisations such as the Orange Order and the socialist movement with the latter in staunch opposition to fascism.

By making use of domestic utensils such as a “rolling pin,”<sup>59</sup> Sarah is a character who will clearly use her domesticity to defend and uphold the political cause in which she believes. Sarah becomes all the more heroic because she shows how she can utilise her role as a matriarch so that it is not solely limited to the “domestic space.”<sup>60</sup> Ronnie says to Sarah in Act Three, scene two about food, “Food and sleep and you can see no reason why a person

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Joanne Luft, “Brechtian *Gestus* and the Politics of Tea in Christina Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup*,” *Modern Drama*, Volume 42 (1999), p. 215.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 24.

<sup>60</sup> Luft, “Brechtian *Gestus* and the Politics of Tea in Christina Reid’s *Tea in a China Cup*,” p. 215.

should be unhappy,”<sup>61</sup> Sarah then replies to him “[from the kitchen]”<sup>62</sup> that “I’d have looked blue all these years if I hadn’t been optimistic.”<sup>63</sup> The fact that the stage direction dictates that she should reply from within the kitchen implies that the kitchen is a form of security for her specifically in the last act of the play. In the final act of the play her life has become more of a daily struggle, this is echoed in the words that she says about looking blue. In terms of staging used we see how in the introductory stage directions for Act One, scene one that the kitchen is positioned in the middle of their house in the “*East End of London*,”<sup>64</sup> in contrast the stage directions to Act Two, scene one direct that the kitchen is offstage. Wesker’s decision to take the kitchen away from the audience’s vision is peculiar since a London County Council flat would be smaller than the previous abode of the family. The staging suggests that this is less of a homely, “*warm and lived in*”<sup>65</sup> setting than the house in the East End and the absence of the kitchen highlights this thought of lost time as the space between the first two acts is ten years. In support of this new style of housing, renowned urban planner and architect Max Lock said that “we find the cleared and cleaned up spaces”<sup>66</sup> of the contemporary flats a “relief.”<sup>67</sup> However, on a negative note Mollie Panter-Downes commented that “‘the average Londoner wants a little house and a garden,’ but ‘according to the new plans, he’ll have to settle, nine times out of ten, for a flat and a window box.’”<sup>68</sup> These two contrasting viewpoints regarding the changes made to social housing post World War Two indicate that there was an ambiguity towards these so-called “cleared and cleaned up spaces.”<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 70.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain* (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2011), p. 35.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 335.

In Act Three, scene two when Sarah emerges from the kitchen she enters carrying “two cups of tea,”<sup>70</sup> asking Ronnie if he would like some “biscuits”<sup>71</sup> and to “have a piece of cake,”<sup>72</sup> and that the cake was “made specially”<sup>73</sup> for him. The affection of this interaction between Ronnie and Sarah is heightened by Sarah’s forcefulness towards Ronnie to take some food, furthermore the cake being “specially”<sup>74</sup> made for him depicts the image that food is made in a bespoke way therefore original and unique. The abundant presence of real food on the stage as is exemplified through stage directions such as “bread ready for cheese sandwiches,”<sup>75</sup> and “she snatches a slice of bread and butter from table,”<sup>76</sup> conveys how it is at the pinnacle of human interaction. This is contrasted by Wesker in the next play which will be examined in this chapter. Though set in the kitchen of a restaurant, *The Kitchen* does not have any actual food being cooked within it. Emphasising how the relationships in this play have become so engulfed in the drive and greed of a society dictated by capitalism that they have broken down amidst a setting of a discombobulated workplace.

(ii) Pigs and Capitalism in *The Kitchen*.

“By now EVERYBODY is hard at work”<sup>77</sup>

The introduction to *The Kitchen* is influenced by Wesker’s own personal experiences working as a pastry chef at Le Rallye restaurant in Paris. He writes that the “world might have been a stage for Shakespeare but to me it is a kitchen...”<sup>78</sup> suggesting to his audience that this is not a play that is merely about the preparation of food but that a working kitchen is an analogy for society and hierarchy as a whole, which is further intensified by the phrase

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<sup>70</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 70.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>77</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, From *Wesker’s Social Plays* (Oberon Books, London, 2008), p. 24.

<sup>78</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, Introduction and Notes.

that “when the world is filled with kitchens you get pigs.”<sup>79</sup> A phrase with animal imagery at its core which is critical of the robotic nature of society driven by mass consumerism and capitalism, the link with pigs may be seen as Wesker abiding by traditional Judaism. In “Judaic tradition,”<sup>80</sup> a pig is seen as “an unclean animal”<sup>81</sup> associated with “baseness”<sup>82</sup> and “filth.”<sup>83</sup> In this play the kitchen becomes a euphemism for the regimental, sterile nature of a society in which money is both a motivation and necessity for survival. De Lima interprets that the setting of a kitchen for the play can be compared to a “quasi-Dantean inferno,”<sup>84</sup> a loaded opinion from De Lima, in which he is comparing the “madhouse”<sup>85</sup> of this workplace with a form of hell. De Lima also writes that the “frenzy”<sup>86</sup> of characters in this play “lose their own identity”<sup>87</sup> and also their “capacity of expressing their ultimate necessities.”<sup>88</sup> Therefore, because of the claustrophobic, ultra-efficient environment which is promoted by the management of this restaurant those working in the kitchen have become immersed in a form of institutionalization, as a result the characters in this play can become hard to differentiate from each other.

Food features abundantly in the dialogue between the characters in this play, examples of this include “One turbot,”<sup>89</sup> “Two cod,”<sup>90</sup> “Two roast veal and spaghetti”<sup>91</sup> and “The bloody soup is still bloody sour.”<sup>92</sup> This is to name only a few, however in contrast to *Chicken Soup with Barley* where food is something associated with personal emotions, in *The Kitchen* it

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>80</sup> Simona Cohen, *Animals as Disguised Symbols in Renaissance Art*, Brill (2008), p. 220.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> De Lima, “Wesker: A Cook preparing the meal of human despair.”

<sup>85</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, From *Wesker's Social Plays* (Oberon Books, London, 2008), p. 54.

<sup>86</sup> De Lima, “Wesker: A Cook preparing the meal of human despair.”

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, p. 54.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.



appears to be devoid of any such meaning. It is objectified completely, our writer's brusque, direct tone of dialogue is evocative of this. In the most recent example that was taken, there is a repetition of both "b" and "s" sounds that convey how the character of the Head Waiter dramatically loses his temper, additionally this repetition also shows how the employees of the kitchen have become so accustomed to food that they have now become exasperated with it.

A key feature to note is that no food appears on the stage, which suggests that this is a kitchen with no core because the main thing which we associate with a kitchen is missing. The absence of food may also denote that the characters who feature in this play are struggling to "maintain a decent level of existence."<sup>93</sup> Additionally, this is an absurdist characteristic of Wesker's play where there is an element of meaninglessness despite the fact that every single character in this large cast has a specific role within the kitchen, yet their roles appear to be fruitless as the audience will never see any actual dish presented at completion. This may also implicate that time has become wasted because the characters in the kitchen have become so mechanized that they have lost any imagination or spontaneity that they may have once had and which real food is a symbol of. Marx claims that workers "co-ordinate with the unconscious organs of the automaton, and together with them, subordinate to the central moving-power."<sup>94</sup> Marx's theory implies that the human workers become so engulfed with the mindless, repetitive nature of work that they themselves transform into the inanimate parts of a machine carrying out a specific function, man and machine become inseparable. In Part One the character of Peter whose role is to oversee "boiled fish"<sup>95</sup> shows a dismay towards those who oversee the running of the business, "He talks like that because it is summer now. Not enough staff to serve all his customers, that is

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<sup>93</sup> Francine Heather Conley, "Review of *The Kitchen*," *Theatre Journal* (Volume 50, No. 1, 1998), p. 125.

<sup>94</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume One*, Publication from Lulu.com, Published Online (2018), p. 283.

<sup>95</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, p. 9.

why he is kind. Wait till winter. Fewer customers. Then you'll see. The fish is burnt! Too much mise-en-place. The soup is sour!"<sup>96</sup> The language used by Peter is cynical in tone, by referring to two seasons he deliberately insinuates that when the "proprietor"<sup>97</sup> of the restaurant is making a lot of money that he is a "kind old man."<sup>98</sup> However, when this is not the case, he becomes hypercritical and unpleasant and his staff will unfortunately bear the brunt of this. In this example of dialogue Wesker conveys how the food in this restaurant is viewed clinically as a means of making money and not as something associated with creativity or individuality.

Iball makes the assertion that "food draws attention to its own life, its own presence"<sup>99</sup> and "highlights the 'liveness' of the theatre."<sup>100</sup> She implies that the organic nature of food mirrors the action of a live theatre performance. She is also suggesting that having real food on the stage helps to authenticate the story being told, hence removing a barrier between the audience and the actors. Her insinuation is a contrast to what Marx claims due to the fact that she views the presence of food on the stage as a means of normalising the dramatic situation, however I believe that Marx's interpretation is more fitting for *The Kitchen* due to this play's allegorical characteristic which is heightened through the absurd absence of food.

A closing comment on *The Kitchen* is a short analysis of the following excerpt from the "kitchen porter"<sup>101</sup> Dimitri. In the play's interlude he says "We got time on our hands. A prize of one million dollars for the best dream. Raymondo he wants a new woman every night. I want a workshop. Paul he wants a friend. Irishman he wants a bed, and Hans he just want the million dollars."<sup>102</sup> Dimitri is hopeful, hopeful that there will be more to life than the

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<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Iball, "Melting Moments: Bodies upstaged by the foodie gaze," p. 70.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, p. 9.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

“*crashing crockery*”<sup>103</sup> of the kitchen. By including this excerpt from Dimitri, Wesker suggests that dreams are what really make us live for tomorrow, the fact that the character of Dimitri delivers this phrase holds significance due to him being at the lower end of the hierarchal scale within this kitchen. However, he does not let this deter him from wishing for a better future.

The second play of *The Wesker Trilogy* is *Roots* (1959), in which a young woman returns to her rural home in Norfolk after studying in London. However, her dreams prove too much for her rural family to cope with, this is applicable to another assertion from De Lima who claims in reference to *The Kitchen* that it conveys how “men, in spite of being altogether, are separated by the barriers of language and individual prospects.”<sup>104</sup> A claim that can be applied to Beatie Bryant due to the fact that her individual prospects are too far reaching for her family to contemplate. However, when she returns to Norfolk what is made evident is how she talks the “same”<sup>105</sup> as she did before she left, causing the audience to question how far we can integrate ourselves into a new community.

(iii) Wesker’s *Roots* and the Battle between Potatoes and Victoria Sponge Cake.

“*Roots! The things you come from, the things that feed you. The things that make you proud of yourself-roots*”<sup>106</sup>

*Roots* is the second play of the *Wesker Trilogy*, the main female character Beatie returns from London where she is in a fledgling relationship with Ronnie Kahn, she has also been attending university. The setting of *Roots* is the Norfolk countryside where Beatie returns to her family home, a rural homeplace with “*no water laid on, nor electricity, nor gas.*”<sup>107</sup> The

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<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>104</sup> De Lima, “Wesker: A cook preparing a meal of human despair,” p. 28.

<sup>105</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Roots*, Taken from *The Trilogy*, p. 88.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

fact that Wesker highlights the lack of facilities evokes a mood of inevitability that our main female protagonist is returning to a homeplace that she won't be satisfied with due to its overt simplicity.

During the audience's first acquaintance with Beatie she cheerily says to her sister Jenny that "I'll bake you some pastries when I get to Mother's."<sup>108</sup> In this phrase, Wesker shows how food such as sweet pastries can be used as a way of gifting others, however this is then contrasted with the following phrase which draws attention to the practicalities of making indulgent foods such as pastry, "Father won't let you use his electricity for me, don't talk daft."<sup>109</sup> Therefore, although the second phrase in this example is anti-climactic in tone, food is shown to again act as a representation of bonds between the family. On the other hand, it depicts Beatie as quite childish because prior to this interaction she fails to show any appreciation for Jenny's "*beautiful-looking plaited loaf of bread*,"<sup>110</sup> instead simply saying that she "could eat it now."<sup>111</sup> The fact that Wesker specifies in this stage direction that the bread is highly delectable in appearance conveys the amount of effort which Jenny has gone to, and it shows how the audience's attention should obviously be drawn towards the bread. In culture, bread may be viewed as a symbol of how financially secure a household is. Prior to Jenny's plaited bread reaching the table, Beatie's naivety surrounding life is exposed through the following interaction with her sister: "BEATIE: [*suddenly looking around the room at the general chaos*]: Jenny Beales, just look at this house. Look at it! JENNY: I'm looking. What's wrong? BEATIE: Let's clean it up? JENNY: Clean up what? BEATIE: Are you going to live in this house all your life? JENNY: You gonna buy us another?"<sup>112</sup> Beatie's idealism is contrasted with Jenny's realism about life. The impression that the actor depicting

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<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

Beatie should give is of her demeaning attitude towards both her sister and her sister's home. The interaction between Beatie and her sister is awkward because of Beatie's newfound, idealistic views honed by her university education, something which her sister does not have. The level to which Beatie has been educated in contrast to Jenny's husband Jimmy arises from the following interaction between the two characters: "BEATIE: [*explaining-not trying to get one over on him*]: Ever heard of Chaucer, Jimmy? JIMMY: No. BEATIE: Do you know the M.P. for this constituency? JIMMY: What you drivin' at gal-don't give me no riddles. BEATIE: Do you know how the British Trade Union Movement started? And do you believe in strike action?"<sup>113</sup> However, the ironic thing about this interaction is that Beatie comes across as the ignorant party in this conversation due to the fact that she deliberately appears to expose Jimmy's lack of knowledge about current affairs which will appear both tasteless and unfair of her.

In contrast to Beatie, Jenny who is married and now running a house of her own with a child has not had the same opportunities as Beatie, yet she is excelling in her domestic efforts despite the "ole ovens"<sup>114</sup> that Beatie ridicules. In this play Wesker contrasts the menial with the specialised as one stage direction reads that "MRS BRYANT *continues to peel potatoes as Beatie proceeds to separate four eggs, the yolks of which she starts whipping with sugar.*"<sup>115</sup> This staging conveys the difference between the whipping of egg whites for Beatie's cake, taking place beside the monotonous nature of peeling potatoes, a basic, staple ingredient to an abundance of dishes. The outspoken Mr Bryant then exclaims that "I aren't spendin' money on electricity bills so's you can make every Tom, Dick and Harry a sponge cake,"<sup>116</sup> a condescending comment from Beatie's father which suggests that Mr Bryant is

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<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

not a man who appreciates his daughter's spontaneous nature, rather that he is frustrated due to the insecurity of his job which he has no control over, therefore his daughter and wife bear the brunt of his domination over this "*tied cottage*."<sup>117</sup> It is also important to note that a cottage which is tied is one in which an employee is provided with a dwelling by their employer, therefore Mr Bryant is literally dependent on someone with a greater authority than him for the roof over his head. His comment may also allude to how he is not encouraging her to become sexually promiscuous which the audience does see when she tells Jenny that her and Ronnie would "make love"<sup>118</sup> after rows, suggesting a free and easy attitude to sex. Mr Bryant is shown to use his futile patriarchal power over the household to overrule his daughter, he says that "I pay the electricity bill and I says she isn't bakin."<sup>119</sup> The two key words that require analysis in this phrase are "pay"<sup>120</sup> and "bakin."<sup>121</sup> due to Mr Bryant asserting his financial control over the household with the goal of placing constraints over what Beatie desires to do when she is at home. He pays the electricity bill which supplies power to the oven, therefore he believes that he should dictate how and when the oven is used. Simultaneously, Mr Bryant conveys a miserly attitude concerning his money by taking the stance that his two daughters should be financially independent once they leave home. He bluntly says that if "Jenny wants cakes, she can make 'em herself."<sup>122</sup> Mr Bryant's tone of language is imperative and he appears to represent a fatalistic attitude present in a significant number of the working-class community in England. Ultimately, this fatalistic attitude manifests itself through the inactivity that he shows in relation to the state of flux that his workplace appears to be going through. In his workplace large numbers of employees are being made redundant, Beatie asks her father why "can't you do something to stop the

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

sackings?”<sup>123</sup> He replies that they are as “sharp as a pig’s scream”<sup>124</sup> and that you “just *can’t* do nothing.”<sup>125</sup> The interaction between Beatie and Mr Bryant is intriguing, Beatie’s use of language has the same tone as a chime of protest with “stop the sackings,”<sup>126</sup> the simile her father retorts with conveys the pain and unpredictability of life because of the uncertainty over employment. The word “can’t”<sup>127</sup> in this instance has been written by Wesker in italic font which if adhered to by the actor who plays Mr Bryant should convey his mood of frustration and powerlessness at being unable to stand up against the management of his workplace. This frustration is largely vented on his wife and daughter in this scene and his disregard for the food which they make is epitomised by his chauvinistic, one-dimensional attitude, “let’s hev grub and not so much o’ the lip woman.”<sup>128</sup>

In the aftermath of Beatie and her mother carrying out their opposing culinary tasks which make the cultural differences between Beatie and her mother become apparent, Mrs Bryant who has a liking for the commercially popular music of the time such as Jimmy Samson’s “I’ll wait for you in the heaven’s blue,”<sup>129</sup> tells Beatie to turn off “*Mendelssohn’s Fourth Symphony*.”<sup>130</sup> It is worth noting that the song that Mrs Bryant has a liking for never existed in real life whereas Mendelssohn’s Fourth Symphony did, the significance of this is that Wesker is deliberately exposing the gullibility of Mrs Bryant as she embraces a faceless, run-of-the-mill, stereotypical love song instead of appreciating a classical piece. After this the two characters share an emotional interaction where Beatie harshly tells her mother that “no wonder I don’t know anything about anything. I never heard nothing but dance music

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<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

because you always turned off the classics,”<sup>131</sup> which suggests that an appreciation of the fine arts and music is inculcated within our domestic and social environments. However, through the character of Beatie, Wesker appears to personify the frustrations of someone from a “*tied cottage*”<sup>132</sup> who desires to have the artistic opportunities of someone from London but who lacks the capital and moral support to do so. Though contradiction is evident in Wesker’s construction of Beatie as she herself has a partiality for comic books as the following stage direction from Act One, scene one makes apparent “*BEATIE makes herself at home. Nearby is a pile of comics. She picks one up and reads.*”<sup>133</sup> The fact that the phrase “herself at home”<sup>134</sup> is used in this stage direction suggests that the comic books provide a nostalgic comfort for Beatie, and that she is staying true to her own roots when she does the “lazy things”<sup>135</sup> that she likes doing when at home. The repetition of “h” sounds in this stage direction are also emphatic of how this is Beatie staying true to her own identity and not altering herself to satisfy her cosmopolitan love interest Ronnie. She then proceeds to say that Ronnie does not support her liking for what he sees as a childish pursuit for an educated young woman by rhetorically saying “A comic? For a young woman of twenty-two?”<sup>136</sup>

In addition to ties between family members, food can also be symbolic of the strength of relations within a community, the outgoing Mrs Bryant declares “there go Sam Martin’s fish van. He’ll be calling along here in an hour,”<sup>137</sup> highlighting the sense of unity that is unconsciously created by people purchasing food from one private, sole trader. A trader who visits everyone, and as a result inadvertently creates a sense of community spirit in contrast to a larger commercial corporate business selling the same products. We could also say that the

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<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.



fact that Sam Martin's van visits everybody tells us that he is selling something which most people in the community can afford, so once again the quality of food is not being dictated by a family's material wealth. By having a grocer who dispenses food straight from a van is a positive thing, because the produce will not have gone through the pollution of an urban environment. This can be compared with Wesker's characterisation of Mrs Bryant as she has lived in the Norfolk countryside all of her life and is a traditional, English homemaker whom Beatie criticises for having a limited taste in art and what the expectations of women in society should be. The goods which Sam Martin brings are accepted by Mrs Bryant as there is no debate and no inquisition because of the lack of options like her own life. Furthermore, it perhaps reflects the monopoly which the production company HM Tennent Ltd had in the theatre scene of London during the 1940s and 1950s, Dominic Shellard writes that this company was "dedicated to creating viable financial concerns,"<sup>138</sup> therefore Shellard accentuates that post World War Two drama was not based on quality or realism but on commerce and what was in high demand from a society that yearned for patriotic nostalgia.

The staging of food in *Roots* has significant meaning symbolically within the text. A marked difference between *Roots* and *Chicken Soup with Barley* is how in the former play food is used for the entertainment of people or a person whereas in the latter it is only used as a means of sustenance and to maintain close familial relationships. Prior to the expected arrival of Ronnie, what is made blatantly apparent is that Mrs Bryant has made a large amount of effort where Wesker writes the stage direction that "*there are cakes and biscuits on plates and glass stands. Bread and butter, butter in a dish, tomatoes, cheese, jars of pickled onions, sausage rolls, dishes of tinned fruit-it is a spread!*"<sup>139</sup> The specificity in Wesker's writing with this list of items suggests that the staging should be reflective of the

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<sup>138</sup> Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (Yale University Press, Yale, 2008), p. 1930 as per publication available via Google Books.

<sup>139</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, p. 130.

particularities of food preparation where “everything is prescribed.”<sup>140</sup> The dainty nature of “*glass stands*”<sup>141</sup> which he specifies are reminiscent of Afternoon Tea which was referred to earlier in the chapter. In this stage direction the presence of plates and glass stands convey how Mrs Bryant who lives a rural, sheltered life as Wesker writes that she “*spends most of the day on her own*”<sup>142</sup> and that the “*only people she sees are the tradesmen, her husband, the family when they pop in occasionally,*”<sup>143</sup> therefore for Ronnie who is from London Wesker conveys how this is Mrs Bryant’s way of doing her daughter proud. I feel that this can be compared to the following section from a precursor of the genre that came to be known as domestic realism which is Walter Greenwood’s *Love on the Dole* (1933) “Pay day. No scratching and scraping today; kitchen table littered with groceries; sugar in buff bags; fresh brown crusted loaves; butter and bacon in greaseproof paper; an amorphous, white-papered parcel, bloodstained, the Sunday joint; tin of salmon for tomorrow’s tea; string bag full of vegetables; bunch of rhubarb with the appropriate custard powder alongside.”<sup>144</sup> A comparison can be made between Greenwood’s text and Wesker’s due to food being used as an indicator for how opulent a household is. The fact that Greenwood’s salubrious description of food is preceded by the monosyllabic phrase “pay day”<sup>145</sup> conveys how money ultimately dictates this because when there is an abundance of money then there will also be an abundance of food. Pathos is evoked for Mrs Bryant because of Beatie’s upsetting attitude as is represented by phrasing such as “When Ronnie come I want him to see we’re proper. I’ll buy you another bowl so’s you don’t wash up in the same one as you wash your hands in and I’ll get some more tea cloths so’s you’ont use the towels.”<sup>146</sup> This phrase comes from Act

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<sup>140</sup> Starr, “Food and Holiness: Cooking as a Sacred Act among Middle-Eastern Jewish Women,” p. 134.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Walter Greenwood, *Love on the Dole* (Penguin Books, London, 1974), p. 55.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

Two, scene one of the play then in Act Three when the fabulous spread which Mrs Bryant puts on is revealed, an audience will feel that Beatie should show more appreciation for her mother no matter how lacking in intellectuality she is. Like Sarah, Mrs Bryant shows her love through her domesticity. Wesker directs in Act Three that “*none of this will be eaten,*”<sup>147</sup> it is a stage direction which is forceful and specific in style, suggesting to those who are producing this play for the theatre that this is staging which should be adhered to. The fact that he instructs for not a modicum of food to be consumed during this particular meal coincides with the inevitable no-show of Beatie’s boyfriend Ronnie. Perhaps the food in this instance denotes that because nothing has been eaten then nothing will come of Beatie’s fledgling relationship with the idealistic socialist in this part of *The Trilogy*. There is a sense that all of the preparation and formality has gone to waste which provokes a feeling of disappointment from the audience as expectation is created through the preparation of Mrs Bryant’s spread for Ronnie. We also notice in this passage that Wesker specifies that the fruit should be “tinned”<sup>148</sup> and not fresh which suggests that Wesker is paying homage to how the availability of certain foods was starting to change and become more accessible to those from all classes in society. His attitude appears to compare to the attitude of Richard Hoggart who also viewed canned food in a positive light, when writing about his parents’ generation he extolls how this: “World had many advantages to offer; cheaper and more varied clothes, cheaper and more varied food, frozen meat at a few pence the pound, tinned pineapples for next to nothing, cheap tinned savouries, fish-and-chips round the corner.”<sup>149</sup>

Therefore, Hoggart’s opinion of tinned food was a positive one as he viewed this as a way of making the working-class in society have more access to vitamin c and protein rich food.

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<sup>147</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, p. 130.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, 1957), p. 11.

Wesker's representation of "tinned food"<sup>150</sup> is also a notable contrast from how the poet John Betjeman viewed the commodity in his poem from 1958 "Slough," a poem in which Betjeman's snobbish attitudes towards a working-class provincial town are evoked. When describing Slough he says that "There isn't grass to graze a cow,"<sup>151</sup> which denotes the sterility of the environment, a place where there is no prospect of nourishment. Furthermore, Betjeman refers to food which is tinned to heighten his illustration of an environment that has become unnaturally processed, a place without identity or character, "Tinned fruit, tinned meat, tinned milk, tinned beans, tinned minds, tinned breath."<sup>152</sup> In *Roots* the durability of the tinned fruit may be part of the staging to purposely act as a contrast to the inevitable failure and temporary nature of Beatie's relationship with Ronnie. It also reflects the artificiality of Beatie's nature and resentment for her roots whereas fresh, unpreserved fruit is natural as well as being true to where it originated from. We can also say that the specificity of Wesker's directions relate to a point made by Iball who insinuates that "a banquet could be described as a spread of food that has been made theatrical already."<sup>153</sup> Iball is therefore suggesting that a large selection of food organised on the stage is used merely for visual impact and as a decoration on the stage. Furthermore, Iball's comment accentuates the opinion that the vivid beauty of the food on stage heightens the anti-climactic mood of the entirety of this act as the beautiful spread goes to waste. However, food displayed onstage can also act as a template in which pivotal interactions between the characters occur, I believe that Iball perhaps overlooks this important aspect to the presence of food. Diane Purkiss claims that "dramatic representations of feasts and banquets are interested in exploring the duplicity of hospitality,"<sup>154</sup> which suggests that in drama there is an ulterior motive that

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<sup>150</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, p. 130.

<sup>151</sup> John Betjeman, "Slough," From *Collected Poems* (John Murray, London, 1997), pp. 20-21.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> Iball, "Melting Moments: Bodies upstaged by the foodie gaze," p. 77.

<sup>154</sup> Diane Purkiss, "The Masque of Food: Staging and Banqueting in Shakespeare's England," *Shakespeare Studies*, Volume 42 (2014), p. 95.

contrasts with the perfection and visually appealing nature of staged food. The duplicitousness of *Roots* is seen after the food is laid out in Act Three, scene one, the tension between Beatie and her mother reaches a climax with the stage direction that “*the murmur of the family sitting down to eat grows as BEATIE’S last cry is heard,*”<sup>155</sup> so eating in this case is used by Beatie’s family in order to distract from her philosophical ideas. Therefore, the perfect spread of food in this case juxtaposes with the imperfect relations between Beatie and her mother who chooses to ignore what she views as Beatie’s “high-class squit.”<sup>156</sup> Furthermore, we are informed that Mrs Bryant adds the finishing touches to her trifle by “puttin’ these glass cherries”<sup>157</sup> on top of it. We automatically assume that she is referring to edible glacé rather than “glass”<sup>158</sup> cherries. However, if the audience were to take this literally, we can understand Iball’s assertion which is that a formal spread of food on the stage is solely a visual theatrical device of which “*none*”<sup>159</sup> of it “*will be eaten.*”<sup>160</sup> By mentioning glass, perhaps Wesker is also wanting to evoke the fragile nature of relationships between Beatie and her family and how this uneaten spread ultimately symbolises the cracks in their relationship. *Roots* is the second play of three from Wesker’s *Trilogy*, the final play *I’m Talking About Jerusalem* (1960) which is examined in the next section of this chapter represents the realisation that a utopian society completely free from urban capitalism is unattainable whenever you are trying to run a commercial enterprise and provide for your family.

(iv) The Search for Strawberries and Dreams in *I’m Talking About Jerusalem*.

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<sup>155</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, p.148.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 130.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

“Colonel: To come to the country? A fine life, a fine life.”<sup>161</sup>

In the final play of *The Trilogy*, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, the role of food is less obvious and more oblique than the previous two plays of *The Trilogy*. The title of this play refers to William Blake's 1808 poem "Jerusalem" which features passionate patriotic language such as "I will not cease from mental flight"<sup>162</sup> until Jerusalem is built on "England's green and pleasant land."<sup>163</sup> Blake's specification of the green and pleasant land immediately causes us to think of a rural setting which relates to Ada and Dave who decide to leave the stressfulness of the city of London for the "fresh air"<sup>164</sup> of the countryside. The wholesomeness of the countryside is symbolic of the ideals of socialism which promote equality and self-sufficiency as is represented by Dave's initial attempts to craft furniture without the assistance of machines. He presents himself to the audience as overconfident "There I shall work and here, ten yards from me, where I can see and hear them, will be my family. And they will share in my work and I shall share in their lives. I don't want to be married to strangers. I've seen the city make strangers of husbands and wives, but not me, not me and my wife."<sup>165</sup> The repetition of the personal pronoun "me"<sup>166</sup> in this excerpt is indicative of an egotistical side to Dave's characterisation also as he would appear to be mainly thinking of his own ambition whereas his wife's desires are treated as secondary concerns.

In addition to this trait Dave also simplifies what it takes to manufacture something effectively this is made apparent to the audience in Act One, scene one as Dave and Ada are moving into their new house in the country. When in conversation with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Removal Man

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<sup>161</sup> Arnold Wesker, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy* (Penguin Books, London, 1979) p. 168.

<sup>162</sup> William Blake, "Jerusalem," link as follows: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/poetryseason/poems/jerusalem.shtml>.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>165</sup> Wesker, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, Taken from *The Trilogy*, p. 165.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

about the island of Ceylon “2<sup>nd</sup> RM: We didn’t see anything precious about living in mud huts and working in disease. Dave: No, no. You miss the point-I’m talking about the *way* they worked, not the conditions...”<sup>167</sup> Ceylon was the previous name for Sri Lanka which achieved independence from the British Empire in 1948. In 1938 L.E. Blaze wrote the *History of Ceylon* at the start of this text Blaze extols the fecundity and promise of the land itself by writing of “its delightful climate, its valuable commercial products...the wealth that lay hidden in the heart of its mountains and in the sands of its rivers.”<sup>168</sup> This is an idealised view of the country which corresponds to the ideas which Dave has for his life in the countryside. Additionally, he says to Ada with a tone of superiority that “we’ve made our garden grow haven’t we?”<sup>169</sup> which demonstrates how he is headstrong and refuses to listen to the common sense which Ada displays as is symbolised by her repeatedly asking him if he wanted “salad”<sup>170</sup> for his dinner. Dave’s dogmatic nature is heightened through the repetition of “g” sounds in this phrase as they convey his overbearing, pushy nature. When moving towards the end of the play idealism ultimately gives way to realism, Dave goes to the bank to ask them to “loan him money then he can buy machinery and his work’ll be easier,”<sup>171</sup> so the audience see how his quest for Jerusalem has been in vain with a subtle reference to Blake’s imperative line “Bring me my spear: O clouds unfold”<sup>172</sup> which is similar to Dave saying “I picked up my spear and I’ve stuck it deep,”<sup>173</sup> telling the audience that he tried in vain to make life about quality and not profit. However, he comes to realise that low profit usually means a poor standard of living as is exemplified by Dave repeatedly referring to money in the following excerpt “Of course we need a little praise. [*Dips in his pocket for*

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<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

<sup>168</sup> L.E. Blaze, *History of Ceylon* (Asian Educational Services, Sri Lanka, 1938), p. 2.

<sup>169</sup> Wesker, *I’m Talking About Jerusalem*, p. 177.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

<sup>172</sup> Blake, “Jerusalem.”

<sup>173</sup> Wesker, *I’m Talking About Jerusalem*, p. 206.

*coins*] Or maybe you want me to buy it from you! Like in the market! Here, two half-crowns for half-minute of praise. I'll buy it! You can't afford to give it away? I'll pay for it! Five bob for a few kind words, saying we're not mad. Here y'are-take it! Take it!"<sup>174</sup>

Food in this play holds different representational value, for example Ronnie links the political change of the time with food by saying that "it's schmaltz herring and plum pudding for the meanwhile,"<sup>175</sup> which is a contrast to "strawberries and cream."<sup>176</sup> Schmaltz herring and plum pudding contrast each other in terms of their origins. Schmaltz herring or pickled herring would be a "recognisably central European Ashkenazi Jewish dish,"<sup>177</sup> whilst plum pudding or Christmas pudding is a quintessentially English dish. The Englishness of the dish was interpreted and emphasised in the 1805 illustration by James Gillray known as "Plum Pudding in Danger." In Gillray's illustration the plum pudding is used to symbolise the threat posed to England by the French during the Napoleonic Wars. One of a series of cartoons by Gillray that "mocked"<sup>178</sup> Napoleon Bonaparte whilst upholding English "patriotism."<sup>179</sup> The spherical, well-formed pudding therefore becomes associated with English stability and military strength: "the pudding, like a speckled cannon-ball, so hard and firm, blazing in half of half-a-quatern of ignited brandy."<sup>180</sup> This short passage comes from Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* from 1843, and his use of combative language such as "cannon-ball,"<sup>181</sup> "blazing"<sup>182</sup> and "ignited"<sup>183</sup> complement the importance of the pudding within the framework of the domestic household so that it appears to radiate with a warmth and strength

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<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Panayi, Panikos, "Migration, Cuisine and Integration: The Anglo-Jewish Cookbook From the Lady to the Princess," *New Formations*, Volume 74 (2011), p. 114.

<sup>178</sup> Anita McConnell and Simon Heneage, "Gillray, James," Oxford University Press, Oxford, 24<sup>th</sup> September 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/10754>.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (Vintage, London, 2009), p. 63.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*



that mirrors family unity. The fact that Ronnie associates these two dishes together shows how the Kahn family who consider themselves as Jewish have “incorporated English foods”<sup>184</sup> into their diet. Panikos Panayi states that food acts as a “marker of identity and integration.”<sup>185</sup> Therefore, like plum pudding and roast beef being associated with British identity, Ronnie has also adopted plum pudding as an Anglo-Jewish dish by using it in a casual conversation with his sister, therefore showing how when a dish is adopted by any culture of society it becomes second nature to that particular culture.

The significance in the twentieth century of strawberries and cream is that they are associated with the upper-echelons of English society through their associations with the All-England Tennis Club and Lord’s Cricket Club. Like cricket and tennis, strawberries are a fruit associated with summer and therefore more sought after because of their temporary nature. Strawberries coming into season is a quintessentially English experience that conjures imagery of idealised summer days with “lunches in tents,”<sup>186</sup> “tall hats”<sup>187</sup> and “pretty frocks.”<sup>188</sup> Imagery which excludes a large proportion of English society post World War Two. Therefore, by making a marked contrast between strawberries and cream and schmaltz herring and plum pudding, Ronnie draws attention to how what food you receive is dependent on how high your standard of living is. Wesker uses strawberries and cream to symbolise the ideals which socialism aspires to “Out go the slums, whist! And the National Health Service comes in,”<sup>189</sup> contrasting the austerity that is being experienced by the Kahn family at present “None of the easy life for them, none of the comforts of electricity,”<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Panikos, “Migration, Cuisine and Integration: The Anglo-Jewish Cookbook from the Lady to the Princess,” p. 113.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Wesker, *I’m Talking about Jerusalem*, p. 157.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

which is associated with the bleakness of winter that we associate with plum pudding as it is traditionally eaten during the Christmas period.

Later in the play Dobson associates the amount of rich food that was consumed by his former wife with gluttony and obesity. Dobson bluntly says that “she chewed all the time, you know. Don’t believe me? I watched her! Chewing all the time. Even in bed, before she went to sleep-an apple or a piece of gateau.”<sup>191</sup> Wesker repeats the verb of “chewing,”<sup>192</sup> commonly associated with ruminant mammals to convey how eating can lose its enjoyment if it is done to excess. Wesker’s characterisation of Dobson suggests a war veteran who is suffering from malaise caused by anti-climactic feelings from his role in the Second World War: “DOBSON: Oh, no Simmonds, please. No old chums and their war memories- I’m on holday. I’ll help you chop your wood-I’ll even dance round the maypole with you-but no heart-searching, I’m a tired man.”<sup>193</sup> The fact that Dobson says that he feels “tired”<sup>194</sup> of “heart-searching”<sup>195</sup> informs the audience that he has given up on the complexities of humanity and now only wants light-hearted activities that require little in the way of mental strength. His frustration with life at present can be seen through his use of military jargon such as “Tilley lamps-the lot. You two have really taken your backward march seriously, eh? Dead serious-cor!”<sup>196</sup> Phrasing such as this is representative of his unhappiness and desire to dwell on the past, the jargon that he mistakes for normal language is indicative of this. A Tilley lamp is a lamp which was fuelled by burning paraffin, they were used both in domestic households and within the British Armed Forces in both World War One and World War Two. However, with the introduction of electricity into the domestic household the demand for them inevitably fell post World War Two. The fact that in the interaction which follows

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<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

between him and Dave we see how Dobson overbearingly condemns Dave's endeavour to not only "want"<sup>197</sup> socialism but to also "live it."<sup>198</sup> In a bombastic use of language from Wesker, Dobson says "No banks or offices-no commercial market! No humdrum jobs, then no anything!"<sup>199</sup> so through Wesker's characterisation of Dobson there is a representation of the cynicism of capitalists in society towards the "social, as opposed to an individualist, approach to life,"<sup>200</sup> which socialist values promote. The fact that Dave starts his enterprise away from the city of London may be resonant of Wesker's own efforts to make theatre as accessible in the provincial towns as it was in the cities. He saw the arts as a means of narrowing the inequality that exists within society by encouraging those who were in trade unions to get involved with the arts. His main objective was the hope of discovering "a new audience for the arts,"<sup>201</sup> an audience not dictated by how little or how much disposable income they had available to them. The fact that Dobson scathingly reduces his wife's eating into a matter of disgust indicates that whenever capitalism and mass consumerism drive society then the appreciation of something which provides social cohesion such as food becomes irrelevant and unimportant, instead it becomes meaningless fodder. This assertion reflects the comment that was made in reference to *The Kitchen* where Wesker's characters become so exasperated by food because of its association with "Money, Money, Money!"<sup>202</sup> that the creativity of making a dish has been disregarded. This is a reflection of Wesker's own opinion of theatre houses who exploited the length of plays for their own gains due to people purchasing refreshments during the intervals. At the end of Part One of the kitchen he sarcastically includes this suggestion in the following stage direction: "*It is of course possible*

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<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 164.

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>200</sup> John Cannon and Robert Crowcroft, *A Dictionary of British History*, Third Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016).

<sup>201</sup> Michael Billington, "Arnold Wesker: Food for Thought," *The Guardian*, London, 21<sup>st</sup> May, 2012.

<sup>202</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, p. 39.

to perform the play without an interval.”<sup>203</sup> A statement which is indicative of our writer’s dislike of the commercialism that exists within the theatrical establishments due to the blatant tone of cynicism prevalent in this instruction.

(v) “The King’s Daughters:”<sup>204</sup> Wesker and an Anti-Tale made for Foodies.

In the final section of this chapter, I will analyse how food complements female eroticism, and though there is a significant difference between female eroticism and the themes analysed previous in this chapter it is of equal importance to Wesker’s representation of food. *The King’s Daughters* is arguably Wesker’s most erotic, sexualised work. I chose this work from Wesker’s later writing career because *The King’s Daughters* is a work which has been deliberately neglected. Therefore, it features in this thesis because one of my objectives is to recognise Wesker’s later works and to identify that they were as important as his earlier works. Emma Tristram claims that this text is dominated by “manic verbal frothings.”<sup>205</sup> Tristram rightly asserts that Wesker’s writing in this text has a superlative amount of adjectival language. Natasha Fairweather writes that “every kind of sexual peccadillo is explored here... Food is the dominant prop.”<sup>206</sup> The fact that Fairweather describes food as a “prop”<sup>207</sup> is because of her belief that it enhances the sensuality of Wesker’s writing, whilst her use of the word “dominant”<sup>208</sup> implicates that food overpowers all other descriptions within the text. Wesker’s text is obviously modelled in the image of the traditional fairy-tale story. However, *The King’s Daughters* is what is contemporarily referred to as an anti-tale, due to its exhibition of all of the common anti-tale characteristics such as “social critique,

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<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>204</sup> Angela Carter, *The Virago Book of Fairy-Tales* (Virago Press, London, 1991).

<sup>205</sup> Emma Tristram, “Princess Amissia and her Sisters,” *The Times Literary Supplement*, (1998).

<sup>206</sup> Natasha Fairweather, “Beastly Girls,” *Times* [London, England] 21 Nov. 1998: 19[S1]. The Times Digital Archive. Web. 19<sup>th</sup> June (2017).

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

satire<sup>209</sup> and “rebelliousness”<sup>210</sup> and its opposition to the moral values that are of detrimental importance to any fairy-tale such as good conquering evil. Whilst fairy-tales predominantly feature “infantalized,”<sup>211</sup> “patriarchal”<sup>212</sup> settings anti-tales commonly have “adult themes”<sup>213</sup> and a “feminist”<sup>214</sup> viewpoint, which is exemplified through the Princesses taking control of their own bodies and not being controlled or dictated to by their father. Instead their father the King is ironically characterised to the reader as powerless, which is a contrast to the traditional hero figure of folklore who is seen as dominant and all-encompassing. In my view Wesker’s style of writing resembles the nineteenth century writer Christina Rossetti and more specifically her fairy-tale poem “The Goblin Market.” Wesker writes about the “crust covered casks of the jellied clotis root, flavoured with ground bitter almonds.”<sup>215</sup> In comparison Rossetti writes about the “bright-fire-like barberries,”<sup>216</sup> that the all-encompassing goblin men sell in order to tempt the innocent maidens Laura and Lizzie who knead “cakes of whitest wheat,”<sup>217</sup> and make food “for dainty mouths to eat.”<sup>218</sup> In terms of how Wesker depicts the virtuous aspects of the twelve promiscuous princesses in his story, he systematically at the beginning of each chapter describes their lady-like interests such as “tapestry,”<sup>219</sup> gardening, painting, “singing”<sup>220</sup> and charity work. Then as each chapter moves to a conclusion, we read of how they engage in a graphic sexual activity with one or more people and sometimes animals. The female character who is introduced at the start of the

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<sup>209</sup> Martine Hennard Dutheil: Review of "Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment" *Marvels & Tales* (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 2012), p. 277.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> *Anti-Tales: The Uses of Disenchantment*, Edited by Catriona McAra, David Calvin (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, 2011), p. 3.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>215</sup> Arnold Wesker, *The King's Daughters* (Quartet Books, London, 1998), p. 97.

<sup>216</sup> Christina Rossetti, “The Goblin Market,” Taken from *Goblin Market and Other Poems* (Dover Thrift Editions, New York, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>219</sup> Wesker, *The King's Daughters*, p. 74.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

chapter is the personification of female biddableness and subservience this is a marked contrast to the young woman at the conclusion who acts according to her lustful desires. This is a key structural feature to *The King's Daughters* which will be analysed further in chapter two of the thesis which examines the representation of women in Wesker's later work.

Susan Honeyman claims that food is a way of "manipulating"<sup>221</sup> the human body. Honeyman's assertion is relevant to Wesker's novel and indeed the plays which have been referred to previously in this chapter. By making food a paramount part of his writing, he is manipulating his audience/readers by making it mouth-wateringly attractive to watch and to read. He writes that "she snuggled into the crook of his neck, enveloped by the smell of apples which rose from his weathered body,"<sup>222</sup> a highly sensory use of language illustrating how the physical attraction is heightened between these two characters because of the tempting scent of fruit. However, Wesker may also choose the smell of apples because of the biblical significance, specifically female transgression symbolised through the character of Eve in the book of Genesis. Apples also feature in the Song of Songs, where "May your breasts be like clusters of grapes on the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples."<sup>223</sup> Overall food in this text by Wesker is used mainly to accompany and heighten the sensuality and eroticism and to convey how this is a text that presents human nature at its most base and impulsive and to go against what Honeyman describes as the denial of satisfying "certain bodily urges."<sup>224</sup>

(vi) "She promised herself many things...To stop drinking, to cut out chocolates..."<sup>225</sup>

Wesker and eating alone.

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<sup>221</sup> Susan Honeyman, "Gingerbread Wishes and Candy(land) Dreams: The lure of food in Cautionary tales of Consumption," *Marvels and Tales*, Wayne State University Press, Volume 21 (2007), p. 195.

<sup>222</sup> Wesker, *The King's Daughters*, p. 52.

<sup>223</sup> The Bible, The New International Version, <https://biblehub.com/niv/songs/7.htm>.

<sup>224</sup> Honeyman, "Gingerbread Wishes and Candy(land) Dreams: The lure of food in Cautionary tales of Consumption," p. 206.

<sup>225</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, Taken from *One-Woman Plays* (Penguin Books, London 1989), p. 59.

In Wesker's one-woman play *The Mistress*, food and in particular chocolate is used to resonate the inextricable link between female sexuality and food. In this play chocolate is used as a means of accentuating the vulnerability felt by Samantha Milner who awaits contact from her married lover, yet Samantha is a contrary character. I make this assertion because yes she appears weak-willed as her married lover clearly treats her as a secondary concern within his life, as she willingly asks herself "why isn't it time for the phone to ring?"<sup>226</sup> but on the other hand this is a female character who is in demand from wealthy clients as a fashion designer, "You're a client. A rich, impatient, thoughtlessly demanding client who forgot she has a wedding in two days' time and needs an outfit."<sup>227</sup>

Wesker tempts the audience with a box of chocolates, in this particular example we can agree with Iball as she uses the analogy of sweets thrown towards the audience during a pantomime to symbolise how the audience themselves have their taste buds teased by the presence of food on the stage. Iball asserts that there exists a desire to "catch"<sup>228</sup> the "sweets at the pantomime"<sup>229</sup> because the "stage"<sup>230</sup> transforms them into "objects of desire."<sup>231</sup> Therefore through this observation Iball conveys how a writer may use food as a technique to gain and hold the audience's focus. Iball's analogy can also be applied to Samantha's relationship with her married lover, as him being formally attached to somebody else adds value to him which somebody who is unattached does not have. Samantha's smooth use of language with the repetition of rhetorical questions act to entice with "burnt sugar crunch in truffle? Roast almonds in cream? Soft toffee between biscuit? Oh look, a Jack Daniels

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<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>228</sup> Iball, "Melting Moments: Bodies upstaged by the foodie gaze," p. 78.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

liquor.”<sup>232</sup> We should therefore agree with Iball’s interpretation as this style of writing is attractive to read and like a box of chocolates, we are always guilty of desiring more.

Samantha indulges in the box of chocolates by herself which encourages pathos for her character because the shallow comfort which she finds in the chocolate is equivalent to the love that she is yearning for from another human being. A box of chocolates is quintessentially something that should be shared with others and this makes her isolation more acute. Wesker specifies that she has only “*the dummies*”<sup>233</sup> for company, so the chocolate box accentuates the loneliness which Samantha suffers from in this short play. However, having a box of chocolates to yourself could also be interpreted as an action of pure self-indulgence. Diane Barthel views the consumption of chocolate as the “impending”<sup>234</sup> capitulation of “sexual resistance...”<sup>235</sup> on the part of a woman, which an audience may see in the character of Samantha as she takes an easy going attitude towards her married lover’s indecision as to whether or not he will be meeting her in the evening “He *might* want to go to a theatre, a movie, a concert, a restaurant-or he might just want to *talk.*(*Pause.*) Or not. (*Pause.*) Make love or not.”<sup>236</sup> Wesker’s use of language in this example suggests the doubt and lack of reliability prevalent in Samantha’s relationship, this contributes to the audience perception of Samantha as weak-willed. Samantha’s repetition of past times that are associated with allusion and escapism also inform the interpretation of her as a character synonymous with isolation. However, I disagree with Barthel’s comment which suggests that Samantha is weak but do agree with her when she claims that “chocolates promise escape from the everyday into narcissistic retreat...”<sup>237</sup> because this is what

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<sup>232</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 72.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>234</sup> Diane Barthel, “Modernism and Marketing: The Chocolate Box Revisited,” *Theory, Culture and Society*, Volume 6 (SAGE London, Newbury Park and New Delhi), 1989, p. 433.

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 65.

<sup>237</sup> Barthel, “Modernism and Marketing: The Chocolate Box Revisited,” p. 432.



Samantha is wanting. First, in Wesker's phrase above we see how she always has a form of entertainment in mind, later in the play we see how she conveys her vanity in regard to her body, "I want my body firm, I want it to stay the way it is."<sup>238</sup> However, there is a key similarity between Wesker's female protagonist and the food in question, as "chocolate is capable of being moulded into a range of shapes and of being incorporated into a variety of concoctions."<sup>239</sup> This suggests a malleable nature reflective of both Samantha's unstable personal life and her profession as a "dress designer,"<sup>240</sup> in which she can create any identity for herself through the "paraphernalia"<sup>241</sup> that adorns the sanctuary of her "workshop."<sup>242</sup>

In *The Four Seasons* (1965) the gradual disintegration of a romantic relationship between two people is catalogued. During a specific part in this play the character of "*Beatrice goes to the oven and from it with oven cloths retrieves a 'cooked meal.'*"<sup>243</sup> The staging used by Wesker in this example can be compared to the ambiguous staging which he used previously in *Roots* where he instructed that nothing of the food was to be eaten. The fact that he places the phrase cooked meal inside speech marks suggests that there should be a mood of sarcasm as lifting a meal cooked from an oven is to a point stating the obvious. However, it may also suggest that society imposes certain stereotypical features onto men and women according to their gender, this is evoked through the ironic tone that Beatrice uses towards Adam when she says the line that "Your command is my wish."<sup>244</sup> A phrase in which Beatrice's tone color conveys her dismay at having to cook for Adam. Her dismay is contrasted with the dynamism of Adam who prepares an apple strudel live on the stage which is a sweet pastry dish. In comparison to *The King's Daughters* there are obvious biblical connotations to Adam

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<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 431.

<sup>240</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 59.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> Wesker, *The Four Seasons*, From *Wesker's Love Plays* (Oberon Books, London, 2008), p. 20.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*

preparing a dessert in which the primary ingredient is apple. It is possible that the implication through this choice of dessert is the inevitable failure of Adam's relationship with Beatrice, on the other hand apple strudel is a quintessentially Jewish dish due to the fact that it became part of the "Ashkenazic"<sup>245</sup> culture. It became part of this specific culture because a large number of the "professional bakers of Austria were Jewish,"<sup>246</sup> and the city of Vienna was where the "earliest recipe for Strudel"<sup>247</sup> was recorded during the seventeenth century. The relevance of the apple strudel to this chapter arises from the fact that this is our writer clearly paying homage to both his religious heritage and his love of cooking as he himself worked in Paris as a pastry chef at the restaurant "Le Rallye."<sup>248</sup>

The thread throughout Wesker's representation of food in which sexuality and food are linked comes to the fore again in *Lady Othello*. This work in contrast to the works analysed previously is set in 1970s New York and charts the will-they-won't-they love story between the dynamic African American Rosie Swanson and her stiff upper lip English lover Stanton Myers who also happens to be married. In terms of the characterisation of Rosie they may deduce that Wesker adheres to what Robert Staples sees as "white stereotypes about black immorality and hypersexuality,"<sup>249</sup> namely through Rosie's energetic approach to her relationship with Stanton. Descriptive stage directions such as "*expectant*,"<sup>250</sup> "*eager*"<sup>251</sup> and "*ferocious*"<sup>252</sup> all highlight the athleticism that Rosie is associated with. In contrast Judith who is Stanton's wife is unseen in this play, we only hear her voice, therefore unlike Rosie

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<sup>245</sup> Gil Marks, *The Encyclopaedia of Jewish Food* (John Wiley and Sons, 2010), accessed through Google Books: [https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=gFK\\_yx7Ps7cC&pg=PT1717&dq=apple+strudel+jewish&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiL5tOm9LnjAhWBuHEKHYNBpUQ6AEIODAD#v=onepage&q=apple%20strudel%20jewish&f=false](https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=gFK_yx7Ps7cC&pg=PT1717&dq=apple+strudel+jewish&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwiL5tOm9LnjAhWBuHEKHYNBpUQ6AEIODAD#v=onepage&q=apple%20strudel%20jewish&f=false).

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> "Obituary: Arnold Wesker: Playwright of stark working-class dramas," *The Irish Times*, April 16<sup>th</sup> 2016.

<sup>249</sup> Robert Staples, *Exploring Black Sexuality* (Rowman and Littlefield, Lanham, 2006), p. 25.

<sup>250</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, Taken from *Lady Othello and Other Plays* (Penguin Books, London, 1990), p. 198.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>252</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

her physical presence is entirely absent. She is presented by Wesker as moral and loyal through language such as “all my instincts are to fight tooth and nail to keep you as part of our family,”<sup>253</sup> therefore she is characterised as a woman who is dedicated to the welfare of her family’s unity. The white stereotype of black female sexuality which Staples draws our attention to also corresponds to how Wesker constructs Judith who is wholly sexually unavailable so she could be seen as “aloof from the world of lust and passion.”<sup>254</sup> This is a clear act of opposition to the character of Rosie who has an “availability”<sup>255</sup> in terms of her body. These points all show how Stanton can therefore place his wife “on a pedestal”<sup>256</sup> because of her controlled, asexual nature. In this play in comparison to the *The King’s Daughters* eroticism is related to the temptation which is inevitable due to the scrumptious descriptions of food that are described in the staging. In Act One, scene five Rosie has on one hand “a dish of kedgerree”<sup>257</sup> and on the other “plates with a foilful of spare ribs on top,”<sup>258</sup> particularly the latter phrase in this case suggests that there is an excess of food in this meal by specifying that the foil wrapper in which the ribs are wrapped is full. When Rosie and Stanton start their meal their behaviour towards each other becomes more flirtatious and playful as the following interaction illustrates “Stanton: Can I have my spare ribs, please? *Holding his gaze she reaches for a spare rib, presents it to his mouth, he bites, she bites,*”<sup>259</sup> in offering it to him for the second time she “pulls it away, smears his lips with it then *tongues the grease off his lips, melting into a kiss.*”<sup>260</sup> A highly sexually charged use of staging from Wesker, the animalistic method of eating spare ribs becomes synonymous with the impulsive relationship that Rosie and Stanton share. By choosing spare ribs as the dish

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<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>254</sup> Staples, *Exploring Black Sexuality*, p. 19.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>257</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 204.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

that these two characters eat Wesker is deliberately playing devil's advocate with the Jewish religion here in regard to kosher meat in order to accentuate the lack of logic in regard to these two people and their relationship which crosses barriers in terms of both culture and race. However, this can be interpreted as a caricatured, exaggerated use of staging which is more comical than sexy because of the repetitive, clichéd (overplayed) actions between the two characters with "he bites, she bites"<sup>261</sup> and "offers it to him again, pulls it away,"<sup>262</sup> it is an interaction overtly eroticised through food but perhaps to the detriment of the credibility of Rosie and Stanton's relationship from the audience's point of view. The dish of spare ribs may also in comparison to *The King's Daughters* have biblical connotations attached as in the book of Genesis we see how Eve is created through Adam's spare rib. Feminist readings of Genesis commonly associated this with an "account of male power over women"<sup>263</sup> however in this scene we see how it is Stanton who asks Rosie for a spare rib and not the other way around. Perhaps suggesting that Rosie ironically is the dominant, stronger partner within their relationship. The repetitive nature of Wesker's staging which in this example is also seen in Act One, scene nine when after rowing he uses food as a means of appeasing Rosie, the words "He bites. She bites,"<sup>264</sup> are repeated amidst an exchange of various savoury foods such as a "pickled pepper,"<sup>265</sup> "a small meatball"<sup>266</sup> and "cold creamed potatoes with onions."<sup>267</sup> In this example food is used as a means of showing how two people are brought closer together. Rosie then goes on to tell Stanton that the doctor believes that she has an "eating problem"<sup>268</sup> but that he really means that she is a "pig"<sup>269</sup> which is the second reference in this chapter to this animal. On the first, a pig was to represent the greed of a

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<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> Jen Green, "Paradise Revisited," *Spare Rib*, January 1982.

<sup>264</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 204.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

capitalist society, however in this example it relates to Rosie's uncontrollable lust for Stanton which is symbolised through her inability to resist the food that he cooks which is a role reversal from Act One, scene five because this time he is the one who brings in the "*plate of goodies*."<sup>270</sup>

In Act One, scene nine a more strained interaction between the two main characters is conveyed when they visit "*Francesca's restaurant*."<sup>271</sup> First, the food which they will be eating is more refined with "*bouillabaisse*"<sup>272</sup> and "*veal in mozzarella*."<sup>273</sup> Second, the contrast in the style of the food perhaps accentuates the strained mood in this scene as the couple are in a public setting and are therefore restrained as they can't act on their physical attraction to one another. The dialogue which is spoken between the two characters is very clipped and snappy in style as the following interaction conveys: "Stanton: But we *will* have some wine to be getting along with please. (To Rosie) White? Rosie: Depends what I eat. Stanton: I see. It's going to be that kind of evening, is it?"<sup>274</sup> In comparison to the uncomfortable interaction between Harry and Sarah in *Chicken Soup with Barley* rather than tea it is wine in this instance which is used as a euphemism for the couple who have disagreed as to how the titular character of Shakespeare's *Othello* should be interpreted: "Stanton: Yes, but I was thinking of just a little starter-like a glass of cold Chablis. Rosie: (*Cantankerously*): Prefer red, myself."<sup>275</sup> The stage direction instructing the actor depicting Rosie to say that she prefers red wine with a tone of cantankerousness should also emphasise the comedy of the situation as she is deliberately trying to start a petty squabble with her lover. The pettiness arises from her wanting the opposite of everything that Stanton suggests.

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

In a summation of this section of the chapter, there is without a doubt a thread throughout Wesker's writing that links sexuality with the consumption of food. In the example of Samantha from *The Mistress* the role that chocolate has is to evoke a pathos from the audience towards our female protagonist for her fragmented personal life, as well as to provide her with emotional comfort through self-indulgence. There may be a portion of the audience who believe that Samantha is not entitled to pathos due to her meddling with a family. However, Wesker himself rhetorically asks if an actor has "the right to present an unfaithful"<sup>276</sup> woman as "ruthless"<sup>277</sup> just because they think that that's what they are like. In contrast, *Lady Othello* has many different foods, such as kedgeree, spare ribs and peppers amongst others. The predominant role of the food that features in this play is to heighten the sensuousness of the interactions between Rosie and Stanton. A Freudian critic would interpret that during the interaction in which they share a spare rib that the role the spare rib occupies within this scene is as a symbol of phallic strength. Furthermore, this informs my interpretation of Rosie in chapter two of this thesis as Stanton's dominance over her is ultimately verified due to his lack of commitment to their relationship and the play's open-ended conclusion.

(vii) "Pools:" Mrs Hyams the Jewish Everywoman

In "Pools"<sup>278</sup> we encounter the character of Mrs Hyams, an elderly lady living in the East End of London who appears to be using food as a way of offering her friendship but as Reade W. Dorman claims seems "vulnerable"<sup>279</sup> and isolated, as people such as her son seem to be

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<sup>276</sup> Arnold Wesker, "Interpretation: To Impose or Explain," *Performing Arts Journal* (Volume 11, No. 2, 1988), p. 68.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> Arnold Wesker, "Pools" From *Six Sundays in January* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1971).

<sup>279</sup> Reade W. Dorman, *Arnold Wesker: A Casebook* (Routledge, London, 2014), p. 86.

“indifferent”<sup>280</sup> to her. The simplicity of Wesker’s writing in this story highlights what Mark Clapson sees as the “drab”<sup>281</sup> nature of Mrs Hyams’s life, we can see this through phrasing such as “she bought a box of matzos, a quarter of a pound of soft cheese, some chopped liver, butter, a loaf of bread and a box of fancy biscuits.”<sup>282</sup> This example conveys how important buying food is to Mrs Hyams as is emphasised by the specificity of the author’s writing. Wesker’s writing emphasises her tastes and her character because of its insightful tone. Furthermore, it keeps the writing real and down-to-earth because he characterises Mrs Hyams as universal because of the joy she gets out of the simplistic food that she buys and cooks. She is a Jewish everywoman character that can be related to because her daily activities such as cooking and grocery shopping are typical for many people living in England. I think that Clapson’s comment is unfair as I view Mrs Hyams as being associated not with the basic groceries in this list but with the “fancy biscuits,”<sup>283</sup> something that provide comfort, friendship and are uplifting because of their difference. What can also be ascertained is that during her holiday in the small seaside village of Burnham Deepdale she extolls her feeling of unrivalled excitement at eating an entire ice cream, she tells Mr Mortimer that “I bought a sixpenny cornet and I sucked it all!”<sup>284</sup> In my view this phrase suggests that Mrs Hyams feels guilty at eating the whole ice cream because she is portrayed by Wesker as a working-class character who feels that some enjoyments are looked down upon because of her position in society. The implication made by Mrs Hyams’s tone of language is that she is rebelling from the constraints and rigour of her daily life by indulging in this small, simplistic, wholesome pleasure. Wesker characterises Mrs Hyams as a lady who is endearing, sweet and wants to

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<sup>280</sup> Kevin De Ornellas, “Arnold Wesker,” *British and Irish Short-Fiction Writers, 1945-2000, Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Edited by Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm (Thomson Gale, Detroit, 2006), p. 364.

<sup>281</sup> Mark Clapson, *A Bit of a Flutter: Popular Gambling in British Society, C. 1823-1961* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1992), p. 175.

<sup>282</sup> Wesker, “Pools,” p. 11.

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

make simple things memorable, and the pathos for her is predominantly created by the fact that she appears to be ignored by others in the midst of “modern life”<sup>285</sup> which is associated once again with capitalism. The capitalist element of society is suggested through the short story’s opening phrase “Very slowly Mrs Hyams took her card, number eight, from its slot, handed it to the time-keeper and stepped out of the clothing factory into Brick Lane.”<sup>286</sup> In this opening phrase, Wesker’s language is evocative of how capitalist society views people not as human beings but dehumanises them into numbers who perform specific functions to contribute to the profit of the specific enterprise that they are working in, in comparison to *The Kitchen*.

Mrs Hyams’ Jewish identity is reinforced by Wesker mentioning traditional Jewish food such as “barley soup,”<sup>287</sup> and “apple strudel”<sup>288</sup> as well as showing how she enjoys quintessentially English food such as fried egg and chips, which contributes to the Anglo-Jewish ambience of this work also. Wesker uses language which has superlatives such as “she spent all day in preparing the evening meal,”<sup>289</sup> and “asked if they had had enough to eat,”<sup>290</sup> which like Sarah in *Chicken Soup with Barley* suggests that she feels that dedication and time is an element which helps to perfect the enjoyment that food gives. Wesker creates a female character who is representative of those who see themselves as insignificant and unimportant within a society, who see themselves as “nothing.”<sup>291</sup> They are not exceptional or wealthy but this is why “Pools” is so appealing because the reader may see themselves reflected through Mrs Hyams’ humility and her “dreams”<sup>292</sup> of “happiness,”<sup>293</sup> both she and

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<sup>285</sup> De Ornellas, “Arnold Wesker,” p. 364.

<sup>286</sup> Wesker, “Pools,” p. 11.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*



Sarah are based on the housewives that Wesker wanted to bring the arts to through Centre 42. Conversely, through the character of Mrs Hyams we see how she is representative of a normal working-class lady.

The depiction of the daily life of Mrs Hyams is evocative of the working-class fiction of the post-war years in Britain. The fact that she is a working-class woman who by preparing food and running a home is portrayed as independent and self-sufficient portrays how Wesker in comparison to other working-class writers of the period was illustrating a “*lived* experience that middle-class novels”<sup>294</sup> were “only able to *observe*.”<sup>295</sup> This reiterates the point made earlier in this chapter in which drama written for the middle-classes viewed servants as ineffectual, subservient beings, characters not worth developing. On the other hand the repetition of the word “herself”<sup>296</sup> in phrasing suggests that her life is isolated and lonely, “set about making herself some eggs and chips,”<sup>297</sup> and “while the chips were frying she laid the table for herself.”<sup>298</sup> Both of these phrases convey how unlike Sarah she has no family around her to share food with. Food has therefore become a warmth and a comfort which is complemented by the “slippers”<sup>299</sup> which wears and the “fire”<sup>300</sup> that she sits close by, two things which act as supplements for the familial love that she lacks.

The irony comes from the fact that she herself subscribes to the capitalism that exists in this society as is symbolised with her “weekly football coupon.”<sup>301</sup> It is this weekly foray into the world of gambling that provides our main female character with hope. A hope that she will be able to give other people something that neither she nor they would be able to afford

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<sup>294</sup> John Fordham, “Working-Class Fiction Across a Century,” From *The Cambridge Companion to the English Novel*, Edited by Robert L. Caserio (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 131-145.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> Wesker, “Pools,” p. 15.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

themselves. Nonetheless the conclusion sees her feeling worthless due to her being unsuccessful at the pools. The end of the short story sees Mrs Hyams become just a number in comparison to the card she uses to clock in her attendance at work, she says to herself that she is “no one. She’s nothing. So? *Nu?*”<sup>302</sup> The final phrase of Wesker’s work is evocative of a point made by Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács who claims that members of the working-class in society who do industrial jobs such as Mrs Hyams are representative of a “transformation of a human function into a commodity,”<sup>303</sup> which reveals “in all its starkness the dehumanised and dehumanising function of the commodity relation.”<sup>304</sup> By the end Mrs Hyams views herself as insignificant and ineffectual in a society dictated by capitalism and material wealth. Pathos is felt for her due to the fact that her story is cyclical in nature, it begins with her leaving the clothes factory in Brick Lane and it ends with her needing to return back there. Her brief hope that her life would change with a win at the pools allowing her to “piece together the ruins of her family,”<sup>305</sup> becomes all but an allusive dream. The isolation the reader associates with her and which is denoted by Wesker repeatedly showing her eating on her own is our lasting image of Mrs Hyams.

### Conclusion

Throughout Wesker’s work food is a primary theme. In this chapter there has been an analysis of, how it acts as a benchmark of identity both Jewish and Anglo-Jewish, how its presence enhances eroticism, complements and develops some of the main female characters throughout his works and ultimately how it was related to and symbolised the aspirations which Wesker had for the working-class and their increased participation in the arts. We should also note that the examples of food which have been analysed in this chapter are

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<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>303</sup> Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (MIT Press, Massachusetts, 1971), p. 92.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>305</sup> Wesker, “Pools,” p. 20.

varied, they range from commonplace traditional Jewish dishes to classic English food and drink.

Both the presence and absence of food hold meaning within Wesker's *oeuvre*. In his *Trilogy* the presence of food will be taken for granted. Where Sarah is there will without a doubt also be food. In the example of *Chicken Soup with Barley* food symbolises a familial togetherness amidst everchanging ideologies. The chicken soup that Sarah credits with curing Ada's diphtheria is also representative of how it is the simple things in life that have the deepest meaning such as sharing sandwiches together, drinking a cup of tea or making someone their favourite cake. The analysis of *Roots* focussed on how Wesker uses food in this play for a dramatic purpose. The contrast made between the sponge cake that Beatie starts to bake whilst her mother peels potatoes is evocative of the emotional gulf that exists between mother and daughter due to Beatie pursuing university education. However, it is the spread of food that Mrs Bryant puts out for Ronnie's supposed arrival where a true anti-climax is created. Dave and Ada's hope for a new organic life in the country provides the basis of *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*. By repeatedly referring to "salad"<sup>306</sup> Ada emphasises this couple's wish to escape the pollution of the city and to live a life at one with the organic nature of the countryside.

In *The Kitchen* it is the absence of food which is symbolic of how the kitchen in which these people work has lost its soul. The specificity of the functions that each person is directed to perform can be interpreted as Wesker informing us that if art becomes too commercialised and money-orientated then it loses its heart.

It is matters of the heart that then became the focus of the latter stages of this chapter, with *Lady Othello*, *The Mistress* and *The King's Daughters*. In each of these works the presence of

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<sup>306</sup> Wesker, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, p. 176.

food heightens the mood of sensuality that our writer wanted to create for each. Whether it was chocolate or a savoury spare rib, the food present is a manifestation of the respective characters and their feelings. In regard to *The King's Daughters* we see how each of the twelve princesses all indulge in various foodstuffs, and their indulgence also represents their impulsive sense of freedom. A freedom far away from the constraints of patriarchy.

Finally, in the section on Mrs Hyams in "Pools" we see how food is ultimately representative of the everyday, the norm and the necessity. Sadly, food cannot be bought without money, and money cannot be got without adhering to the infinite clock- in machine known as capitalism.

Some of the female characters which have played a part in this chapter will now be examined in more detail in the next chapter of the thesis. The women that feature in both Wesker's early work and his later work are pivotal to his writing, as they are markers that represent how Wesker was continually reinventing himself as a writer, from politically laden domestic dramas and epistolary plays that are so-called portraits of marital bliss to one-woman plays where the female protagonist lives among the isolation of her dress atelier awaiting confirmation that her married lover wants to meet. Thereby making a notable transition from dutiful, self-sacrificing mothers and wives to amoral career women who are fully at one with their sensuality.

## **Chapter Two: Women**

### (i) “Centre of power:”<sup>1</sup> Wesker’s early women.

This chapter will examine how Wesker represented women in both his early work and later work, from the 1950s to the 2000s. The two works that will be examined to analyse his earlier depictions of women shall be the play that brought him to fame in 1958: *Chicken Soup with Barley* and the second will be *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, an epistolary play told through the medium of letters. *Love Letters on Blue Paper* was also subsequently a screenplay and short story published by Jonathan Cape in 1974. The chapter will focus on the infallible matriarchal figure Sarah Kahn of *Chicken Soup with Barley* and devoted wife Sonia Marsden from *Love Letters on Blue Paper*.

The comment said by Dame Joan Plowright which will be explored in more detail later in this chapter shows how Wesker contributed to the evolution of the female role within British drama. Narrative is taken from *Dusty Wesker’s Cookery Book* which highlights how the character of Sonia Marsden was loosely based on Wesker’s first wife Dusty, as well as complimenting the originality of this thesis this also enriches the biographical approach which I have taken when writing this thesis.

Another important aspect to this pivotal chapter within the thesis is to counter the accepted opinion of critics such as Kenneth Tynan whose perception of the character of Sarah is that she is a domesticated, easily influenced, shallow character whose talents do not exceed beyond the brewing of a cup of tea. Away from the domesticity which is paramount in

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<sup>1</sup> Michelene Wandor, *Post-War Drama: Looking Back in Gender* (Routledge, London, 2001), p. 52.

Wesker's construction of both Sarah and Sonia, is the importance of female appearance. In the second section of this chapter the work of *Lady Othello* is explored in addition to *The Mistress*, two works in which clothing and make-up are highlighted as key aspects to the whole of the female identity. In comparison to food and specifically chocolate in the first chapter of this thesis, make-up has the ability to transform a person's identity just as chocolate can incorporate itself into a variety of moulds and shapes to suit the specific environment that it is in. In Rajesh Tiwari's thesis "Women in Arnold Wesker's plays with Special Reference to his Six One-Woman Plays," he makes a point regarding how Wesker's female characters in comparison to their author are the antithesis of stagnancy which is a remark that is applicable to all of the characters which will be analysed in this chapter both pre and post 1970s. Regardless of whether they are career women or stay at home wives they all want to make their lives better and they do show a resilience of spirit no matter what role they occupy as will be shown throughout this second chapter.

*Chicken Soup with Barley* is the play that established Wesker's place as a so-called kitchen-sink dramatist, an opinion which I referred to in the first chapter of this thesis. My view is that this is a demeaning way of referring to this particular genre, because it suggests domestic monotony and ignores how this form of writing reflected the current affairs of the period in which they were written and also of today. The term is a simplification of a genre that encompassed a game-changing era of British playwrighting, a period of anti-institutionalisation and rebellion with "abrasive"<sup>2</sup> realism and the "cut and thrust of domestic polemic."<sup>3</sup> It was also the era when Wesker and other playwrights such as Shelagh Delaney and Harold Pinter came to public recognition in the 1950s and 1960s. Although the term can be considered as too trivial, we can agree with Michelene Wandor's view which is that it is

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<sup>2</sup> Jenny Stringer, *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005), p. 366.

<sup>3</sup> Wesker, Note to Actors and Directors of the *Trilogy*, From *The Wesker Trilogy*.

drama that is the “antithesis”<sup>4</sup> of “drawing-room drama”<sup>5</sup> where “invisible servants”<sup>6</sup> worked at an “invisible sink.”<sup>7</sup> In *Chicken Soup with Barley* Sarah epitomises the opposite of this invisibility of domestic living in every sense. Billington asserts that Wesker “wrote exceptionally well for women.”<sup>8</sup> In this statement Billington insinuates that actors depicting a female character by Wesker get a good opportunity because of his complex characterisations of them both in his early writing through to his later writing. Furthermore, the actor Joan Plowright said that she was “entirely indebted to Arnold Wesker, who provided for the contemporary actress what Osborne had provided for the actor—a character who spoke to and for our own generation and who had never before been seen on an English stage.”<sup>9</sup> Therefore, Plowright insinuates that Wesker’s depiction of the fairer sex also contributed to the evolution of female roles within British drama. In an article from 1988 Wesker himself asserted that there exists a “neurosis by academics and the media for dividing life into decades,”<sup>10</sup> and yes whilst my thesis does do this in regard to how he represented women it does not deem his work irrelevant and therefore unable to “extend into 2020,”<sup>11</sup> rather it seeks to do the opposite of this by arguing that the themes explored throughout his work have crossed both “time and frontiers.”<sup>12</sup>

Wesker says in his autobiography *As Much as I Dare* (1994) that the “impact”<sup>13</sup> of Osborne’s 1956 play *Look Back in Anger* on both him and his writing “cannot be

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<sup>4</sup> Wandor, *Post-War Drama: Looking Back in Gender*, p. 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Michael Billington, “Arnold Wesker: The radical bard of working Britain,” *The Guardian*, Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> April, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Joan Plowright, From Germán Asensio Peral, “Margaret Drabble and British Drama of the Late 1950s and the 1960s” (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2018), p. 140.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold Wesker, “Interpretation: To Impose or Explain,” *Performing Arts Journal* (Vol. 11, No. 2, 1988), p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Arnold Wesker, *As Much as I Dare* (Random House, London 1995), p. 566.

understated.”<sup>14</sup> *Look Back in Anger* voices the frustration of the young working British people of the time, a complete contrast in terms of how life in England is presented from Noël Coward and David Lean’s *In Which We Serve* from 1942. A patriotic film which upholds the strength of the British naval forces and how this is what ultimately provides security at home. This was perhaps a means of reassuring the British people that life was not going to change as Britain would be victorious. In contrast, 1956 the year in which *Look Back in Anger* was first performed, was a year that saw the British armed forces face humiliation. The Suez Crisis in Britain was a historical event that ultimately “cut through the imperial circle”<sup>15</sup> as Britain was shown to be “impotent if superpower relations got out of control.”<sup>16</sup> This was due to no aid being provided from the United States of America, Britain was unable to triumph in military conflict as they did not keep control of one of their “major imperial arteries”<sup>17</sup> which in this case was the Suez-Canal. Wesker and his peers became motivated to interrogate contemporary issues that affected not the Britain of *In Which We Serve* that pays tribute to hierarchy but a Britain which is confused and restless because of how their Empire has become severely depleted “old plants left over from the Edwardian wilderness that can’t understand why the sun isn’t shining any longer.”<sup>18</sup> Issues such as poverty, the welfare state and unemployment now became the focus of these contemporary playwrights rather than pride in a tarnished, weakened British Empire.

Wesker in his presentation of *The Trilogy* writes that “the cut and thrust of domestic polemic, should take place in the midst of physical action.”<sup>19</sup> Rebelling against the theatre of the Bourgeoisie, Wesker specifies that passionate political debate should take place not

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *The British Isles since 1945*, Edited by Kathleen Burk (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003), p. 164.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger*, (Faber & Faber, London, 2013).

<sup>19</sup> Arnold Wesker, *The Wesker Trilogy*, A Note to the Actors and Directors of the *Trilogy* (Penguin Books, London 1979).



within the confines of a comfortable “drawing-room”<sup>20</sup> but at the same time as an everyday domestic activity such as Sarah “cutting bread.”<sup>21</sup> Wandor ascertains that “the domestic territory”<sup>22</sup> in *Chicken Soup with Barley* is “in the charge of a strong woman”<sup>23</sup> which in this case is Sarah whereas her husband Harry is the “secondary figure.”<sup>24</sup> Harry proves unable to provide support to his family either financially or mentally, he is overall represented as an emasculated male character who by Act Three of the play becomes wholly dependent on his wife. In this chapter however, I want to interrogate how in this linear play by Act Three the character of Sarah becomes “isolated,”<sup>25</sup> in terms of both her family and in her marriage. According to my interpretation of the play she becomes a shadow of the “strong woman”<sup>26</sup> whom the audience first encounters in Act One, scene one.

Act One, scene one of *Chicken Soup with Barley* is set amidst what Grant Fletcher McKernie reads as the “bubbling...enthusiasm, excitement and anticipation”<sup>27</sup> of this Jewish family and their rebellion against fascism. The key aspect that we interpret from Wesker’s construction of Sarah at the beginning of the play, is that she is determined, gutsy and outspoken. Her extrovert nature is predominantly illustrated through her participation in the political demonstrations that are ongoing. She shows condescension towards Harry with the statement that “you won’t see him at any demo. In the pictures you’ll find him. [*Goes to landing to make tea*].”<sup>28</sup> Wesker initially constructs the forcefulness of Sarah through stage directions such as “*From a corner of the room she finds a red flag with a hammer and sickle*

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<sup>20</sup> Wandor, *Post-War Drama: Looking Back in Gender*, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>27</sup> Grant Fletcher-McKernie, “Politics in Modern British Drama: The Plays of Arnold Wesker and John Arden,” (Ohio State University, Ohio, 1977), p. 108.

<sup>28</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy* (Penguin Group, London 1979), p. 16.

on it and thrusts it in Harry's hand,"<sup>29</sup> portraying the Sarah of Act One as imperative and purposeful. A matriarchal figure who is upfront about her enthusiasm for communism as is epitomised by her forcing the Soviet Flag into Harry's hands. Wesker includes in a stage direction that she is the "antithesis"<sup>30</sup> of her husband Harry because of his inability to provide for his family. However, the extent of this antithesis changes as does the presumed reaction to her character. At the start of the play Sarah has a tangible admirability however at the end her obvious destitution will provoke pathos as she becomes a broken, jaded version of the character we first encounter in Act One, scene one. She becomes frustrated with life as it has become so debilitating because of Harry's illness "is that what you want me to be satisfied with-a television set?"<sup>31</sup> She unlike Harry (with his love of the cinema) rejects escapism as she views it as a cowardly way of giving in to the "frothy commercialism"<sup>32</sup> that is imposed upon the working class in society as a poor substitute for live performing arts. Sarah Hemming writes in her review of *Chicken Soup with Barley* that the play is now a "period piece"<sup>33</sup> specific to the 1950s, however I disagree with this reading. My disagreement is based on how the themes that are dominant in this play are still themes that are applicable today in the twenty-first century. For example: caring for an ill family member at home, applying for money through the Welfare State and racial/social discrimination are still as prevalent today as they were in the 1950s. My interpretation of Hemming's conclusion is that it is a comment of convenience on her part which suggests that Wesker's play should stay in the mid-twentieth century because it is most applicable to then.

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>32</sup> David Edgar, "Noel Coward and The Transformation of British Comedy," Taken from *Look Back in Pleasure: Noel Coward Reconsidered*, Edited by Joel Kaplan and Sheila Stowell (Methuen, London, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Sarah Hemming, "Chicken Soup with Barley," *Financial Times*, London 9<sup>th</sup> June (2011).

In the case of Sonia of *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, the “dichotomy”<sup>34</sup> that is “central to the play”<sup>35</sup> provides the audience with two portraits of her character. In his 2007 interview with Chiara Montenero, Wesker says on the subject of female characters that “Flaubert’s portrait of a woman in *Madame Bovary* is not a portrait of *all* women, nor is Tolstoy’s portrait of a woman in *Anna Karenina* a portrait of *all* women.”<sup>36</sup> Rather they are “recognisable enough to be considered truthful as secondary truths.”<sup>37</sup> Therefore, in his response to Montenero, Wesker said that each of his female characters were unique and influenced by his own experience of women throughout his life. Dichotomy is a fundamental element to Wesker’s presentation of Sonia in the drama version of *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, because on one hand she can be interpreted as a “primarily passive”<sup>38</sup> character. On the other hand “she has to summon up a concentrated quietness and a stage presence as spiritual as physical.”<sup>39</sup> In these assertions Lawrence Bommer succinctly claims that what may initially be viewed as Sonia’s weaknesses are really her strengths also. In contrast to the outgoing nature of Sarah, it is Sonia’s “silent solidity”<sup>40</sup> in which Sonia’s mettle as a woman may be interpreted and who has been overshadowed by her husband’s imperious masculinity in his role as a Trade Union representative. The two sides seen of Sonia represent the physical presence of her onstage in contrast to the nostalgic thoughts that are only personal to her and never spoken publicly. On one level our interpretation of the Sonia who appears physically on the stage is one that this character is purely functional and practical as she is continually preparing food; seemingly absent of all affection and emotion. However, the harrowing letters written on blue paper to her husband Victor give the audience a different insight. This

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<sup>34</sup> Wesker, Notes on the Letters, Taken from *Wesker’s Love Plays* (Oberon Books, London 2008), p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Chiara Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W* (Oberon Books, London, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Lawrence Bommer, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” *Chicago Reader*, November 10<sup>th</sup> 1988.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

time, they see a Sonia who is emotive, fragile and loving, in reference to Wesker's 1995 analytical essay "The DNA of a play" we can say that in Sonia's case "femininity is the element,"<sup>41</sup> wife "is the subject"<sup>42</sup> but there are two themes at work, one is love and the other is an integration of duty and sacrifice. Wesker shows compulsiveness in his specification that all of the letters between Sonia and Victor are written on blue paper. In terms of the colour blue and its symbolism Jack Tresidder claims that "blue"<sup>43</sup> reflects the "sky, therefore the spirit and the truth."<sup>44</sup> The tone of the letters can be interpreted as confessional and "unexpected,"<sup>45</sup> perhaps a true reflection of what Sonia is actually like. Tresidder also says that "colours"<sup>46</sup> are usually "life-affirming symbols of illumination as reflected in the glories of ecclesiastical stained glass."<sup>47</sup> The fact that the letters are all written on blue airmail paper is evocative of how this middle-aged couple who have been married for years are attempting to revisit the emotions of amateurish, early romance which over the years has evidently been dulled by the necessity of everyday life and the challenges that come with that.

The *New York Times* drama critic Mel Gussow comments after seeing Wesker's *Love Letters on Blue Paper* in 1977 in Syracuse that it was "a complete picture of a beautiful sharing marriage."<sup>48</sup> Gussow's comment based on the play version of this work will be examined in this chapter also. The fact that Gussow uses the word "sharing"<sup>49</sup> in her article is an accurate term to use according to my analysis of the play. It is accurate because sharing implies that one person in this marriage has had to make sacrifices to accommodate the

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<sup>41</sup> Arnold Wesker, "The DNA of a Play, Taken from *Wesker on Theatre* (Oberon Books, London, 2010), p. 20.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Jack Tresidder, *Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature* (Duncan Baird Publishers, London, 2004), p. 116.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Wesker, Notes on the Letters, Taken from *Wesker's Love Plays*, p. 115.

<sup>46</sup> Tresidder, *Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature*, p. 116.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Mel Gussow, "The Stage: 'Love Letters' to Life: Drama of Tenderness Gets Its Premiere in Syracuse," *New York Times*, New York 8<sup>th</sup> November (1977).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

other's happiness. In this chapter I will explain this by focussing on the claustrophobic, sheltered, kitchen-centric existence that Sonia leads, in contrast to the politically active, extrovert life that Victor has had. It will also be noted how each of the letters that Sonia writes to Victor are all read by Maurice Stapleton. Stapleton is a close friend of Victor's, whom Richard Christiansen sees as an "awkward go-between."<sup>50</sup> To elaborate Christiansen's point further, by having someone else both seeing and reading the letters it exposes feelings that are obviously unique to Sonia to another person, therefore cheapening her words and trivialising the content of the letters for the entertainment of these two men. Christiansen also writes that the play is an "intense romance,"<sup>51</sup> however I think this portrays *Love Letters on Blue Paper* as solely a love story, instead it is an exploration of Sonia's psyche as the death of Victor looms over her. It shows how it has unsettled her mentally not just because he is her husband but because she has become so dependent on him. In contrast to Sarah, Sonia appears as an isolated figure throughout the whole of the play and more so in the short story version of this work. The main difference between the play version and the short story version of this work is that in the latter Sonia's isolation is more apparent due to the fact that we never hear a voiceover read Sonia's "soulful confessions"<sup>52</sup> of love to her dying husband, we never get a sense of Sonia's voice. Whereas in the play version the technique of the voiceover adds a dimension to Sonia's characterisation because yes, she is still "never one much for talking,"<sup>53</sup> but the voiceover will create intrigue because of Sonia's Jekyll and Hyde characterisation. In the short story the letters are all read by Maurice, therefore a sense of Sonia's voice is inevitably altogether absent. The absence of the voiceover in the short story

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<sup>50</sup> Richard Christiansen, "Love Letters on Blue Paper` Takes an Indirect Approach to The Heart," *Chicago Tribune*, Chicago 3<sup>rd</sup> November (1988).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Alfred Kazin, "Arnold Wesker and the East End Jews: Love Letters on Blue Paper," *The New York Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 1975.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

version accentuates the “harsh personality”<sup>54</sup> that Sonia allegedly has because the reader will predominantly base their opinion of her on what she does rather than on what she says.

Both Sarah and Sonia will be analysed in line with Deborah from the play *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* which is part of Wesker’s collection of *One-Woman Plays* (1989). These plays will be explored in more detail in my analysis of Wesker’s women in his later work as I shall argue that Wesker’s female characters evolved in direct proportion to the society in which they lived. Therefore, the homebound lives of Mrs Bryant, Sarah and Sonia contrast the freedom that the characters of Rosie and Samantha have in his later works both in terms of their careers and in how they approach sexuality.

In the introductory notes to *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, Wesker instructs that Deborah is representative of “Mother Earth.”<sup>55</sup> She is conveyed as relishing motherhood and household duties. The style of dialogue that Wesker writes for Deborah is frantic and giddy with phrasing such as “I loved changing their smelly nappies, washing their smelly bums with smelly soap.”<sup>56</sup> The use of sibilance in this phrase when said by the actor depicting Deborah may cause the dialogue to sound dishonest and exaggerated, as it will make Deborah seem overly enthusiastic about some of the more humble aspects of being a parent. Her account is a cleansed depiction of motherhood in which she transforms the negative aspects of parenting into positive ones such as changing nappies. However, she may entirely be genuine in that she is never more in her element than when she is being a parent, it parallels the idealistic account of motherhood that Sonia gives in both the play and short story version of *Love Letters on Blue Paper*. My reading of Deborah as a figure of isolation comes from Wesker’s opening stage direction in which “*Deborah wheels a supermarket trolley around,*”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, Note on Play, p. 67.

<sup>55</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, Taken from *Wesker’s One-Woman Plays* (Penguin Books, London 1989), p. 38.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

informing the audience that this is a cyclical, repetitive part of her life. We are also informed by Wesker that she is “*defiant*,”<sup>58</sup> obviously feeling the need to uphold her way of life, hence showing pride. Her defiance is evoked through phrasing such as “so just let anyone dare bully me into thinking it’s me who’s the prisoner”<sup>59</sup> as she contrasts herself with men who are “caught in a rush to a top they’ll never reach in a thousand years.”<sup>60</sup> On one hand I interpret that she is not constructed as being ironic at all and is fully satisfied with her “love of shopping.”<sup>61</sup> On the other hand, why does she need to talk about the career world if she is as content as she professes?

Judith Butler’s assertion is that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts.”<sup>62</sup> Her assertion is relevant to Deborah, Sarah and Sonia because they are all presented by Wesker as leading disciplined, repetitive, stifled lives. Therefore, an analysis is done of how in Wesker’s early work, women are represented as stalwarts of the domestic sphere who have strong moral values, in terms of how they perform their duties as wives and mothers. These moral values however are what ultimately leads to Sarah’s impoverished state and to Sonia’s indecision over a future that does not include her husband. Therefore, in Wesker’s early writing, his representation of women may be seen as evocative of how an early-mid twentieth century society expects women to behave. These expectations were ultimately that women were to be faithful to their husbands no matter what physical or mental sacrifice this entails and dutiful mothers despite the fact that their children often leave the home.

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Taken from *Theatre Journal*, Johns Hopkins University (1988), p. 519.

(ii) “Preserving the mask of a busy, uncommunicative housewife:”<sup>63</sup> Wesker’s invisible women in *Chicken Soup with Barley* and *Love Letters on Blue Paper*.

Sonia, the main female protagonist of the play/screenplay and short story *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, is introduced in the stage version of this work as “matronly, around 60.”<sup>64</sup> In comparison to Sarah Wesker is very specific as to what age Sonia is. From his autobiography *As Much as I Dare*, Wesker writes that Sonia is a “portrait of Dusty as an older woman,”<sup>65</sup> Dusty being Wesker’s first wife. Wesker’s use of the term “portrait”<sup>66</sup> conveys how he wanted this play to be centred and focussed on Sonia. With that in mind he simultaneously wanted an impression of his wife Dusty to be present in her characterisation. Dusty’s cookbook can be interpreted as a catalogue from the memorable to the mundane with “I saw a marvellous play by N.F. Simpson called the One-Way Pendulum,”<sup>67</sup> to “I cooked him a breakfast of grilled sausages, tomatoes, fried eggs and toast,”<sup>68</sup> therefore an amalgamation of food and the theatre. Her cookery book is structured in a diary format, giving an insight into the woman who shared in pivotal moments in Wesker’s career. In comparison to Sonia we see how she was “remote”<sup>69</sup> from her husband’s professional life all but “feeding”<sup>70</sup> whoever he decided to invite. Yet her comment about the play she had seen conveys how Dusty’s opinions on the theatre should not be discarded or seen as inferior in importance.

By describing that Sonia should appear matronly in the previous stage direction epitomises how she should radiate with a dignified reserve, she should command respect from those who surround her. In the short story version of this work Wesker draws attention to how Sonia’s

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<sup>63</sup> Irving Wardle, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” *The Times*, London 16<sup>th</sup> February (1978).

<sup>64</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, Taken from *Wesker’s Love Plays* (Oberon Books Ltd. 2008, London), p. 67.

<sup>65</sup> Arnold Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 666.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Dusty Wesker, *Dusty Wesker’s Cookery Book* (Chatto and Windus, London, 1987), p. 10.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*



past identity is a contrast to her identity now, he describes how “her gaiety having been so wild and unpredictable, was now a large, heavy old woman, withdrawn.”<sup>71</sup> Alluding as to how Sonia has gradually become more introverted through age and a loss of confidence, his use of the past tense in this phrase is evocative of how she has changed. This description creates a mood of melancholy and it will make a reader curious to know what the Sonia of the past was indeed like. It is important to include the short story in this examination because it shows how the Sonia of the short story influenced the Sonia that was put on stage. Sarah in Act One, scene one of *Chicken Soup with Barley* is referred to as “a small, fiery woman aged 37.”<sup>72</sup> Therefore, initially an archetype of matriarchal energy and pride, however by Act Three, scene one has grown weary and is starting to show the harsh “signs of age and her troubles.”<sup>73</sup> The time span which *Chicken Soup with Barley* encompasses is twenty-years whilst *Love Letters on Blue Paper* is set within a matter of weeks. Therefore, Wesker makes the struggles that these women have faced in life evident through his staging and their external appearances. The significance of this is that pathos is evoked from both the reader and the audience member due to the fact that each of these female characters have had their passions stifled to some degree. In the case of Sarah it is her faith in a political ideology, whereas Sonia has been overshadowed by her husband’s work as a Trade Union representative. Their struggles are evident because of the tone of each of these respective plays, a tone of anxiety, strain and worry epitomised through language associated with bereavement and loss.

In terms of how Sarah and Sonia each find comfort, Wesker poignantly informs the reader in the short story that the “sea-side miniatures, now prized by some collectors in pursuit of

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<sup>71</sup> Arnold Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” Taken from *Love Letters on Blue Paper: Three Stories* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1974), p. 75.

<sup>72</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

nostalgia at the price of ugliness, were Sonia's-only *her* nostalgia was real."<sup>74</sup> This phrase with the use of italicised font to emphasise the second personal pronoun shows how although these kitsch style ornaments may be worthless to others but to her personally they symbolise pivotal times in her marriage to Victor. In the midst of her tirelessly caring for terminally ill Victor, these ornaments are vital to her because they act as a poignant reminder of the past. In *Yardsale* which is another play from Wesker's collection of *One-Woman Plays* Stephanie exclaims "a box full of postcards? I don't understand it. People write to you-it means something!"<sup>75</sup> portraying a mood of sadness that these greetings have been discarded and forgotten by the owner. Similarly, in the short story version of *Love Letters on Blue Paper* Victor sarcastically says to Maurice that "I don't think she's written more than a hundred letters in her life and most of them were postcards or anyway just a handful of phrases."<sup>76</sup> The fact that Victor says this to Maurice alludes to Sonia's previous enthusiasm for friends and company, creating a contrast to the present Sonia who leads an isolated life with limited friends around her. On the other hand, Sarah's nostalgia does not come from objects but comes from her unwavering belief in socialism. In Act Three, scene two she tells her son Ronnie that "Socialism is my light, can you understand that?"<sup>77</sup> A rhetorical question that illustrates how even though twenty years have passed and Harry has suffered two strokes Sarah still admirably believes in the same cause as she did in 1936, this question should be delivered by an actor depicting Sarah with a tone in which her passion is made tangible through her speech. She goes on to criticise the society of 1955 by saying to Ronnie "is that what you want me to be satisfied with-a television set?"<sup>78</sup> A comment which criticises how the working-class are bought off with access to mediocre consumer goods in an attempt to

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<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>75</sup> Wesker, *Yardsale*, p. 20.

<sup>76</sup> Wesker, "Love Letters on Blue Paper," p. 75.

<sup>77</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 74.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

keep the performing arts exclusive to those in the upper echelons of society. Hemming, in her review of the play, makes the assertion that “Sarah’s anguish sounds across the decades as she despairs that people have forgotten what they were fighting for.”<sup>79</sup> Hemming’s interpretation of Sarah is that she epitomises loyalty, both in terms of the ideology that she stands by whilst her family desert it and in terms of her role as a mother and a wife. Hemming describes Sarah’s tone as one of anguish to emphasise how Sarah’s mood at the conclusion of the play is one of distress, a contrast from the Sarah of Act One, scene one who radiated with an energetic bloom. Sarah’s phrase in reference to a television set openly rejects shallow escapism because the hope of a classless society is what keeps her sane, “I’m a simple person, Ronnie, and I’ve got to have light and love.”<sup>80</sup> Wesker’s construction of Sarah is that she herself is the embodiment of the “light”<sup>81</sup> and “love.”<sup>82</sup> Simon Shepherd claims that the “alliterative gathering up-light, life, love-gives emotional solidity, to the political rebalancing that is going on,”<sup>83</sup> Sarah is a symbol of unchanging morality and familial love, amidst a political environment which is in a continual state of social and political change. In the following statement from Hemming she succinctly summarises Sarah’s character which is that she is “a fighter, who embraces the cause from her kitchen,”<sup>84</sup> therefore Sarah is a female character who adheres to the moral standards that are expected of her as a woman yet at the same time uses her ideological beliefs to complement her role as a mother and wife. By using the word “embrace”<sup>85</sup> in this phrase, Hemming cleverly suggests that the love she has for her family is her way of contributing to the political cause that she believes in, the devotion she has to socialism compares with the maternal embrace she continually provides her children

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<sup>79</sup> Sarah Hemming, “Chicken Soup with Barley, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Royal Court Theatre,” *The Financial Times*, June 8<sup>th</sup> 2011.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Simon Shepherd, *Modern British Drama-An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009), p. 148.

<sup>84</sup> Hemming, “Chicken Soup with Barley, Jerwood Theatre Downstairs, Royal Court Theatre.”

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

with. By investing in her matriarchal role Sarah is fighting the battle against the soulless capitalism that she despises so much and which a television set in her opinion epitomises.

A notable characteristic of *Chicken Soup with Barley* is Wesker's specificity about the environment in which the Kahn family are living. This was previously referred to in chapter one of this thesis. In Act One he writes that it is "4 October 1936,"<sup>86</sup> in the "East End of London."<sup>87</sup> The same day as the Battle of Cable Street, in which Wesker himself recalls the people of the East End rising against Oswald Mosley's right-wing "blackshirts,"<sup>88</sup> as they planned a "provocative"<sup>89</sup> march through a predominantly Jewish district of London. Their main objective was to threateningly uphold their dangerous, right-wing supremacist ideology. Ten years later and Act Two opens with a tone of futile optimism as Wesker unconvincingly recounts that the "*working class is a little more respectable now, they have not long voted in a Labour government.*"<sup>90</sup> A mood of optimism would have evolved from the belief that the government would now be run by a political party who advocated "welfare"<sup>91</sup> and that did not favour the privileged upper-class of society. However, at the beginning of Act Three we see how Sarah becomes exasperated with the administration that came with these new political developments, "*Sarah is sitting by the table struggling to fill out an official Government form.*"<sup>92</sup> The audience may interpret that Sarah is applying for a life insurance policy for Harry who by Act Three is "*completely unfit for work,*"<sup>93</sup> therefore incapable of providing for himself should anything happen to Sarah. The following questions are included on the form "Have you an insurance policy for life or death? Name of company. Amount

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<sup>86</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 13.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>89</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 602.

<sup>90</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 36.

<sup>91</sup> David Kynaston, *Austerity Britain: 1945-1951* (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2007), p. 181.

<sup>92</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 57.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

insured for. Annual payments...’’<sup>94</sup> The irony of this is that in the event of her death Sarah’s value to her husband will become purely monetary which is ironic due to her dislike of capitalism. Sarah’s struggling comes from the pressure that is now on her to care for a deteriorating, infantile, sick husband amidst her now “broken up’’<sup>95</sup> existence. Her family have moved on with their lives yet she is trapped in a stagnant cycle of hardship. “My only dread is that he will mess himself. When that happens I go mad-I just don’t know what I’m doing.’’<sup>96</sup>

However, Harry’s invalidity is not shown to at all wane Sarah’s passion for politics. Sarah criticises Bessie Blatt who wants to avoid talking of politics, telling Bessie that “politics is living, Bessie. I mean everything that happens in the world has got to do with politics.’’<sup>97</sup> So, even though Sarah becomes more alienated from her family and her husband throughout the course of the play, her belief is unwavering. In the following statement Harry shares his liking for “*Ravel’s La Valse*’’<sup>98</sup> with Sarah he says that “I liked it. It reminds me of-of-of-of-it reminds me of Blackfriar’s Bridge in a fog.’’<sup>99</sup> His reference to “fog’’<sup>100</sup> evokes an image of confusion and disorientation, the fact that he stammers whilst saying this to Sarah with the repetition of “of’’ heightens the mental and physical impairment which he is now suffering from. The “fog’’ may be representative of the infinite frustration present within the psyche of the working-class, because the Clement Attlee administration had now been defeated by Winston Churchill and the Conservative Party. Similarly, Kenneth Tynan comments that in Acts Two and Three of Wesker’s play “a fog of doubt descends; and black and white blur into grey.’’<sup>101</sup> The hustle and bustle of Act One, with personalities who all shared the

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage 1944-1963* (Davis-Poynter, London, 1975), p. 290.

communal vision of change and equality have now become disillusioned, as is represented by Ronnie saying to his mother that “I was going to be a great socialist writer. I can’t make sense of a word, a simple word.”<sup>102</sup> Ronnie’s use of the past tense in this phrase and his supposed inability to make “sense”<sup>103</sup> of the socialist philosophy reiterates the lack of literal sight and perceptiveness that one would have when in the middle of fog. Sarah also takes Monty Blatt to task as he has now adopted this communal feeling of disillusionment and powerlessness of a mid-1950s working class society. Disillusionment and disappointment created by the fact that the “social politics of the 1930s remained unchanged by war,”<sup>104</sup> therefore the expectations of members of the working-class became futile. David Kynaston reiterates this point further by concluding that the “working class”<sup>105</sup> were still looked upon in a post-World War Two society in a “negative or at best condescending”<sup>106</sup> manner as “the dominant sense is of the working-class living in a world apart from most other people.”<sup>107</sup> In Act Three, scene one the following interaction between Monty and Sarah exemplifies Monty and his feeling of powerlessness amidst an everchanging political world: “Sarah: And when someone drops an atom bomb on your family? Monty [*Pleading*]: So what can I do-tell me? There’s nothing I can do any more. I’m too small; who can I trust? It’s a big, lousy world of mad politicians-I can’t trust them, Sarah.”<sup>108</sup> Monty also demeans Sarah, by mocking her understanding of what socialism truly is by saying “Do you think she ever read a book on political economy in her life? Bless her! Someone told her socialism was happiness so she joined the Party.”<sup>109</sup> Therefore, Wesker is drawing attention to Monty’s lack of loyalty in this excerpt because of the fact that he jeeringly accuses Sarah of not understanding what

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<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *The British Isles Since 1945*, p. 24.

<sup>105</sup> Kynaston, *Family Britain: 1951-1957* (Bloomsbury Publishing, London, 2010), p. 150.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 62.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

socialism really is about. His language is patronising because of his use of the term “bless her”<sup>110</sup> as it suggests that it is because she is a woman that she knows no better and is more vulnerable to influence, yet ironically Sarah is the one who will be viewed as the stronger of these two characters, due to the fact that Sarah realises that what happens politically does and will affect the security of the domestic sphere. Billington comments that one of the reasons why support for the Labour Party failed progressively after the election of 1945 was because “Labour had betrayed its core principles by its endorsement of the nuclear deterrent.”<sup>111</sup> The rhetorical question that Sarah puts towards Monty is reflective of how despite the amount of time that has lapsed, her beliefs are still the same as she refuses to adhere to the “the social malaise of contemporary post-imperial Britain where affluence, apathy and elitism had eclipsed the social hope of 1945.”<sup>112</sup> Instead her determination to “be happy and eat”<sup>113</sup> adds a poignancy to this play because of the fact that the gradual “physical decay”<sup>114</sup> of Harry, exemplified by his attack of incontinence at the close of Act Three, scene one, conveys how life has become unfairly humbling towards a female character who only ever desired to be dutiful to her cause and her family.

Respect for Sarah will stem from her unwavering hope that circumstances will improve and that a socialist society will prevail. The fact that Sarah goes to brew a cup of tea for Monty after disagreeing with his blasé attitude towards nuclear weapons, shows her multi-faceted construction. Tynan also writes that “only Sarah-ignorant, intuitive, tea-brewing Sarah,”<sup>115</sup> stands firm in her views. However, I disagree with what in 2020 can now be seen as an overtly out of date interpretation and attitude towards Wesker’s female character on the

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945* (Faber & Faber, London, 2007), p. 156.

<sup>112</sup> Alexander Hutton, “Literature, Criticism, and Politics in the Early New Left, 1956–62,” Taken from *Twentieth Century British History* (2016), p. 69.

<sup>113</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 62.

<sup>114</sup> Andrew Wyllie, *Sex on Stage: Gender and Sexuality in Post-War British Theatre* (Intellect Books, Bristol, 2009), p. 65.

<sup>115</sup> Tynan, *A View of the English Stage: 1944-1963*, p. 291.

part of Tynan, he fails to recognise the complexity of what her domesticity translates into. My interpretation is that the more isolated Sarah becomes in her beliefs the more admirable her character is. They see a woman who is dedicated, loyal and steadfast both domestically and politically. Her “tea-brewing”<sup>116</sup> is paramount to this because it reaffirms the importance of patience and stability within a household as was previously analysed in chapter one of this thesis, “HYMIE [*coming away from the window*]: Make yourself some food! With her it’s food all the time. Food and tea. No sooner you finished one cup than you got another.”<sup>117</sup> In reference to this statement said by Hymie in Act One, scene two of *Chicken Soup with Barley* the fact that he refers to how Sarah always keeps your cup filled conveys the infinite nature of her love for both her peers and her family. Furthermore, Robert Kleinberg ascertains that “Sarah’s immediate concern is to feed”<sup>118</sup> people and that Wesker’s intent with this is to symbolise “life-avoidance.”<sup>119</sup> I disagree with Kleinberg’s assertion because Sarah’s culinary nature does not represent her avoiding life but rather her keeping in touch with the necessities of life, of which eating is one, rather it symbolises her awareness in regard to physical strength and survival.

Sonia can be compared to Sarah because of the multi-dimensionality of her character in both the play and the short story. Letters are the main mode of communication between Sonia and her husband Victor. However, all of the letters being shared with his friend Maurice in my view dilutes the connection between Sonia and Victor because the letters are being intercepted. On a biographical note we see letters which Wesker wrote to his own wife Dusty. In one example Wesker introduces the letter by writing that “I hand wrote a rushed letter to Dusty-no date, no address.”<sup>120</sup> This is reflective of Maurice’s statement when he says that

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 30.

<sup>118</sup> Robert Kleinberg, “Seriocomedy in *The Wesker Trilogy*,” *Educational Theatre Journal* (Volume 21, No. 1 March 1969) p. 37.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I dare*, p. 638.



they all had “no date, no beginning”<sup>121</sup> and “no ending.”<sup>122</sup> Therefore, no uniform structure. However, the fact that Wesker still took the time to write the letter to Dusty conveys that the formality of the letter is not what is important, rather it is the written communication where intimacies are being exchanged. Wesker reflects this in his use of affectionate, conversational language towards his wife, “Please forgive me for this mad note- wait to hear from me more. I LOVE YOU, Wiz.”<sup>123</sup> The narrative which Maurice gives us between Sonia and Victor in both the short story and the play is reflective of the warmth that Wesker shared with Dusty. This is exemplified through phrasing such as the following “Very tense time that was my love. I’m laughing as I write it down,”<sup>124</sup> a short phrase in which the repetition of the personal pronoun “I” and referring to Victor as “my love”<sup>125</sup> is evocative of how Sonia sees her relationship with Victor as both unique to the two of them and wholly exclusive of others.

However, the interception of the letters by Maurice and presence of the voiceover as a replacement for Sonia reading them onstage overall creates a sense of an oppressive relationship between Sonia and Victor. Oppressive because naturally a contrast is formed between the lethargy of Victor with Sonia’s domestic prowess. Furthermore, we see how in the short story Victor shares with Maurice details of his and Sonia’s love life ““in fact don’t laugh, we’re lovers again.””<sup>126</sup> He then proceeds to highlight the quirks of her body, “she’s got grey hairs growing out from her chin.”<sup>127</sup> This is an overtly shallow observation from Victor which is preceded by Sonia profoundly crediting him for giving her an education. This creates a contrast between Sonia and Victor and what they place value by within their marriage. This letter features in both the play and the short story, functioning to portray

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<sup>121</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” p. 120.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I dare*, p. 638.

<sup>124</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” p. 96.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” p. 91.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

Victor as a domineering figure. The voiceover says that “after the teasing and tormenting my brain got harder and I grew proud of what I got to understand and how I could listen to you and your mates.”<sup>128</sup> Wesker’s choice of language in this letter represents how Victor wants to control Sonia’s beliefs and thoughts, psychological bullying is suggested by the words “teasing”<sup>129</sup> and “tormenting”<sup>130</sup> and the repetition of harsh “t” sounds reflects the oppressive attitude that Victor had towards Sonia. However, it is important to note that Sonia does not show any feelings of resentment towards her husband for the way in which he treated her in the past. In the short story she says that “after the teasing and tormenting my brain got harder and I grew proud of what I got to understand and how I could listen to you and your mates arguing.”<sup>131</sup> In this section Sonia internalises the abusive treatment that Victor exposed her to at times, however she appears to defend it by saying that this is what she needed to help her develop into a “woman.”<sup>132</sup> My interpretation of this is that Sonia is fully aware that the manner in which Victor treated her was wrong, however if she were to admit this she would see that as an act of unfaithfulness because it would go against her duty as an obedient wife. It is also important to note that she distinguishes herself as being separate from him and his friends as she uses the personal pronoun “your,”<sup>133</sup> suggesting that she viewed herself as detached and inferior to Victor’s peers.

The home surpasses all else when it comes to the lives of Sarah and Sonia. In the play version of *Love Letters on Blue Paper* the only scene which is not within the four walls of the home is scene eighteen which takes place in hospital at Victor’s deathbed. It is curious that this is the only time that the character of Sonia is seen outside her home. This corresponds to a comment made by Ann M. Shanahan who claims that by being outside the domestic space

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<sup>128</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 81.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” p. 90.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

the female character is breaking “free of dependent or oppressive relations with male characters.”<sup>134</sup> However, I believe that Shanahan’s comment is too simplistic when it comes to our interpretation of Sonia. This is because we see in scene seventeen that the actor portraying Sonia should be convey her sense of disorientation as she “*looks around for what to do*,”<sup>135</sup> the actor portraying these actions should make it clear of how caring for Victor has taken up so much of Sonia’s time that she has lost sense of her independence as a woman. She should then poignantly prepare his bed as though he will return as simultaneously the audience will hear the voiceover reading “why am I so clumsy, never graceful as you deserved. Wretched body, wretched heart, dull old mind not any part of me good enough for you.”<sup>136</sup> Language that embodies the lack of confidence which she has in herself and how she believes she only possessed a sense of worth when her husband was by her side. It reiterates the tone of despondency from Sonia’s letter in scene four, conveying further her sense of inferiority in this marriage. The language that Sonia uses in this letter accentuates her self-awareness, by specifically referring to her body and her clumsiness. However, in the case of the short story version we see that Sonia is not characterised at this point as lost at all, instead we read that she is “surrounded”<sup>137</sup> by all her children looking “thinner”<sup>138</sup> and “magnificent with her black hair swept back in a tight bun.”<sup>139</sup> A clear contrast to the “withdrawn”<sup>140</sup> woman that we encounter at the beginning of the short story, the difference between the Sonia from the play and the Sonia from the short story is based on Wesker wanting to create greater dramatic effect for his play. The voiceover read during the last letter whilst Sonia stands on the stage alone would heighten the melancholy mood and Sonia’s loneliness. In

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<sup>134</sup> Ann M. Shanahan, “Playing House: Staging Experiments About Women in Domestic Space,” *Theatre Topics*, Volume 23 (2013), p. 134.

<sup>135</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 90.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*, p. 113.

<sup>137</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” p. 119.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*., p. 75.

contrast the ending is less emotive as it concludes with Maurice receiving Sonia's last letter to Victor from the nurse in the hospital, Maurice says that "like all of them it was on blue paper."<sup>141</sup> However, because Sonia is not present when he reads the last letter this has the effect of making Maurice intrusive by taking possession of a letter which was meant for someone else and reading it for himself. Overall, the conclusion of the short story is one which is disappointing and tepid, because that last piece of heartfelt correspondence is intercepted by someone else. In the play Sonia like Sarah carries out her duties as a loyal wife to the end, at the hospital she "*gathers his belongings*"<sup>142</sup> taking care to fold "*each item very carefully*."<sup>143</sup> Simultaneously, the final voiceover depicts the equal leveller that is death: "It's a glorious moment beloved. Even for the simpleton, even for him, his foolishness falls away just as from the madman his madness falls away."<sup>144</sup> One reading of this conclusion would be that there is a clear sense of closure as Victor has died, however another reading is that this is the start of a new chapter of Sonia's life. The collection of letters that were exchanged between Sonia and Victor are a celebration of the life which they shared, however the next part of Sonia's life without Victor will be firmly under her control. In the appendix which follows the play, Wesker writes that the last letter will be "addressed to her husband who lies dead before her."<sup>145</sup> Wesker obviously desires to portray an intense morbid mood for this final scene, we also see in the stage directions from scene Eighteen that Victor's body is "*prone*."<sup>146</sup> Therefore, his body should be positioned chest down and back up as if still alive and sleeping. The fact that Wesker specifies that Victor's body should be left positioned in this way signifies that this is not an ending of closure for Sonia as she is now left alone and heartbroken. The stream of consciousness style of narrative that the voiceover speaks with in

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<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>142</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 114.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, Note on the Letters, p. 115.

<sup>146</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 113.

the last letter reflects the emotional imbalance of Sonia's mind at this impasse in her life. The lack of punctuation and logical sense of the phrase "oh my love oh my Victor oh my heart,"<sup>147</sup> accentuates this also because these words should be spoken by the actor depicting Sonia in a manner in which her emotionally overwhelmed state is palpable to the viewing audience.

Whilst in *Chicken Soup with Barley* Sarah's domesticity symbolises her contribution to a political ideology and her power as a matriarch, in the case of Sonia it is a means of her husband exerting his patriarchal control over this household. In scene four of the play, Sonia says how she "could listen"<sup>148</sup> to Victor and his "mates arguing and saving the world"<sup>149</sup> but "couldn't talk,"<sup>150</sup> which is indicative of the automatic silence that Victor expected of her, she was to be seen but not heard. This is symbolised in the following excerpt between Maurice and Victor where Victor picks up "a piece of heavily fruited cake. 'Eat some. It's Sonia's.'"<sup>151</sup> He then proceeds to reminisce about his days as a Trade Union official saying that "Yes, have to work hard at thinking. But I win, in the end. I bloody do. All those years of hard wage negotiations."<sup>152</sup> Thereby, Victor inadvertently contrasts the domestic world denoted by the fruitcake which belongs to Sonia and the political world that he has inhabited. The simplistic triviality of the fruitcake is contrasted with what he views as the urgent importance of worker's wages, Victor is a character who rejoices in the memories of his prime. The fact that he tells Maurice that the cake belongs to Sonia, reinforces that her place as far as Victor is concerned is the kitchen. In *As Much as I Dare*, Wesker says that the character of Victor was influenced by Victor Feather who was "General Secretary of the

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<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>148</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 81.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> Wesker, "Love Letters on Blue Paper," p. 83.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

TUC.”<sup>153</sup> The organisation which strives to ensure the appropriate rights for people who are working. Victor in the short story says that during the “hospital workers’ strike”<sup>154</sup> he went at it “full pelt”<sup>155</sup> with “bloody all night discussions about compromise, open-air gatherings up and down the country, executive committee meetings- the lot.”<sup>156</sup> The bombastic, passionate tone that Victor uses in this phrase highlights his dedication to get the best wage for the workers who are on strike. His language is impassioned in tone which has the effect of moving the reader emotionally, it is emotional because these words are now coming from a man who through terminal illness now has “slouched eyes...like a tired, hunted stag indifferent to slaughter.”<sup>157</sup> Animalistic language which conveys how Victor has been a powerful figure within his field as a stag represents an image of masculinity at its peak as it is “linked with virility and ardour.”<sup>158</sup> Wesker constructs the Victor of yesteryear as being an archetypal figure of manliness. The poignancy of the animal imagery used by Wesker is the fact that the stag has become weak and lost its pride and erectness as the word “slouched”<sup>159</sup> helps to illustrate. Kevin De Ornellas interprets the impending death of Victor as a parallel to “an admission that hopes for a socialist England have been vanquished.”<sup>160</sup> De Ornellas’ comment is overt in its pessimism. Instead I choose to ascertain that Victor’s imminent death is evocative of the transient nature of personal relationships and that death does not necessarily bring closure or a sentimentalised opinion of the relationship when the people involved were able-bodied. In addition to the shared political interests that Victor and Feather have we see how they are also both interested in the arts. Wesker writes that “Victor’s

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<sup>153</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 232.

<sup>154</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” p. 83.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>158</sup> Jack Tressider, *Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature*, p. 145.

<sup>159</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” p. 78.

<sup>160</sup> Kevin De Ornellas, “Arnold Wesker,” From *Dictionary of Literary Biography: British and Irish Short-Fiction Writers, 1945-2000*, Edited by Cheryl Alexander Malcolm and David Malcolm (Thomson Gale, Farmington Hills, 2006), p. 365.

passion was the visual arts, a sad passion hanging like a delayed and lonely blossom on an old bush whose other flowers had long gone.”<sup>161</sup> In comparison Geoffrey Goodman writes that Feather was a “devoted admirer of the arts and a talented painter,”<sup>162</sup> reinforcing Wesker’s own belief that the Trade Union should become more involved with the arts. Wesker writes that the “BBC radio and Penguin books”<sup>163</sup> were his “university,”<sup>164</sup> a statement which fully advocates being an auto-didact. Furthermore, he famously oversaw the organisation Centre 42 which had the main aim of encouraging more working-class people to participate in the arts. The fact that Wesker would have worked alongside the TUC is significant to *Love Letters on Blue Paper* due to the fact that Wesker has created a male character who is a Trade Union official. In the play and short story Victor is engrossed in conversations with Maurice who is a university professor. Their conversations include the topics of art history and philosophy. They discuss Giotto di Bondone, M.C. Escher, John Ruskin and J.M.W Turner. Victor enthusiastically says that ““Ruskin wrote *Modern Painters* in 1843, when he was twenty-four years old-twenty -four!””<sup>165</sup> However, a key observation in both the short story and in the play is that Sonia is never included in their highbrow discussions. Sonia who would be considered as one of the housewives that Wesker had in mind when he famously said that he wanted to write plays for “the housewife, the miner and the teddy boy,”<sup>166</sup> is never invited to join these discussions.

The silence of Sonia is a significant motif in both the play and the short story. In the play, she mentions that her brother Stan was “gassed and slaughtered”<sup>167</sup> as a soldier during World War One. The silent way in which her brother was killed by the gas may mirror how

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<sup>161</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” pp. 77-78.

<sup>162</sup> Geoffrey Goodman, Article on: Feather, Victor Grayson Hardie, Baron Feather (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004).

<sup>163</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 130.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>165</sup> Wesker, “Love Letters on Blue Paper,” p. 94.

<sup>166</sup> *Arnold Wesker: A Casebook*, Edited by Reade W. Dornan (Routledge, London, 2013), p. 2.

<sup>167</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 81.

feminists would say that her spirit is being killed by having to also remain silent by her husband due to his dislike of her taking an active role in political debate or discussion. Scene thirteen conveys that when Sonia did grow in confidence that Victor felt unsettled by this, he angrily says that “in confidence, cockiness, independence...Grow, mature, take over...all but me General Secretaryship, became another woman.”<sup>168</sup> This phrase highlights Victor’s chauvinistic opinion of Sonia, the repetition of “c” sounds emphasise his sheer disgust to the audience. Finally, he says that she “became another woman,”<sup>169</sup> therefore not recognisable to him and not what his expectations were for her to be.

When we compare the role that money plays within the lives of Sarah and Sonia we see two contrasting portraits. On one hand, because of Harry’s lack of ambition and his illness, Sarah oversees the monetary duties as well as the domestic ones in her household. Andrew Wyllie makes the assertion that Sarah “provides both men and women with a new role model, which unites a traditionally masculine political activism with a traditionally feminine culinary and caring activism.”<sup>170</sup> However, when accusing Harry of joking around whilst in the middle of his first stroke in Act Two, scene one, “Harry: Sarah! [*He stops, chokes, and then stares wildly around him.*] Mamma. Mamma. [*He is having his first stroke*] Sarah [*frightened but not hysterical*] Harry! Harry! What is it? Harry: [*in Yiddish, gently*] Vie iss sie-der mamma? Sarah: Stop it, Harry.”<sup>171</sup> Her tone is accusatory and sharp towards her suffering husband and not at all caring, her sharpness originates from her frustration at him for pushing their daughter Ada away. She is obviously aware of her isolation as she repeatedly asks Ada in Act Two, scene one to stay: “Oh no, Ada, stay, it’s early yet. Stay. We’ll play solo,”<sup>172</sup> and “stay here and write to Dave. We’ll all be quiet. Ronnie’s going out. Daddy’ll go to bed and I’ve

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<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> Wyllie, *Sex on Stage: Gender and Sexuality in Post-War British Theatre*, p. 65.

<sup>171</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.



got some washing to do. Stay, Ada, stay.”<sup>173</sup> The repetition of the word “stay,”<sup>174</sup> these examples have the effect of depicting Sarah as vulnerable and yearning for human contact. It is a scene in which we fully view her as the archetypal matriarch as she desires to keep her family close regardless of politics or war. Her awareness of money is highlighted at various times in the play through phrasing such as “Ah, Harry, you couldn’t even make money during the war. The war! When *everybody* made money.”<sup>175</sup> Wesker formats “everybody”<sup>176</sup> in italic font in order to place emphasis on how the actor depicting Sarah should make a spectacle out of her husband’s lack of enterprise. Additionally, the audience learns that Harry without permission takes money from Sarah, Sarah says in Act One, scene two that “you took ten shillings from my bag.”<sup>177</sup> In a contrast to Sarah’s dismay, in the short story version of *Love Letters on Blue Paper* Sonia says to Victor that “You spent good money on a washing machine.”<sup>178</sup> The reader learns that Sonia has been financially dependent on Victor, and that she is a character who shows appreciation for her husband and does not begrudge that she does not have any financial say. Also, in Kynaston’s *Modernity Britain* (2001) we read that “among the middle class”<sup>179</sup> in society during the year 1960 “barely half”<sup>180</sup> owned a “washing machine.”<sup>181</sup> To own a mod con such as this would have been seen as a sign of wealth and would have made Sonia’s life easier because carrying out laundry would not have been as cumbersome and laborious a task as it had been.

Scene eight of *Love Letters on Blue Paper* sees Sonia directed specifically to “cut eight roses for a vase,”<sup>182</sup> the flower traditionally viewed as symbolic of love and romance. This

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<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> Kynaston, *Modernity Britain: 1957-1962*, p. 471.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 92.

staging by Wesker is overt in its specificity, which has the effect of characterising Sonia as compulsive and obsessive about how she does her flower arranging. However, by repeatedly referring to her love of gardening and flowers Sonia is actually referring to the cyclical nature of life and death. Sonia says that “in me there are flowers”<sup>183</sup> which has the effect of portraying that her body is not her own. In Sonia’s marriage with Victor, her representation of motherhood is idealised in order to uphold the structure of traditional gender roles during the mid-twentieth century. In scene fifteen, we hear that Victor “only needed to be in the house and I felt my life and the lives of the children I cherished could never go wrong.”<sup>184</sup> The tone of language that Sonia uses in this letter extols the virtue of her husband, the repetition of “ch” sounds has the effect of making the language poetic. This excerpt from the play is obviously portraying Sonia as weak and vulnerable, whilst Victor is characterised as a stabilising force within the household. This adheres to what Sarah Stoller views as “the supposed naturalness of the model of the male-breadwinner family that formed the basis of British social policy,”<sup>185</sup> instilled in 1970s British society that women were primarily to attend to their husbands and their children. She goes on to say that “do you know I’ve felt myself beautiful only because you chose me?”<sup>186</sup> and “you are my rock my hero my love.”<sup>187</sup> Sonia is shown to idolise Victor and credits him for completing her identity as a woman. The repetition of the personal pronoun “my” conveys how she wants to possess him like a child. Whilst the voiceover is reading this letter, Sonia is directed to “*deftly and lovingly*”<sup>188</sup> prepare “*a jar of fresh fruit slices*”<sup>189</sup> for Victor. The presence of fruit in this scene reflects the fruitfulness that Sonia associates with her marriage to Victor, Sarah Carr-Gomm writes that

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<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Sarah Stoller, “Forging a Politics of Care: Theorizing Household Work in the British Women’s Liberation Movement,” *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 85 (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018), p. 102.

<sup>186</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 111.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

in art fruit represents “nature’s bounty.”<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, Tressider writes that fruit symbolises “abundance, prosperity”<sup>191</sup> and “earthly pleasures,”<sup>192</sup> therefore the fruit is a physical representation of the fecundity of Sonia and Victor’s marriage. However, the oranges which feature in this scene are cut and shaped as the voiceover simultaneously says that “You took me and you shaped me and you gave me form. Not a form I couldn’t be but the form I was meant to be.”<sup>193</sup> Reiterating my previous assertion which is that Sonia credits her husband with the completion of her identity as a woman, just as oranges cannot be eaten with the pith. Furthermore, the fact that the voiceover repeats the word “form”<sup>194</sup> tells us that Sonia has to be adjustable and malleable in this relationship in order to adhere to Victor. A parallel is thereby created between Sonia and the oranges. The voiceover’s repetition of the personal pronoun “you,” emphasises further Sonia’s lack of independence and her inferiority within this marriage which she appears to be satisfied with. The voiceover then goes on to extol her fertility by speaking about the children that Sonia and Victor share, botanical imagery features again with “And in me there are flowers. Blossoming all the time. Explosions of colour and energy,”<sup>195</sup> however in my view this conveys how during her marriage Sonia did not consider her body to be her own. The botanical imagery which Wesker creates in this language heightens the representation of reproduction that is already suggested by the stage presence of the fruit. Additionally, through an intimate tone of phrase the voiceover declares that “I feel you there as I’ve felt my children in me, your blood in my blood,”<sup>196</sup> so Sonia is making a comparison between the intimacy between mother and child during pregnancy and the intimacy that she has had in her marriage to Victor. It is sensory in style and the repetition

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<sup>190</sup> Sarah Carr-Gomm, *The Hutchinson Dictionary of Symbols in Art* (Helicon Publishing, London, 1996), p. 97.

<sup>191</sup> Tressider, *Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature*, p. 196.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 110.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 111.

of “b” sounds emphasise the strength of Sonia’s attachment to Victor because it emphasises physicality through the imagery of intermingling blood. Tressider writes that traditionally the “mingling of blood is a symbol of union,”<sup>197</sup> a tradition which Wesker reiterates and adheres to. The audience of today may find this imagery outdated in style as it does suggest that one of the most important functions of being a woman is to have children. We could say that during 1977 this was provocative in the eyes of Second Wave Feminists, as Helene Cixous’s essay “The Laugh of the Medusa” first published in 1976 dealt with this subject matter. Cixous plays devil’s advocate regarding the subject of motherhood when she claims that “there is always within (woman) at least a little of that good mother’s milk.”<sup>198</sup> A sarcastic phrase which implies that all women should inevitably possess a maternal instinct due to their bodies and if they do not, then they are abnormal. Wesker characterises Sonia as an idealised representation of this maternal longing as she wholly adheres to what society expects of her. It is also important to note that Victor never once mentions his feelings on the subject of children, therefore Wesker is shown to adhere to gender stereotypes of the era in his characterisations of Sonia and Victor.

In comparison to Sonia, Deborah from the *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* also depicts her life as a homemaker with hyperbole. First performed in 1982 this play is composed of four “vignettes”<sup>199</sup> in which one woman is focussed on in each. This work from Wesker’s later repertoire was selected because of the fact that it is a play that highlights the loneliness of a female character who has dedicated an abundance of time to the well-being of others. In comparison to Sarah and Sonia we don’t see anyone reciprocating the loving acts that she has bestowed on others. Alone on the stage, Deborah features in the final vignette of *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, and in the opening stage direction, Wesker instructs that the

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<sup>197</sup> Tressider, *Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature*, p. 73.

<sup>198</sup> Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” Taken from *Signs*, Summer (1976).

<sup>199</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 38.

background sound should be the “*Electronic sound*”<sup>200</sup> of a “*cash register constantly in the background,*”<sup>201</sup> staging that should accentuate the mechanical, timed, repetitive existence that Deborah leads. Her opening words are “me a prisoner,”<sup>202</sup> a rhetorical phrase which portrays Deborah’s immediate defence against someone who implies that she leads a closed, trapped existence. However, the fact that her opening statement is preoccupied with language associated with imprisonment and labour causes the audience to interpret that she is overly, unnecessarily defensive, “those poor men, tied to their jobs, tied to their hours...they’re the prisoners, they’re the slaves!”<sup>203</sup> The repetition of the word “tied”<sup>204</sup> has the effect of depicting a form of inescapable torture. Wesker constructs Deborah similarly to Sonia in that both female characters’ lives are completely centred within the home. Deborah’s life like Sonia’s appears ineffectual, she repeatedly fusses over food in the supermarket, “look out for the date on that yoghurt”<sup>205</sup> and “don’t buy that! Frozen pastry! Doesn’t work. Makes your pies taste like leather.”<sup>206</sup> The fact that Wesker punctuates the second phrase with exclamation marks depicts how the actor playing Deborah should emphasise this phrase with an urgent tone. Furthermore, both women praise themselves on how well their children have turned out. In *Love Letters on Blue Paper* in scene fifteen, the voiceover for Sonia says that her children “never did go wrong. They have confidence and pity and daring in them.”<sup>207</sup> Similarly Deborah says that “my children are not spoilt or overfed. They know about poverty, they know about hard work, and they know that everything has to be earned.”<sup>208</sup> In scene eight of the play Sonia writes to Victor about how “the lilac”<sup>209</sup> is now “dead,”<sup>210</sup> which they

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<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>202</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 110.

<sup>208</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 51.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

planted “forty-one years ago.”<sup>211</sup> The death of the flower foreshadows Victor’s impending death in the play, as she describes the lilac as a “thin thing”<sup>212</sup> with “only a few whispery strands between living and dying.”<sup>213</sup> In my view this botanical image represents the “span of time”<sup>214</sup> that has been shared between Sonia and Victor, time which in comparison to the life of any plant is limited. In contrast Deborah talks of her love of nature by having the house “covered with pot plants creeping all over...which I water and prune and talk to.”<sup>215</sup> The fact that Deborah talks to the plants accentuates the loneliness that is caused by her rigidly adhering to her role as a matriarch who is beyond reproach. In terms of how far a comparison can be made between Deborah and the character of Sarah, I am of the opinion that both characters yearn for their family to be near them. Deborah tells the audience of how it takes tremendous effort to “make my home a haven, a womb, an anchor, a magnet,”<sup>216</sup> the words haven, anchor and womb all imply security however they also suggest isolation and stagnancy. The word magnet tells us that like Sarah she does not want her family to ever leave her, she wants them to be unnaturally attracted and drawn back to her in order for her to feel needed and depended on in order to combat the loneliness that she inevitably feels within the home.

One marked difference between Sonia to Sarah is how they have contrasting attitudes towards their ill husbands. Sonia is permanently caring for her husband without opinion or protest, whilst Sarah’s attitude to her husband is one of resentment epitomised in the phrase that “a housekeeper wouldn’t do what I do for you, Harry-washing all those sheets.”<sup>217</sup> Sarah sees the role of being Harry’s wife as demeaning and pitiful. In contrast Wesker characterises

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<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>214</sup> Tressider, *Complete Dictionary of Symbols in Myth, Art and Literature*, p. 190.

<sup>215</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 53.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>217</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 28.

Sonia to be subservient and passive as she cares for Victor. The sheets that Sonia hangs up on the clothes line should appear to be “*dazzling*,”<sup>218</sup> so this is the intensity of how clean they should appear to the audience. Furthermore, when referring to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*’s definition of *dazzling* it reads as “extremely bright, especially so as to blind the eyes temporarily.”<sup>219</sup> Likewise to the silence which Sonia is associated with in this play, in this example sight becomes another sense which is lost due to the deadening regimented nature of her life with Victor. Simultaneously, the voiceover says the overtly wholesome feelings which she has for Victor, taking place in the midst of her attending to their bed-linen. Her acceptance of only being able to “listen”<sup>220</sup> and not participate in the activities of Victor and his “mates”<sup>221</sup> is symbolised in the contradiction between Wesker’s staging and his dialogue in this example. Between her industriousness in her domesticity and the flowery language that she uses to extol the happiness that she has had in her marriage to Victor I believe that she is a quintessential exemplum of traditional female morals.

In the appendix which follows *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, Wesker comments that it must “not seem possible that such a woman could be writing,”<sup>222</sup> the letters. This implies that because Sonia appears physically to be content with her life within the domestic sphere that it should be taken for granted that she is psychologically happy. In her letters in scene two and in scene four, Wesker’s choice of language emphasises her self-professed lack of intelligence, her supposed narrow-mindedness and stupidity such as “when we first met I was really plain. Plain-minded I mean, not looking,”<sup>223</sup> and “soft brain I had in them days. Could I help it though?”<sup>224</sup> In both these instances, the audience gets the impression once again that Sonia

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<sup>218</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 80.

<sup>219</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of English*, Edited by Angus Stevenson, Third Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015).

<sup>220</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 81.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, Appendix, Notes on the Letters, p. 115.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

lacks severely in confidence. We can draw a comparison between Sonia and Sally Hardcastle from Greenwood's *Love on the Dole*. The following excerpt conveys Sally's belief that she is not good enough for the politically astute Larry Meath "What had she to give? Who was she? Sal Hardcastle, an insignificant weaver at Marlowe's cotton mills. She shrank from the acknowledgement of her abysmal negligibility: by comparison Larry seemed more remote than ever."<sup>225</sup> In Sonia's case Victor psychologically made her feel intellectually inadequate in contrast to him as Wesker uses forceful language such as "bullied"<sup>226</sup> and "tormenting."<sup>227</sup> Sonia tells Victor that "you teased and you shouldn't have done because I was badly hurt by it."<sup>228</sup> Within the same excerpt in scene four she also reveals that Victor "used to tease"<sup>229</sup> her "about God"<sup>230</sup> in order to deter her Christian belief. We see how Victor was insistent that Sonia adopt his belief in Marxism, as she reveals that it went from "God to you,"<sup>231</sup> Sonia therefore lost her belief in Christianity. The fact that Victor wanted to remove Sonia's Christian belief is no coincidence as the Marxist ideology which he was a follower of would state that "religion was a form of alienation,"<sup>232</sup> signifying how he wanted to isolate Sonia so much to the point that she "missed God."<sup>233</sup> However, it is interesting that she is obviously only revealing her unhappiness to him now whilst he is in the midst of his dying days. This implies to the audience that perhaps an element of Sonia's fear of him has subsided because he is the one completely dependent upon her. Therefore, through the letters in scene two and scene four the audience would feel pathos for Sonia because she is presented as not getting the same opportunities as Victor who was a Trade Union official. Other examples in which

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<sup>225</sup> Greenwood, *Love on the Dole*, p. 139.

<sup>226</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 76.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81.

<sup>232</sup> *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Politics and International Relations*, Edited by Garrett Brown, Iain McLean, and Alistair McMillan (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018).

<sup>233</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 81.



Wesker represents Victor's political allegiance include the phrase from the short story that "capitalism's built up a resistance to criticism,"<sup>234</sup> and in the play he tells Maurice that "Marx"<sup>235</sup> and "Keir Hardie"<sup>236</sup> are two influential people who are both dead. Karl Marx, who was the founder of the Marxist doctrine, criticised like Victor "capitalism"<sup>237</sup> as he believed that it was a "a highly exploitative system,"<sup>238</sup> that favours the wealthy in society. When in the short story Victor spoke with Maurice about negotiating fairer pay for the hospital workers who were on strike, Victor was following suit of Marx's belief in "a stateless, egalitarian, and co-operative society, founded on the principle of providing for everyone according to their needs."<sup>239</sup> Keir Hardie was the "founder of the Labour party"<sup>240</sup> and was also involved with "mining trade unionism,"<sup>241</sup> therefore, Victor indulgently affiliates himself with two stalwarts of equality. The fact that Victor associates himself with these two notable figures is significant because it symbolises how he views that his own impending death is synonymous with his feeling that the ideology that he believed in is dead also.

The audience sees several times over the course of the play how Sonia craves for physical, prolonged heat. One example of this occurs when making tea her "*hand rests on a tea-cosy, pausing to feel the heat.*"<sup>242</sup> Informing the audience that she tries hard to make the home as comfortable as she can as a tea cosy is traditionally a knitted covering for a teapot which keeps the contents warmer for longer. To savour the heat she pauses, therefore she is a character who is in tune with her senses and yearns for warmth. Furthermore, when she is

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<sup>234</sup> Wesker, "Love Letters on Blue Paper," p. 106.

<sup>235</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 112.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *The Oxford Companion to British History*, Edited by Robert Crowcroft and John Cannon, Tim S. Gray, article on Karl Marx (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015).

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> Kenneth O. Morgan, "Hardie (James) Keir," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 6th January 2011.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> Wesker, *Love Letters on Blue Paper*, p. 76.

attending to some laundry outside in the garden area of the stage Wesker indicates that she “closes her eyes”<sup>243</sup> in order to bathe in the sunlight. There is an irony to tasks which on the first instance are mundane and simplistic such as making “morning tea,”<sup>244</sup> and cutting up slices of “‘cut-and-come-again cake’.”<sup>245</sup> In the example of the cut and come again cake, we interpret that although Sonia does not openly portray her happiness to those who visit, by giving them this home baked fruitcake she clearly wants them to call again. The fact that she bakes in order to communicate in this example subtly accentuates her oppressed loneliness. In the example of Deborah from *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* she extols the wonderful taste of a Danish biscuit, “it’s not cheap but it’s a real delicacy. Something to surprise them with. Made in Denmark. An absolutely scrumptious biscuit. Melts in your mouth.”<sup>246</sup> The sibilance that Wesker uses with “something”<sup>247</sup> and “surprise”<sup>248</sup> accentuates how when the actor who portrays the character of Deborah delivers these sections of dialogue they should emphasise them in order to denote the character’s enthusiastic attitude to spending time within the world of retail, however in my opinion they should not be delivered in such a manner that Deborah comes across as materialistic. Therefore, an approach of caution by the actor needs to be applied when saying either the repetitive “s” or “m” sounds so as Deborah does not become two-dimensional or a caricature. In *Chicken Soup with Barley* in Act Three, scene two Sarah invites Ronnie to partake in the cake that she has made “specially”<sup>249</sup> for him. With each of these examples in mind, these female characters all use baked food as a method of suppressing the loneliness that they feel within their homes and the progressive alienation that they feel from their families.

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<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>246</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Women*, p. 52.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 70.

Through my examination of Deborah, Sarah and Sonia, I have come to the conclusion that Wesker's representation of each of these female characters is associated with the "theme"<sup>250</sup> of "sacrifice."<sup>251</sup> Particularly, we see how none of these women have careers of their own and how none of them are entirely financially independent. In addition to financial sacrifice, there is a lack of appreciation and recognition towards each of these women. The invisibility that I associate with Deborah, Sarah and Sonia arises from the fact that they either talk to themselves or inanimate objects. Furthermore, the loss of both hearing and sight which is associated with the character of Sonia emphasises a lack of existence and physical presence from the view of the audience. In order to fully understand how Wesker represents women, I believe that a cross-section of his female characters throughout the entirety of his writing career should be taken. However, my final note on the women from his early work is that they are embodiments of the limitations imposed on women in a mid-twentieth century British society. These limitations have been aforementioned in this chapter and predominantly caused women to be confined to the domestic sphere regardless of what class in society they belonged to. We see how Sarah is a member of the working class whilst Sonia belongs to the middle class yet both women lead closed, sheltered lives.

In the next section of this chapter I will analyse female characters from Wesker's later work in order to prove how he evolved as a writer of women in relation to how society itself evolved. Therefore, I will be making close reference to works from the 1980s onwards, a period which saw a significant proportion of Wesker's work failing to even be recognised. However, the fact that Wesker never stopped contributing to the literary world illustrates how rather than shield himself behind the secure, stagnant nature of a brand he in comparison to his female characters made his writing relevant to the times in which he lived. To do this I

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<sup>250</sup> Wesker, "The DNA of a Play," p. 20.

<sup>251</sup> *Ibid.*

will present how his female characters became more sexualised and self-sufficient in not all but some aspects of their lives.

(iii) “Daughters of Eve:”<sup>253</sup> Wesker’s Women from the 1980s-2000s.

This section of the chapter will be an analysis of Wesker’s representation of women in the later period of his career as a writer. In comparison to the previous section I will present how Wesker depicts women as products of their time, asserting the opinion that his representation of them evolved with the society in which they lived. However, what will be made clear throughout is that although his female characters are evocative of the rise in equality that womanhood experienced post 1970s, Wesker still conveys awareness that in regard to their respective relations with the opposite sex some aspects did not change at all. These aspects include male dominance within a relationship as examined in *Love Letters on Blue Paper* and the invisibility that is associated with the matriarchal figures within Wesker’s *oeuvre* as was demonstrated through my analysis of both Sarah and Sonia.

The key theme examined in this section will be how Wesker evolved as a writer in relation to his representation of female sexuality and how they are shown to break away from the constraints experienced by their female predecessors. Though the women of Wesker’s later works are still as complex and contradictory as they are in his earlier work, we see this in the cases of Rosie Swanson of *Lady Othello*, Stephanie from *Yardsale* and Samantha Milner of *The Mistress* who each have careers of their own, their own homes and strong personalities yet they all still yearn for the love and support of a man. In a review of *Yardsale* one commentator ascertained that Wesker’s “ploddingly prosaic dialogue evokes a character who amounts to little more than a textbook stereotype.”<sup>254</sup> According to my reading of *Yardsale* Stephen Holden’s comment is unfair in regard to Wesker’s characterisation of Stephanie as he implies that she is the archetypal female character who is abandoned by a

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<sup>253</sup> Chiara Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W* (Oberon Books, London, 2011), p. 30.

<sup>254</sup> Stephen Holden, “Stage: Yardsale and Betty Lemon,” *New York Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> February 1988.

man. However, my interpretation of *Yardsale* is that it's a play that examines the futility of human relationships and the hollowness of men in relation to how they treat women, and the yardsale that Stephanie visits herself in the play acts as an analogy of this. The complexities of human nature became more of a concern for Wesker in his later repertoire of writing. He himself said that "men and women are unpredictable with mixed appetites and diverse motives,"<sup>255</sup> an informative statement exemplifying how Wesker was interested in the dynamics of human interaction.

A selection of Wesker's female characters from works which have had little air time have been chosen for the second part of this chapter to recognise their value. The fact that in the later part of Wesker's career there was a decrease in the number of his works which were performed on the stage also reflects how his popularity as a writer began to wane post-1970s due to critics who pigeon-holed Wesker and did not agree with his deviation away from the "gritty naturalism"<sup>256</sup> that they associated with *The Trilogy* and into the "abstract,"<sup>257</sup> such as his collection of *One-Woman Plays*. These works have been selected because they show how Wesker's presentation of women is over the space of thirty years from the 1970s to the 2000s. It will examine *Lady Othello* a screenplay which has never been performed or filmed but was first published in 1987, his collection of *One-Woman Plays* the collection which features *Yardsale* and *Groupie*. These plays are vitally important to this chapter because they show "portraits of different women,"<sup>258</sup> that originate from Wesker's own "experience"<sup>259</sup> of the female "variety."<sup>260</sup> Rajesh Tiwari interprets that Wesker's female characters "long for something better, something unique in their personal lives. They are not stagnant in their

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<sup>255</sup> Wesker, "Accepting the Unacceptable," From *Distinctions* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1985), p. 205.

<sup>256</sup> David Edgar, "Appreciation: Arnold Wesker (1932-2016)," *Contemporary Theatre Review* Volume: 26 Issue 4 (2016), p. 546.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>258</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 30.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*

attitude, they want to grow and get matured.”<sup>261</sup> In Wesker’s *Yardsale* when Stephanie goes to the yard sale she says “and that’s how life goes and still no one’s here to say hello, how are you, here’s a tired old coat hanger, a three-legged chair, an old fashioned mirror, an old fashioned typewriter, an old fashioned waltz.”<sup>262</sup> Stephanie’s statement evokes pathos because she has mercilessly been abandoned by her husband for another woman whom she refers to as the “husband thief.”<sup>263</sup> She tells the audience in scene six how as a way of moving on she has been advised to change “her hairstyle, buy clothes, sell your house, get yourself massaged,”<sup>264</sup> all things which focus on her objectifying herself as a way of self-improvement. However, they are also reflective of a thread which is common in Wesker’s earlier depictions of women, particularly in the example of Sarah who rejects commercialism as a replacement for political activism. In the example of Stephanie, it is her attempts to compensate for her emotional turmoil through “consumption”<sup>265</sup> which is purely artificial and commercial. The neglect and discard of these used items is what she relates strongly to in this particular scene, like the items she too was once loved and felt “lovely.”<sup>266</sup> Our sense of pathos for Stephanie reaches a climax when Wesker directs that at the yard sale Stephanie should start to dance a solo waltz “*a little*.”<sup>267</sup> The solo dance symbolises how this female character has become “deserted,”<sup>268</sup> and lost without her husband as she has been forced to let go of the other half whom she would have shared this dance with. Her timorous nature is exemplified through the adverb “little,”<sup>269</sup> the minimalist way in which she dances the waltz insinuates that she no longer wants to commit to getting the most out of life because she has

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<sup>261</sup> Tiwari, Rajesh, “Women in Arnold Wesker’s Plays with Special Reference to his Six One-Woman Plays,” Gauhati University (2009), p. 92.

<sup>262</sup> Wesker, *Yardsale*, p. 19.

<sup>263</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> Alessandro Marzola, “Writing for Radio and Radio for writing,” Taken from *Arnold Wesker: A Casebook*, Edited by Reade W. Dornan (Routledge, London 2014), p. 115.

<sup>266</sup> Wesker, *Yardsale*, p. 19.

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>268</sup> Rajesh, “Women in Arnold Wesker’s Plays with Special Reference to His Six One-Woman Plays,” p. 117.

<sup>269</sup> Wesker, *Yardsale*, p. 19.

lost her confidence. Stephanie desires to wallow in her own self-pity, desiring to go to the “*Whitney Museum of American Art*”<sup>270</sup> and be able to “look”<sup>271</sup> at the work of the “painter Hopper”<sup>272</sup> without automatically associating herself with the “desperation and loneliness”<sup>273</sup> that he represents in his paintings. In comparison to the female characters examined in the first section of the second chapter, the female characters of his later work can also be associated with loneliness and isolation.

Discarded items are therefore an important motif in Wesker’s play *Yardsale*. Whilst attending the yard sale in scene eight, Stephanie poignantly asks why “you get tired of things,”<sup>274</sup> and then goes on to say that she had “a husband”<sup>275</sup> who felt this way about her. He became tired even though his wife is a woman who has mastered the balancing act between her career and family down to a fine art: “there! That’s the steaks slapped and peppered, the potatoes scrubbed and baking, the mushrooms chopped and frying, the tomatoes grilling.”<sup>276</sup> She is a character who is shown to thrive when multitasking, despite her having only returned home from another day pursuing a career as a “*primary school teacher*.”<sup>277</sup> Stephanie is a female character who has made sacrifices in her own life in order to appease her husband and her family. She comically but scathingly says that “I opened my legs and thought about cooking the next day’s meal while you heaved and puffed and made all those absurd shrieks you informed me was passion,”<sup>278</sup> a phrase that objectifies women as she was placed in the missionary position as a means of satisfying her husband. One reading of this would be that Stephanie has placed what her husband wanted before her own wants, both in terms of food

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>274</sup> Wesker, *Yardsale*, Taken from *One-Woman Plays* (Penguin Books, London, 1989), p. 19.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.



and lovemaking. Language associated with hard work and exertion such as “heaved”<sup>279</sup> and “puffed”<sup>280</sup> represents how Stephanie was uncomfortable at having to listen to her husband making these noises. The uncouthness of her husband is exemplified through the words named above as they depict how their sex life is being compared to a hard day’s work, a chore that had to be carried out. There will be an examination of how his female characters are synonymous with the “discarded,”<sup>281</sup> once loved items that Stephanie peruses, in many cases used for the sexual gratification of a man and then abandoned. Scene Eight of *Yardsale* accentuates this resentment of a woman who now feels like a used object on sale, the best days of her life appear to be over as she keeps dwelling on the memories that she made with her husband rather than moving on “Serendipity’s where we’d each order an over-sized knickerbocker glory or hot fudge sundae, and laugh and laugh and laugh.”<sup>282</sup> The steak that Stephanie prepares in scene one is representative of duty to her family and the ice cream in scene six is representative of comfort, nostalgia and revisiting her youth, in comparison to the seaside ornaments that belonged to Sonia in *Love Letters on Blue Paper*.

*Lady Othello*, an unperformed “Love Story”<sup>283</sup> is about the affair between Stanton Myers who is a Professor of American literature from England and Rosie Swanson, an African American woman, during the “late seventies”<sup>284</sup> in New York. The title of this work obviously alludes to William Shakespeare’s *Othello*. However, what is clear is that it is not like Wesker’s play *Shylock* which is a rewriting of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. *Lady Othello* is not a rewriting, but rather Wesker uses Shakespeare’s tragedy to intensify the key themes which also prove to be divisive in the love triangle composed of Judith Myers, Rosie and Stanton. These themes include: racial anxieties, lack of trust and misogynistic

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<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>283</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, Taken from *Lady Othello and Other Plays* (Penguin Books, London, 1990), p. 189.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

attitudes. In an article from 1988 Wesker claimed that Shakespeare belonged to “16<sup>th</sup> Century England,”<sup>285</sup> but at the same time had a “quality of insight”<sup>286</sup> that allows “future generations”<sup>287</sup> to “continually refresh themselves.”<sup>288</sup> Wesker insinuates that Shakespeare’s works can still be made applicable to the many decades after they are written. In this specific work by Wesker there exists an allusive link with *Othello*. According to my reading of Wesker’s work it is Stanton’s wife Judith who is representative of Iago, a figure who throughout this play is continually “pouring the poison of doubt into”<sup>289</sup> Stanton’s ear over his relationship with Rosie and Rosie as a person. This is exemplified through phrasing such as “You ought not to stay longer than twelve days with her, Stanton. That way she’ll have the illusion it would *all* have been like that.”<sup>290</sup> We may assume that the titular character of the play is indeed Rosie, and the tragedy enveloped within this play’s centre in comparison to its predecessor appears to be “the lovers’ own respective ideas of naturalness in a context of social disbelief.”<sup>291</sup> A mood of “disbelief”<sup>292</sup> forms the template in which this work is set as Act One, scene one of the text opens with Stanton saying to himself “Repeat after me: this relationship can’t possibly work.”<sup>293</sup> Furthermore, Wesker’s use of staging in this first scene directs Stanton to finish “*shaving with old-fashioned cut-throat*”<sup>294</sup> which he goes onto describe as “*dangerous*.”<sup>295</sup> This is eerily reminiscent of the conclusion of Shakespeare’s play in which Othello “*stabs himself*.”<sup>296</sup> Therefore, by having Stanton do this at the beginning of

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<sup>285</sup> Wesker, “Interpretation: To Impose or Explain,” p. 70.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>289</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, Taken from *Lady Othello and Other Plays*, p. 243.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>291</sup> Peter Hollindale, “Othello and Desdemona,” *Critical Survey* (Volume 1, No. 1, 1989), p. 48.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 196.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>296</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello* (Wordsworth Editions, London, 2001), p. 132.

Wesker's play foreshadows how in comparison to Shakespeare's tragedy that this adaptation will also not have a happy-ending as Stanton and Rosie do not stay together at the end.

Originally a screenplay, it has never been filmed or performed despite being "bought by Goldcrest films."<sup>297</sup> However, Wesker felt that the "director Joseph Losey 'lacked the sense of humour *Lady Othello* required."<sup>298</sup> Wesker's relationships with directors was at best "mixed"<sup>299</sup> as he said himself. He believed that directors did not "direct plays which are tightly constructed"<sup>300</sup> as plays such as this leave "no room for them to impose their concepts."<sup>301</sup> Wesker's tone colour in this comment is brimming with sarcasm in which he claims that a writer's work should not be altered in order to aid the director's "lookout for glory and wealth."<sup>302</sup> Rather it should stay true to what the writer initially envisaged when the work was originally written.

Rosie is constructed by Wesker as a free-spirited, youthful personality who is at ease about her sexuality and feelings for Stanton. It is a screenplay where Wesker specifies in the text that the actor depicting Rosie should simulate an orgasm therefore Wesker is wanting to depict sex in a relatable manner and to convey how it can be experienced in a variety of forms. In contrast his wife Judith whom we only get to know through a voiceover device is conveyed as boring, cold and manipulative. The fast pace of the screenplay is created by its episodic structure. However, it lacks a closed ending because the audience does not know whether Stanton returned home to his wife and family in England or stayed with Rosie. However, the fact that Wesker quotes Ralph Waldo Emerson's poem "Give all to Love"

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<sup>297</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 80.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>299</sup> Wesker, "Interpretation: To Impose or Explain," p. 63.

<sup>300</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

which says that you should “leave all for love,”<sup>303</sup> suggests that Stanton in the end did reject the stiff conventions of society, by deciding to pursue his relationship with Rosie. It is an ending which is without closure, perhaps if the screenplay were to be developed for screen or stage the most commercial conclusion would be that Stanton and Rosie begin a new life together. What Judith and Rosie do have in common is that they are two female characters who are both alone at the conclusion of this work. Pathos is evoked from the audience for both of these women as they show their dedication towards an indecisive, selfish man. In the prelude to Act One Stanton’s daughter sarcastically says to her mother that “he’s going to see his girlfriend,”<sup>304</sup> as it does not take “twelve days to give a lecture,”<sup>305</sup> therefore Stanton’s daughter will make an audience aware from the start what kind of person her father is. The blunt tone from Stanton’s daughter also highlights the disillusioned, naïve, inferiority of her mother, as her daughter is trying to bring her mother to see her father’s dishonesty for what it really is which is a breaking of the marital vows. In this example Wesker constructs a role reversal between mother and daughter. It exposes the vulnerability of both Judith and Rosie because they appear to be fooled by Stanton’s devious nature towards both of them. Rosie emotively says in Act Two, scene eleven that she feels fooled because she has been metaphorically “making love with a dead horse.”<sup>306</sup> The animalistic imagery that Wesker uses in this phrase accentuates the fruitlessness of their relationship as it deliberately alludes to flogging a dead horse. Judith clearly differentiates herself from Rosie and Rosie’s way of living by furtively telling Stanton to dwell on all of the memories that they have made so far in their marriage: “what about the family network and the friends you cherish and all of our

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<sup>303</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Give all to Love,” Taken from *Poems* (1904), Taken from Literature Online, Link as follows:

<https://literature.proquest.com/searchFulltext.do?id=Z200195854&childSectionId=Z200195854&divLevel=2&queryId=3053643065503&trailId=162E328EAB9&area=poetry&forward=textsFT&queryType=findWork>.

<sup>304</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 69.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 257.

rituals of Sunday lunches, and Sunday teas, surprise birthday parties, and the musical Friday evenings?”<sup>307</sup> The repetition of days of the week in this phrase highlights the uniform relationship that Judith and Stanton share. However, in an interview with Giles Gordon from 1966, on the theme of marriage Wesker said “that personalities and temperaments and the very nature of being male or female can effect marriage and love”<sup>308</sup> and that “social background”<sup>309</sup> or financial stability has little to do with whether or not a couple stays together. Though the conclusion of this play contradicts this statement due to the following phrase spoken by Rosie in Act Two, scene seven, “Nothing was right, was it? You’re English, I’m American; you’re a Londoner, I’m a New Yorker; you’re a Professor, I’m a student; I’m Catholic, you’re Jewish.”<sup>310</sup> Therefore, in the screenplay Wesker suggests that the racial and cultural differences between these two characters meant that their love affair was doomed from the beginning.

In Act Two, scene eleven, Wesker writes that the interaction between Rosie and Stanton should follow “*tempestuous love-making*”<sup>311</sup> between them. The physicality of this relationship is highlighted in Wesker’s staging, a notable contrast from the representation of his marriage with Judith known for its association with sterility. In this chapter this unproduced text shall be examined in order to show how both of these women are neglected by Stanton. Additionally, I will examine how Wesker was influenced by Shakespeare’s *Othello* due to numerous features of this screenplay. First, when depicting the racial tension between Rosie and Stanton, Wesker twice directs Stanton to become “*a ‘stage’ black,*”<sup>312</sup> therefore, what appears to be a deliberate mockery of her African American heritage. Second,

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<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 219.

<sup>308</sup> “Arnold Wesker: An Interview by Giles Gordon,” *The Transatlantic Review*, No.21 (Summer 1966), p. 18. Accessed through JSTOR.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>310</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, Taken from *Lady Othello and Other Plays*, p. 243.

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

in the “self-mocking”<sup>313</sup> display of sexuality that we associate with the character of Rosie, and how this was playing into stereotypes that surround black sexuality reflecting the racist mindset of Iago in *Othello* who saw this as a threat. Pathos can be felt for Rosie due to her being styled as the outsider in this work both in terms of her race and her role as the third-party in Stanton’s marriage, the most logical assumption for the conclusion of this screenplay is that Stanton does return to the security of his life with Judith and Rosie remains on the outside. The ending of the play is evocative of Rosie being used as a means of Stanton analysing whether his marriage can work or not, therefore it is undecided as to whether Rosie has merely been taken advantage of throughout the duration of the screenplay.

The other female characters who will be analysed in this chapter will be from Wesker’s *One Woman Plays* namely: Naomi from *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, Betty Lemon from *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* and Samantha Milner from *The Mistress*. The final female character to feature in this chapter will be Matty Beancourt from *Groupie*. In comparison to Stephanie in *Yardsale*, Naomi too becomes synonymous with the damaged, forgotten, overused neglect that is symbolised through her surroundings such as “a paperback book, which she has read so many times that all its pages are loose.”<sup>314</sup> The overused book is an object that also alludes to the irretrievable hopes of Naomi ever being able to become a mother. This is further heightened by her lackadaisical humming of the lullaby “‘O ma babby, ma curly-headed babby’.”<sup>315</sup> Additionally, we see that the “dead pot plant,”<sup>316</sup> which sits close by her contrasts her with the steadfast matriarch Lena Younger from *A Raisin in the Sun* which was written by Lorraine Hansberry and first performed in 1959 at the Barrymore Theatre in New York. A play that Wesker wrote an unpublished review for *The Guardian* in

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<sup>313</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 83.

<sup>314</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 43.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

1959: “A *Raisin in The Sun* and *Krapps Last Tape and Embers*. A review commissioned by Guardian May 1959. Not printed.”<sup>317</sup> In Hansberry’s play we see how Lena like Naomi has an indoor plant, however the plant in this play is representative of continuity, strength and pride. We see at the conclusion of *A Raisin in the Sun* how the Younger family who are African American have to leave the community they moved to because of racial discrimination. The final stage direction of *A Raisin in the Sun* reads that “*the door opens and she comes back in, grabs her plant, and goes out for the last time.*”<sup>318</sup> The plant insinuates that even though circumstances change, familial love will remain constant. This is a contrast to Naomi whose loneliness is accentuated by the abundant nature of “*dust*”<sup>319</sup> that surrounds her and the fact that the only human contact she has is through a fragmented telephone conversation with her nephew Danny: “Oh this is a shocking line, shocking. You ‘what’ for him? A. B. What? E?”<sup>320</sup> Pity is evoked for Naomi through a sense of unreciprocated love and lost time. She shares with us that “I looked after an invalid mother, then I looked after a sick sister and now there’s no one to look after me- *that’s* what I remember, A life gone!”<sup>321</sup> In comparison to Sarah and Sonia, Naomi has had to sacrifice her time because of illness, and now has lost hope of ever getting married and having a family of her own. We can compare Naomi with Betty from *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* in that she too is completely alone. The opening stage directions of this play read that the stage should be set up as “*four areas in four corners: the front door, the study, the lounge, the kitchen. In the centre sits an electric wheelchair.*”<sup>322</sup> The electric wheelchair informs the audience that this play will be an exploration of how disability affects this female character’s existence. The fact that Wesker

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<sup>317</sup> Wesker, Bibliography, Sourced from [www.arnoldwesker.com](http://www.arnoldwesker.com).

<sup>318</sup> Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London, 2013), p. 120.

<sup>319</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 43.

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>322</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* Taken from *One Woman Plays* (Penguin Books, London, 1989), p. 25.

writes “*four areas in four corners*”<sup>323</sup> also depicts how this female character’s life is claustrophobic, trapped and uniform. The presence of the wheelchair relates to an assertion by Glenda Leeming who claims that Wesker’s female characters “struggle against constraints which are not biologically innate but are imposed on society.”<sup>324</sup> The wheelchair highlights the physical disability of Betty who is “*crippled by everything old age brings*.”<sup>325</sup> It also symbolically suggests that Betty has also been disabled mentally throughout her life because society has expected her to stay inferior to her politician husband and “keep”<sup>326</sup> her “ideas”<sup>327</sup> to herself. This interpretation of Betty’s life relates to Leeming’s assertion that Wesker shows how society places limitations on women and how it is not because of biology or nature. However, in Wesker’s 2007 interview with Montenero he says that the titular character of Betty who is also the widow of a socialist MP challenges the “status quo,”<sup>328</sup> informing us that whilst being physically disabled her mind more than compensates for what she has lost physically. Additionally, Wesker directs that “*off-centre*”<sup>329</sup> there is a “*a rope looking like a noose, without the hangman’s knot*,”<sup>330</sup> a deathly, macabre symbol from Wesker which can be compared to Naomi’s dead pot plant in *Four Portraits of Mothers*. However, whilst the dead plant is a symbol of Naomi’s continual loss of interest in life, in Betty’s case the noose that does not yet have the “*hangman’s knot*”<sup>331</sup> spurs her on and “*gives her resolve to face the day’s battles*.”<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>324</sup> Glenda Leeming, “Arnold Wesker and Women-His Later Plays,” Taken from *Arnold Wesker: A Casebook*, p. 194.

<sup>325</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* p. 25.

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>328</sup> Chiara Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 18.

<sup>329</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* p. 25.

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*



In the opening stage directions of *The Mistress*, Wesker condenses the personality of Samantha into two “mottoes”<sup>333</sup> which Wesker says “give us the first hint of the woman we are about to see,”<sup>334</sup> which is followed by “KNOCK HARD. LIFE IS DEAF”<sup>335</sup> and “NO GOOD DEED GOES UNPUNISHED.”<sup>336</sup> This prescribes that Samantha should come across as a cynical character who is unsatisfied with what she is getting from life, the fact that life cannot hear accentuates her sense of isolation as an image of a muffled, suffocated cry for help is created. Likewise, to Rosie of *Lady Othello* she too is having an affair with a married man and the plot of this one-woman play is focussed around her waiting expectantly for him to contact her. In the mean time she carries on her work as a dress designer in her “atelier.”<sup>337</sup> Samantha’s loneliness is accentuated by her talking to the dress dummies that she uses to manufacture her clothes, she tells herself “You’re talking to the dummies, Sam. You promised yourself you’d *stop* talking to the dummies, Sam.”<sup>338</sup> A phrase which is significant because Wesker obviously formats the word “stop”<sup>339</sup> in italicised font to instruct the actor who is playing Samantha that an emphatic tone should be applied when saying this word. My interpretation of this emphasis is that Wesker is not only referring to Samantha’s anthropomorphism towards the dummies but is referring to how she should forget about pursuing the relationship with the married man. The fact that she has a conversation with the dummies who are played by the same actor as Samantha and are named Ninotchka and Jessica accentuates a Faustian battle of wills that she experiences as a result of this. “(All innocent) To give who up? Him, Samantha, him! ‘Who!’! God you’re so full of shit.”<sup>340</sup> It is apt that Samantha can be interpreted to become a dummy herself because of the fact that she

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<sup>333</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, Taken from *One Woman Plays*, p. 59.

<sup>334</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>339</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

refuses to lose hope in this fruitless relationship “The phone’s out of order! He’s had an accident! His wife’s had an accident! One of his children! God in heaven it’s time! Ring, damn you! Rescue me. I-NEED-RESCUING!”<sup>341</sup> Amidst the melodramatic nature of Samantha, it is hard to comprehend why she needs “rescuing”<sup>342</sup> however Wesker conveys how even though Samantha is a contemporary career woman who is financially self-sufficient, she still desires a man in order for her to feel complete.

In the play, *Groupie*, Matty rediscovers her sexuality. After starting a friendship with her favourite artist Mark Gorman, we see how she gains a more energetic, freer approach to life. Like Mrs Hyams of “Pools” which featured in chapter one of this thesis we see how Matty is the personification for appreciation, especially when it comes to the simplicities in life such as food and days out. In Act One, scene one she tells Mark how she studies his artwork by buying “postcards”<sup>343</sup> of his pictures. Additionally in Act Two, scene one the appetite of the audience is again wetted by Wesker as Matty cooks Mark a dinner of “Fish Kedgeree,”<sup>344</sup> “Apple pie,”<sup>345</sup> “Custard”<sup>346</sup> and tells Mark that she bought herself “a box of After Eight mints.”<sup>347</sup> The comforting, sweet nature of the food that Matty specifies in this section reflects her humorous, warm and relatable characterisation. *Groupie* will be the final play examined in this chapter and could be considered as the most hopeful, positive portrayal of womanhood from the selection which has been chosen for analysis.

There was a clear shift in terms of where Wesker’s later works were first performed. *Yardsale* was first performed at the Edinburgh Festival, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* had its first performance at the Théâtre du Rond-Point in Paris in 1986, *Four Portraits-Of*

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<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>343</sup> Wesker, *Groupie* (Oberon Books, London, 2011), p. 9.

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

*Mothers* was “written for the Tokyo festival of One-act plays”<sup>348</sup> and first performed in 1982 at the Mitzukoshi Royal Theatre. The version of *The Mistress* that is scrutinized in this chapter is a “pre-production”<sup>349</sup> one. Therefore, several of these later plays were not brought to attention in high profile performance venues but rather niche festivals and small theatres. His earlier work, such as the plays of *The Trilogy* had their maiden performance at the Royal Court Theatre in the West End of London in 1958 and in 1962 with *Chips with Everything* was the last play Wesker had piloted in as highly esteemed a venue as The Royal Court Theatre amidst the hub of artistic London. This shift in regard to where his plays were being premiered reflects how Wesker’s reputation in the United Kingdom did not evolve in proportion to his writing. Wesker moved from being mainstream to marginalized. However, in his representation of women he did not remain stagnant or un-progressive. Instead he naturally drifted away from a dedicated, Jewish matriarch in Sarah to an amoral career-woman in Samantha.

(iv) “O, these men, these men!”<sup>350</sup> Love against all odds in *Lady Othello*.

In the transcript from Montenero’s 2007 interview with Wesker, we read that he deliberately began a “blue period”<sup>351</sup> of writing which spurred from the observation that there was no “sex or violence”<sup>352</sup> in his plays by Margaret Drabble. In *As Much as I Dare* Wesker shares that he personally felt he was “typecast as a playwright of what was imagined to be ‘social realism.’”<sup>353</sup> A “label”<sup>354</sup> which Wesker saw as “meaningless.”<sup>355</sup> The fact that Wesker viewed this categorisation of his writing as “meaningless”<sup>356</sup> conveys how he himself disliked

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<sup>348</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 38.

<sup>349</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 56.

<sup>350</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello* (Wordsworth Editions, London, 2001), p. 115

<sup>351</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 55.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>353</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 81.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

the marginalisation of his work and that audiences came to base their opinion on him solely on *The Trilogy*. Whilst engaging in one of their many romantic exchanges the two main characters of *Lady Othello* comically discuss race: “Stanton: Are you black? Rosie: Well, it sure ain’t Californian suntan. *He leans down to kiss her neck, lightly. She freezes with ecstasy. He moves up, kiss by kiss, to her ear. When he moves to her cheek she backs away.*”<sup>357</sup> *Lady Othello* is therefore a screenplay that is a complete contrast from the “gritty”<sup>358</sup> loftiness of kitchen-sink realism that Wesker became synonymous with and which is epitomised by his earlier work such as *Chicken Soup with Barley*. In a review of his play *The Four Seasons* the reviewer claims that the “flaw in his play is that he totally excludes the outside world,”<sup>359</sup> whilst Wesker himself said that his concern is the “human beings in the situation”<sup>360</sup> of his choice. This statement conveys his own desire to not become type-cast by his critics. Instead, *Lady Othello* is associated with what would be considered as the “bourgeois”<sup>361</sup> preoccupation of “love affairs,”<sup>362</sup> therefore Wesker wrote this screenplay solely for the enjoyment of his audience and not due to any political persuasion. However, Montenero writes because “critics wanted Wesker to carry on”<sup>363</sup> with “gritty”<sup>364</sup> political drama that the later work of his career was not as well received. Works that explored matters of the heart and sexual morality were too much of a change for those audiences who saw him as the “frozen”<sup>365</sup> playwright of the “trilogy,”<sup>366</sup> hence infinitely affiliated with *The Trilogy* and the main themes dealt with in it.

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<sup>357</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 134.

<sup>358</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 15.

<sup>359</sup> “Love Without the Social Pressures,” *The Times*, September 1965.

<sup>360</sup> “Arnold Wesker: An Interview by Giles Gordon,” *The Transatlantic Review*, No. 21 (Summer 1966), p. 17.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>363</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 15.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>365</sup> Julia Pascal, “Sir Arnold Wesker Obituary,” *The Guardian*, Wednesday 13<sup>th</sup> April (2016).

<sup>366</sup> *Ibid.*

*Lady Othello* is set in New York City in 1976 and in this comical, romantic, witty screenplay the relationship between Rosie and Stanton is sexually-charged. However, my interpretation of this is that Stanton uses Rosie as a means of escapism from the mundanity of life in England. Therefore, in *Lady Othello* Wesker's representation of women is predominantly associated with the themes of isolation and neglect at the hands of Stanton. This screenplay depicts women as polarised into two groups as Stanton's wife Judith symbolises the discipline and security of marital domesticity whilst Rosie denotes a freedom rejecting the constraints of the domestic sphere. Stanton is presented by Wesker as a male character who exploits this polarisation for his own gain.

The 1970s which is the era of the screenplay's setting was a period of notable social change. Feminism was now becoming associated with women expressing "their determination to seek emancipation by challenging economic, political, sexual, cultural, and social traditions."<sup>367</sup> Wesker himself said that during the 1970s he underwent a political reevaluation of his own life as he discovered that he was not a socialist but an "old-fashioned humanist,"<sup>368</sup> due to him being "damaged by the 'uncomradely' behaviour and attitudes of the New Left,"<sup>369</sup> attitudes that resulted in his play *The Journalists* not being performed at The National Theatre. The consequence of this for Wesker's career was that the theatre establishment shied away from performing his work due to the allegation that he was difficult to work with. In the example of *Lady Othello* we see how Rosie is an advocate for women wanting to progress with their education as we see through the multiple occasions that we hear her interpreting Shakespeare's *Othello*: "that's a crude interpretation Stanton. The passion is in his blood. His problem is he's got no language to express it."<sup>370</sup> In terms of race,

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<sup>367</sup> Paul S. Boyer, *The Oxford Companion to United States History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2004).

<sup>368</sup> John O'Mahony, "Portrait: Frozen in Time," *The Guardian*, February 11<sup>th</sup> 1994.

<sup>369</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>370</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 136.

the Civil Rights Act of 1964 outlawed discrimination on the basis of one's colour, this was seen as a pivotal moment for America's "Judeo-Christian"<sup>371</sup> consciousness. However, complications would follow and as is exemplified in Act Two, scene nine of *Lady Othello* the African American community's hostility within society was exemplified through "looting, firebombing, and otherwise wrecking businesses"<sup>372</sup> as gang violence became a significant problem within American society. Wesker does not explicitly state that in this specific scene the perpetrators of the "riot"<sup>373</sup> are African American. However, it is heavily suggested from the interaction between Rosie and one of the men: "SECOND BOY'S VOICE: Hey, man, can't see, man. Gotta see, man. (*Whoosh of ignited paraffin. Flames*) Can see now, man. See plenty. In we go. ROSIE'S VOICE: OK, brothers, where's the action? FIRST BOY'S VOICE: All around you, sister, all around, the Lord be praised."<sup>374</sup> The fact that Rosie refers to the gang members as "brothers"<sup>375</sup> and they respond to her with "sister"<sup>376</sup> conveys how it is suggested that they share the same racial background due to Rosie using the same colloquial language as these men. With "*ferocious mockery*"<sup>377</sup> she also says that "we got permission, man, we got permission from all you white liberals cos you told us being black and poor is good enough reason for being lawless."<sup>378</sup> Therefore, Rosie insinuates that racial prejudice towards the African American community is what drives the anti-social behaviour displayed in this specific scene. In Act One, scene eleven another contextual marker of the era is placed whilst the main characters Rosie and Stanton engage in sexual foreplay. During this scene she asks him "are you talking to *me*?"<sup>379</sup> A famous line taken from the 1976 film

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<sup>371</sup> Randall B. Woods, "The Politics of Idealism: Lyndon Johnson, Civil Rights, and Vietnam," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 31, Issue 1, January 2007, p. 12.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>373</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, From *Lady Othello and Other Plays*, p. 247.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>375</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248.

<sup>378</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>379</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 151.

starring Robert De Niro entitled *Taxi Driver*. In this renowned film De Niro plays the “pathologically alienated”<sup>380</sup> Travis Bickle, a former US Marine who returns to New York from the war in Vietnam. Jefferson Cowie ascertains that Bickle is an “anti-hero”<sup>381</sup> who is “condemned to wander unconnected”<sup>382</sup> and isolated from society. The fact that Rosie quotes this pivotal line in this scene from *Lady Othello* denotes her connection within New York and those who may feel isolated within New York society.

It is worth noting that the surname Swanson is one letter short of being Swan Song. Highlighting how this is supposedly the last visit that Stanton will make to Rosie, it also foreshadows the sad ending of this play as Rosie is being compared to the last song that is sung by a swan. However, it is worth noting that swans are monogamous animals and are considered as embodiments of love and fidelity. This is ironic in the context of *Lady Othello* as in *As Much as I Dare*, Wesker also asserts that this text explores the “failure of marriage, the impossibility of sustained love, the changing needs of couples who cannot help but grow apart,”<sup>383</sup> therefore by the 1990s Wesker’s own view of the longevity of sexual relationships is very ambiguous as he places an emphasis on the temporary nature of relationships.

In terms of the text’s intertextual link with Shakespeare’s *Othello*, we see how in Act Five, scene two Iago murders his wife Emilia whose dying words are as follows: “What did thy song bode, lady? Hark, canst thou hear me? I will play the swan. And die in music.”<sup>384</sup> Throughout the duration of *Othello* we see how Iago and Emilia’s marriage is strained mainly through Iago’s disrespectful attitude towards women. Excerpts such as the following are instrumental to this “Iago: How now? What do you here alone? Emilia: Do not you chide; I

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<sup>380</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (The New Press, New York, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>382</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 332.

<sup>383</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 59.

<sup>384</sup> Shakespeare, *Othello*, p. 129.

have a thing for you. Iago: A ‘thing’ for me? It is a common thing,”<sup>385</sup> an excerpt which represents Iago as misogynistic because he is sexually objectifying his wife by referring to her body as “common.”<sup>386</sup> However, as the audience sees at the conclusion of *Othello* it is Emilia who brings Othello to realise that he murdered his wife Desdemona in vain, all because of Iago’s meddling. It is also important to note, that in Shakespeare’s text in her dying moments Emilia starts to sing the Willow song, Desdemona also sings this in Act Four, scene three. The context of this song is significant when interpreting the relationship between Rosie and Stanton. Desdemona says that “my mother had a maid called Barbary. She was in love; and he she loved proved mad, And did forsake her.”<sup>387</sup> Barbary was abandoned in comparison to Rosie, however the lyrics in the song read that “Sing all, a green willow must be my garland. Let nobody blame him; his scorn I approve.”<sup>388</sup> This conveys how Barbary although heartbroken did not feel anger towards the lover who chose to forsake her. Barbary can be compared to Rosie who imperatively tells Stanton “promise me you won’t be too proud to come back if you change your mind.”<sup>389</sup> The fact that the maid was called Barbary also suggests that race played a transgressive part in the breakdown of this relationship as the Barbary coast was a “historical name for the North African coastline stretching westwards from Egypt to the Atlantic.”<sup>390</sup> Racism is a theme embodied in Shakespeare’s tragedy mainly through the character of Iago. Iago racially insults Othello, by calling him a “Barbary horse.”<sup>391</sup> The image of the horse is used by Iago to heighten his disgust at the sexual relations between Desdemona and Othello. Iago falsely says how a mixed-race relationship caused peculiarities in the offspring as he goes on to say that “you’ll have your nephews

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<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>386</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>389</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 186.

<sup>390</sup> John Everett Heath, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of World Place Names*, Third Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014).

<sup>391</sup> Shakespeare, *Othello*, p. 38.



neigh to you; you'll have coursers for cousins, and jennets for germans."<sup>392</sup> The alliteration used in this phrase by Shakespeare conveys to the audience how disgusting and unnatural Iago sees the marriage between Desdemona and Othello. The deliberate referrals to breeds of horse symbolise how Iago views black sexuality regardless of gender as unruly and "unbridled."<sup>393</sup> He believes that the deviance in their sexuality is passed on through the generations, therefore posing an uncontrollable threat to society. Wesker, like Shakespeare uses race as a way of alienating the character of Rosie from Stanton. The status of Rosie as the racial Other is a status which is verified when she repeatedly uses language associated with colonialism. Examples include "No, of course I'm not gonna shoot myself. For an Englishman? A coloniser?"<sup>394</sup> and "It's this Englishman here, he's getting fresh. Still thinks were a colony."<sup>395</sup> In these examples Rosie is consciously depicting the racial difference between herself and Stanton, identifying with the fact that America was a British colony. Therefore, in Wesker's screenplay, a similarity can be made between Rosie and Shakespeare's Barbary.

In regard to the representation of black female sexuality in Wesker's screenplay during Rosie's phone conversation with a friend which occurs in the midst of Stanton playfully soaking her with soap suds, Wesker portrays Rosie as a female with a high sex drive. The adjective "lascivious"<sup>396</sup> is an archetypal term that is associated with stereotypical mindsets concerning black sexuality. Jill Fields writes that "black bodies have for several centuries in Western culture...been linked to deviant and particularly lascivious sexuality."<sup>397</sup> In Wesker's screenplay he adheres to this stereotypical mindset in order to accentuate the

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<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>393</sup> Leah Gray-Smith, "Sex and Gender in the Equine in Literature," *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations* (Iowa State University Press, Iowa, 2008), p. 20.

<sup>394</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 180.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>397</sup> Jill Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie and Sexuality* (University of California Press, California, 2007), p. 15.

futility of the relationship between Rosie and Stanton. One of the reasons that Stanton uses to justify his visit to Rosie is that “she’s powered by an apparently endless and delightfully unashamed lust and I have come to put myself at risk!”<sup>398</sup> This corresponds to Field’s assertion that by “ascribing lasciviousness to black women, white men could blame the irresistible lure of their colour and bodies rather than admit to conscious exploitation of the woman’s vulnerable state.”<sup>399</sup> Wesker portrays a white male character who abides by this rule in order to present himself as the passive partner in this relationship in contrast to Rosie who is depicted as the dominant partner.

In Act One, scene four Rosie angrily tells Stanton “Dammit, Stanton! I don’t want to be your mistress. I want to be your wife,”<sup>400</sup> which shows how she is unapologetic about this adulterous relationship, displaying the seriousness of her feelings for him. In contrast, Stanton has no belief that the relationship can work, he says phrases which are full of doubt such as “Then why, Professor Stanton Myers, are you travelling three thousand miles to be with a woman who is so utterly not your type?”<sup>401</sup> A rhetorical question which shows vital aspects to the characterisation of Stanton. First, he pompously refers to himself as “Professor,”<sup>402</sup> which conveys to the audience how he places prominence on a high social standing and second, he condescendingly refers to Rosie as a “type,”<sup>403</sup> therefore not individual or unique but a “type” of woman, objectifying Rosie and showing how he has a condescending attitude towards her. The reverse of this is shown when Judith rhetorically asks in Act One, scene six “how could you hate harmless, loving, wise, playful, faithful li’l ole me? So tell me. Why can’t wives be mistresses?”<sup>404</sup> Both women show resentment for the

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<sup>398</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 122.

<sup>399</sup> Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie and Sexuality*, p. 117.

<sup>400</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 133.

<sup>401</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>402</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>404</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

roles which they are respectfully playing within Stanton's life. The main difference between these two female roles is how open they are with their sexuality. Wesker's use of staging is symbolic in terms of the type of life which Stanton would have with each of the two women. First, during a conversation between Stanton and Rosie it is depicted that Judith is a talented homemaker and a stabilizing influence, she is drawn by Stanton as a woman in her element within the household. Stanton says that "in our circle she's an anchor,"<sup>405</sup> the image of Judith which is created by his use of the noun "anchor,"<sup>406</sup> is that his marriage with her is synonymous with the rigidity of family values and security, she is the person within this family that keeps constancy. Furthermore, the fact that Stanton says "our"<sup>407</sup> has the effect of immediately excluding Rosie from belonging to this aspect of his life. Judith is primarily depicted as a two-dimensional archetypal housewife figure, she is two-dimensional due to the fact that her own personality never comes through, she is firmly styled by Wesker as wife and mother. Lesley Johnson and Justine Lloyd claim the figure of the housewife often has no "self-actualisation"<sup>408</sup> and this is seen in Wesker's construction of Judith. Particularly, in Act Two, scene one, Judith tells Stanton that he will be unable to talk with Rosie about "our family, our friends"<sup>409</sup> and "our children."<sup>410</sup> Each example that Judith provides Stanton with is attached to the plural personal pronoun of "our"<sup>411</sup> agreeing with the assertion from Johnson and Lloyd that the archetype of the housewife has "no image of the future"<sup>412</sup> or of "themselves as women."<sup>413</sup> Judith is presented as adhering to this stereotype as she has no sense of her own individual identity, an identity which is detached from her marriage to

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<sup>405</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>406</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>408</sup> Johnson and Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*, "Defining the Housewife: Early Second Wave Feminism," p. 7.

<sup>409</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 158.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>412</sup> Johnson and Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*, "Defining the Housewife: Early Second Wave Feminism," p. 9.

<sup>413</sup> *Ibid.*

Stanton and her role as a mother. Wesker contrasts the household that Judith creates with Rosie's dishevelled apartment space. In Act One, scene five he directs that Rosie's apartment should be "cluttered,"<sup>414</sup> as she is "indifferent to 'things,'"<sup>415</sup> chaos should be evoked with "scant furniture,"<sup>416</sup> and "records, mostly out of their sleeves."<sup>417</sup> Through the haphazard presentation of these items, Wesker uses language such as "scant"<sup>418</sup> and "out of their sleeves"<sup>419</sup> informing us that they are discarded and abandoned, foreshadowing the end of the play which sees Stanton abandoning Rosie. This can be compared with the items at the yard sale which Stephanie goes to and how she associates her husband's neglect of her with the forgotten objects at the sale. Judith is also left to care for her children full-time whilst Stanton furthers his career and pursues a relationship with Rosie. Judith is constructed by Wesker similar to Deborah of *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* as both these female characters believe "that their most important role, and the primary determinant of their status, is the function of wife and mother, whereas for males it lies in occupational achievement."<sup>420</sup> In terms of how Judith and Deborah both identify themselves to the audience as agents who allow their husbands to pursue career success, in Act Two, scene one of *Lady Othello* Judith says "Oh, I'm sorry. It's not a holiday, is it? It's a business trip. To discover if you're in love."<sup>421</sup> In this phrase Judith cleverly combines her frustration at being at home full-time to loyally carry out her duties, whilst her husband is using his role as the main breadwinner within their home as leverage in order to behave as he desires. In the example of Deborah from *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* we see that she also adopts a defensive tone when she says that "I get very angry when people ask what I do and I tell them and they say, 'Oh, you don't

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<sup>414</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 127.

<sup>415</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>419</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>420</sup> David Kowalewski, Judith S. McIlwee and Robin Prunty, "Sexism, Racism, and Establishmentism," *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Sage Publications Inc. (1995), p. 202.

<sup>421</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 158.

have a profession, then? I *do* have a profession’.”<sup>422</sup> By using italic font on the word “do”<sup>423</sup> it is clear that Wesker wants the actor who is depicting Deborah to be fully aware of her sense of importance when delivering this segment of dialogue. A feminist reading of this example, would be that it encapsulates the assertion of Johnson and Lloyd who claim that “family work”<sup>424</sup> often suffered “devaluation”<sup>425</sup> by feminists specifically during the 1970s, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* was first performed in 1982. My assertion is that the characters of Judith and Deborah are embodiments of the “defensiveness provoked and articulated by the self-description ‘just a housewife.’”<sup>426</sup>

According to my examination, Rosie embodies the escapism that Stanton craves because his marriage to Judith is synonymous with discipline and routine. However, in this text Wesker can also be accused of making Rosie both a racial and sexual Other due to Rosie being representative of a an overly laissez faire attitude to sex whilst Judith symbolises a woman who dares not step beyond the boundaries of a matrimonial union. The abundance of love scenes in this screenplay illustrates how one of the main objectives that Wesker had in his later writing career was to normalise sex in the performing arts. He told Montenero that “sex is central to our lives”<sup>427</sup> and therefore he strove to remove its status as a taboo and *Lady Othello* epitomises this. In Act One, scene eleven, we see how Rosie is directed to undress, then dress up in a “bra, panties, suspenders, stockings and a see-through dress,”<sup>428</sup> and all of this should be done in a “calculated”<sup>429</sup> manner. Furthermore, it should be staged as a “strip show”<sup>430</sup> and likewise to when Rosie applies makeup, we see how Stanton should become

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<sup>422</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 52.

<sup>423</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>424</sup> Johnson and Lloyd, *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife*, “Defining the Housewife: Contemporary Feminism,” p. 6.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>427</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>428</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 149.

<sup>429</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>430</sup> *Ibid.*

“mesmerized.”<sup>431</sup> This scene can be interpreted in two different ways, it can be viewed as attempting to satiate the masculine gaze in this screenplay, however, it may also denote the confidence that Rosie has in her own body. There are numerous aspects worth analysing from this small excerpt, first, the clothing obviously chosen by Rosie to attract Stanton’s attention, the lingerie is interesting because on one hand Rosie puts herself in an exposed position by putting on this clothing which has a “transformative erotic power.”<sup>432</sup> Simultaneously she adopts what Katherine Liepe-Levinson views as the “sex-object role.”<sup>433</sup> Therefore, a role in which Rosie deliberately conveys the “accessibility”<sup>434</sup> of her body to Stanton, which will also inevitably heighten her “vulnerability,”<sup>435</sup> because she is giving Stanton more physical control over her. However, these points are all purely from what an audience’s point of view may be. Stanton is mesmerized therefore it is difficult to ascertain whether Rosie, by acting in this way, is manipulating Stanton and if she is really the dominant partner in this relationship because he has become powerless due to her erotic supremacy during this interaction. Wesker directs that she should perform in a way which will “*inflame him sexually and impress him intellectually*,”<sup>436</sup> so in my view this scene is pitiful because Rosie has to end up using her body in order to grab Stanton’s attention intellectually.

In Judith’s voiceover in Act One, scene two, there is a repetition of language associated with control such as “civilised,”<sup>437</sup> “dignified”<sup>438</sup> and “self-control.”<sup>439</sup> The fact that Judith is aware that her husband is having an affair and that he is blatantly travelling to New York for a make-or-break trip to his mistress would seem aggravating yet she is presented as surreally

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<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>432</sup> Jill Fields, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie and Sexuality*, p. 216.

<sup>433</sup> Katherine Liepe-Levinson, “Striptease: Desire, Mimetic Jeopardy and Performing Spectators,” *TDR*, Summer (1998), p. 10.

<sup>434</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>435</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>436</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 149.

<sup>437</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122.

<sup>438</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>439</sup> *Ibid.*

calm and passive. The voiceover says at the end of this passage to “be strong, and go knowing mine is a long standing love,”<sup>440</sup> which obviously implies that his relationship with Rosie will falter because as Stanton admits it is largely based on his vulnerability to the power of Rosie’s “delightfully unashamed lust.”<sup>441</sup> Rosie is constructed as a female character who adheres to her sexual desires and not a woman who like Judith aims to be an exemplar of bourgeois respectability, rather she is “*offbeat*.”<sup>442</sup> Whilst Stanton unchivalrously describes his sex life with Judith as “stale”<sup>443</sup> and “predictable”<sup>444</sup> his sexual interactions with Rosie are constructed to be the antithesis of this marital predictability. In Act One, scene thirteen after having breakfast Stanton performs oral sex on Rosie, however in this scene Wesker’s use of language and staging constructs stereotypes for both of these characters. This assertion can be proven with the fact that Rosie says she hasn’t had “a chance to read the gossip column,”<sup>445</sup> before she reaches a climax whilst Stanton emerges from beneath Rosie with the “*mating call of a Tarzan. Of sorts!*”<sup>446</sup> Wesker’s choice of staging for this scene denotes how Stanton controls Rosie in this specific interaction in order to gain a sense of his own dominance and masculinity. However, Wesker’s quip at the end with “*Of sorts*”<sup>447</sup> conveys how this whole scenario may be viewed as a melodramatic middle-aged man trying to prolong his sexual prime and hence view the whole interaction as humorous. The fact that Wesker specifically compares Stanton with the fictional character Tarzan is worth noting due to this being another deliberate example of the racial othering that exists in this text. Tarzan symbolises a rejection of the civilised norms in western society, wildly gliding from tree to tree in an African jungle is the image that is stereotypically associated with this character. Therefore, in this sexual

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<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>445</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, From *Lady Othello and Other Plays*, p. 227.

<sup>446</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*

interaction between Stanton and Rosie, Wesker insinuates that this is an abnormal, unnatural way for a man such as Stanton to behave due to Rosie's associating him with the elite snobbishness of British society "I expect you to have brought me the Crown Jewels."<sup>448</sup> In the midst of another sexual interaction in Act One, scene fourteen the audience sees that Rosie is the only character who has any dialogue as Stanton remains silent in this scene. The absence of dialogue for Stanton exemplifies how he is treating Rosie solely as an inanimate object, Wesker instructs that she should view him as a "*madman*"<sup>449</sup> whilst she refers to him as a "sex crazed Hebrew"<sup>450</sup> and "an Anglo-Saxon psychotic."<sup>451</sup> The actor portraying Stanton should humorously exaggerate how he cannot control his carnal desires so much so that Rosie should begin to find him threatening. In this text Wesker's main male character is poorly drawn and predictable due to his lack of faith and his view that women are a means to either sexual gratification or domestic respectability. However, what can also be ascertained in this work is how Wesker's representation of women is polarised due to Judith being representative of spousal devotion towards a man who is not worthy of this, whilst Rosie is representative of a woman who views marriage as a means for a man to take possession of a woman as is exemplified in the following phrase from Act Two, scene two as she tells Stanton that "*Your* lady may be a good little house-lady but not this little lady."<sup>452</sup> Wesker's use of emphasis in this phrase signifies the provocative tone of Rosie's attempt to mock Stanton's appraisal of Judith as a wife.

In Act One, scene seven as Rosie and Stanton engage animatedly into a conversation about *Othello*, Rosie's thoughts are evocative of a different side to her character. She sarcastically says that "Othello is a man who gives himself utterly. Utterly to

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<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>450</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 231.



war, utterly to jealousy, utterly to love. Wouldn't catch him cheating on Desdemona for a black chick."<sup>453</sup> In this short excerpt Rosie appears to be intentionally putting herself down whilst cleverly insinuating that Stanton is cowardly and non-committal, by contrasting him with the tragic hero of Shakespeare's play. However, Stanton condescendingly retorts by rhetorically asking Rosie does she want "sober intellectual exchange or female backstabbing."<sup>454</sup> He therefore conveys to Rosie how he believes that she is not discussing the play in an intelligent manner. His sexism towards Rosie is apparent in this interaction because he adds "female"<sup>455</sup> to backstabbing which suggests that this is a trait that is exclusive to women. In Shakespeare's play in Act Two, scene one, Iago crudely says "If she be black and thereto have wit, she'll find a white that shall her blackness hit,"<sup>456</sup> a sexually graphic use of imagery that alludes to his prejudiced theory, that if a black woman is intelligent then she will attract a white man. In Wesker's play this is alluded to during the interaction in which Rosie urges Stanton to take her literary criticisms seriously with "take me seriously, Stanton, I know *Othello* backwards."<sup>457</sup> Rosie wants to be considered as intellectually competent as she shows her pride at knowing the play in detail. Wesker calls *Lady Othello* a "Love Story."<sup>458</sup> However, this may be the mischievousness of the playwright who says in *As Much as I Dare* that a "love story was not considered my provenance,"<sup>459</sup> therefore astutely referring to his critics and the negativity surrounding his later work. By knowing *Othello* backwards Rosie identifies her own personal circumstances with Shakespeare's play if it were to be performed in such a way that would result in Othello and Desdemona staying together and living happily ever after. To develop this in more detail, the

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<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>455</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>456</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, p. 59.

<sup>457</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>458</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, From *Lady Othello and Other Plays*.

<sup>459</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 81.

division by race which inevitably causes the bitterness and tragedy in *Othello* to become irrelevant, hence Desdemona and Othello marry regardless of what is considered socially acceptable. In relation to the character of Rosie, this is what she wishes would happen for her and Stanton. In Act Two, scene six Stanton reservedly says to a volatile Rosie that “I have this overwhelming desire to be different. Change my skin, disappear from everyone I know, everything I am.”<sup>460</sup> In reply a hopeful Rosie begs “Stay! Marry me, and stay!”<sup>461</sup> emulating the words of Sarah from *Chicken Soup with Barley* when she begged Ada to stay a while longer. Both of these female characters are presented as strong intellectually yet vulnerable in terms of their relationships with those whom they love, making them complex to their respective audiences. In terms of how race is again depicted as dividing Rosie and Stanton, we see how in Act One, scene seven Stanton is provocatively directed to perform as Iago and Othello “making Othello a stereotypical black,”<sup>462</sup> the following lines should then be delivered by Stanton: “Othello Get some of de poison, Iago, dis night. Iago Do it not with poison, strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated. Othello Good, good, de justice of it pleases; very good.”<sup>463</sup> The fact that Wesker directs Stanton to be “stereotypical”<sup>464</sup> and also Stanton’s deliberate pronunciation of “th” sounds as “d” sounds make this purposely offensive towards Rosie as he emphasises the vernacular spoken by African Americans. In terms of the audience’s point of view this draws further attention to the cultural difference between them in this relationship. Additionally, Stanton interprets Othello’s relationship with Desdemona as based purely on sexual desire as he crudely says that “I tell you he’s only endowed with a mighty prick.”<sup>465</sup> A statement which falsely suggests that Desdemona and Othello’s relationship was based purely on sex, which is eerily

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<sup>460</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 169.

<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>462</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>463</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, From *Lady Othello and Other Plays*, p. 211.

<sup>464</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>465</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 136.

familiar to the coarse, offensive phrase spoken by Iago in Act One, scene one of *Othello* where he tells Desdemona's father that "your daughter and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs."<sup>466</sup> A phrase denoting that Desdemona and Othello are having sexual intercourse with each other whilst suggesting that the result of this may be something cruel. Therefore, the fact that Stanton speaks about sexuality with the same brusque tone as Iago conveys how in *Lady Othello* Stanton subconsciously becomes representative of Iago and the discriminatory ideas that Iago is an advocate for. This scene should be performed in a manner in which the embarrassment and humiliation that Rosie will inevitably feel should be palpable, this is a scene in which cracks should be visibly starting to show between Rosie and Stanton.

My analysis of *Lady Othello* brought me to the realisation that Rosie embodies the liberation that women were seeking during the Second Wave Feminist Movement. Wesker constructs a blatant contrast between Rosie and Stanton's wife Judith whom like Sonia we only hear through the voiceover. Whilst the voiceover in *Love Letters on Blue Paper* endears the audience to Sonia, in *Lady Othello* it detaches us from the character of Judith. Unlike Rosie she is representative of how women should behave within a conventional, patriarchal society. Stanton says in Act One, scene six of the play that Judith "runs the house"<sup>467</sup> and "guards the children."<sup>468</sup> Both of these phrases suggest that Judith carries out her domestic role as if she were doing a job, words such as "runs"<sup>469</sup> and "guards,"<sup>470</sup> perhaps suggesting that Stanton feels claustrophobic because of Judith's dominance in running the household. On the other hand, Rosie encompasses the audience with her performance which is full of physicality and earthiness from the first time an audience encounters her as a "*Jamaican-*

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<sup>466</sup> Shakespeare, *Othello*, p. 38.

<sup>467</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 132.

<sup>468</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>469</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>470</sup> *Ibid.*

*black New Yorker-a kind of Barbra Streisand.*”<sup>471</sup> A broad mix of types and tropes. The fact that Wesker alludes to the American icon Barbra Streisand in his introduction for Rosie suggests that she should appear as fashionable and glamorous in her “1930s astrakhan coat”<sup>472</sup> with a “fur collar.”<sup>473</sup> Rosie should be a woman whom other women envy because of her enthusiastic, insatiable aura. In Act One, scene six what is made blatant is how she takes a pride in her appearance with the stage direction that sees her go through a routine of “spitting on make-up boxes”<sup>474</sup> applying various “creams”<sup>475</sup> and “different thicknesses of sticks of eye makeup”<sup>476</sup> a very tangible use of staging that allows her to be as contemporary to the audience from the twenty-first century as well as one from the twentieth century. However, the fact that Stanton is directed to simultaneously watch Rosie “mesmerized”<sup>477</sup> will convey an ambiguity, because it suggests that he is not transfixed by her when she does not have the cosmetics on her face but when she is using them to create a different image for herself. It is a scene which if depicted correctly should emphasise the contrast between Rosie without make-up and the Rosie after the application of make-up to ensure that those viewing understand that the result of the cosmetics is purely an artificial, exoticized representation which is very palpable for Stanton, because he now views her as more available in terms of her sexuality. Make-up becomes a tangible symbol for Rosie’s effervescent attractiveness and unwavering energy. We see how she is directed to be anxious when she realises that Stanton has been watching her: “stop watching. Makes me nervous.”<sup>478</sup> The fact that she feels nervous conveys that she needs the makeup in order to make her feel more comfortable or to be able “to

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<sup>471</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>472</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>473</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>474</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>475</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*

project a confidence<sup>479</sup> within her “own skin.”<sup>480</sup> The application of her makeup is then followed by her saying that “my therapist says,”<sup>481</sup> telling us that she is receiving a form of psychological help. This relates to another point examined in LaPorchia C. Harris’s thesis which is that an “observer’s perspective on one’s body (self-objectification) leads to negative body image and mental health outcomes.”<sup>482</sup> Overall, there must be an impression created that Rosie is not confident in herself without these frills of femininity attached, her body image is very important to her. She emphasises this to Stanton by saying “love me, love my curlers,”<sup>483</sup> so she playfully informs him that her hair style is paramount to her complete identity.

The following interaction occurs between Rosie and Stanton in Act One, scene eleven: “Rosie: You’re not *what*? Are you talking to *me*? Are you saying I can’t rouse your banner high? *His neck* Are you saying there’s no arrow for my bull’s eye? *His chest* Are you suggesting I can’t make your fella meet the requirements? Because I do have requirements, you know. I’m not just a housewife or a brilliant intellect. You’re sleeping with a creature. A ker-reecha! *She bites his nipple and slides her hand down to his crotch.*”<sup>484</sup> Overall, this acts as a form of roleplay because of how Rosie is directed to put on a “pretence.”<sup>485</sup> She mocks her African American heritage by referring to herself as a “ker-reecha,”<sup>486</sup> by dehumanising herself in this example she reflects her desire to not be defined by her gender but by her abilities. The whole interaction comes to a climax with the stage direction that “*STANTON*

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<sup>479</sup> LaPorchia C. Harris, “African American women's use of cosmetics products in relation to their attitudes and self-identity” (Iowa State University Press, Iowa, 2013), p. 24.

<sup>480</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>481</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 133.

<sup>482</sup> Harris, “African American women's use of cosmetics products in relation to their attitudes and self-identity,” p. 25.

<sup>483</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 131.

<sup>484</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>485</sup> Liepe-Levinson, “Striptease: Desire, Mimetic Jeopardy and Performing Spectators,” p. 16.

<sup>486</sup> *Ibid.*

*claps his hand over her mouth then plants upon her lips a wild kiss.*<sup>487</sup> The animalistic form of sexuality that these characters engage in should saturate this scene when it's being portrayed. Relating to a point made by Wesker in his interview with Montenero which is that he aimed to arouse his "audiences"<sup>488</sup> and their "sexual appetite,"<sup>489</sup> asserting that sex as much as "joy, sadness, fear or anger"<sup>490</sup> is "central"<sup>491</sup> to people's lives. Rosie and Stanton's interactions are perhaps not the making of the sexiest erotica but this comment from the writer informs us how it wasn't necessarily sexy erotica that he was striving for but an honest depiction of sex. Rosie and Stanton may be an unconventional couple but the relationship that they have appears to be very tangible and the comic element that Wesker wanted to exist within this screenplay complements this because it adds authenticity. Wesker's decision to write a screenplay such as *Lady Othello*, exemplifies his evolution as both a writer and as a social commentator because it was only from the 1980s onwards that he started to interrogate the topic of sex; thirty years into his career as a writer. However, more than once in *Lady Othello* Stanton treats Rosie like an animal that requires colonization and control emphasised by language associated with colonialism such as "plants"<sup>492</sup> and "wild."<sup>493</sup> Hence her body becomes associated with a loss of identity and a "loss of self"<sup>494</sup> as Stanton is ultimately only interested in her physical ability and not in her mental ability.

Within Shakespeare's *Othello* the image of the horse was of significance as it is in Wesker's work also. In both works the animal denotes negative connotations. Rosie resentfully says "Stay and fuckin' marry me, Stanton! (*Pause*) Like talking to a dead horse.

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<sup>487</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>488</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 55.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>490</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>491</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>492</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 151.

<sup>493</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>494</sup> Carol E. Henderson, "AKA: Sarah Baartman, The Hottentot Venus and Black Women's Identity," *Women's Studies*, Volume 43 (2014), p. 950.

What the hell was I doing making love with a dead horse.”<sup>495</sup> Which symbolises how this relationship was inevitably always going to fail. Stanton’s nonchalant reply to this plea from Rosie portrays his lack of commitment to her with “Come here, four eyes.”<sup>496</sup> Rather than be serious he chooses to mock her. Rosie then goes on to tell Stanton that “You’ll be all right. A little strain at first, but one by one they’ll come round. Judy will forgive you...Nothing much will change.”<sup>497</sup> Rosie therefore conveys her belief that Stanton will be able to return to England and find that his life has not been altered, it will be as if this whole episode in his life never occurred. In contrast Rosie has to stay in America even though her life has been permanently altered by this ill-fated relationship. The fact that Rosie refers to Judith by the nickname “Judy”<sup>498</sup> conveys her jealousy and lack of respect for Judith, as Judith is clearly an embodiment of a love rival in Rosie’s eyes. On the other hand Rosie’s strength and physicality is emphasised until the very conclusion of the screenplay as she is directed to swagger “like a male athlete.”<sup>499</sup> A marked contrast is therefore made apparent between “Judy”<sup>500</sup> and the empowered Rosie, who refuses to return Stanton’s “last wave.”<sup>501</sup> Therefore, the ending of Wesker’s “Love Story”<sup>502</sup> appears to be an unhappy one, the ending aptly reminds us of an assertion from Tynan who claims that *Othello* is “a moral play: rigidly and cruelly so.”<sup>503</sup> Regardless of how humorous Wesker initially set out to have his play, the ending has sadly adhered to the cruelty that the “Bard’s work”<sup>504</sup> originally specified with the

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<sup>495</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 184.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>499</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.

<sup>500</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>501</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>502</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, From *Lady Othello and Other Plays*, p. 189.

<sup>503</sup> Kenneth Tynan, *He That Plays the King: A View of the Theatre* (Longmans Green, London, 1950), p. 84.

<sup>504</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, From *Lady Othello and Other Plays*, p. 252.

deaths of both Desdemona and Othello, whilst in Wesker's case it is Stanton leaving Rosie behind at the "Departure gate"<sup>505</sup> of the "Kennedy Airport"<sup>506</sup> in New York.

However, the ending is of course open to interpretation as the audience will not know where Stanton decided to go at the airport. Overall, my concluding note on *Lady Othello* is that it is a text which predominantly portrays men as selfish because of how Stanton alienates each of these two women from his life. In one of their discussions about Shakespeare's *Othello*, in Act One, scene seven, Stanton repeatedly asks Rosie not to play Othello: "don't play Lady Othello, Rosie,"<sup>507</sup> and "don't let's play Othello, Rosie."<sup>508</sup> Instead, Stanton requests that Rosie "play Rosalind"<sup>509</sup> and he will be her "Orlando."<sup>510</sup> In the context of this interaction between the two characters, Stanton is uncomfortable when Rosie criticises him for pursuing a relationship with her. Stanton compares Rosie with Othello because he sees her as foolish as she portrays herself as having double-standards. On one hand she is happily going along with the relationship and on the other hand she is blaming him even though she is equally at fault. The fact that Stanton asks Rosie to instead play Rosalind from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is significant, because Rosalind is stereotypically associated with being the "perfect, morally superior heroine."<sup>511</sup> Therefore Stanton's reference to Rosalind would appear unattainable to the fallible Rosie. However, Margaret Boerner Beckman comments in her article based on Shakespeare's Rosalind that she is a paradoxical character as on one hand like Rosie she is a "voice of critical realism about love,"<sup>512</sup> but on the other hand has idealistic theories surrounding love too. In Act One, scene five where

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<sup>505</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 185.

<sup>506</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>507</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>508</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>510</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>511</sup> *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare*, Edited by Michael Dobson, Stanley Wells, Will Sharpe, and Erin Sullivan, Second Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2015).

<sup>512</sup> Margaret Boerner Beckman, "The Figure of Rosalind In *As You Like It*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington (1978), p. 47.



Rosie creates a stereotypically romantic setting for her and Stanton to have dinner which adheres to the cliché that a way to a man's heart is through his stomach "you, candlelight, smell of food, Frank Sinatra, what more could a man want?"<sup>513</sup> However, Shakespeare's Emilia in Act Three, scene four of *Othello* has a contrasting view to Rosie who symbolises the complexities of heterosexual relations in the following excerpt that men "are all but stomachs, and we all but food; They eat us hungerly, and when they are full They belch us."<sup>514</sup> This is a damning statement through which Emilia summarises how women are simply fodder used to satisfy a man's sexual appetite at a specific moment in time. Emilia's opinion would provide the character of Rosie with a reality check on the deplorable way that she is treated by Stanton. Another key aspect to Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is that Rosalind disguises herself as a man, Boerner-Beckman writes that Rosalind is both a "protecting masculine figure"<sup>515</sup> and a "faint hearted female figure,"<sup>516</sup> again a complexity that can be viewed in Wesker's characterisation of Rosie as in one example he compares her to a male athlete and in a different example he depicts her as both "*made up*"<sup>517</sup> and "*stunning*."<sup>518</sup> Therefore, the fact that Stanton smugly suggests that Rosie should play Rosalind exposes his own stupidity by taking the common assertion that Rosalind was the ideal woman as fact. In comparison to his portrayal of Othello which lacked moral awareness through him overtly accentuating racial stereotypes, Stanton again shows how he is influenced by common presumptions. Ironically, Stanton is more like Othello than Rosie, as he is characterised by Wesker as a disingenuous, foolish male who feels threatened by the tenacious nature of his youthful lover whom he patronisingly refers to as a "teeny-bopper,"<sup>519</sup> I make this assertion

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<sup>513</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 129.

<sup>514</sup> Shakespeare, *Othello*, p. 94.

<sup>515</sup> Beckman, "The Figure of Rosalind in *As You Like It*," p. 47.

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>517</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 123.

<sup>518</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>519</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello and Other Plays*, p. 257.

due to the fact that in Act Two, scene eleven Stanton tells Rosie that he will “grieve”<sup>520</sup> for her when he returns to England. The hyperbole which I associate with a lack of sincerity on Stanton’s part in this section is due to him obviously being determined to return to his other, legitimate life in England, therefore abandoning Rosie to fend through her own isolation in New York. In comparison to Othello he is naïve as is encapsulated in Act Three, scene three of Shakespeare’s tragedy as Othello believes the meddling Iago’s claims that Desdemona has committed adultery. He fails to hear who he now sees as the “lewd minx”<sup>521</sup> and her side of the story, Shakespeare highlights the inferior position that women held in society in contrast to the all-powerful superiority of men as is symbolised through Othello’s emotive exclamation of “O, blood, blood, blood!”<sup>522</sup> Like Othello, Stanton adheres to the voice of his conscience which is represented in this play by the voiceover of Judith, engulfing his mind with doubts over his relationship with Rosie. These thoughts poison him against Rosie by depicting Rosie as unfaithful “You ought not to stay longer than twelve days with her, Stanton. That way she’ll have the illusion it would *all* have been like that.”<sup>523</sup> Therefore, Stanton’s conscience like Iago ultimately triumphs as Stanton abandons Rosie.

(v) “I have no distorted, rosy image of them:”<sup>524</sup> Wesker as an authentic writer of women.

The female characters that will be analysed in this section are Naomi from *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, Samantha from *The Mistress*, Betty from *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* and Matty who is the main female character in *Groupie*. This selection of characters shall be examined at this point in the thesis to illustrate how Wesker’s representation of women became less polarised than it had been in earlier work with the inclusion of *Lady Othello*. Tiwari ascertains that the *One-Woman Plays* are “character studies of women placed in

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<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>521</sup> Shakespeare, *Othello*, p. 91.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>523</sup> Wesker, *Lady Othello*, p. 177.

<sup>524</sup> Wesker, “The Women in My Writing,” Taken from *Distinctions* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1985), p. 150.

different social stratas.”<sup>525</sup> Tiwari in this comment succinctly identifies how Wesker was now beginning to depict a wider variety of women in terms of their background, meaning that his representation of them was veering further from the predictability of the beyond reproach housewife figure.

The *One-Woman plays* which Wesker writes for “one actress,”<sup>526</sup> are not monologues because all of the different characters are carrying out an activity or addressing someone or something else. All of the female characters which make up the cycle of *One-Woman plays* are shown to indeed be “dominant”<sup>527</sup> but yet flawed, whether physically or mentally. However, they like all of his female characters from both his early work and later work are admirable. Although they are all flawed and at times “destructive”<sup>528</sup> they each confront the “world’s problems.”<sup>529</sup> In the case of *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* Deborah unknowingly refers to the limitations of being a woman in the workplace: “Those poor men, tied to their jobs, tied to their hours, caught in a rush to the top.”<sup>530</sup> In *The Mistress* acclaimed fashion designer Samantha gives generously to different charity appeals, however, she ironically conveys how she is the one who needs help due to her complex personal life, “Tell me Ninotchka who is *not* an unsung hero.”<sup>531</sup> The character of Betty in *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* satirically exposes the hypocrisy of the British honours system. We hear an excerpt from a conversation she shared with her husband “Sir James Lemon”<sup>532</sup> in which she conveys the deception involved when rising the political ranks: “‘You play to the gallery,’ I told him.

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<sup>525</sup> Tiwari, “Women in Arnold Wesker’s Plays with Special Reference to his Six One-Woman Plays,” Chapter One, p. 10.

<sup>526</sup> Wesker, Introduction, Taken from *One-Woman Plays*, p. 7.

<sup>527</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 30.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>529</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>530</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 50.

<sup>531</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 62.

<sup>532</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* p. 25.

‘Easy solutions and slick slogans. The politics of comfort! Questions! Questions! You don’t teach them to ask questions. You’re filled with lies and bullshit.’<sup>533</sup>

The staging at the beginning of Naomi’s act in *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* constructs a character who immediately evokes sympathy. Wesker instructs that the actor performing Naomi should continuously reach for an overused “*paperback book*”<sup>534</sup> as she needs to “*stay in touch with something familiar.*”<sup>535</sup> Therefore, an actor should accentuate these movements in order to highlight how this solitary female character yearns for comfort and security. Additionally, Wesker instructs that she has a “*constant need for ‘news,’ about anything,*”<sup>536</sup> in terms of this trait in her characterisation a comparison can be made between Naomi and the character of Mrs Bryant. The archetypal matriarch and housewife figure of the second play of *The Trilogy: Roots*. In the opening stage directions of Act Two, scene one of *Roots*, we see how Wesker encapsulates Mrs Bryant’s loneliness from the beginning of the play. Wesker wants the actor portraying Mrs Bryant to give the impression that “*she spends most of the day on her own,*”<sup>537</sup> as the only people she sees are “*the tradesmen, her husband*”<sup>538</sup> and the “*family when they pop in occasionally.*”<sup>539</sup> These stage directions emphasise her sheltered existence and it is this which contributes to the divide between Mrs Bryant and her daughter Beatie. Beatie returns from University enlightened by the socialist ideals of her boyfriend Ronnie of *Chicken Soup with Barley*, she clashes with her mother whom she views as lacking in progression and uninfluential. Mary Stevens harshly writes that Mrs Bryant is “*unimaginative, conventional and unable to see the relationship between thought and action,*”<sup>540</sup> I believe that Stevens’ assertion about Mrs Bryant is harsh because I think that

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<sup>533</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>534</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>535</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>536</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>537</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy*, p. 106.

<sup>538</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>539</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>540</sup> Mary Stevens, “Wesker’s the Wesker Trilogy,” *The Explicator*, Volume 43 (1985).

Wesker does portray Mrs Bryant as having imagination, as the audience will see in Act Two, scene one when she disagrees with Beatie over her taste in music. Mrs Bryant tells Beatie “I tell you what I reckon’s a good song, that ‘I’ll wait for you in the heaven’s blue’. I reckon that’s a lovely song I do. Jimmy Samson he sings that.”<sup>541</sup> To which a condescending Beatie retorts that “It’s like twenty other songs, it don’t mean anything and its sloshy and sickly.”<sup>542</sup> Wesker’s use of sibilance in Beatie’s dialogue at this point highlights her disregard for what she believes is art without depth and substance. One reading of Beatie’s insinuation that “it’s like twenty other songs”<sup>543</sup> could be that Wesker was indirectly criticising what John Russell Taylor regarded as the “conformity”<sup>544</sup> which was required if you were to be successful on the West End Stage. The fact that Mrs Bryant supposedly endorses this commercialism relates to her role as the “Earth-mother figure.”<sup>545</sup> Like Deborah in *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, Mrs Bryant is “unchanging”<sup>546</sup> and continually promoting how her ideas are the best ones to have. Some audience members would take the stance that these two female characters should be considered as overbearing, however my insinuation is that they both embody the lack of opportunities for women in society during the early to mid-twentieth century. Stevens however, is clearly taking the viewpoint that Beatie had during this interaction with her mother, an opinion about imagination which is entirely subjective and against Mrs Bryant. Stevens’s view is endorsed by Lyn Gardner who writes that “Mrs Bryant measures out her life in the passing of buses and fish vans,”<sup>547</sup> therefore Mrs Bryant leads a transient yet stagnant life lacking in progression and ambition accentuated by the cyclical motif in the play of potatoes which are forever needing to be peeled “*she starts peeling.*”<sup>548</sup> This can be

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<sup>541</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, p. 114.

<sup>542</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>544</sup> John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (Pelican Books, London, 1963), p. 14.

<sup>545</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>546</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>547</sup> Lyn Gardner, “Roots-Review,” *The Guardian*, Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> October (2013).

<sup>548</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, p. 106.

compared to Deborah who is constantly wheeling around her supermarket trolley, like peeling potatoes this movement is also cyclical and infinite. Therefore, I will reiterate a point which was made in the first section of this chapter which is that Wesker portrays the figure of the matriarch as one who does not receive any reciprocation for the sacrifices that she makes for her family. Rather she is represented as a moralistic figure who will uphold the “institution of the family”<sup>549</sup> so much that it becomes to her own detriment.

In *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, Wesker writes that “our first image”<sup>550</sup> of Naomi is her uneasiness as “all of the leaves”<sup>551</sup> of her book are coming “loose”<sup>552</sup> making it more difficult for her to turn a page. This piece of staging can be interpreted as Wesker ironically playing on the saying of turning over a new leaf, as we the audience view that it is now all but impossible for Naomi’s life to change as is symbolised through her drinking from a receptacle with “yesterday’s crumbs”<sup>553</sup> sticking to the cup. Naomi is therefore synonymous with the emotional decay that occurs because one chooses to live in the past. Naomi can be compared with Harry in *Chicken Soup with Barley* who in Sarah’s crude use of language has become a figure of self-neglect and loss of pride who lets the “dirt”<sup>554</sup> gather “around”<sup>555</sup> her. By having Naomi only have a mere conversation by phone with her nephew Danny, this heightens the isolation which he creates for her. “You ring me and that’s good of you but yours is the only voice I hear.”<sup>556</sup> This is a phrase which conveys how Naomi realises that her nephew is only keeping in contact with her out of duty and not desire. Her tone is melancholy with the words the “only voice I hear,”<sup>557</sup> which accentuate her own sense of alienation and

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<sup>549</sup> B. Chandrika, *The Private Garden: The Family in Post War Britain* (Academic Foundation, Delhi, 1993), p. 53.

<sup>550</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 43.

<sup>551</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>554</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 74.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>556</sup> Wesker, *The Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 46.

<sup>557</sup> *Ibid.*

detachment from the outside world. A comparison can be made between Naomi and Mrs Hyams because how each of these female characters are formidable in regards to their positive thinking, despite their lonely existences. However, both of them encapsulate disappointment and a loss of expectation, Naomi shares with the audience a memory from her childhood in which she hung a “pillow case”<sup>558</sup> in anticipation of “Father Christmas”<sup>559</sup> paying a visit even though “Jewish people”<sup>560</sup> such as her family didn’t celebrate Christmas. She wakes on Christmas morning to find that the pillow case is indeed left “empty.”<sup>561</sup> The emptiness of the pillow case reflects how she finds her life to be empty and vacuous now also. Similarly, in “Pools” Mrs Hyams tries her hand at betting by attempting to win the pools like her husband. Wesker writes that Mrs Hyams’ husband “died”<sup>562</sup> causing Mrs Hyams to take happiness from “trivialities,”<sup>563</sup> she believes that she “*must* win the pools because with the money she would piece together the ruins of her family.”<sup>564</sup> Therefore, Mrs Hyams’ futile belief, that if she wins the money her family will be united again, exposes like Naomi her desire for company. The language which Wesker uses in this example is associated with a sense of damage and incompleteness, as the imagery reminds the reader of an imperfect jigsaw puzzle. However, at the conclusion when Mrs Hyams does not win at the pools, like Naomi she says a phrase which is crammed with negativity: “‘why,’ she said to herself, ‘should Mrs Hyams win £75,000 anyway?’”<sup>565</sup> which is followed with “she’s no one. She’s nothing.”<sup>566</sup> The rhetorical questions that Mrs Hyams’ asks herself in this excerpt can be compared to Naomi complaining to Danny that his was the one and only voice she hears, the lack of reply to Mrs Hyams’ questions accentuates her solitude also. Both Naomi and Mrs

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<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>559</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>560</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>561</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>562</sup> Wesker, “Pools,” Taken from *Six Sundays in January* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1971), p. 20

<sup>563</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>564</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>565</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*

Hyams are female characters which the audience or reader ultimately feel pathos for, because through the imagery that Wesker creates which is associated with incompleteness he simultaneously informs the audience or reader that Naomi and Mrs Hyams' lives were complete at some time. Ultimately it is loss that we associate Naomi and Mrs Hyams with as we realise that the missing pieces of their jigsaws will never be found: "*she looks slowly around the room as though realizing for the first time how she's allowed it all to go to pieces.*"<sup>567</sup>

Samantha in *The Mistress* is a character whom the audience would have mixed feelings about, on one hand highly successful in the field of fashion design: "*she is thirty-nine years old, voluptuous, energetic, efficient, talented and famous.*"<sup>568</sup> Conversely, her loneliness is epitomised through her conversations with the dress dummies in her studio as she waits for her married lover to contact her: "what shall I wear for him tonight? Long, *décolleté*, clinging? Something sparkly with black net stockings, suspenders? (*pulls a box of bottles towards her*) And which perfume?"<sup>569</sup> The repetition of rhetorical questions that Wesker uses in this case conveys the one-sided nature of her relationship with her lover as it shows the high level of preparation that she does. Therefore, pity may be evoked towards Samantha, however the complexity of her character lies in the fact that there won't be a unified audience response because others will see her as the personification of a dissembling form of vanity, the fact that she devotes her life to the artificial world of cosmetics and fashion is evocative of this also, "Fiji? Aramis? Blazer by Anne Klein? Not really, they're for sport. Ralph Laurie? Tatiana? No, they're for day clothes. Eau de Floris by Nina Ricci? Mmm. Romantic but not sexy."<sup>570</sup> The ambivalent, mixed reception that the character of Samantha will get

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<sup>567</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 47.

<sup>568</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 59.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64-65.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.



from the audience is reflective of Wesker's own opinion of women. Speaking to Montenero he says that "I'm not ambivalent about women, I just recognise their differences."<sup>571</sup> In this contradictory point Wesker puts forth how he does not want his female characters to be two-dimensional, mannequin-like figures, rather he makes known his conscious decision to create females who are complex and intriguing. This explains the variegated nature of the characters he graces us with which include: dutiful housewives, isolated spinsters and secluded career women. In each of the categories which I have referred to we can say that what Wesker makes synonymous with each of his portraits of womanhood is that of sacrifice.

First, I will examine, the ambitious, infallible side of Samantha. When she exclaims towards the ringing phone that "you'll talk about your diets, your husbands, your children, your homes in that order and I'm not interested,"<sup>572</sup> one interpretation of this statement may be that this is a female character who is dedicated to her career and rejects both marriage and motherhood. In comparison to Rosie she does not adhere to patriarchy or the ties of domesticity. Recalling the loss of her virginity she repeatedly criticises her love rival who she saw as "matronly,"<sup>573</sup> hence informing the audience that Samantha is similar to Rosie as she views image as paramount to identity. Samantha then goes on to share with the audience that while the boy "worked for a mere matronly kiss I had worked my alchemy to lose him deep inside me."<sup>574</sup> The fact that Wesker uses the term "alchemy"<sup>575</sup> portrays how Samantha coerced the boy to satisfy her own sexual desires. This conveys how Samantha is a female character who likes to have superiority over men and is also very open about enjoying sex. Her enjoyment of sex is further emphasised when she says that "But-when she has her good friend's husband in her arms, on her lips and between those ample, fleshy thighs, her good

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<sup>571</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 30.

<sup>572</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 60.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>574</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>575</sup> *Ibid.*

friend is banished from her thoughts.”<sup>576</sup> In this phrase Samantha may be interpreted as amoral through her enjoyment of sex in this instance because she discards her friendship in order to fulfil her own indulgences. The lack of maternal instinct which is prevalent in Samantha’s characterisation is brought to a climax when she reveals that “I want my body firm. I want it to stay the way it is.”<sup>577</sup> Once again Wesker conveys how Samantha’s self-proclaimed vanity is a rebellion against the conventions of society. Finally, the audience will see how Samantha shows her angry and scornful attitude at the thought of her lover deserting her “Queen of the double standard! That’s you! Of the double standard, Queen!”<sup>578</sup> The language that Wesker uses in this phrase echoes the terminology that he uses in his essay the “Queen Moves to Protect King.”<sup>579</sup> In this essay he defends women as he writes that “for me the story of Eve is the story of the woman who knew a good thing when she saw it and courageously bit the apple.”<sup>580</sup> Wesker criticises the supposed superiority of men, and insinuates that Eve becoming the archetype of female transgression was created by men in order to warn fellow men of “female scheming.”<sup>581</sup> Furthermore, he writes that the “story of Eve as temptress”<sup>582</sup> was a design of “male tellers of tales to ensure that women were fully aware and ashamed of their amoral nature.”<sup>583</sup> The next part of this section will examine how Samantha is presented as being ashamed of her way of life.

“Do you enjoy being a mistress? Who asked that? Which one of you brazen dummies asked that? Is that this evening’s blinding question?”<sup>584</sup> This is the question unpacked throughout the duration of the play. In chapter one, I examined how Samantha uses chocolate

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<sup>576</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

<sup>579</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 30.

<sup>580</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>582</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>583</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>584</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 64.

to ease her guilt and give herself fleeting solace, however she uses alcohol to do this also. “‘Enjoy’ is when you love yourself rather than your good friend’s husband. I need another whiskey!”<sup>585</sup> The whiskey like the chocolate becomes a medium of escape for Samantha who is at odds with her emotions due to her guilt. She quotes from the famous song from the 1949 musical *South Pacific*: “(Sings) ‘I’m gonna wash that man right out of my hair, I’m gonna wash that man right out of my hair,’”<sup>586</sup> a song that promotes female empowerment and to abandon a man’s happiness so that you are able to fulfil your own as a woman. When examining how the audience may find Samantha full of her own importance, I highlight her lack of maternal instinct, however in the following example she again needs alcohol informing us that perhaps she secretly does yearn for a stereotypical family. “Ninotchka: And babies? (*Irons in Silence*) And babies? (*Irons in Silence*) And babies? Samantha: You are relentless! (*Moves down for another Jack Daniels*).”<sup>587</sup> Finally, towards the conclusion of the play she says to herself “face it, Babushka. This affair has no future and its demeaning and lonely,”<sup>588</sup> which shows that despite all of Samantha’s futile attempts to show disdain for domesticity and motherhood, she feels unhappy and excluded in her current existence as the Other woman. Samantha is the antithesis of Deborah from *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, Tiwari insinuates that “Both Samantha and Deborah present two different points of views regarding women’s socio-cultural status in the modern British society.”<sup>589</sup> However, ultimately the character of Samantha contradicts this polarised, simplistic assumption from Tiwari because my reading of her is of a female character who in comparison to Deborah defends her way of life to the hilt but in contrast to Deborah has regrets about how she lives her life. Samantha is

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<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>587</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>589</sup> Tiwari, “Women in Arnold Wesker’s Plays with Special Reference to his One-Woman Plays,” p. 129.

a “perfect”<sup>590</sup> daughter of “Eve”<sup>591</sup> in my view because of Wesker’s complex construction of her.

*Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* is a play saturated with a darkly humorous tone. Wesker’s first phrase in this one-woman play is that Betty lives in “*an Edwardian mansion flat.*”<sup>592</sup> Margaret Rose writes that this “shows”<sup>593</sup> how “Betty has climbed the social ladder and become a member of the middle class.”<sup>594</sup> Rose’s assertion possesses a tone of snobbery because she suggests that Betty should be satisfied with her life because of her ascension in social status. However, Betty tells the audience that she has instead been left destitute by her husband who was “honoured”<sup>595</sup> but was also “penniless,”<sup>596</sup> contradicting Rose’s assertion. The humour of this play arises from the bluntness of Betty’s opinions and thoughts on life even though she is an “*old woman crippled by everything old age brings,*”<sup>597</sup> she hasn’t let this dampen her acerbic wit. She candidly informs the audience that her husband “Sir James Lemon! Socialist MP for Birmingham North”<sup>598</sup> passed away “honoured and penniless. Though he spent his seed more than his pennies.”<sup>599</sup> Hence Betty insinuates that her husband was a philanderer. However, the fact that she chooses to expose his moral misgivings draws attention to the differing expectations that exist in society between men and women.

Betty’s frustration at the contrasting expectations that exist between men and women within society is the template in which this play is framed. Her husband was obviously lauded professionally whilst Betty says that she was automatically expected to behave like a

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<sup>590</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 30.

<sup>591</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>592</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* p. 25.

<sup>593</sup> Margaret Rose, “Wesker’s One-Woman Plays as Part of a Popular Tradition,” Taken from *Arnold Wesker: A Casebook*, p. 134.

<sup>594</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>595</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* p. 25.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>597</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>598</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>599</sup> *Ibid.*

“lai-dy.”<sup>600</sup> She then goes on to refer to herself as “the loud-mouthed cow. The sardonic shadow. The caustic, unappreciative bitch at his side,”<sup>601</sup> because this was the derogatory way that she believes she was viewed by their peers. The fact that Wesker uses sibilance with the term “sardonic shadow”<sup>602</sup> shows that he wants the actor portraying the character of Betty to convey her sense of frustration at how much his work as a politician was appreciated in contrast to her work as a wife. This is further developed as she talks of her abandoned ambitions as an athlete “That’s what I wanted to be, my Lords, Ladies and Gentlemen, not a writer but a runner who won races. I was neither. I became a wife.”<sup>603</sup> Like Matty who gave up her passion for music in the play *Groupie* which will be the final play to feature in this chapter, Betty sacrificed her love of sport for the constraints of married life. “What about those handicapped by the wrong relationship until death do them part.”<sup>604</sup> This is a phrase said by Betty which implies that an unhappy marriage is as hindering to one’s life as a physical disability. Wesker’s tone of phrasing in this example parallels the rhetorical questions which are said by Ninotchka/Samantha in *The Mistress* such as “what about the poor provincial woman whose mind is large and whose husband is dull? The lonely country wife whose passion is stormy but whose horizons are hedges?”<sup>605</sup> However, what Betty’s thought and Ninotchka/Samantha’s have in common is that they both emphasise the isolated life which women can lead as a result of patriarchy within the household. Kynaston asserts that a woman was ideally expected to be an “embodiment of femininity”<sup>606</sup> who is a “cost-effective, uncomplaining homemaker”<sup>607</sup> in her “home-centred, fourfold role.”<sup>608</sup> The word

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<sup>600</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>601</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>602</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>603</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>604</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>605</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 71.

<sup>606</sup> Kynaston, *Family Britain: 1951-1957*, p. 566.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>608</sup> *Ibid.*

“uncomplaining”<sup>609</sup> used by Kynaston highlights the presumed passivity expected of women in the mid-twentieth century. However, in both *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* and *The Mistress* the female characters portray the isolation and unhappiness that was experienced by these so-called homemakers at the expense of their husband to progress in the career world. The isolation and solitary way that Betty lives is conveyed to the audience several times in this play. First, we see Betty’s anger at her daughter always ringing her at an unsuitable time:

“Hello, daughter. This is your handicapped mother of the year calling you from heaven. I passed away two months ago. You can reach me on cloud nine extension 010101010101...Oh! Oh! Oh? (*She is in tears. Controls herself.*)  
Goodbye, machine. (*Receiver down.*)”<sup>610</sup>

We can compare this performance of Betty’s with Naomi from *Four Portraits-Of Mothers* (who is extremely hard of hearing) as she has an unsatisfactory conversation with her nephew after which she “*replaces the phone. Looks sadly around. Runs her finger over top of television and wipes dust on her apron. The exchange has made her sad.*”<sup>611</sup> Pathos is associated with both of these female characters ironically because their isolation is accentuated by these automated, sterile conversations with their family members. In the example of Betty, we see how Wesker’s staging heightens Betty as the “embodiment”<sup>612</sup> of isolation further as “*She wanders around her flat. Lost. Lonely. Uncertain what to do, where to settle. Finds herself beneath the noose. Utterly depressed.*”<sup>613</sup> Betty is a character who as a result of placing her spouse’s interests before her own has become a “shadow”<sup>614</sup> of her former self who questioned the gender-specific roles that society imposed. This is epitomised

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<sup>609</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>610</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* p. 35.

<sup>611</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 45.

<sup>612</sup> Kynaston, *Family Britain: 1951-1957*, p. 566.

<sup>613</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* p. 35.

<sup>614</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

through a recollection of her mother requesting that Betty went and got two heavy chairs to bring down to the dinner table whilst Betty's brothers sat idle. A request in which the young Betty retorted "Not while there are two big hefty boys standing idle either side of me,"<sup>615</sup> however, as Kynaston writes "A woman's place?' almost needlessly asked *Woman's Own*. 'Yes, it is! For it is the heart and centre of the meaning of home.'<sup>616</sup> This represents how publications of this lifestyle magazine aimed at women, promoted that a woman's vocation was set within the four walls of the kitchen.

The main female character of *Groupie* is Matty, who is now sixty-one years of age and the years are a "couple...before the millennium."<sup>617</sup> Through her enthusiasm and appreciation of art, Wesker characterises Matty as an energetic, happy-go-lucky, loveable woman. However, her admission that her "nimble fingers"<sup>618</sup> which were "made"<sup>619</sup> for her talent at the "piano"<sup>620</sup> were instead "applied"<sup>621</sup> to the "typewriter,"<sup>622</sup> inform the audience that in order to conform as a woman during the mid-twentieth century she was forced to abandon her musical talent in pursuit of a realistic and acceptable livelihood. In terms of context the mid-twentieth century in Britain was an era in which women were looked upon as the main stalwarts of the household. In 1945, Coward's *Brief Encounter* was released, Kynaston writes because Laura Jesson does not pursue her extra-marital liaison with Dr. Alec Harvey this is a "vindication of restraint, domesticity and pre-war values."<sup>623</sup> Therefore, a mid-twentieth century Britain was not a place that advocated women deciding their own destinies, instead they were to adhere to patriarchy. In Terence Rattigan's 1952 play *The Deep Blue Sea* a

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<sup>615</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>616</sup> Kynaston, *Family Britain: 1951-1957*, p. 568.

<sup>617</sup> Wesker, *Groupie*, p. 5.

<sup>618</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>619</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>620</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>621</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>623</sup> Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, p. 99.

disillusioned and frustrated Hester Collyer criticises her husband Sir William Collyer's trivialisation of love, "Love, Bill, that's all- you know-that thing you read about in your beloved Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope,"<sup>624</sup> therefore she mocks William's comparison of reality with conventional, upper-class, idealised representations of relationships. Hester is a character who rebels against society's restraints as she, unlike Laura, does pursue a highly sexualised love affair. However, the play concludes with her as a broken, isolated woman. This relates to Sally Alexander's comment that a woman in the mid-twentieth century "dared not act on her feelings"<sup>625</sup> as "she would have lost home and children,"<sup>626</sup> to share the same fate as the female protagonist depicted in Augustus Egg's *Past and Present* triptych. Rattigan's portrayal of "female desire"<sup>627</sup> being adhered to conveys how this is a "time-bomb waiting to explode,"<sup>628</sup> something which will end very badly. In the case of Matty we see how she has followed the example set by the character of Laura Jesson and not Hester Collyer.

Matty's fingers did not meet with their artistic vocation so she had to instead adhere to the norms of society. She writes to her male companion and artist Mark Gorman that she also gave up the piano due to her becoming "a wife and then a mother."<sup>629</sup> Her own identity and talent therefore had to be sacrificed in order for her family's needs to be placed first. A similarity at this point is seen between Matty and Naomi, as Naomi also says that "I looked after an invalid mother, then I looked after a sick sister and now there's no one to look after me."<sup>630</sup> Both women portray how they feel unrewarded at this point in their lives for the efforts that they have made for others. Naomi's mood of fruitlessness is also conveyed when

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<sup>624</sup> Terence Rattigan, *The Deep Blue Sea* (Samuel French, London, 1952), p. 56.

<sup>625</sup> Sally Alexander, "Sexual Nostalgia," *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 76, Oxford University Press, Oxford (2013), p. 309.

<sup>626</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>629</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>630</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 45.



she says that she is “No one in the middle of nowhere with no more chances. Nothing good to remember, nothing good to miss.”<sup>631</sup> The repetition of negative terminology in this phrase symbolises the depression and “*resignation*”<sup>632</sup> that Wesker wants to depict in his portrayal of Naomi. In Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*, the plant that Lena avidly takes care of is symbolic of continuity, in the case of Naomi we see how the “*dead pot plant*”<sup>633</sup> is instead representative of the opposite of this. The plant in Wesker’s work is a motif for barrenness, deterioration and sterility encapsulated by Naomi’s isolation.

Matty and Naomi also place a tremendous amount of store by the fairy-tale character of Prince Charming, Matty says in scene eighteen that the “Prince Charming story”<sup>634</sup> is about “not bringing the dead alive but making the frozen feel.”<sup>635</sup> Naomi says that her memory may awaken “if Prince Charming came along,”<sup>636</sup> therefore, both of these women inhabit a fantasy world filled with romance and an idealised lover that is an emotional sanctuary for each of them. However, it may also be that Matty and Naomi both want rescued from the lives that they are currently leading, Naomi emotively says as her scene in the play comes to a close that “what I really miss is to be held. No one’s held me for years,”<sup>637</sup> encapsulating how Naomi desires warmth and affection. Furthermore, it implies that because these women are of a certain age this doesn’t mean that they do not desire to have the physicality of love present in their lives.

When visiting the National Portrait Gallery Matty takes a shine to the portrait of Anne Boleyn by an unknown artist. This is significant because Matty tells Mark that she likes the

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<sup>631</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>632</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>633</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

<sup>634</sup> Wesker, *Groupie*, p. 63.

<sup>635</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>636</sup> Wesker, *Four Portraits-Of Mothers*, p. 45.

<sup>637</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

painting because the “faint smile in her eyes”<sup>638</sup> is as though “she’s mocking herself for sitting for a portrait,”<sup>639</sup> a quality which Matty admires. When observing the expression on Boleyn’s face it is indeed one of amusement towards us, despite all the formality that would normally be depicted in such a work, her sense of humour prevails over all of this. Mark and Matty then get into a conversation about the painting in greater detail, Matty asks “why is the necklace and chain slipped underneath her dress rather than over it?”<sup>640</sup> to which Mark replies “Maybe she enjoys the feel of it against her skin.”<sup>641</sup> The astute Matty then retorts that “that’s a man’s response. Women want to show off their jewellery.”<sup>642</sup> The engagement which Matty shows with this painting highlights how her relationship is making her “feel again,”<sup>643</sup> as she is gaining confidence by being able to discuss art in better terms intellectually. It also shows how Matty is not afraid to expose and mock the sexualisation that men impose on women, as is highlighted with Mark’s highly sensory observation about the portrait of Boleyn. Prior to the above conversation with Mark at the “*Portrait Gallery*”<sup>644</sup> Matty tells Mark that “Nooooo! I’ve lived a lifetime of lids. I’m your original lidded woman.”<sup>645</sup> Matty’s opinion of herself contrasts with the interpretation of her character by Barbara Eda-Young who depicts Matty in a stage version of the play in America. Young says that the character she portrays “doesn’t have a cover”<sup>646</sup> due to her being so “open,”<sup>647</sup> therefore there is an irony in Wesker’s characterisation of Matty due to these conflicting aspects of her personality. On one hand this can be understood as a comical, simplistic phrase in which Matty is overly modest about herself and her capabilities, on the other hand she is alluding to the constraints that

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<sup>638</sup> Wesker, *Groupie*, p. 60.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>640</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>641</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>642</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>643</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

<sup>644</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>645</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>646</sup> Barbara Eda-Young, Interview about *Groupie* directed by Charles Maryan, Link:

<https://vimeo.com/243249714>, 2017.

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.*

have been placed on her throughout her life. The imagery which Wesker uses in this phrase conveys how her life has been claustrophobic and trapped because of these constraints.

Wesker's language is very alliterative in this phrase as there is a repetition of "I" sounds in comparison to Sarah in *Chicken Soup with Barley* with "I'm a simple person Ronnie and I've got to have light and love."<sup>648</sup> However, whilst the alliteration in Sarah's case was a poignant magnification of how Sarah believes that her most memorable days are over, in Matty's case there is excitement, hope and relief that she has now gained freedom from domesticity and motherhood.

In scene eighteen, like Boleyn, Matty decides that she would like Mark to do a portrait of her and in the end the portrait is of her partially nude. Her own disbelief at doing this is emphasised as she refers to herself as "-a copper's daughter with one breast hanging out"<sup>649</sup> and "-a copper's daughter from Stepney."<sup>650</sup> Therefore, this shows how Matty at the age of sixty-one does not feel that she has an individual identity of her own, she has either belonged to her father or her husband. In Kynaston's *Austerity Britain* (2007), he claims that the police were considered as the "finest body of men,"<sup>651</sup> who uphold the "time tested constitution, traditions and democracy of the British Way of Life."<sup>652</sup> By posing semi-nude for Mark she feels that she is using her femininity as a rebellion against the quintessential manliness of the British Police. The fact that Matty repeatedly refers to her father's role encapsulates how she believes that he would be disgusted at her behaving in this way. In an interesting aside it is also worth noting that Dame Barbara Windsor was the actor chosen to voice Matty in the radio play of *Groupie* first broadcast in 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2001. Windsor's notoriety came from the *Carry-On* series of films that started in 1958. The fact that the films all began with "Carry

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<sup>648</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 74.

<sup>649</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>650</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>651</sup> Kynaston, *Austerity Britain*, p. 363.

<sup>652</sup> *Ibid.*

On” conveys how they were depicting life in England in the decades after World War Two. The famous motivational phrase “Keep Calm and Carry On,” originated in the late 1930s in order to keep morale high amongst the British public. These films were farcical comedies which mocked life in England. Windsor gained fame through these films because of her feminine, light-hearted persona, playing female characters who all had the main objective of satisfying the heterosexual male gaze. It was a good piece of casting to select Windsor because she herself would have been fully aware of English culture in the 1950s/60s which was the period in which Matty would have been a young woman.

### Conclusion

It is of paramount importance to emphasise how Wesker’s representation of women evolved from the 1950s-2000s as showing the evolution of Wesker as a writer is a key objective of this thesis. His female characters evolved because in contrast to Sarah and Sonia they became part of the career world as we have examined with Stephanie of *Yardsale* being a schoolteacher, Samantha of *The Mistress* being highly successful as a fashion designer and the aspiring academic in *Lady Othello*’s Rosie. Therefore, by constructing female characters who have jobs and are financially independent, Wesker, as a writer is moving with the socio-economic landscape of the time in which he is living. However, in comparison to the female characters of his early work as examined previously they are still depicted as the inferior party when it comes to relationships, as the male characters whom they are involved with all have the final say. Stephanie is abandoned by her husband for another woman, Samantha is at the receiving end of her married lover’s wishes and Rosie is left in limbo through Stanton’s indecision. Furthermore, the older female characters inform us about the sacrifices that they had to make in order to appease their husbands. Betty cathartically releases her anger at her husband’s lack of appreciation for the support and sacrifices that she made just so as his

political career could be bettered and Matty shows her regret at being unable to pursue her music after she became a wife and mother.

Sarah and Samantha were the two female characters that were referred to in the introduction to this chapter and who illustrate how Wesker evolved as a writer in his representation of women. Both Sarah and Sonia are immigrants to England, in the example of Sarah we learn in Act One, scene one of *Chicken Soup with Barley* that she is “of European origin”<sup>653</sup> whilst Wesker includes in Samantha’s character description at the start of the play that her parents were “Eastern European emigrés.”<sup>654</sup> Sarah and Samantha shared the same cultural beginnings yet are represented to be at opposite poles of the social spectrum. From being disheartened homemakers trapped within the four walls of the home, to financially independent members of a society that was gradually becoming more plural in terms of the role of women. “The Perfect Daughters of Eve”<sup>655</sup> who do not attempt to disguise their displeasure or unhappiness towards the Patriarchy that exists in British society.

The challenge of patriarchy within British society is a theme which continues into the third chapter of this thesis. *Denial* is a complex, episodic play in which Wesker presents two opposing worlds, the first being that the accuser Jenny is indeed telling the truth and the denial is that of her father who is dishonest to claim that he didn’t abuse her. The second is that Jenny is the one in denial as she can’t accept that the heartsome, infinite and unconditional love that she received as a child from her parents cannot be compared or replicated in the relationships she has with men since the failure of her marriage due to their being largely based on physicality and sexual gratification. Hence her parents appear to become scapegoats for her lack of happiness within her adult life, therefore she decides to

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<sup>653</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 13.

<sup>654</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 59.

<sup>655</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 30.

manipulate her childhood memories in order to blame somebody else for her misfortunes.

Two opposing narratives are therefore juxtaposed against each other in this next play under my analysis, what narrative anyone decides to believe is purely objectional.

### **Chapter Three: Denial**

#### (i) Supposedly “false accusations of child abuse.”<sup>1</sup>

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of May in the year 2000, Wesker’s play about the False Memory Syndrome *Denial* had its first performance at the Old Vic theatre in Bristol. In this performance the music composed by John O’Hara is exceptionally haunting which complements the mood of the play itself which is one of a bourgeois family disintegrating due to a commercially-driven therapist and her allegedly bogus theories. The bourgeois status of the family is accentuated through the father figure/accused Matthew being attired in a corporate suit throughout whilst each member of the Young family including the accuser Jenny speaks with an upper-class English accent. Wesker describes this play as a “hot potato,”<sup>2</sup> a figurative use of language which implies that the theatre establishment were unsure as to whether they should put their reputations at risk by staging this play.

The contextual material of this chapter is formed around the two opposing narratives which are present in this play. One aspect of this play’s presentation is the fact that Wesker is completely in control of the structure of this play. This will also be evident when viewing the play on the stage due to the divide between Jenny and her parents which is made more apparent by them not sharing any scenes until the latter parts of the play. This as a result can cause one to interpret that our playwright is slightly biased and on the side of Jenny’s parents. Therefore, it is vital to keep this at the forefront when researching this problematic work from a Wesker who now into the 1990s was as controversial as ever. In her article “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Abuse in Recent British Drama”<sup>3</sup> Anna Rosalind Harpin views

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Anna Rosalind Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Abuse in Recent British Drama,” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Volume 23 (2013).

*Denial* as having “nigh-pantomimic two-dimensionality,”<sup>4</sup> therefore, she insinuates that Wesker deliberately avoids developing his characters as fully as they should be in order to impose his own agenda and summation of the False Memory Syndrome onto the viewing audience. The fact that she compares it with a form of pantomime suggests that to an extent this play cannot be considered as a realistic representation because the characters are too polarised by the playwright.

It was vital when composing this chapter to also read into the decade of the play’s setting which is of course the 1990s. Specifically, how cultural markers of the nineties are reflected in Wesker’s play such as the emergence of the ladette phenomenon in which women openly expressed their enjoyment of sex and their rejection of conventional gender stereotypes which is epitomised through the main female character Jenny and the overhaul she has in her appearance. Anna Tippett’s article “Debating the F1 grid girls: feminist tensions in British Popular Culture,”<sup>5</sup> is one in which she analyses the sexualisation of the female body, one of the points she makes in this article is how it can be viewed as a “self-sufficient”<sup>6</sup> display of liberty. This can be applied to Wesker’s characterisation of Jenny due to the fact that she appears to see both her body and her sexuality as wholly within her control and something which is purely physical and something which she can ultimately use as leverage against men.

Typecasting Wesker in the way that some critics enjoy doing is sadly inevitable as family unity is what most are comfortable with in his writing. His gravitation away from the stability of domestic life in this play symbolises how Wesker’s style became more liberated as his career moved from one era into another. In an article from 1991, Wesker claimed that one of

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> Anna Tippett, “Debating the F1 grid girls: feminist tensions in British popular culture,” *Feminist Media Studies*, Volume 20, 2020, Issue 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, taken from Abstract.



the British theatre establishment's major problems was that it favoured staging the "classics"<sup>7</sup> and ignored work produced by living writers due to the "troublesome"<sup>8</sup> fact that living writers "answer back with matching, often more vivid theatrical imaginations"<sup>9</sup> than the directors themselves have. Therefore, in this specific article Wesker exemplifies how his inability to abide by directors and their interpretations of his work partly contributed to his waning reputation within British theatre.

*Denial* depicts the antithesis of the family unity seen in *Chicken Soup with Barley*, therefore *Denial* is illustrative of the genre of theatre known as "In-Yer-Face"<sup>10</sup> theatre. Plays that belonged to this specific genre often had the objective of being "consciously confrontational,"<sup>11</sup> with characters who are "damaged"<sup>12</sup> at their core. Aleks Sierz claims that this genre of drama "jolts actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm,"<sup>13</sup> therefore one of the main objectives of this genre is to make an audience feel uncomfortable. In the case of this play it is the female character of Jenny who is representative of this as she is instrumental in the destruction of her family. She is determined to cause damage to her family as a means of easing her own conscience as she fails to show any maternal love or interest towards her children and she lacks any sense of ambition. By making allegations of abuse against her parents, Wesker subsequently portrays how Jenny is the one abusing and causing damage to "Conservative social values,"<sup>14</sup> that were by the 1990s ultimately evocative of an "idyllic England of the past."<sup>15</sup> Peter Marks ascertains that the "1990s is now appreciated as a decade when a startlingly aggressive and

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<sup>7</sup> Arnold Wesker, "Raise the Living above the Dead," *The Times*, July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1991.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Peter Marks, "Love in the Nineties," *Literature of the Nineties: Beginnings and Endings*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2018, p. 72.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, "What is in-ye-face theatre?" p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

confrontational theatre appeared,”<sup>16</sup> which was written by a “new generation of young writers.”<sup>17</sup> However, Marks fails to recognise Wesker’s contribution to the “In-Yer-Face”<sup>18</sup> hall of fame, as at the age of sixty-eight Wesker was still contributing and evolving with the theatrical fashions of his time. The performance of *Denial* at the Old Vic theatre with its blank screen background, sparse set and contemporary costumes is evocative of how Wesker can never be defined solely through his contribution to the kitchen-sink drama of the 1950s/1960s. In the play’s production at the Old Vic the only sense of home which is created is a picture of a living room displayed on the blank screen background behind the characters, heightening one of the key themes of this play which is deception.

His presentation of women in this play is varied: Jenny embodies female anxiety amidst a new “contradictory”<sup>19</sup> century in regard to female equality. Jenny is representative of “victim feminism”<sup>20</sup> due to the fact that she seeks control through “an identity of powerlessness.”<sup>21</sup> Therefore, Jenny attempts to condone her failures as a person by seeking revenge on her parents as she accuses them of abusing her as a child. Turning to the “New Age”<sup>22</sup> movement for direction symbolises how Jenny is looking for some understanding to life and explanation for the misfortunes which she has faced. Seeking an explanation for her unhappiness causes Jenny to regurgitate scenes from the past as a way of cleansing herself of blame and responsibility. The following excerpt can be interpreted as a scene from a child being bathed in contrast it could also be interpreted as a scene of a child being baptised. The common interest in each of these interpretations is that of purification and the desire to feel renewed

“and when he washed me he passed me back to you to be washed again, as though I was not

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, “New Feminism: Victim vs. Power,” *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2018), p. 110.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 142.

*clean enough.*<sup>23</sup> The language used in this phrase is semi-biblical in tone as it highlights the deliberate nature of the act of abuse that Jenny is accusing her father of and which the entirety of this play is framed around. The fact that Jenny says that she felt she “was not clean enough,”<sup>24</sup> is paramount to how we interpret Jenny’s characterisation because she is a character who has become embittered and unable to cope with the pressures of modern life. She chooses to place the blame on her parents by equating the abuse of her body as a child with the disappointment which they now have in her failing as a wife and in her job. This is exemplified by her mother’s condemnatory tone in the following statement from scene twenty-one: “the business collapses, divorce, debts and wild love affairs-all of them with boyfriends who had problems.”<sup>25</sup> The misfortunes of Jenny which Karen takes pains to itemise in this statement portray how Karen firmly believes that Jenny has brought these failures upon herself.

Karen is the mother figure of the play, a character whose refusal to give up on her relationship with Jenny may extol admiration from the audience towards her: “did they have chains on their feet? Did we bribe them with riches?”<sup>26</sup> In each of these rhetorical questions hyperbole is used in order to exaggerate the supposed ridiculousness of Jenny’s allegations. Karen’s use of the words “bribe”<sup>27</sup> and “riches”<sup>28</sup> show how she is materialistic, a character who obviously believes if you provide a child with an abundance of money that this will make them happy. Abigail Young, Jenny’s sister, is the voice of reason in this play, to balance the argument between the two sexes and someone who encourages her sister to take responsibility for her actions rather than blaming others “attaching blame to oneself

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

undermines the profession, huh?”<sup>29</sup> Last, Valerie Morgan who also has the dubious role of being Jenny’s therapist is representative of a frustrated personality who uses gender stereotypes in order to promote her own success: “my wife and I were happy for twenty years and then we met-boboom!”<sup>30</sup> She says this phrase in what Wesker calls “*a little music-hall*.”<sup>31</sup> This suggests that Valerie is trivialising the severity of Jenny’s allegations by performing this “gay raffish, and carefree”<sup>32</sup> form of light entertainment. This trivialisation also causes us to cast doubt on whether Valerie’s prognosis that Jenny was abused as a child is correct.

Kate Bassett claims in her review of the play that *Denial* is “ultimately a conservative play”<sup>33</sup> where Wesker sympathises with a family whose “middle-class life is assaulted by Valerie’s new-fangled ideas.”<sup>34</sup> Bassett’s choice of the term “assault”<sup>35</sup> is curious as this term is usually referring to a physical attack, yet we cannot say that Valerie is guilty of this. Rather I believe that Bassett is alluding to how the quintessential traditional family structure is being violated and tarnished by this play. We could accuse Karen of being socially conservative in this play, this is epitomised through the condescending language which she uses in scene seventeen with “What does fucking few-year-old, jumped-up, half-educated, self-righteous fucking Mrs Coming-from-nowhere have?”<sup>36</sup> In this rhetorical question from Karen she repeatedly refers to Valerie’s lack of a formal medical education and her class status in order to belittle her diagnosis of Jenny’s condition, as a result this shows Karen to be overbearing. However, the fact that Karen uses strong language numerous times in this example ultimately

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<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Phyllis Hartnoll and Peter Found, *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, Second Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Kate Bassett, “Angry Young Woman 2000 seduced by a psychological vandal,” 23<sup>rd</sup> May, *The Telegraph*, (2000).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 181.

portrays Karen as having lost a certain amount of her own control and self-respect which from my point of view alters our opinion of her. She graphically describes what she would like to do to Valerie with “I want to drag her by the hair and haul her up and down the road with a placard round her neck saying ‘I break up happy families.’”<sup>37</sup> My own interpretation of this statement from Karen is that she views herself as the woman being forcibly dragged by the hair along the road for her shame. Karen is affronted at how her seemingly “conservative,”<sup>38</sup> stable, traditional domestic household has been “ruptured”<sup>39</sup> so acutely by the external influence of Valerie. Karen’s embarrassment can be compared to the female character of Stephanie from Wesker’s one-woman play *Yardsale*, a character who also fails to comprehend her husband’s decision to break-up their supposedly happy marriage and leave her for another woman, disrupting her settled, organised way of life. It is also important to be aware that we only get one side of the story in *Yardsale* because we never get to hear what Stephanie’s husband has to say about their relationship. Wesker uses graphic, passionate language in order to represent Stephanie’s bitterness towards her husband’s lover, saying that she desires to “see her struck blind.”<sup>40</sup> Like Karen she wants to see the factor in her family’s breakdown physically impaired and made powerless, causing us to call into question how sanctimonious Karen and Stephanie really are.

The male characters of the play are of paramount importance when interpreting Wesker’s controversial work because it represents how in comparison to his female characters, he also underwent a transformation in terms of how he constructed his male characters. In contrast to the male characters analysed in previous chapters where Wesker largely manipulates a non-sympathetic response towards, rather in this play pathos is evoked for the male characters. At

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Bassett, “Angry Young Woman 2000 seduced by a psychological vandal.”

<sup>39</sup> Anna Rosalind Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Sexual Abuse in Recent British Theatre.” *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Volume 23 (2013), p. 168.

<sup>40</sup> Wesker, *Yardsale*, Taken from *One-Woman Plays* (Penguin Books, London, 1989), p. 14.

the beginning of the play the home video of allegedly “*halcyon*”<sup>41</sup> times is used as a staging device by Wesker, it appears to deliberately construct an image of Matthew as a dedicated, loving father. Anna Rosalind Harpin writes that Wesker “Deploys captured filmic proof and tenders it as stable theatrical evidence.”<sup>42</sup> My own reading of Wesker’s use of a video at the start of the play disagrees with Harpin’s because Wesker may make use of the video in order to give the sense of a twist and to engage the audience’s attention. In the performance staged at the Old Vic theatre in 2000 the play begins with the adult Jenny standing alongside her parents watching the video with admiration, therefore the initial illustration that can be ascertained from this opening scene is that this family is the archetype of familial convention and stability. The video which shows Matthew dropping to the ground “*on all fours*”<sup>43</sup> to play ‘dog’ can be interpreted in two different ways. First, it can be representative of playfulness and affection. The fact that Wesker punctuates the word dog in between inverted commas suggests that this is what Matthew and Jenny were previously discussing before he started to play this game with her. On the other hand, it can be seen as a vicious, unpredictable animal who hides beneath a warm and friendly exterior. The first scene of the play is full of ambiguity in comparison to Matthew’s character as the work progresses. The other main male character is Ziggy Landsman an elderly man who in comparison to Abigail provides a level-headed commentary on the erratic events which unfold. In a discussion about his granddaughter, Ziggy tells Matthew that “I love being alone with her. We sit at a table, read books together, I ask her to name the orange, the ladder, the lion, the bear,”<sup>44</sup> therefore referring to how he enjoys furthering his granddaughter’s education and teaching her about different animals. This informative comment from Ziggy about his grandchildren is supposed to provide perspective to fathers who have anxiety about raising children. Ziggy’s speech

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<sup>41</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 139.

<sup>42</sup> Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Sexual Abuse in Recent British Theatre,” p. 179.

<sup>43</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 139.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

reassuringly tells fathers that it is ok to enjoy spending time with your child and have physical contact with them. It is also worth noting that the name Ziggy originates from the German name Siegfried which is associated with triumph. We can deduce that if Jenny is contriving these allegations in order to be malicious then she will not have success, Ziggy is representative of how justice prevails against evil and malice due to him being a Jew who survived a Nazi concentration camp. In this play we do ascertain that Wesker does make a comparison with those who experienced the Holocaust with people who have been accused of being abusers. Additionally, we learn that Ziggy is a Jew due to his surname "Landsman,"<sup>45</sup> which is a term that can mean a "fellow Jew."<sup>46</sup> We can link the persecution that Matthew is facing with the persecution that Ziggy faced by the Nazis for being a Jew as both men have been the victims of ill treatment by their fellow humans. The significance of Ziggy's survival of the concentration camp is supposed to make Jenny's accusations appear self-indulgent as Ziggy has authentic, first-hand experience of the pinnacle of human menace.

Billington, in his review of the Old Vic's production of the play in 2000, conclusively says that *Denial* is an "attempt"<sup>47</sup> to "dissolve the molten security of family."<sup>48</sup> Overall, my reading of Billington's opinion of the play is that it is a notable contrast from the language he used in reviews of Wesker's earlier work such as *Chicken Soup with Barley*. In 2005 Billington's review of *Chicken Soup with Barley* includes phrasing such as the "family's disintegration is perfectly mirrored by the failure of the socialist dream."<sup>49</sup> Billington appears to recognise that in *Chicken Soup with Barley* the breakdown of the Kahn family stems from the everchanging socio-political circumstances of the time, circumstances that cannot be prevented. Whilst in *Denial*, the family falling apart is caused by one member's refusal to

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 140.

<sup>46</sup> Jennifer Speake and Mark LaFleur, *Oxford Essential Dictionary of Foreign Terms in English* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>47</sup> Michael Billington, "Never Trust a Therapist," *The Guardian*, 20th May (2000).

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Billington, "Chicken Soup with Barley," *The Guardian*, 13th April (2005).

take responsibility for her own failures, instead this character chooses to blame her upbringing and her parents for her short comings in life. It is the disintegration of a family which we interpret that Wesker believes is avoidable and rectifiable: “one minute you’re a functioning family, your daughters at the end of a phone talking, listening, sharing - the next, she’s a stranger and you’re an outcast.”<sup>50</sup> Wesker’s use of the term “outcast”<sup>51</sup> is significant both to *Denial* and to the playwright himself. Billington claims that “Wesker himself is the victim not so much of repressed memories as of exaggerated nostalgia,”<sup>52</sup> equating Matthew’s disbelief at his daughter’s allegations with Wesker’s inability to understand why his later career did not have the same success as his early career. The “exaggerated nostalgia”<sup>53</sup> which Billington refers to is depicting how the reception to Wesker’s work contributed to his marginalisation. Wesker in his interview with Montenero says that he “confused the critics who had applauded”<sup>54</sup> his “gritty earlier plays”<sup>55</sup> and who “wanted”<sup>56</sup> him to “carry on doing the same thing.”<sup>57</sup> In other words they did not appreciate Wesker deviating from “broadly political pieces”<sup>58</sup> to “more close-up domestic dramas.”<sup>59</sup> However, in contrast to John Osborne’s faded music-hall performer Archie-Rice whose dated style of humour prompts one of the judges at the Miss Great Britain competition to say “where did they dig him up?”<sup>60</sup> Wesker did choose to evolve as a playwright as the society in which he lived evolved too, ensuring that his work did not become stagnant in terms of the genre that

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<sup>50</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, Taken from Wesker’s Social Plays (Oberon Books, London, 2009), p. 172.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> Billington, “Never Trust a Therapist.”

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Chiara Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W* (Oberon Books, London, 2011), p. 15.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> Michael Patterson, “The Reception of Arnold Wesker’s Plays in Europe,” *History of European Ideas*, Taylor and Francis Online (1995), p. 33.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> *The Entertainer*, Directed by Tony Richardson with Sir Laurence Olivier as Archie Rice, British Lion Films (1960).



he contributed to. A stark contrast to the anti-hero Archie of Osborne's play who refused to progress with the times in which he was living, instead deciding to let his voice echo infinitely amidst the fading audience of a dilapidated, coastal town theatre. *Denial* is a deliberate polar opposite to the "family cohesiveness"<sup>61</sup> favoured by Wesker in his early career, however through *Denial* Wesker was presenting his audiences with a new form of kitchen sink drama because forty years on from *The Trilogy* he is still making the domestic household a template for his work and using it to analyse the whole of the society in which he is living in.

When comparing the staging that is used between *Chicken Soup with Barley* and *Denial* marked differences can be drawn. First, in Act One, scene one of *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Wesker instructs in a stage direction that "*everyone draws up a chair by the table,*"<sup>62</sup> a direction which gives the Kahn family portrait a sense of wholeness and unity. Wesker makes the "table"<sup>63</sup> a motif for family togetherness because it is a place where conversations are had both personal and political, as well as somewhere that food is prepared and shared together. In contrast in *Denial* the damaged, faded nature of the metaphorical Young family portrait arises from the fact that they will never be seen all together. The closest the audience gets to seeing them altogether is in scene twenty-one, as Matthew and Karen both try to mend their relationship with Jenny. Wesker's stage directions include "*Mother and daughter confront each other,*"<sup>64</sup> and "*Father confronts daughter.*"<sup>65</sup> By repeatedly using the word confront Wesker purposely wants to create an intense atmosphere of hostility and tension between the parent and the child. The fact that Matthew speaks to Jenny at a different time from Karen also emphasises the fact that this family have become accustomed to separation and

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<sup>61</sup> Billington, "Never Trust a Therapist."

<sup>62</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy* (Penguin Books, London, 1979), p. 17.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 193.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 199.

alienation from each other: “I’m wild! I’m wild! We’ve lost a daughter-I’m wild!”<sup>66</sup> Karen’s repetition of the word “wild”<sup>67</sup> can be interpreted in two different ways. First, it can literally be referring to Karen’s unhappiness and lack of comprehension at her daughter’s allegations. On the other hand, it can be interpreted as Wesker subtly referring to Karen’s lack of domestication and her inability to realise that money is not the solution to maternal success. In contrast, the light-heartedness which permeates from Mrs Bryant and Sarah Kahn with phrases and staging such as “MRS BRYANT: Did you see my flowers as you come in? Got some of my hollyhocks still flowering,”<sup>68</sup> and “*She opens her eyes and after a second of looking at him she jumps up into his arms.*”<sup>69</sup> Both Mrs Bryant and Sarah portray how they are traditional matriarchal figures who are dedicated to maintaining the “family cohesiveness”<sup>70</sup> which Billington refers to. In the case of Mrs Bryant, the flowers which she refers to are seen as a metaphor for the dedication and nurturing which she has put into her family. In Sarah’s case, her association with the image of the infinitely boiling kettle is representative of how she continually desires to create a domestic sphere which radiates warmth just as any steaming orb of kettle will also. It is therefore pitiful in *Denial* that Karen resorts to bribery and manipulation as the means to gain her daughter’s love back. In scene seventeen she tells Matthew that “Perhaps we can pay someone to work where she’s working, befriend her, gain Jenny’s confidence by pretending that she too is a victim of child abuse.”<sup>71</sup> This is a statement which accentuates Karen’s desperation and how she is frustrated at the threat which Valerie poses to her identity as a mother. It is the sort of capitalist thinking that socialist enthusiast Sarah despised: “You give them a few shillings in the bank and they can

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy*, p. 110.

<sup>69</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 69.

<sup>70</sup> Billington, “Never Trust a Therapist.”

<sup>71</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 183.

buy a television so they think it's all over."<sup>72</sup> Uncharacteristically for Wesker, food does not play a significant role in this play, however its absence does, an absence which informs us that the Young family are not a unit. Instead they have been torn apart by Jenny's therapy sessions with Valerie who encourages Jenny to reject her father's "patriarchal authority."<sup>73</sup> For members of the audience who are familiar with *The Wesker Trilogy* this absence will be poignant because there will be a sense of disbelief that it is the same playwright putting this work on the stage. There will also be a nostalgia for the family togetherness that is so palpable in *The Trilogy*, whereas in *Denial* this familial unity is displaced by a fractured, irretrievable image of what was once considered a happy family which the audience will only ever get a sense of through the ambiguous video projected at the start of the play. The rejection of patriarchy is not new within Wesker's *oeuvre*. This is of course the same Wesker who writes the following exchange between Ada and Harry Kahn "Harry: Then you're a coward-that's all I can say- you're a coward. Ada [*sadly*]: She had a fine example from her father, didn't she?"<sup>74</sup> This exchange clearly signifies Ada's sense of disappointment in her father, conversely Ada unlike Jenny is condemning her father's lack of patriarchal authority rather than his abundance of it. Furthermore, the questionable nature of father-daughter relationships is not new to Wesker either as in *Roots* a dubious interaction is staged between Beatie and her father, as Beatie tells him that "I know men as 'ould pay to see me in my dickey suit. [*Posing her plump outline*] Don't you think I got a nice dickey suit? [MR BRYANT *makes a dive and pinches her bottom*]. Ow! Stoppit Bryants, stoppit! [*He persists*] Daddy, stop it now!"<sup>75</sup> The main feature of this interaction is the fact that Beatie repeatedly tells her father to stop hurting her, however his bullish persistence prevails as he dislikes his daughter openly flaunting her body in order to convey her sexual openness. Mr Bryant is

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<sup>72</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 73.

<sup>73</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 199.

<sup>74</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 43.

<sup>75</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy*, p. 123.

directed to take a “dive,”<sup>76</sup> creating an image of a predatory animal in comparison to the dog which was played by Matthew in the video from *Denial*. *Denial* is therefore a play which in addition to interrogating more contemporary aspects of twenty-first century society such as abuse, breakdown of the nuclear family, divorce and women in the workplace also revisits and heightens themes which have been present in Wesker’s *oeuvre* since he first came to prominence as a writer such as the role of women in the household and how the female body can become an object in which male desire is manifested.

(ii) “There has to be a reason.”<sup>77</sup> A Torn Family Portrait.

When viewing the play itself, my interpretation was that it is structured in such a way so as to manipulate an audience and project one side of the story. In the performance of the play at the Old Vic, scenes of Jenny in consultation with her therapist Valerie are juxtaposed with scenes which convey her parents in dismay. Ultimately, what is achieved by this structure theatrically is that sympathy is created for Jenny’s family, whereas Jenny and Valerie will be viewed as disruptive influences to what will appear to be a conventional, genuine, loving family. However, I emphasise the term “appear” because this is a play in which two audience members sitting side by side will not have the same opinion, this is an inconclusive play in which everyone must decide who to believe for themselves. Wesker himself claims that the “play is a mosaic of scenes,”<sup>78</sup> literally meaning that the scenes are not in an organised, chronological order. The fragmented characteristic of a mosaic mirrors the relationships which are now severed within the Young family, convention and uniformity have been permanently lost due to Jenny and the allegations that she makes which distort the role of her parents and grandfather within the family. The lack of chronological order heightens the

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Denial*, Taken from *Wesker’s Social Plays* (Oberon Books, London, 2009), p. 182.

<sup>78</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 137.

audience's perception of Valerie's manipulation of Jenny and accentuates the pathos that the audience will feel towards Jenny's parents. The "mosaic"<sup>79</sup> is also reflective of the disturbed nature of Jenny's mind because she has remembered fragments from her childhood and compiled them together in order to create a complete but supposedly false image, an image that she uses in order to justify her own misfortunes in life "I had a home, a family, a future-wrecked, wrecked, wrecked!"<sup>80</sup> Jenny's outburst of emotion is worthy of a Shakespearean tragedy, such as Roderigo's outburst in Act Two, scene three of *Othello* with "Reputation, reputation, reputation! O, I have lost my reputation! I have lost the immortal part of myself, and what remains is bestial."<sup>81</sup> The comparison which I want to make between Jenny and Roderigo is that they are characters whose anxiety has arisen from the loss of their own pride as is exemplified through the melodramatic repetition used by both of them. Roderigo's use of the word "bestial"<sup>82</sup> can also be compared with Wesker's *Denial* as the term means to act or be like an animal, this also relates to scene one of *Denial* where Matthew acts like a dog which is the last interaction that the audience will view of Matthew and Jenny as a child. In my view it is no coincidence that scene two of Wesker's play then begins with Jenny accusing her father of sexual abuse with "you raped me."<sup>83</sup> In *Othello* Roderigo believes that because he has lost everything, now all that is left is his body, Jenny too feels because her marriage has failed all that remains is an impulsive, physical form of sex absent of any emotional connection. In my interpretation Jenny is guilty of hamartia as she fails to take responsibility for her own actions and as a result blames her father. The repetition of the term "wrecked"<sup>84</sup> emphasises how she believes that her life is irretrievably damaged and that she now has taken the attitude that she has nothing to lose. Wesker also writes that *Denial* is

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>81</sup> William Shakespeare, *Othello*, Edited by Cedric Watts (Wordsworth Editions, London, 2000), p. 71.

<sup>82</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 171.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

“non-sequential,”<sup>85</sup> which is an obvious contrast with Wesker’s earlier work, especially the *Trilogy* which has a linear structure. In *Denial* the setting of this play is predominantly based within the confines of a “*bleak consulting room*,”<sup>86</sup> where Valerie holds her counselling sessions with Jenny. Wesker’s repetitive use of the word bleak highlights the barren, colourless, empty nature of this room, a sense that nothing productive will emerge. This is notable contrast to the domestic setting in Wesker’s other works both early and late which are characterised by their cluttered, haphazard appearances. This is usually a reflection of characters whose nature is to embrace life “*The house of a woman who’s decided house-working days are over and all time spent on tidying up is time wasted from living.*”<sup>87</sup> The bleakness of the consulting room and the fact that we are never familiarised with the Young’s home conveys the pessimism of this play. This arises from the fact that we automatically expect the representation of family life to reflect a tangible warmth as it does so often in Wesker’s previous works.

In scene one of *Denial*, Wesker introduces the play with the following:

*A screen.*

*Projected upon it is a home movie of a father and daughter aged about five. It seems to be a record of love, delight, innocence.*

*But are they halcyon days?*<sup>88</sup>

The chilling rhetorical question that he asks at the end of this has the effect of placing doubt within our minds as to whether this “*record of love, delight*”<sup>89</sup> and “*innocence*”<sup>90</sup> is indeed a

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<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>87</sup> Wesker, *One More Ride on the Merry-Go-Round*, Taken from *Lady Othello and Other Plays* (Penguin Books, London, 1990), p. 29.

<sup>88</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 139.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

truthful account. Wesker's use of the term "halcyon"<sup>91</sup> is significant because it derives from the Greek myth of the halcyon bird that charmed "the wind and waves into calm."<sup>92</sup> The fact that the bird used a charm suggests that there was something unnatural and perhaps magical at work, something false. Therefore, the main objective of this device is to create a sense of security whether it is false or true we never find out due to the play's open-ended conclusion. However, the fact that he includes the term "halcyon" in my view shows that these images are perhaps too good to be truthful. He specifies that as the father plays with the child that noises are heard that include "*Growls! Laughter! Shrieks!*"<sup>93</sup> The ambiguity of the sounds that the child makes along with the father's adoption of animalistic behaviour on one hand suggests the lack of control the child has in contrast to her father's almost threatening superior physicality. The child in the video also "*shrieks with delight*"<sup>94</sup> but simultaneously attempts to push her father "*away*,"<sup>95</sup> signifying that the child does not know how to react to her father's overbearing physicality. The "*woman's voice*"<sup>96</sup> which is heard in the "*background*"<sup>97</sup> imperatively tells Matthew to "*stop that*"<sup>98</sup> as it will make the child ill. The voice of the woman has the effect of adding a chilling atmosphere to the screen projection, and the tone colour of her voice will suggest that Matthew is indeed doing harm to the child. On the other hand, it can be viewed as an archetypal, playful, simplistic exchange between child and parent. However, Wesker's tone of doubt in the rhetorical device referred to previously destabilises our presumption that this is the case. Doubt is another major theme in this play and one which is neither approved or disproved. In scene two Jenny hysterically

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>92</sup> Andrew Delahunty and Sheila Dignen, *The Oxford Dictionary of Reference and Allusion* (Third Edition) (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010).

<sup>93</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 139.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

exclaims that “my father”<sup>99</sup> was “so fucking fatherly and loving that he loved me like a lover.”<sup>100</sup> This is a revelation which will have the effect of both shocking and unsettling the audience because they may now feel that the image of family life that they saw projected was indeed a deceptive, false image. The repetition of “f” sounds in this phrase highlights this perverse juxtaposition which is made by Jenny to imply that her father’s love towards her was sexual rather than fatherly. The hard-hitting tone that Jenny delivers this dialogue with continues with “you raped me, Matthew, father...”<sup>101</sup> Jenny feels adamant that her body was violated by her father as a child, an allegation that irretrievably ruins the “presumed safety of domesticity.”<sup>102</sup> The audience’s initial reception of Jenny is that she is aggressive, angry and out of control, as Wesker exemplifies with his use of the term “manic.”<sup>103</sup> Therefore the film of scene one where the child’s father “*bites her bum*”<sup>104</sup> and “*grabs her leg*”<sup>105</sup> through Jenny’s allegation in scene two becomes a metaphorical image for non-consensual sex and this is further heightened with the repetition of forceful, imperative language such as “*bites*”<sup>106</sup> and “*grabs*.”<sup>107</sup> The dog becomes a symbol of ambiguity as it could be interpreted as an uncontrolled, predatory force but can also be viewed as a source of affectionate playfulness. Billington claims that this is a play that explores the “tactile pleasure in the bathing, handling and kissing of children that stops short of sexual abuse,”<sup>108</sup> therefore Billington’s interpretation of the play is that Wesker is deliberately playing Devil’s advocate as to what is and what is not acceptable for a parent to do with their child. When referring to one definition of sexual abuse from the *Dictionary of Public Health* it reads that it is a “crime

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Anna Rosalind Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Sexual Abuse in Recent British Theatre,” p. 168.

<sup>103</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 139.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Michael Billington, “Never Trust a Therapist.”



perpetrated by a person in a position of trust against a vulnerable person or persons, using force or persuasion.”<sup>109</sup> The definition reiterates Billington’s interpretation of the play because by repeatedly blowing raspberries into his daughter’s “neck”<sup>110</sup> despite the warning that this will make the child sick shows how Matthew is using his force against a person who is more vulnerable than him. Furthermore, Wesker writes in his stage direction that Matthew should bury “*his mouth into her neck.*”<sup>111</sup> This is a vampiric form of imagery heightening both the vulnerability of the child and the predatory nature of Matthew. Therefore, the content of the video that Wesker uses ultimately portrays Matthew exerting his power as patriarch within the family to treat this child in the way that he chooses, which simultaneously means that he ignores his wife’s commands. However, this does not mean that he is guilty of abusing the child sexually.

The lack of control that Jenny has in her adult life will cause numerous responses however two prominent ones will be that either there is full belief in the allegation which she makes against her father or to feel empathy for her as she is characterised by Wesker as having a lack of control as the result of the abuse which she has suffered. Admissions in scene six such as “I eat eat-bulimia eat then I gag...”<sup>112</sup> and “I sleep around,”<sup>113</sup> are representative of how she is both excessive and sexually promiscuous. When referring to her previous career she recalls how she “frightened people into expensive insurance...”<sup>114</sup> portraying how this is a female character who has the ability to deceive and manipulate people. She is therefore a character who previously exploited peoples’ anxieties for the success of her business and the progression of her livelihood. In the performance of the play at the Old Vic theatre, the actor

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<sup>109</sup> Miquel Porta and John M. Last, *A Dictionary of Public Health*, Second Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2018).

<sup>110</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 139.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

depicting Jenny makes apparent the resentment that she feels at having ever done this job. Harpin claims that “women have a talent for devious masquerade and sexual display,”<sup>115</sup> Harpin’s comment conveys that Jenny has the ability to meddle with people so that they believe their lives are inadequate and under threat, stating “the right insurance to match the right fear.”<sup>116</sup> Wesker’s repetition of the word “right”<sup>117</sup> in this example cleverly highlights how society has become preoccupied with materialism and consumerism. It echoes another comment made by Wesker during his interview with Montenero in which he says that “Yes, I do find much of what confronts me insults my intelligence. The jolly exaggerations of advertising...the simplistic headlines of tabloid newspapers...the list is endless.”<sup>118</sup> Additionally, the fact that Wesker specifies that Valerie should imitate a “*music-hall*”<sup>119</sup> act in scene eight will heighten the audience’s perception of Valerie as a commercially-driven fame-seeker, as she appears to trivialise her sessions with Jenny. This implies that Valerie’s therapy will not be beneficial to Jenny because Valerie is not encouraging Jenny to deal with her life at present, instead she is offering Jenny get out clauses such as “Valerie: What is it, I often wonder, that we don’t want to see when our eyes deteriorate? Jenny: Nothing! There was nothing I didn’t want to see. I wanted to see everything. I just couldn’t.”<sup>120</sup> By trying to offer reason where reason is not applicable Valerie is shown to deliberately poison Jenny’s mind. In this example the language used between the two characters is hypothetical in style highlighting the vague, unscientific nature of Valerie’s branch of therapy; the branch of therapy in which the “whodunnit”<sup>121</sup> mood of this play is created. The theme of exploitative commercialism occurs again in the play when Abigail satirically says to Valerie “Welcome to

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<sup>115</sup> Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Abuse in Recent British Theatre,” p. 178.

<sup>116</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 148.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 14.

<sup>119</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 154.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>121</sup> Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Sexual Abuse in Recent British Theatre,” p. 179.

the land of comfortable ‘could be’s. Choose whichever suits your need, your personality, your therapist.”<sup>122</sup> The sarcastic tone of phrase which the actor depicting Abigail should say this phrase with will cause a viewing member of the audience to question how trustworthy a character Valerie is, as Abigail exposes the materialism that is associated with Valerie’s branch of medicine.

In scene six the treatment that Jenny has had at the hands of men is magnified as she says that “blokes-they handle you like meat...”<sup>123</sup> which on one level is a clear reference to the harsh physical treatment she has received by men. Conversely, it may also be that Jenny is unknowingly admitting that she enjoys this form of treatment at the hands of her sexual partners as she says that “I want to be handled like meat.”<sup>124</sup> The fact that Wesker alludes to meat twice in this excerpt conveys the carnivorous, impulsive, red-blooded sexuality that Jenny craves and how she is completely consensual with this. Jenny’s discourse is contradictory rhetoric, as on one level it is misandrist because she insinuates that being treated as a mere sex object to gratify a man’s lust is wrong, yet she is also misogynistic because she condones this treatment of a woman’s body. Jenny feels that because her marriage has failed that she is free of institutions or rules to adhere to and can therefore act according to her own desires.

In their examination of the sexualised representation of the female body within the lads mag genre, Laura Garcia Favaro and Rosalind Gill conclude that the “laddist culture emerged against the backdrop of anxieties about change and crisis within men’s lives, in the wake of (partial) successes of feminism.”<sup>125</sup> Jenny’s admission that she desires to be treated like an inanimate object confirms how she feels liberated by this freedom with her body, relating to a

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<sup>122</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 187.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>125</sup> Laura Garcia Favaro and Rosalind Gill, “Emasculation nation has arrived”: sexism rearticulated in online responses to Lose the Lads’ Mags Campaign,” *Feminist Media Studies*, Volume 16, 2016, Issue 3, p. 382.

point made by Anna Tippet who believes that “sexualisation”<sup>126</sup> of the female body can be seen as “a form of body proprietorship and economic independence for women.”<sup>127</sup>

Therefore, the enjoyment that Jenny gets from having her body treated in this way denotes her sense of freedom from the constraints of patriarchy. We can compare this aspect of Jenny’s characterisation to the Twelve Princesses of Wesker’s 1998 text *The King’s Daughters*, who all rebel against the patriarchal rule of their father by indulging in unconventional sexual practices “The being inhabiting her body was preparing to take its place in her summer head.”<sup>128</sup> Vanessa Thorpe writes that none of the encounters that the Princesses partake in involve “conventional romantic love.”<sup>129</sup> Thorpe in this statement is obviously referring to how Wesker chose to rebel against the form of the traditional fairy-tale, which advocates celibacy, heterosexuality and female subservience under patriarchal rule. One aspect which the *The King’s Daughters* and *Denial* do have in common is that the main female characters are associated with discourse which is contradictory rhetoric. I have previously referred to the example which it is revealed that Jenny has this as she criticises men for treating her as a mere sex object but simultaneously admits that she enjoys to be treated like this probably because of the lack of commitment that is required to engage in this mindless, casual, sexuality. In the case of *The King’s Daughters* our male author shows the complex duplicity of the female gender by first showing how each of the Princesses during the daytime engage in quintessentially feminine pursuits such as painting, “tapestries,”<sup>130</sup> keeping “King Melania’s gardens”<sup>131</sup> and “singing.”<sup>132</sup> Come the night time Wesker conveys how they all enjoy sex which is based mainly on lust and physicality, and not on female duty

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<sup>126</sup> Anna Tippet, “Debating the F1 grid girls: feminist tensions in British popular culture,” *Feminist Media Studies*, 4<sup>th</sup> February 2019, p. 5.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> Wesker, *The King’s Daughters* (Quartet Books, London, 1998), p. 137.

<sup>129</sup> Vanessa Thorpe, “Wesker Re-Writes Grimm as Erotica,” *The Independent*, Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> October, London (1998).

<sup>130</sup> Wesker, *The King’s Daughters*, p. 74.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

or intimacy, “a subdued Amazon herself subduing.”<sup>133</sup> By referring to Greek Mythology with the term “Amazon”<sup>134</sup> which in this context is referring to a woman who is “fierce and aggressive”<sup>135</sup> heightened by Wesker’s use of the simile that Princess Margeria is “like a rough man,”<sup>136</sup> Wesker associates her with masculinity yet conveys how she is finding herself overpowered by the servant of Jonas. The male author presents how *The King’s Daughters* is a text which explores the power-struggle between the sexes where sexual intercourse is involved and the complexities of the female psyche.

Jenny’s use of slang for men “blokes,”<sup>137</sup> insinuates that men are stereotypically associated with “straightforwardness, bluntness, and lack of affectation.”<sup>138</sup> This insinuation corresponds to Harpin’s opinion that one of the “serious problems”<sup>139</sup> with this play is its “sexism.”<sup>140</sup> When reading Harpin’s assertion alongside an analysis of scene six ultimately an agreement can be made with Harpin because the interaction between Jenny and Valerie is sexist towards men. “Valerie: And you have an orgasm each time? Jenny: You must be joking. Valerie: I try.”<sup>141</sup> The way that the two female characters discuss sex is demeaning towards men as it denotes how women should use sex as a means of satisfying their own pleasure regardless of how men should feel. Jenny’s retort to Valerie that she “must be joking”<sup>142</sup> heightens the mood of mockery towards men that Wesker creates in this scene as a lack of sensitivity ultimately evolves from this interaction as well as misandry. However, what can also be said is through his representation of these two female characters, that Wesker is misogynistic here

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Delahunty and Dignen, *The Oxford Dictionary of Reference and Allusion*.

<sup>136</sup> Wesker, *The King’s Daughters*, p. 147.

<sup>137</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 150.

<sup>138</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Modern Slang*, Edited by John Ayto and John Simpson, Second Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013).

<sup>139</sup> Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Abuse in Recent British Theatre,” p. 179.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 150.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*

as he deliberately attempts to manipulate the audience into disliking Jenny at this point. A tone of mockery is present in this interaction which echoes remarks made by two other female characters of Wesker's from his collection of one-woman plays. First, Stephanie from *Yardsale* says that "I laid on my back more times than I cared for you, you know that?"<sup>143</sup> and second, when Samantha from *The Mistress* tells the audience that her lover has a "still centre and-and-Oh, be honest, Sam (*changing to growls and humour*)- the sex is lascivious and breath taking."<sup>144</sup> The three female characters of, Jenny, Samantha and Stephanie are all open to talking about how men have or have not satisfied them sexually. Yet, in *Denial* if a male character was to talk openly about how a female has pleased him sexually this would be considered as chauvinistic, patriarchal and sexist. My summation of this aspect of Wesker's *Denial*, unlike the *One-Woman plays*, is that it does succeed in portraying how men have just as many insecurities as women when it comes to sex and relationships, "Until it turns out he has problems he's never dealt with."<sup>145</sup> This signifies how Wesker continually evolved with contemporary society by showing how relationships between men and women became and are still becoming more fluid and harder to define.

When in scene six Jenny says that "I look in the mirror and I think you're a young woman of thirty and you look like shit,"<sup>146</sup> the fact that she specifies her age conveys her anxiety at being the age of thirty and yet being at such a troubling impasse in her life. She is characterised by Wesker at this point in the play as being a deeply troubled women full of remorse for how her life has turned out. She says that she "had a couple of kids, blew a marriage,"<sup>147</sup> in this example the sparse, snappy language that she uses conveys how she is entirely focused on all that is negative with her life, a tone of despondency is evident in this

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<sup>143</sup> Wesker, *Yardsale*, p. 14.

<sup>144</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 68.

<sup>145</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 187.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

phrase and it is symbolised by the anxiety that she feels when she observes her reflection. Although it would be comfortable to believe that Jenny has always been behaving the same as she does at present, we learn from her mother Karen in scene three that this has not been the case. She comments about Jenny's transformative appearance with "that mass of chestnut hair, remember it? Gone! She'd cut it down to a crew cut,"<sup>148</sup> Karen uses language associated with nostalgia and memory such as "remember"<sup>149</sup> and "gone."<sup>150</sup> This shows how in comparison to Jenny's exploration of her hypothetical childhood memories, Karen's tone reveals how she has also started to believe that the Jenny, who was an archetype of femininity with her "mass of chestnut hair,"<sup>151</sup> is also a false memory. The fact that Karen displays her dismay for her daughter's change of image is represented when she says that Jenny's new appearance is: "Shocking. But all I say is "Oh, your new hairstyle... 'well' I say, 'you've got a beautiful face so it doesn't matter what hairstyle you have.'"<sup>152</sup> Karen's comment symbolises how society is engulfed with imagery aimed at specific genders. The character of Karen is shown to be adhering to these images that are aimed at particular genders, she is abiding by the "social construct"<sup>153</sup> of gender, a construct which is based on the conventions of society and not biology. The fact that Karen conveys her discomfort with Jenny's new appearance represents how society is not comfortable when the binary lines of gender overlap. Karen's dismay towards Jenny is induced partly by Jenny's new androgynous appearance. Furthermore, Karen says that Jenny should never have become involved in the insurance business with her husband, she disparagingly says that Jenny:

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<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> Linda Grant, "The Supermarket of Gender Politics-Men vs. Women in the 1990s," *Jewish Quarterly*, Volume 44 (1997), p. 6.

Dominated the business, I used to tell her, husband and wife in the same office? Mistake. Don't do it. Did she listen? 'We're in love!' she tells me, 'we want to be together.' So-they were together-until the staff kept coming to her instead of him and he got jealous.<sup>154</sup>

In this opinion expressed by Karen I interpret how she solely places the breakdown of the marriage at Jenny's door. Failing to acknowledge the fact that Jenny was talented and successful at her job and that it was her husband's anxiety at being emasculated due to the staff looking for Jenny's approval rather than his that really caused the tension and unhappiness in the relationship. Karen's insinuation is also hypocritical as on the Character Page which precedes the play itself Wesker writes that Matthew is a "retired businessman,"<sup>155</sup> and that Karen is his "business partner."<sup>156</sup> Therefore within her own marriage Karen desired a say in the running of her husband's business, as a result of this, Karen is shown to be self-centred and selfish in the above interaction.

Valerie, Jenny's therapist is the embodiment of a cynical attitude towards society. She conveys a disparaging, stereotypical view towards gender as she says to the Journalist who is conducting an interview with her that "we're not talking cookery and workouts here, and no doubt you can edit me...?"<sup>157</sup> conveying how in the era of this play's setting the media are seen as depicting current affairs in a way in which they impose their own agenda. Valerie in this instance is critical of the media's superficiality. The word "edit"<sup>158</sup> reflects how in the year 2000, the year of the play's first performance the importance of technology was increasing within society, the term alludes to technologically altering a publication. This is

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<sup>154</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 146.

<sup>155</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, Characters, p. 137

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 152.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*



one explanation of Valerie's use of the word "edit,"<sup>159</sup> the other interpretation is that Wesker is again referring to how society and its capitalist nature is causing people to dissociate themselves from their own failures and responsibilities. Like a word document that can be changed and undone immediately, people now believe that their lives should be as easy to alter as this.

When Valerie talks with the journalist Sandy about the work regarding abused children, one of the aspects discussed is the complex relationship between parents and their children. In the performance at the Old Vic the scenes that show Sandy questioning Valerie provide a balance due to the fact that Valerie is no longer the one in control as she is shown to be in her sessions with Jenny. She is extremely blunt in her choice of language with phrasing such as "she gives breast, cleans up the shit, cuddles and comforts and rocks to sleep until, one day, the sexual tampering begins and in an instant the bond broken."<sup>160</sup> The language used here is preoccupied with physical processes but is devoid of any mood of unconditional parental affection. Valerie uses a sensationalist tone of language when discussing some of the physical side-effects of abused children. She says that she dealt with "young boys with gaping anuses,"<sup>161</sup> and "children who shudder at your touch,"<sup>162</sup> all because of how they have been hurt by "intimidating thugs called parents."<sup>163</sup> The definitive tone at this point in the play denotes how Valerie has tunnel vision when it comes to the guilt of Jenny's father and how she is hypocritical when refusing to talk about her own family "I would prefer to keep my own family out of this interview."<sup>164</sup> The aim of the interview is to provide the audience with a neutral perspective into the shocking accusations that Jenny is making about Matthew, and in the performance of the play itself at the Old Vic the interview scenes do have the effect of

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<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

exposing the glory-seeking nature of Valerie. Wesker ultimately characterises Valerie as a misleading influence who adheres to what Emily Gaarder in her article about False Memory Syndrome describes as the “witch hunt terminology”<sup>165</sup> that compares the so-called “‘epidemic’ of sexual abuse accusations and the Salem witch hunts and trials.”<sup>166</sup> In *Denial* I believe that it would be impossible not to agree with what Gaarder suggests concerning the subject, due to the sheer bias exemplified by Valerie and the lack of professional medical terminology in her diagnoses. The language that Valerie uses when said by the actor should come across as a form of “misogynist”<sup>167</sup> stereotypical propaganda “My wife and I were happy for twenty years and then we met-boboom!”<sup>168</sup> and “I haven’t spoken to my wife in eighteen months- I don’t like to interrupt her-boboom!”<sup>169</sup> These examples embody Valerie’s main objective in this play which is to place emphasis on how patriarchal rule has a detrimental effect on women in society. The style of jokes that Valerie deliberately uses at this point would be typical of the genre of comedy which accentuates gender stereotypes whilst simultaneously upholding a patriarchal society.

I interpret from the very start of *Denial* that Jenny wallows in her own self-pity “you’re given opportunities, you fuck them up. You’re given choices, you make the wrong choice.”<sup>170</sup> The repetition of language with a tone of negativity highlights how Jenny has become deeply troubled by her failures in life, so much now that she is no longer recognising the positives such as her children. By adhering to antiquated stereotypes which are constructed about both genders, Valerie suggests that women are unnecessarily and overly talkative and that marriage is a covenant that is organised by society and not about love. Therefore, in true

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<sup>165</sup> Emily Gaarder, “Gender Politics: The Focus on Women in the Memory Debates,” Taken from *Journal of Sexual Abuse*, Volume 9, Taylor and Francis Online (2008), p. 95.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>167</sup> Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Sexual Abuse in Recent British Theatre,” p. 171.

<sup>168</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 154.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

“pantomimic”<sup>171</sup> fashion, the audience will find themselves provoked to shout out loud at Jenny to warn her of Valerie’s biased opinions concerning gender. Furthermore, Valerie’s tendency to repeat the term “pet”<sup>172</sup> is used by Wesker in order to reinforce the dubious nature of Valerie’s therapy of Jenny. It is a patronising term which a child would be frequently referred to, therefore it is also representative of how Valerie feels that she has gained superiority over Jenny and is now wholly in control of her life: “Freedom? She can’t do anything without this therapist knowing.”<sup>173</sup> I would go as far as to say that Valerie has adopted Jenny has her own child, as the phrase “she can’t do anything without this therapist knowing,”<sup>174</sup> creates imagery associated with the behaviour of an overprotective parent towards a child. Additionally, in scene two it must be noted that Jenny uses the rhetorical question of “Does that make you smile, pet?”<sup>175</sup> which suggests that now she is treating her father like the pet “dog”<sup>176</sup> which he played in scene one, however she is now the one in control.

Wesker stated in an essay that “perhaps the Nazi holocaust should be the measurement alongside which we decide whether or not to ‘accept the unacceptable.’”<sup>177</sup> In the case of this play the “unacceptable”<sup>178</sup> is the allegation that Jenny suffered abuse at the hands of her father. When the character of Ziggy speaks about the Nazi concentration camps during the war he is simultaneously making a comment on the society that the play is set in. He mentions that the “camp guards”<sup>179</sup> “hated themselves, and the more they hated themselves

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<sup>171</sup> Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Sexual Abuse in Recent British Theatre,” p. 179.

<sup>172</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 147.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Wesker, “Accepting the Unacceptable,” Taken from *Distinctions* (Jonathan Cape Ltd, London, 1985), p. 207.

<sup>178</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 154.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

the more they beat us and screamed.”<sup>180</sup> Ziggy’s repetition of the word “more”<sup>181</sup> in this example shows how the Nazi guards got out of control and how Jenny has also got out of control. Out of control because the more she dislikes herself the more the bitterness towards her father grows. Ziggy’s comment on the behaviour of the guards also applies to Jenny’s behaviour in this play, because she is ashamed because of how her marriage and career have failed. Additionally, Ziggy also says that “the terrible thing about routine murder is that it becomes routine,”<sup>182</sup> insinuating how the Nazi guards who carried out these evil crimes became so accustomed to murdering people that it became a sequential part of their everyday existence. Ziggy is equating the distortion of the guards’ minds with the distortion of Jenny’s mind and hence the hatred which she has for her father. In an interview about the play Wesker said that he wanted to “juxtapose something awful that had happened”<sup>183</sup> with the “supposedly repressed memory of Jenny,”<sup>184</sup> therefore since this play was adapted from the true story of a Jewish family that had broken down because of a daughter who “turned on them,”<sup>185</sup> Wesker decided to stay with the original material that he was provided with which included the family’s heritage.

Throughout the entirety of the play it is repeatedly seen how Wesker’s stage directions specified for Jenny are associated with a mood of aggression, disturbance and unrest with “*suppressed agitation*,”<sup>186</sup> “*scratches her arm, which she’ll do every so often*,”<sup>187</sup> and “*she bangs the table with her fists*.”<sup>188</sup> Wesker makes another allusion to the Holocaust with Jenny’s sensational allegation that she took the “foetus”<sup>189</sup> which belonged to herself and her

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<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> Interview with Arnold Wesker, From the DVD of *Arnold Wesker’s Denial*, Heritage Theatre Ltd, 2002.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 147.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

father to an “incinerator”<sup>190</sup> and “burned it.”<sup>191</sup> This comment from Jenny relates to another point from Gaarder who writes that “anti-choice activists often use Holocaust terminology when they speak of the millions of babies being ‘slaughtered’ yearly in abortion clinics.”<sup>192</sup> My interpretation of the image of the burnt foetus is that Jenny is alluding to her supposed abortion, and in doing so she is equating aborting her child with the Holocaust. Furthermore, Jenny’s interaction with her sister obviously backs up her claim that it was not her choice to have her “baby”<sup>193</sup> aborted. Wesker has characterised Jenny cleverly in this interaction as she has now given the “foetus”<sup>194</sup> an identity as she refers to it as her “baby,”<sup>195</sup> she deliberately does this to provoke pathos from both her sister Abigail and the audience. It is Jenny’s way of convincing both her sister and the audience that she is telling the truth and to accentuate the suffering that she has faced due to the alleged abuse by her father. She then adopts the role of a mother as she “*enfolds her sister,*”<sup>196</sup> and “*rocks her.*”<sup>197</sup> Actions such as these should epitomise her supposed role of purity in this whole account which should mirror the innocence of the phantom child.

Both Jenny’s sister Abigail and the journalist Sandy Cornwall provide the voice of reason and common sense in this play amidst Jenny’s unprecedented “*parrot-like*”<sup>198</sup> behaviour. Wesker uses this animalistic simile to describe Jenny’s behaviour in order to represent how she has become completely brain-washed by Valerie’s persuasion to find and confront the “abused”<sup>199</sup> “inner child”<sup>200</sup> within her even though it may not even exist. Wesker may also

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<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Gaarder, “Gender Politics: The Focus on Women in the Memory Debates,” p. 100.

<sup>193</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 179.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

have chosen the parrot in order to represent how like this bird famed for deceit and imitation, Jenny has also taken on another false identity. Abigail however is characterised by Wesker as a rational character, who explains to Valerie that the breakdown of her sister's marriage may have been caused by innumerable things such as "she makes love clumsily, she's boring, humourless, over-powering. Some women talk their men out of existence, others boss them into oblivion."<sup>201</sup> Within each of these examples Abigail shows an empathy towards men, as she portrays how a man can be in an oppressive relationship as equally as a woman. Abigail's level-headedness reflects a comment which Wesker wrote in his article "Accepting the Unacceptable," which was written as a response to "Letter to a Killer"<sup>202</sup> an emotive article published in *The Sunday Times* in which Wesker tries to comprehend the motive behind the Birmingham Pub Bombings of 1974. In the response he comes to the conclusion that "men and women are unpredictable, with mixed appetites and diverse motives."<sup>203</sup> Therefore, the ambiguity that Wesker has in regard to the sexes is personified through Abigail as she chooses not to be influenced by sides. She then goes on to say that "we all make mistakes and there's no shame in that,"<sup>204</sup> which conveys how she believes that Jenny is not telling the truth. Instead, Abigail views Jenny as a flawed character whose unhappiness is being exploited by Valerie who wants to make a name for herself against the men who she believes are part of a "patriarchal conspiracy to deprive women of power,"<sup>205</sup> and who are causing her career to stunt in progress.

In scene seven whilst interviewing Valerie, Sandy is directed by Wesker to be "*physically at odds with herself*."<sup>206</sup> Wesker is obviously wanting to highlight how Sandy is physically ill at ease with her own body, the fact that Wesker also chooses the name Sandy for her is

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<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

<sup>202</sup> Wesker, "Letter to a Killer," *The Sunday Times*, October 13<sup>th</sup> 1974.

<sup>203</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 205.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

significant as it is traditionally a unisex name. Sandy is defined by her mission to find out the true nature of Valerie's work and is unperturbed by Valerie's sense of self-superiority. A material which is sandy in nature may also be seen as irritating, which is how I interpret the character of Valerie's reaction to Sandy, this is exemplified through interactions such as the following from scene nine:

Sandy: Can we talk about your childhood? Did your parents-

Valerie: I would prefer to keep my family out of this interview.

Sandy: I was simply curious about their occupations in order to-

Valerie: If you don't mind. Thank you.<sup>207</sup>

The fact that Valerie twice chooses to cut Sandy off mid-sentence in this example reflects the annoyance which she feels from Valerie's inquisitive, probing nature. Sandy is the only character who successfully gets underneath Valerie's skin and makes her feel as uncomfortable as she makes other people feel such as Karen and Matthew. Sandy is characterised by Wesker as being articulate and unphased by the sensationalist tone of Valerie's language

Valerie: The sub-conscious produces the evidence-depression, lack of energy, self-contempt...

Sandy: All of which could be evidence of pre-menstrual tension.<sup>208</sup>

In this example she like Ziggy is giving a sense of comical perspective counteracting what Harpin views as the "suspension and sensation"<sup>209</sup> of Wesker's play because both Abigail and Sandy provide highly realistic explanations to Valerie's extreme theories. In comparison to

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<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 157-158.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.

<sup>209</sup> Harpin, "Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Sexual Abuse in Recent British Theatre," p. 179.

Ziggy she highlights how Jenny's anxiety and disappointment in how life has turned out is normal and not something which should be exploited with the aim of distortion and lack of truth. In scene eleven Sandy says that "when I was a young woman I drank, smoked and battered my poor old body not because I was abused as a child but because I wasn't loved as an adult. Love-that's what I craved."<sup>210</sup> This phrase suggests that Jenny's unhappiness has stemmed from the fact that the love she has experienced as an adult has not been equivalent to the love she received as a child from her family. In scene six Jenny says that she was married and he was "good-looking, silent, and strange. Wore shoes with heels extra high. Competed with everyone. Even his children."<sup>211</sup> Through this phrase Jenny depicts how the failure of her marriage was partly caused by her inability to distribute her maternal love towards her children and spousal love towards her husband equally. In scene eleven Sandy also goes on to say that she wanted to be "cherished, taken and enjoyed like a cherry-sweet, succulent, utterly enjoyed,"<sup>212</sup> depicting how Sandy's interpretation of Jenny's behaviour is that it is a muffled cry for help and need for comfort. It is also perhaps no coincidence that Sandy chooses the cherry which is associated with the phrase to pop your cherry or lose your virginity. The loss of virginity is maybe associated with a young girl making the transition from childhood to adulthood, hence Sandy is comparing herself to a cherry in order to convey how her ideas about love changed as she grew up. The first reference to food occurs in scene seventeen with Karen saying that "Food. I'll send her food parcels every week, with special goodies for the children,"<sup>213</sup> highlighting how Karen sees food as a way of gaining her daughter's love back because it is something with an emotive universal appeal. The notable

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<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>213</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183.



absence of food in this play is reflective of the barren, disjointed nature of this family which we can contrast to the warmth created by Sarah offering Ronnie her homemade biscuits.

In this play the overall representation of men is one of sympathy by Wesker. In his interview with Montenero he says that he wants *Denial* to challenge the “status-quo.”<sup>214</sup> The status-quo in this case is the assumption that the person who was accusing was generally believed. In comparison to Wesker’s endeavour to put the domestic household on the stage during an austere post- World War Two England, his endeavour with this play is to show a balanced and not a biased account of a woman’s accusations of abuse against her father. Harpin writes that Wesker’s play “has a reliance on suspense and sensation.”<sup>215</sup> *Denial* is not a play which gives the audience the security of escapism or a closed happy-ending, nor is it a play which can be watched in “detachment,”<sup>216</sup> it is a play that every single audience member will have a different opinion about. Into the new millennium Wesker evolved with the times, likewise to his early career as a member of the Angry Young Men where he aimed to “confuse those used to cut-glass accents and French windows,”<sup>217</sup> in *Denial* his intention is to interrogate the “status quo”<sup>218</sup> by questioning “current ideas of what is”<sup>219</sup> a “normal”<sup>220</sup> way for a father to treat his daughter and how this normal is both judged and reached. In order to depict Matthew as a positive father we see how Jenny unwillingly admits that her father saved up money for her. “My parents fought, my marriage failed, I used up the money my dad set aside for me,”<sup>221</sup> and “savings he’d made from when I was a little girl,”<sup>222</sup> are two examples that can be interpreted as Matthew being a generous father who was preparing for

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<sup>214</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 16.

<sup>215</sup> Harpin, “Unremarkable Violence: Staging Child Sexual Abuse in Recent British Theatre,” p. 179.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>218</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 16.

<sup>219</sup> Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, p. 5.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>221</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 168.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

Jenny's future. However, it may represent how Matthew wanted Jenny to remain financially dependent on him. Matthew himself with a philosophical tone says in scene seventeen that "love is oppressive. It's a fact. It's the fountain of the best kind of happiness, but, paradoxically, it's oppressive."<sup>223</sup> However, in my opinion the repetition of "f" sounds in this phrase help to emphasise how strong Matthew's fatherly love is for his daughter, it authenticates and highlights his sincerity. Wesker's choice of language with "fountain"<sup>224</sup> represents how he is extolling how his love for Jenny is infinite and overflowing. The repetition of the word "oppressive"<sup>225</sup> reinforces how although love is natural and positive it is also suffocating and unbearable at times. We could also interpret that Matthew is indeed in Valerie's words "perhaps been setting aside money for the little girl about whom he felt guilty."<sup>226</sup> This conveys how Valerie relishes in her dissembling, in scene six she sarcastically tells Jenny that her "silence"<sup>227</sup> "costs,"<sup>228</sup> presenting how Valerie is entirely money minded when it comes to her therapy sessions. However, the irony arises from the fact that she has the audacity to accuse Matthew of using money as a means of creating a false image.

### Conclusion

Fifty years after writing *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Wesker was still portraying a Britain which was in a state of bewilderment and disillusion. The Britain portrayed in *The Trilogy* from the years 1936-1956 is suffering from a loss of pride due to the embarrassment of the Suez Crisis and the allusive hope that the Working Class had for a better way of life. There is also a denial from a portion of those who belonged to the middle to upper class in society to

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<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*

admit that Britain was no longer a strong Empirical power. The Britain of *Denial* is the Britain that Sarah foresaw in *The Trilogy*, a Britain that has become so asphyxiated on capitalism that as a result no longer sees the merit in preserving traditional family values. The character of Jenny in my view is the personification for all that is wrong with a Britain that is moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Though Wesker did want this play to challenge the “status-quo,”<sup>229</sup> he did so in a negative way because characteristically for Wesker there is no happy-ending. Speaking to Montenero, Wesker harrowingly says that *Denial* is “motivated”<sup>230</sup> by the same evil as the “act of smashing planes into the twin towers”<sup>231</sup> was on September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 in New York. By saying this to Montenero, Wesker is blatantly informing us that this play is not heart-warming, light or positive, rather it is written with the intention of exploring the cruel nature of humanity. Ironically, the play ends with Karen and Matthew disagreeing over the lyrics of one of the nursery rhymes which they sang to Jenny as a child which in my view is the single most heartsome scene in the play “Karen: No, darling. The last little piggy went ‘wee wee wee wee wee all the way home! Matthew: It went ‘wee wee wee wee wee wee’ not ‘inky pinky ponky poo?’”<sup>232</sup> However, as the structure of the play is not linear, we cannot assume that this is indeed the scene which occurred most recently in the lives of our author’s characters. Matthew also admits that “I loved, absolutely loved bathing them- splashing them, squirting them, blowing bubbles for them, and then- rubbing them in with baby oil,”<sup>233</sup> the sibilance and repetition of “b” sounds in this phrase emphasises Matthew’s enthusiasm for this activity with his young daughter. This is a statement that denotes the sheer happiness of Matthew as a young father, and one which he upholds by saying that “give

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<sup>229</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 16.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 201.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 200.

me back their childhood and the young man I once was and I'd have these glorious bum-biting days all over again."<sup>234</sup> Matthew refers to the word "young"<sup>235</sup> in order to highlight his nostalgia to relive those times when both he and Jenny were young. I believe that Jenny shares these feelings of nostalgia and has found that the love she experienced as a child is not comparable to her experience of love as an adult. This is further epitomised by the fact that she does not refer to herself by her married name but rather her maiden name "Young."<sup>236</sup> In the final scene Wesker directs that she should be "*haunted, confused, uncertain.*"<sup>237</sup> By using adjectives associated with doubt such as "confused"<sup>238</sup> and "uncertain."<sup>239</sup> Wesker emphasises at the conclusion of this play how the bond between the members of the Young family has been permanently destroyed because of Jenny's accusations even though she herself is unsure of the truth. The statement in which Matthew admits how he enjoyed bathing his children however, will seem more ambiguous to an audience from today than perhaps it even did to an audience in 2000 because of how society has changed in terms of how abuse is categorised. In this chapter I have referred to how the term abuse does not have a finalised definition. In my opinion it is something which changes as society changes. When Matthew goes to visit Sandy in order to give his side of the story, her study is in a "*Victorian infant's school*"<sup>240</sup> which has undergone a conversion. In my view this is to symbolise how the treatment of children during the reign of Queen Victoria was different from the treatment of children in the 1990s and the treatment of children in the 2000s would have been different to the treatment of children in the 1990s and so forth. Therefore, a social issue such as abuse evolves with every era, the video of Jenny and her father will be interpreted differently as

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<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>235</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

time moves on. It is only when one era in society overlaps with another that things become distorted and misunderstood.

We must also realise that Wesker is choosing what chronological order to place these scenes in, with the overall view of imposing his own opinion upon his audience or reader. Remember this is the same author who said to Montenero when on the subject of *Denial* that “there are also a lot of false accusations resulting in the destruction of families and careers,”<sup>241</sup> implying that the “destruction”<sup>242</sup> of the Young family is because of Jenny’s accusation which is allegedly “false.”<sup>243</sup> The term allegedly is vital when interpreting this play, there is no resolution or explanation found at the conclusion of this play. We never find out whether Jenny’s allegations are false or true. What the audience ultimately finds in this play is that they are split between two conflicting worlds. In one world Jenny is telling the truth and the traumatic disruption that she brings to this family is justifiable whilst in the second world she is lying and the disintegration of the family structure in this play is a manifestation of her own selfish desire to rewind time to carry out her life differently.

Regret and the truth are massively important themes in the fourth and final chapter of the thesis, in Wesker’s rewriting of Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* he once again reinvents the so-called villain of Shylock. Instead the Shylock that he presents is one which is friendly, hospitable and sociable, however it is sadly these qualities which in this play make him susceptible to the cruelty of others who see him as an easy target for their ant-Semitic prejudiced agendas.

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<sup>241</sup> Montenero, *Ambivalences: A Portrait of Arnold Wesker from A to W*, p. 24.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

## **Chapter Four: *Shylock***

### (i) “Jubilant bibliophile”<sup>1</sup> to “bitter man:”<sup>2</sup> Wesker’s *Shylock*.

Wesker’s main motivation for rewriting this play by Shakespeare was so as he could contrast what he viewed as a “devastating portrait of Shylock the Jew”<sup>3</sup> which had dominated theatre for centuries. Speaking on Shakespeare’s play, Wesker said that he would never be convinced that the “holocaust is irrelevant”<sup>4</sup> to a work which has the “creation of an unforgiving Jew”<sup>5</sup> at its core. In this chapter, I will analyse how Shylock is represented by Shakespeare and Wesker respectively, to determine how far Wesker’s representation of Shylock was a contrast to Shakespeare’s. This work was selected for the final chapter of my thesis due to the fact that Judaism is inevitably a recurring thread throughout Wesker’s body of work, since he himself was raised Jewish. In *Shylock*, Wesker brings to the forefront the persecution of a character because of his Jewish identity amidst a city dominated by Gentiles.

This chapter will analyse three main themes, the presentation of women, the representation of Judaism and finally the importance of education in *Shylock*. The analysis of each of these themes will be informed with how they were represented by Shakespeare in *The Merchant of Venice*. I will do this in order to understand why Wesker felt obliged to rewrite Shakespeare’s play and to do the character of Shylock justice within the literary world.

The contextual material used for this chapter is varied, it will range from sections lifted from interviews with Wesker himself, particularly interviews in which his anachronistic attitude towards Shakespeare is in plain view because I do not intend this final chapter to be a complete lauding of Wesker it is important to be authentic about his at times sensationalist

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Weinraub, “What made Arnold Wesker Rewrite Shakespeare: Rewriting Shakespeare ‘What interests me is the quality of human relationships-says Arnold Wesker,’” *New York Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> November (1977).

<sup>2</sup> Arnold Wesker, *Shylock*, Taken from *Wesker’s Historical Plays* (Oberon Books, London, 2012), p. 98.

<sup>3</sup> Ruby Kohn, “Shakespeare Left,” *Theatre Journal*, Volume 40, No. 1 (March 1988), p. 54.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

opinions towards a sixteenth century writer. These are articles in which Wesker does not present himself as being objective whatsoever, but wholly one-sided therefore it is important not to take every comment he makes in these as fact but to use them in conjunction with the biographical reading that needs to be applied when analysing this play. Other criticism which will inform this chapter will be taken from Efraim Sicher and Anne Etienne and Estelle Rivier, criticism which suggests that through *Shylock* Wesker is attempting to rewrite literary history by whitewashing the Shakespearean Shylock out of a twentieth century audience's mind by bringing his own version of the Jewish Moneylender to the stage. Furthermore, it was imperative in my opinion to read Wesker's *Shylock* alongside Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* because it is only when doing this that the evolution of Shylock can be clearly seen.

The term "jubilant bibliophile"<sup>6</sup> is a fitting description of the titular character of Wesker's play. Wesker's Shylock is invigorated by learning and knowledge "I'm eager. I know it. But here, the last of the manuscripts and then we'll begin by cataloguing my printed books. Such treasures to show you, you'll be thrilled, thrrrrilled! You'll be- I can't wait."<sup>7</sup> The repetition of the word thrilled in this excerpt and his use of the second personal pronoun "you"<sup>8</sup> symbolise how Shylock is both excited by learning and generous towards others because he wants to please his friend Antonio. Shylock's reference to treasure conveys how much Shylock values his books. Therefore, Wesker understandably gives his Shylock an introduction which contrasts with that of Shakespeare's, whose Shylock epitomises an anti-social and egotistical attitude from the outset. The latter quote in the chapter subtitle above is taken from the final time that we see Shylock in Wesker's play. Wesker's use of the

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<sup>6</sup> Weinraub, "What made Arnold Wesker Rewrite Shakespeare: Rewriting Shakespeare 'What interests me is the quality of human relationships-says Arnold Wesker.'"

<sup>7</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

adjective “bitter”<sup>9</sup> emphasises how Shylock portrays his sense of resentment in relation to the treatment which he has received, as the court orders him to give up his “books.”<sup>10</sup> He also exits the play whilst the song “*Adios querida*”<sup>11</sup> plays in the background which is a “*Sephardic song*.”<sup>12</sup> Sephardic refers to Jews “whose ancestors lived in Spain,”<sup>13</sup> therefore, Wesker gives his Shylock a departure from the play that is influenced by Judaism. Simultaneously it is also a respectful departure for a literary character who previous to Wesker’s rewriting of *The Merchant of Venice* was stereotypically viewed as one of the “cold hearted usurers”<sup>14</sup> whose main objective was to gain and preserve their material wealth. This was a stereotype which right-wing Nazi followers were only too glad to abide by due to Shakespeare’s unlikeable Jewish money lender and the exclusion of Shylock “from mainstream society,”<sup>15</sup> compounded by the fact that Shakespeare “goes to great length to indicate that Shylock is to be considered ‘alien,’ outcast, other.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the money which Shylock must forfeit in *The Merchant of Venice* is represented in Wesker’s *Shylock* by books which act as a substitution for money. In Act Two, scene five of *Shylock* we read “Shylock: No books? Will you take my books? Antonio: You take his life when you take his books.”<sup>17</sup> Antonio’s comment suggests that books are pivotal to the whole of Shylock’s existence. Similarly, in Act Four, scene one of *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock says that “You take my life, when you take the means whereby I live.”<sup>18</sup> In the case of Shakespeare’s play, Shylock is referring to the importance of money, however during this point in both

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> David Hey, *The Oxford Dictionary of Local and Family History* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Holiday D. Alexander, “Shakespeare’s Intent: A Discourse on Racism,” Undefined Publication (1991), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> David Hawkes, “Review of Shakespeare and Outsiders,” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington DC, Volume 67 (2016), p. 145.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander, “Shakespeare’s Intent: A Discourse on Racism,” p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Penguin Classics, London, 2015), p. 82.



plays each of the playwrights repeat the verb “take”<sup>19</sup> several times. This informs us that both Shakespeare and Wesker’s Shylock have had something belonging to them taken forcibly from them and into someone else’s control. In my view this shows how each of their lives are taken away from their control and into the hands of the Venetian legal system. First, Shakespeare’s Shylock will find it difficult to survive due to being stripped of his material possessions and second, in the case of Wesker’s Shylock it will be the inability to derive pleasure from what remains of his life due to his books being confiscated. However, a distinguishing feature between the two plays is why each of the Shylocks are disliked, in Shakespeare’s case it is his Shylock’s love of money, in Wesker’s play it is how his Shylock relishes learning and how he is obviously superior to his peers in terms of intellect. This shows accordance with what Wesker believes himself to be a common reason why Jews are perhaps disliked by others in society which is their “cleverness”<sup>20</sup> and not only “their ability to handle money.”<sup>21</sup> However, at the conclusion of both plays, both of the Shylocks are deemed powerless and ostracised from their respective societies.

We can therefore deduce that because Wesker makes books and education have the same value as money that Wesker’s play is a morality play which portrays how it didn’t matter how much or how little money Shylock had, he was always going to face persecution due to him being a Jew. This aura of inevitability that I perceive from Wesker’s rewriting of Shakespeare’s play is also representative of how Wesker did not want to erase the “ugliness”<sup>22</sup> that is so prevalent in the original work by Shakespeare, thereby he refrained from the temptation to portray a “dishonest production of the play,”<sup>23</sup> in order to appease a post-World War Two audience. When we look to Shakespeare’s last description of Shylock

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Wesker, “Shame on you Shakespeare,” *The Independent*, 21<sup>st</sup> July, London (1999).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Rob Conkie, “Shakespeare Aftershocks: Shylock,” *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Volume 27, No.4 (Winter 2009), p. 563.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

in Act Four, scene one it simply reads “*Exit Shylock*”<sup>24</sup> and this is the last time that the audience see him. When comparing Shylock’s exit in *The Merchant of Venice* with the same from Wesker’s *Shylock*, Wesker conveys a sensitivity towards how Shylock should feel whilst Shakespeare conveys no such compassion at all. However, a key comparison between the two playwrights and their respective Shylocks is their use of the noun “alien,” highlighting how in both plays Shylock is considered to not be entitled to have the same rights as a citizen of Venice. In Wesker’s play it states that “an old Venetian law condemns to death and confiscation of his goods the alien who plots against the life of a citizen of Venice.”<sup>25</sup> In Renaissance Venice “Jews were confined to the ‘foundry’ known as the ghetto and were obliged to wear the special badge or hat to distinguish them from Christians.”<sup>26</sup> A different term for this area where the Jews of the city resided was the term “ghetto,”<sup>27</sup> a term first used in 1562 by “Pope Pius IV in his bull.”<sup>28</sup> The term’s initial meaning prior to the middle of the nineteenth century was to denote “zones of Jewish residency.”<sup>29</sup> In today’s society it refers to “any area obligatory or not of segregation for an ethnic community.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, this was originally a term specific to prejudice towards the Jewish community who were viewed by Christians as wholly separate from their society.

Shakespeare writes that “If it be proved against an alien, that by direct or indirect attempts, he seek the life of any citizen,”<sup>31</sup> then he is at the mercy of the law. It is worth noting that in Wesker’s play Shylock describes his daughter Jessica’s displeasure towards Judaism as being caused by an “alien philosophy.”<sup>32</sup> The philosophy referred to in this

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<sup>24</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 83.

<sup>25</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> Louis Jacobs, *The Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Sandra Debenedetti-Stow, “The Etymology of ‘Ghetto’ New Evidence from Rome,” *Jewish History*, Volume 6, Numbers 1-2, The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume, 1992, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 81.

<sup>32</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 73.

instance is Christianity, therefore this is also a play which highlights how there must be a mutual tolerance in society for it to progress. However, in Wesker's *As Much as I Dare* he claims how he feels "like a novice, a convert, an alien."<sup>33</sup> It is therefore possible to undertake a biographical reading of this play, due to the clear parallels which can be drawn between Shylock and Wesker. Wesker portrays how he felt like an outsider because of his "lack of formal education"<sup>34</sup> saying that "I am an autodidact"<sup>35</sup> and "so is my Shylock."<sup>36</sup> Wesker's characterisation of Shylock was shaped by his own experience and his "self-consciousness"<sup>37</sup> because he felt he "missed out,"<sup>38</sup> as he did not excel academically and did not pursue a university education. The author's anxiety at his status as an autodidact is conveyed through the disparaging comment of Rivka towards the titular character in Act Two, scene three with "But you *can't* pretend you're educated, just as you can't pretend you're not an alien or that this Ghetto has no walls."<sup>39</sup> The italicised word "*can't*"<sup>40</sup> in this example conveys how the actor portraying the character of Rivka should place emphasis on this in order to show how she feels that Shylock is fooling himself into believing that he will ever be an equal or have the same opportunities as those who are not Jewish. In this play, Wesker makes the walls of the ghetto a symbol for the limitations and marginalisation which can arise due to being wrongly labelled within a society, in Shylock's case because he is a Jew. Others have preconceived ideas surrounding his character. This echoes a comment from Wesker himself who says that "it's the work that matters not the labels that surround you,"<sup>41</sup> highlighting his

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<sup>33</sup> Arnold Wesker, *As Much as I Dare* (Arrow Books Limited, London, 1995), p. 130.

<sup>34</sup> *Desert Island Discs*, Interview with Arnold Wesker, Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Judith Weinraub, "What made Arnold Wesker Rewrite Shakespeare: Rewriting Shakespeare 'What interests me is the quality of human relationships'".

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Desert Island Discs*, Interview with Arnold Wesker, Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2006.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Ben Quinn, "British Playwright Arnold Wesker dies, aged 83," *The Guardian*, Tuesday 12<sup>th</sup> April 2016.

belief that the quality of a person's work is all that should matter and not what religious or social portion of society they belong to.

Peter Holland in his introduction to *The Merchant of Venice* claims that Wesker's play was a "new version of the narrative,"<sup>42</sup> however it cannot be considered as so much of a "new version"<sup>43</sup> in my opinion because it still decided to show Shylock experiencing humiliation because of his religion and ultimately facing the same fate as Shakespeare's money lender did too. Although not part of Wesker's original *Trilogy* series of plays the conclusion of *Shylock* sees the titular character say "Perhaps now is the time to make that journey to Jerusalem. Join those other old men on the quayside, waiting to make a pilgrimage, to be buried there-ach!"<sup>44</sup> The significance of Jerusalem has changed within Wesker's writing "from utopian dream to the traditional place for old men to die"<sup>45</sup> Therefore this is representative of how Wesker was resigning himself to the inevitable challenges which arose from facing marginalisation. In Act Two, scene three of Wesker's play, Shylock tells Antonio that "Children warm to me on the streets. They don't cry out 'Shylock Old Jew' then."<sup>46</sup> This is a social comment which implies that childhood is innocent and harmless, however because society is nurturing "contempt"<sup>47</sup> these children will have their innocence transformed into cruelty and intolerance. The children judge Shylock by his good-nature and warmth as a person and not by his appearance or race.

Holland also comments that Shakespeare's Shylock is the "epitome of a Western anti-Semitic portrayal of the Jew as evil villain concerned only with money,"<sup>48</sup> a portrayal which

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<sup>42</sup> Peter Holland, *The Merchant of Venice, Introduction*, p. xxi.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 97.

<sup>45</sup> Efraim Sicher, "The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker's 'The Merchant,'" *Modern Language Studies*, Volume 21 (1991), p. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 78.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> Holland, *The Merchant of Venice, The Introduction*, p. xxi.

Wesker does attempt to contradict. This contradiction is seen predominantly through Wesker's characterisation of a Shylock who is light-hearted, hospitable and warm. Shylock is happy to entertain others and to disregard the law where friendship is concerned "A bond? Between friends? What nonsense are you talking, Antonio?"<sup>49</sup> The repetition of rhetorical questions in this example highlights how Shylock conveys disbelief in Antonio's proposal because he doesn't even think about the formalities of law where a pact between friends is made. However, the fact that Venetian society treats him with the same unjust nature as they do Shakespeare's Shylock sadly reinforces Efraim Sicher's claim which is that "never can the anti-Semitic Shylock be written out of English Literature."<sup>50</sup> Sicher makes this claim in the context that part of why Shakespeare's play is considered one of the "world's masterpieces"<sup>51</sup> is because of the association of Shylock as ultimately the villain of the piece which heightens the "dramatic value."<sup>52</sup>

Holland asserts that in *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock's "costume will probably be a sign to the audience of how he fits or, more often, does not belong comfortably alongside those who invite him to dinner."<sup>53</sup> However, this is also a predominant feature of how Wesker heightens tension between Shylock and those he dines with in the play. "Shylock: Oh, Antonio, I love Venice. A city full of busy living, and men passing through freely as a right, not as a favour. Antonio: Venice is distorted through your gratitude, Shylock, you've forgotten your yellow hat."<sup>54</sup> In this excerpt from Act One, scene seven, Antonio compliments Shylock but then attempts to forcibly humble him in the other by reminding him of his Jewishness and therefore subservient status within Venetian society. The "yellow

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<sup>49</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 40.

<sup>50</sup> Sicher, "The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker's "The Merchant," p. 58.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Holland, *The Merchant of Venice, The Play in Performance*, p. LXVIII.

<sup>54</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 54.

hat”<sup>55</sup> in this instance is obviously a yellow cone shaped hat adorned by male orthodox Jewish men. At the conclusion of this scene Wesker’s stage directions provoke pathos from the audience as “*Shylock looks at Antonio and shrugs sadly, as though the hat is evidence to refute all he’s said.*”<sup>56</sup> The shrug should be emphasised by the actor depicting Shylock to represent his feeling of exclusion and inferiority during this interaction. In her commentary to Wesker’s play, Glenda Leeming quotes lines from W.H. Auden’s “The Dyer’s Hand,” specifically the line that “A Jew is not regarded, even in law, as a brother.”<sup>57</sup> Auden’s phrase obviously implies that even though Antonio and Shylock are friendly this does not mean that they are equals. The “all he’s said”<sup>58</sup> in this instance is the passion which he has shown for knowledge and learning through his books, which reminds me of words which come from the author himself in *As Much as I Dare* when he writes “books have moulded me,”<sup>59</sup> a phrase which insinuates that by reading the author found that his entire persona was developed. The hat is a motif for the limitation or label that is automatically placed upon him by society because of his religion; a demeaning reminder of reality. The scene ends with Shylock repeatedly saying “Bubble! Bubble”<sup>60</sup> which is reminiscent of Act Three, scene two of *Chicken Soup with Barley* and Ronnie who uses bubbles as a way of symbolising how he has become disillusioned by the socialist dream which his mother refuses to give up hope in. “Ronnie: I don’t see things in black and white anymore. My thoughts keep going pop, like bubbles. That’s my life now-you know? – a lot of little bubbles going pop.”<sup>61</sup> However, whilst Ronnie’s bubbles are symbolic of his remaining but shallow faith in socialism, Shylock’s are a sense of his infinite hope that things will change for the better. The multi-

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<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>57</sup> W.H. Auden, *The Dyer’s Hand*, Taken from Glenda Leeming’s Commentary on Arnold Wesker’s *The Merchant* (Methuen Student Edition, London, 1983), p. xvii.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Arnold Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 127.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>61</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 73.

coloured nature of bubbles may also reflect how our “patchwork figure”<sup>62</sup> Shylock hopes for more acceptance and diversity within society. It echoes the term “Rainbow Nation”<sup>63</sup> coined by Archbishop Desmond Tutu in 1994 to describe a “post-Apartheid South Africa”<sup>64</sup> which had now become a “multiracial”<sup>65</sup> and “multicultural country.”<sup>66</sup> When Antonio asks rhetorically “What little lost spring can help you now?”<sup>67</sup> he is purposely placing doubt on Shylock’s enthusiasm for education. The fact that there is a repetition of “I” sounds in this rhetorical question shows how Antonio is mocking Shylock because he insinuates that education is pointless if you are born into a specific minority religion. However, Shylock believes that education narrows social inequality with the all- encompassing tone of phrase that “everybody can possess a book.”<sup>68</sup> The word “lose”<sup>69</sup> implies that Shylock’s talent is isolated amidst the discriminatory and prejudiced nature of this Renaissance society. He also makes an unfortunate reference to the inventor of the printing press, Johannes Gutenberg, during the following exchange: “Bassanio: Gutenberg? Shylock: Gutenberg gives birth to an extraordinary invention called-? Graziano: The printing press.”<sup>70</sup> It is ironic that he does this as although Gutenberg did invent the printing press in 1455, he also had his “stock and equipment”<sup>71</sup> taken “possession”<sup>72</sup> of by Johann Fust who “dissolved”<sup>73</sup> their partnership. Therefore, Gutenberg would have no longer been able to print books - just as Shylock will no

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<sup>62</sup> Anne Etienne and Estelle Rivier, “Topsy-Turvyng *The Merchant of Venice*: Shylock as Wesker’s Response to the Renaissance Jew,” Taken from *Rewriting the Plays of Shakespeare for and by the Contemporary Stage*, Edited by Michael Dobson and Estelle Rivier, p. 149.

<sup>63</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Edited by Angus Stevenson, Third Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010).

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 60.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>71</sup> *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, Edited by Dinah Birch (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009).

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

longer be able to read them at the conclusion of this play. In terms of staging, the “ring”<sup>74</sup> of the “bells”<sup>75</sup> in comparison to the yellow hat represent how like a child Shylock must adhere to rules drawn up by others, it shows how Shylock tries but fails to keep his own self-respect because these laws are so demeaning. This aspect is absent from Shakespeare’s play and by showing this “apartheid”<sup>76</sup> nature which is concealed below the pleasantries of “Renaissance humanism”<sup>77</sup> Wesker is not content with literary efforts to “whitewash”<sup>78</sup> Shakespeare and to overlook the segregation which is a paramount feature in *The Merchant of Venice*. My admiration for Wesker’s Shylock arises from the fact that he is defiant in the face of this attitude of superiority as he “defiantly places”<sup>79</sup> the hat on his head then “bows”<sup>80</sup> and exits the stage. In Shakespeare’s play Shylock angrily says “You call me misbeliever, cut-throat dog, And spit upon my Jewish gaberdine,”<sup>81</sup> Shylock specifies his clothing or “gaberdine”<sup>82</sup> as a way of representing the deplorable treatment which he receives. It is ironic that he is the one who is called “dog,”<sup>83</sup> yet those discriminating against him are behaving as animals due to how they “spit”<sup>84</sup> on his clothes. We can therefore understand why Wesker wanted to denounce Shakespeare’s portrayal of the Jew in order to show a fairer depiction. However, we should not be too hard on Shakespeare because examples such as the above highlight how Shakespeare “depicts a man who suffers much at the hands of his fellow men.”<sup>85</sup> Therefore,

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<sup>74</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, pp. 59-60.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> Sicher, “Recasting Shakespeare’s Jew in Wesker’s Shylock,” Taken from *Wrestling with Shylock: Jewish Responses to The Merchant of Venice*, Edited by Edna Nahshon and Michael Shapiro (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017), p. 285.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Sicher, “The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker’s “The Merchant,” p. 58.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 19.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Etienne and Rivier “Topsy-Turvyng *The Merchant of Venice: Shylock* as Wesker’s Response to the Renaissance Jew,” p. 147.



Shakespeare does not entirely portray his Shylock without also exposing how cruel people can be against him.

Another key contrast between Wesker's Shylock and Shakespeare's Shylock is how hospitable they are in nature. In Act One, scene four Shylock says to Antonio "Welcome, young man, welcome. You'll stay to eat with us, won't you?"<sup>86</sup> Earlier in scene one of the same Act he tells Antonio "I've overworked you. Here. Drink. Why wait till we're finished? (*Offers Wine*) Drink. It's a special day."<sup>87</sup> These are two phrases which epitomise the pleasure Shylock gets from entertaining others, regardless of their religion, he always seeks to overfill someone's wine glass. In contrast, in Act One, scene one of Shakespeare's play Shylock says definitively that "I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you."<sup>88</sup> The repetition of the second personal pronoun "you"<sup>89</sup> highlights how Shylock differentiates himself from Antonio and conveys how they will never socialise nor be friends, they will only do business together. He uses pork to decline Bassanio's advances to dine with them: "Bassanio: If it please you to dine with us. Shylock: Yes, to smell pork, to eat of the habitation which your prophet the Nazarite conjured the devil into."<sup>90</sup> Shylock's reference to pork denotes two separate biblical items here, first, he's talking about the miracle in the Gospels where Jesus places demons into a herd of swine, and second, he's referring to the Jewish taboo on pork. Furthermore, in Act Four, scene one Shylock metaphorically says that "there is no firm reason to be rendered"<sup>91</sup> as to why a man "cannot abide a gaping pig"<sup>92</sup> in order to convey how people automatically have preconceived ideas about who they like and who they dislike, and there can be no true logic behind this. In Judaism, pork is not a food

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<sup>86</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 34.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

<sup>88</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 16.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

which should be eaten due to what is written in the book of Leviticus. In Chapter Eleven, Verse Seven it states that “And the swine, though he divide the hoof, and be clovenfooted, yet he cheweth not the cud; he is unclean to you.”<sup>93</sup> In Act One, scene one we see how Shylock says in an “*aside*”<sup>94</sup> that he hates Antonio “for he is a Christian.”<sup>95</sup> This is a clear simplification of Judaism on Shakespeare’s part and relates to Holland’s comment that a “vicious antagonism towards all things Christian”<sup>96</sup> can be seen through Shakespeare’s money lender. Wesker’s Shylock says to his daughter Jessica in Act One, scene three that “we fascinate them all, whether from England where they’ve expelled us, or Spain where they burn us.”<sup>97</sup> A chilling, graphic depiction of the persecution that was experienced by Jews. When Shylock refers to the Jews being “expelled”<sup>98</sup> he is referring to the Edict of Expulsion. The Edict of Expulsion was issued by King Edward I in 1290, it ordered by “royal warrant”<sup>99</sup> for all Jews to leave England. This draconian measure came to be due to Jews who were allegedly involved in “fraud”<sup>100</sup> through the “coining of money.”<sup>101</sup> In my view it is no coincidence that Shylock is a money lender as this also fits the Jewish archetype which dominated a predominantly Christian English society who knew no better; as after the Edict of Expulsion the Jews were “more available to the English as concepts than as persons.”<sup>102</sup> Peter Berek ascertains that the “theatre inhabits a transactional relationship with a culture it both mirrors and creates,”<sup>103</sup> therefore in his representation of Shylock, Shakespeare

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<sup>93</sup> *King James Bible*, Old Testament, Book of Leviticus, Chapter Eleven, Verse Seven, Link as follows: <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Leviticus-Chapter-11>.

<sup>94</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 16.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Holland, *The Merchant of Venice, Introduction*, p. XXXV.

<sup>97</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 24.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> *The Encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages*, Edited by André Vauchez, Article on “Expulsion of Jews,” Danièle Iancu-Agou (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002).

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Peter Berek, “The Jew as Renaissance Man,” *Renaissance Quarterly*, Volume 51, Number 1 (Spring 1998), p. 128.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

embodies the “ambivalent feelings about economic innovation and social change,”<sup>104</sup> as the figure of the Jew traditionally denotes “commercial enterprise and money-lending,”<sup>105</sup> therefore, this has become engrained into stereotypical representations of the Jewish identity. Shakespeare is viewed by Wesker as having a “central role,”<sup>106</sup> in “creating not imitating the frightening yet comic Jewish figure who haunts Western Culture.”<sup>107</sup>

A key difference between the Shylock by Wesker and the Shylock by Shakespeare is how they view themselves. In Act Three, scene one of *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock says “I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?”<sup>108</sup> In this excerpt Shakespeare attempts to humanise Shylock by portraying how he has the same physical limitations as those who are not Jewish and vice-versa. In his article, “A Nasty Piece of Work,”<sup>109</sup> Wesker expresses his anger towards this particular section in *The Merchant of Venice* due to his belief that Shylock’s “humanity”<sup>110</sup> is his “right”<sup>111</sup> and not something which is bestowed upon him by others as a “gracious privilege.”<sup>112</sup> This also heightens what Wesker goes on to write in a piece entitled “Shame on you Shakespeare,”<sup>113</sup> where he writes that this humiliation of a Jewish being meant that the “ground for holocaust was well-prepared.”<sup>114</sup> This is a divisive, extreme, over-simplified allegation from Wesker insinuating that Shakespeare’s creation of Shylock foresaw and encouraged the horrific prejudice that Jews would face at the hands of the Nazis. The Nazis justified their “genocide”<sup>115</sup> of the Jews during World War Two by using the “medieval stock type of

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 47.

<sup>109</sup> Wesker, “A Nasty Piece of Work,” *The Sunday Times*, June 9<sup>th</sup> (1993).

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Wesker, “Shame on you Shakespeare,” *The Independent*, 21<sup>st</sup> July, London (1999).

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Sicher, “The Jewing of Shylock,” p. 57.

Jew,”<sup>116</sup> which Shakespeare’s Shylock could be interpreted as the embodiment of. Etienne and Rivier claim that Wesker through *Shylock* wants to “amend the universal vision of Shylock, a representation of the Jew utilised by Hitler to confirm his Holocaust.”<sup>117</sup> We in a “post-Holocaust”<sup>118</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> century can now understand Wesker’s hostility towards Shakespeare. However, we must also realise that “history”<sup>119</sup> has inevitably “re-defined the context”<sup>120</sup> of performances of *The Merchant of Venice*, therefore Shakespeare is not solely to blame. Rather it is the historical events that have taken place in the interim period between the play’s maiden performance and the twenty-first century that mean dramatic representations which accentuate stereotypical characteristics of the Jewish culture are seen as dangerous and offensive. The actor David Suchet depicts Gregory Solomon in the 2019 production of Arthur Miller’s *The Price* at Wyndham’s Theatre in London. In an interview with Andrew Marr, Suchet says that as a “liberal society”<sup>121</sup> we are “limiting ourselves in art”<sup>122</sup> and this is one of the reasons why the theatrical establishment doesn’t “like doing *The Merchant of Venice* anymore.”<sup>123</sup> Suchet therefore insinuates that the more we are respectful towards each other within society then the less controversial and thought-provoking our artistic contributions will be due to the censorship put in place. We need to note that *The Merchant of Venice* was first performed in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, therefore on one level Wesker’s attitude to Shakespeare may be considered as anachronistic. This is because he is imposing the values of a “liberal”<sup>124</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> century society upon 16<sup>th</sup> century society which is unfair and impossible to compare. However, on a different level Wesker’s dismay towards Shakespeare may reflect what Rob

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Etienne and Rivier, “Topsy-Turvyng *The Merchant of Venice: Shylock* as Wesker’s Response to the Renaissance Jew,” p. 143.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

<sup>119</sup> Robert L. King, “Shylock after Auschwitz,” *Chicago Review*, Volume 40, No.4 (1994), p. 66.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> *The Andrew Marr Show*, interview with David Suchet and Brendan Coyle about the play *The Price*, BBC One, Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> February, 2019.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

Conkie views as Shakespeare's ability to "ghost-write"<sup>125</sup> contemporary works in which the "crucial features of Shylock"<sup>126</sup> are still present such as the "flesh bond narrative, within which is structured a trial scene and comic humiliation."<sup>127</sup> Therefore, Conkie in comparison to Wesker can see the relevance of Shakespeare's work within contemporary Western culture. The perverseness of the trial scene in both *The Merchant of Venice* and *Shylock* is due to the fact that Christians are shown here to justify their prejudice against Jews by saying that they are equally made. It is ironic however that it is not Shylock who appears inhumane in this scene but rather the society doubting his humanity. In *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock says that "the villainy you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction,"<sup>128</sup> meaning that by being cruel to Shylock they are only doing themselves damage because he will get the better of them. It is important to note that although excluded and ridiculed by their respective societies, each of the Shylocks are both needed for financial support. In Act One, scene three he asks Antonio 'Hath a dog money? Is it possible A cur can lend three thousand ducats?'<sup>129</sup> Rhetorical questions exposing the hypocrisy of this society because on one hand they view themselves as superior to Shylock, which is apparent through his repeated reference to dogs of the lowest breed with "cur."<sup>130</sup> However, on the other hand they are dependent on him for financial support. Shylock's disbelieving tone with "is it possible?"<sup>131</sup> should be said with a tone colour which depicts his mockery towards Antonio. In contrast, in Act Two, scene five of *Shylock* it is the character of Lorenzo who says "has not a Jew organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions?"<sup>132</sup> During which Shylock eventually

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<sup>125</sup> Rob Conkie, "Shakespeare Aftershocks: Shylock," *Shakespeare Bulletin*, Volume 27, Number 4 (Winter 2009), p. 550.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 92.

exclaims “No, no, NO! I will not have it.”<sup>133</sup> Wesker in comparison to Shakespeare uses melodramatic repetition in this instance in order to extol Shylock’s frustration at being what Sicher views as “society’s scapegoat.”<sup>134</sup> Wesker asserts through this pivotal section of Shakespeare’s play how Jews are compared with uneducated, uncivilised animals, “the same could be claimed for a monkey.”<sup>135</sup> The scene builds to a climax with Shylock’s passionate speech with the lines “Jew! Jew, Jew, Jew! I hear the name around and everywhere. Your wars go wrong, the Jew must be the cause of it; your economic systems crumble, there the Jew must be...”<sup>136</sup> The fact that there is heavy repetition of the word “Jew”<sup>137</sup> subtly portrays the absurd nature of Christian society because Shylock’s outburst exposes the ridiculous nature of their bigotry. Sicher also asserts that Wesker “cannot but see in the degradation of Shakespeare’s villain the despair of the concentration camp victim,”<sup>138</sup> and indeed pathos may be felt for Shylock as he appears to be both isolated and outnumbered. The courtroom’s provocation of Shylock causes him to draw a knife and pronounce that “I *will* have my pound of flesh,”<sup>139</sup> a menacing tone of phrase and the fact that Wesker includes the word “will”<sup>140</sup> in italic font specifies how this should be delivered with vigour and wrath. At this point Shylock becomes a figure modelled from the image of Janus because we learn of an entirely different side to him, a contrast to the Shylock of Act One, scene seven who epitomises freedom and happiness, exclaiming with a tone of gusto that “I love Venice. A city full of busy living, and men passing through freely as a right, not as a favour.”<sup>141</sup> Wesker’s Shylock idealises equality and independence, he is a man who loathes Peace Walls or any barrier that exists

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<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> Sicher, “The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker’s “The Merchant,” p. 64.

<sup>135</sup> Wesker, “Shame on you Shakespeare.”

<sup>136</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 92.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Sicher, “Recasting Shakespeare’s Jew in Wesker’s *Shylock*,” p. 280.

<sup>139</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 93.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

with the main objective of dividing communities. By “resorting”<sup>142</sup> to the “barbaric”<sup>143</sup> bond advocated by the “barbaric laws”<sup>144</sup> Wesker’s Shylock becomes a tragic figure as his hamartia means that he has now become “an unwilling accomplice of his own destruction.”<sup>145</sup> Furthermore, as Leeming ascertains, Shylock at this point is a villainous figure, a figure which has been used in “living memory as an excuse for persecution.”<sup>146</sup> It would also have gone against the author’s own beliefs as Sicher claims that “the very idea that Shylock could ever cut another man’s flesh was a libel that threatened the Jew’s humanity.”<sup>147</sup> The pathos which I feel for Shylock arises from the relief which he shows when the Court realises that obtaining a pound of flesh cannot be done without drawing blood. The relief which Shylock portrays comes all too late as he has already plotted “against the life of a Citizen of Venice,”<sup>148</sup> he is treated in a condescending manner by Portia as she calls him “old Shylock,”<sup>149</sup> she then overbearingly forces him to give up his books. Though Sicher claims that Wesker creates a Shylock who “embodies what he regards as the essence of Judaism and who arrogantly challenges the supremacy of the state’s authority”<sup>150</sup> and its “oppressive laws,”<sup>151</sup> which I feel he does do, he also creates a Shylock who ultimately becomes a victim of these “oppressive laws.”<sup>152</sup> The “vitality”<sup>153</sup> and energy which radiates from Shylock is ultimately smothered by the “inflexible systems of law and prejudice.”<sup>154</sup> By merely contemplating the removal of flesh, Shylock is going against what the author sees as a

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<sup>142</sup> Sicher, “Recasting Shakespeare’s Jew in Wesker’s *Shylock*,” p. 289.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Leeming, Commentary on Arnold Wesker’s *The Merchant*, p. xviii

<sup>147</sup> Sicher, “The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker’s “The Merchant,” p. 58.

<sup>148</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 95.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

<sup>150</sup> Sicher, “Recasting Shakespeare’s Jew in Wesker’s *Shylock*,” p. 283.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> Leeming, Commentary on Arnold Wesker’s *The Merchant*, p. xxiv.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*

building block of Judaism which is that we should “reason together.”<sup>155</sup> Shylock abandons reason and morphs to fit the stereotypical mould which has been formed for him. One aspect which we can be relieved of is that the parting words which are said to Wesker’s Shylock are mild in comparison to what is said to Shakespeare’s Shylock. In Wesker’s play Antonio pleads with him to “Explain to the court you did not want to set a precedent in law. You’ll save your books.”<sup>156</sup> In contrast Gratiano tells Shakespeare’s Shylock that “Had I been the judge, thou shouldst have had ten more, To bring thee to the gallows, not the font.”<sup>157</sup> This will be a chilling image for any audience viewing *The Merchant of Venice* after the Holocaust because Gratiano’s words are a reminder of the Jews who faced cold-blooded murder by the Nazis in the concentration camps. The fact that Gratiano refers to the “font”<sup>158</sup> conveys how he is perversely upholding Christianity yet he could never be considered Christian due to his hatred for a fellow human being.

It is also difficult not to compare Shylock’s “Oh horror of horrors”<sup>159</sup> with the character of Macduff from the tragedy of *Macbeth* who exclaims “O Horror, horror, horror...”<sup>160</sup> during Act Two, scene three of the play after discovering that King Duncan has been brutally murdered by Macbeth, hence propelling Macbeth into a cycle of self-destruction. The melodramatic repetition and alliteration used in Macduff’s phrase unsettlingly mirrors the words of Duncan to Banquo in Act One, scene four with “let me enfold thee And hold thee to my heart.”<sup>161</sup> Specifically the repetition of “h” sounds with “hold thee to my heart”<sup>162</sup> foreshadows both Duncan’s fate and Macduff’s words at the discovery of his maimed body. Both Shakespeare’s Macduff and Wesker’s Shylock use the term horror in order to

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<sup>155</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 197.

<sup>156</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 97.

<sup>157</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 83.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 91.

<sup>160</sup> Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Edited by A.R. Braunmuller (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), p. 168.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*



accentuate their disbelief as to how humanity can be so cruel and unjust. In Shylock's case, Bassanio and Lorenzo attempt to exaggerate how because Shylock is Jewish, he believes that he is superior to the law. However, the farcical bond that he makes with Antonio, was due to nothing more than Shylock valuing Antonio's friendship: "Antonio: The contract, Shylock. We must draw up a bond. Shylock: A bond? Between friends? What nonsense are you talking, Antonio?"<sup>163</sup> His frustration at Bassanio and Lorenzo causes him to exclaim "Oh horror of horrors!"<sup>164</sup> which epitomises his disgust towards this closed, narrow-minded society who objectifies Shylock as simply "the Jew"<sup>165</sup> in order to uphold their allegedly "sacrosanct"<sup>166</sup> laws.

One of the stereotypes that surround Jewish culture is the Jew's association with capitalism and money, Mario Kessler asserts that this was due to Jews being "permitted to charge interest"<sup>167</sup> when "Christians"<sup>168</sup> were not in Medieval Europe. In Act One, scene five of *The Merchant of Venice*, Shylock tells his daughter Jessica that "I did dream of money bags tonight."<sup>169</sup> In this example Shakespeare uses a repetition of "d" sounds and hyperbole in order to emphasise Shylock's lack of morality and humanist values. In my view at this point Shylock becomes a parodied version of how a Jew should behave; a depiction which embodies the ignorance of a 16<sup>th</sup> century society who knows no better. By highlighting how important money is to Shylock, Shakespeare's construction of him unknowingly becomes a form of Christian propaganda. Furthermore, in the same scene he objectifies his daughter Jessica by treating her as nothing more than a mere possession of his with "Jessica my

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<sup>163</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 40.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>167</sup> Mario Kessler, "Capitalism and the Jews," *The International Review of Social Change*, Cambridge, Volume 55, Issue 2, August 2010, p. 319.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 33.

girl,”<sup>170</sup> and “do as I bid you.”<sup>171</sup> Two phrases which convey his imperative tone towards her, presenting how he attempts to exert patriarchal authority. In contrast, in Act One, scene one of *Shylock*, the titular character says that “I’m a hoarder of other men’s genius. My vice. My passion. Nothing I treasure more except my daughter.”<sup>172</sup> Therefore, Wesker’s Shylock above all else cherishes his daughter. By saying “except my daughter”<sup>173</sup> Wesker’s Shylock knows to differentiate between shallow material goods and flesh and blood, perhaps foreshadowing his downfall because if he had valued the former more than the latter, then he would not have had to forfeit his books. This is an important aspect to Wesker’s construction of Shylock as it is reminiscent of what Wesker wrote in his autobiography. In *As Much as I Dare* he recalls having a “room of his own,”<sup>174</sup> and with this room came “hoarding and order.”<sup>175</sup> However, Wesker also adds that he felt “privileged”<sup>176</sup> because he had his own room, a place where he could compile all he desired. This is also reminiscent of Act One, scene seven during Shylock’s impassioned speech about the wonders of the “printing press”<sup>177</sup> as he melodramatically exclaims “The word! Unsuspected! Written! Printed! Indestructible! Boom! It thrills me.”<sup>178</sup> The melodramatic nature of these words from Shylock epitomises how important education is to him because it is without discrimination or prejudice. The words “printed”<sup>179</sup> and “indestructible”<sup>180</sup> portray how he views them as permanent and irreversible. There is an irony to this because it is this irreversibility which culminates in Shylock having to forfeit his own books. The fact that the “nonsense”<sup>181</sup> bond was made between himself and

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<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>172</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 17.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 155.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>177</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 60.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

Antonio in Act One, scene four with “Antonio: (*Pinching himself*) Do I have a pound of flesh? I don’t even have a pound of flesh. Shylock: (*Pinching him*) Here, and here, and here, one, two, three pounds of flesh!”<sup>182</sup> ultimately concludes with the Doge telling Shylock “No, Shylock, no books.”<sup>183</sup> The repetition of “no”<sup>184</sup> by the Doge in this example highlights the solemn end of Shylock’s jovial nature in the play as he moves away a “*bitter*”<sup>185</sup> man wronged by the unjust nature of society verifying the words spoken by Antonio in Act One, scene four with “Not only is your race a minority, it is despised.”<sup>186</sup> This is a statement which foreshadows the pitiful conclusion of Shylock’s part in the play, as John Gross writes that the fate of Shylock at the end of Wesker’s play “leaves one with a predominant sense of wishful thinking.”<sup>187</sup> It does this because Shylock is a likeable “warm-hearted”<sup>188</sup> character whose futile attempt to outsmart Venetian law backfires and pathos is felt for his final words which are “My appetites are dying, dear friend, for anything in this world. I am so tired of men.”<sup>189</sup> This is a marked contrast from the Shylock of Act One, scene one who projects himself as he read “*aloud*”<sup>190</sup> titles from his “*study*”<sup>191</sup> “*strewn with books and manuscripts.*”<sup>192</sup> The fact that the court takes his books from him, symbolises how they have stripped him bare of the contents of his study and the “room”<sup>193</sup> of his own as well as his identity as a human being. Instead he degenerately returns to being “a Jew of Venice”<sup>194</sup> who is defined entirely by his race and religion and not by his individualism. Last, it echoes how the author himself

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<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>187</sup> John Gross, *Shylock: A Legend and its Legacy* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1994), p. 335.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>189</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 97.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> Wesker, *As Much as I Dare*, p. 155.

<sup>194</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice, The Characters in the Play*.

believes that “antisemitism, like stupidity, is here to stay.”<sup>195</sup> By confiscating Shylock’s books the court is shown to not only be anti-Semitic but possess a “medieval Christian arrogance”<sup>196</sup> through their disregard for the written word.

(ii) “But- Portia reads!”<sup>197</sup> The representation of women in *Shylock*.

In the above quotation taken from Act One, scene two what is immediately seen is how Wesker’s Portia compares with Shakespeare’s. In Act One, scene two of *The Merchant of Venice* Portia tells her “*waiting woman*”<sup>198</sup> Nerissa: “O me, the word ‘choose’! I may neither choose who I would nor refuse who I dislike, so is the will of a living daughter curbed by the will of a dead father,”<sup>199</sup> a statement which extols her lack of independence. By lamenting on the word “choose”<sup>200</sup> she is making a mockery of the term because choice is something which she unfortunately does not have as Renaissance society is “deeply patriarchal in its structure and attitudes.”<sup>201</sup> In contrast Wesker’s Portia exclaims “Oh! Those caskets! Those stupid caskets! Take them out of my sight. I loved him dearly, my father, but those caskets will bring me down as his other madneses brought down my mother, I feel it.”<sup>202</sup> Portia’s forward-thinking persona is already seen as she wants to do things differently than her mother by refusing to abide by what her father prescribes for her in his will. By using the words “bring me down”<sup>203</sup> she is showing how she sees marriage as a limitation placed on women. She tells Nerissa that “I feel, I feel- I feel I-am-the-new-woman-and-they-know-me-not!”<sup>204</sup> The fact that Portia refers to herself as a “new woman”<sup>205</sup> shows how she wants to go against

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<sup>195</sup> Wesker, “A Nasty Piece of Work.”

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 21.

<sup>198</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 11.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> Susan Doran, “Gender, Power and Politics,” *History Today*, Volume 53, London (2003), p. 30.

<sup>202</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 20.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*

the traditional Renaissance female who would have been styled as humble, inferior and submissive. The alliteration used in this phrase highlights how she yearns to be open about her emotions, Wesker's repetitive use of the dash punctuation symbol also shows how the actor portraying Portia should display how the character is thoughtful and keen to carve her own way and not to solely live from her "illustrious"<sup>206</sup> "family name."<sup>207</sup> Portia identifies herself as being different because she can both adhere to society's conventions and go against them too, she tells Nerissa in Act One, scene two that "For centuries the Church has kept me comfortably comforting and cooking and pleasing and patient."<sup>208</sup> The repetition of both "c" sounds and plosive "p" sounds in this phrase convey how the actor portraying Portia should have a tone that shows her frustration at being trapped by domestic duties. These sounds in my interpretation also convey how her tone colour is one of mockery towards the institution of the Church because it is more than content to keep Portia at a certain level in society. Act One, scene two concludes with Portia referring to Elizabeth I as she tells Nerissa "There is a woman on the English throne. Anything can happen and they are coming to find out."<sup>209</sup> Therefore, Portia is equating herself with the female English monarch from 1558-1603, a Queen who had the "ability"<sup>210</sup> to "successfully exercise power in a man's world."<sup>211</sup> In Portia's case her want for "power"<sup>212</sup> is for her to be able to choose her own partner in matrimony, likewise to Elizabeth I. When she tells Nerissa that "they are coming to find out"<sup>213</sup> she is conveying how she will not hesitate to reject these potential suitors in comparison to Shakespeare's Portia who concludes Act One, scene two with "Come, Nerissa, Sirrah, go before. Whiles we shut the gate upon one wooer, another knocks the door."<sup>214</sup> A

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<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>210</sup> Doran, "Gender, Power and Politics," p. 29.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 21.

<sup>214</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 15.

comparison can be made between Wesker's Portia to Shakespeare's in this example because both of them portray how they will not be forced into marrying someone who they do not love. Both authors use language that is imperative in tone with "Come"<sup>215</sup> "go before"<sup>216</sup> and "shut"<sup>217</sup> in order to construct the character of Portia as a formidable, unconventional Renaissance female character.

When in Act Two, scene one of Wesker's play Portia says to herself "perhaps I should be his mistress only. That gives him no holds over me then. As his wife the State chains me,"<sup>218</sup> by using the term "chains"<sup>219</sup> Portia shows her awareness that if she enters into the covenant of marriage then her husband will have control over both her body and her material possessions. It also creates an image which depicts the woman as imprisoned; unable to escape and trapped within a patriarchal institution something which was analysed at length in chapter three of this thesis. In Renaissance imagery, the quintessential depiction of an idealised marriage can be seen in the painting *Arnolfini and his Wife* by Jan van Eyck from 1434. A painting in which the presence of a dog accentuates the submissive nature of the female figure whose head is bowed and eyes are lowered, whilst the male figure stands erect as he exerts his patriarchal authority by raising his right hand. The presence of fruit in the painting symbolises the prospect of the marriage being highly fecund and makes the viewer of the image focus in on the female figure and her fertility; becoming objectified. By referring to her preference to be his "mistress"<sup>220</sup> Portia is simultaneously revealing how she wants to be able to enjoy a sex life without the responsibility that comes with the institution of marriage and motherhood. Act Two, scene one continues with Portia's devilish mood in which her and Nerissa delight in mocking the hyperbolic masculine nature of some men. She

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<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 65.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

tells Nerissa “Such presumption! What else could a woman be but his rib, a mere bone of his body? After all, my dear, men have won battles with a bone missing!”<sup>221</sup> In this rhetorical, sarcastic tone of phrase, Portia is deliberately mocking the smugness of the male sex by purposely dumbing down the importance of the female sex within society. Her reference to the “rib”<sup>222</sup> is a clear biblical allusion to Eve who was created by God from the rib of Adam and the arrogant, innate masculine presumption that women are subservient. We can also refer back to chapter one of this thesis in which Stanton teased Rosie with a meal of ribs in order to exert sexual control over her. When we analyse how Shakespeare presents the same interaction between Portia and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*, we interpret how his Portia does resign herself to the control of her prospective husband, likewise to the female figure in Van Eyck’s painting. In Act Three, scene two she tells Bassanio that she has been “Queen o’er myself; and even now, but now, This house, these servants, and this same myself Are yours, my lord’s.”<sup>223</sup> She, unlike Wesker’s Portia, is allowing a man to take full control of both her body and of her homely possessions because she loves him. Furthermore, referring to herself as “Queen”<sup>224</sup> is no coincidence, because in my view it is a clear allusion to Elizabeth I who is the ultimate figurehead for female authority and choice. However, I want to assert that a comparison between Wesker’s Portia and Elizabeth I would be more fitting, as Act Two, scene one ends with Portia telling Nerissa that “I could found cities with my strengths, Nerissa, cities undreamed of by any man.”<sup>225</sup> This is a bold statement brimming with ambition echoing the power that is synonymous with *The Armada Portrait* from 1588 by George Gower. It is a depiction of Elizabeth I which is a tribute to her imperial strength as a Monarch, with her right hand placed strategically on the globe to symbolise her control over

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<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>223</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 55.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>225</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 66.

the world as Britain has become a seemingly unstoppable empirical force. Wesker's Portia is alluding to how a woman can be just as influential as any man due to the presence of Elizabeth I.

In terms of how the two playwrights stage Portia, in Shakespeare's play Portia's first line is "By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is aweary of this great world."<sup>226</sup> The fact that she is self-deprecating about her "body"<sup>227</sup> shows how she does not see herself as physically comparable to a man. Conversely, Wesker's introductory stage directions for his Portia portray a female character who is proactive. There is a preoccupation with language associated with physical activity, "*pulling*,"<sup>228</sup> "*replacing*,"<sup>229</sup> "*picking*,"<sup>230</sup> "*rubbing*"<sup>231</sup> and "*moving, moving*."<sup>232</sup> Wesker claims that characters need to "live on the stage,"<sup>233</sup> and this can certainly be seen in Wesker's construction of Portia, as she shuns idleness. A notable contrast also appears between Shakespeare's Act Four, scene one and Wesker's Act Two, scene five which are trial scenes for each of the respective plays. Shakespeare's stage direction for Portia's entrance into the scene reads "*Enter Portia as Balthasar, dresses like a Doctor of laws*,"<sup>234</sup> whereas in Wesker's, the stage directions are that "*Portia and Nerissa walk straight up to ask the Doge permission to enter. He grants it.*"<sup>235</sup> Therefore, Shakespeare realises that it is only when Portia adopts the identity of a man that she will have equal say and control over the circumstances in the courtroom. However, Wesker allows his Portia to influence the situation, in addition to keeping the markers of her gender fully intact

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<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>228</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 20.

<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>231</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> Arnold Wesker, "Note to Actors and Directors of the *Trilogy*," Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy*, Penguin Books, London (1979).

<sup>234</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 74.

<sup>235</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 85.



“Of one poor scruple, nay, if the scale do turn But in the estimation of a hair, Thou diest, and all thy goods are confiscate.”<sup>236</sup> Her presence in the trial scene as “Balthasar”<sup>237</sup> influences the whole outcome of the trial, and as a result the play also, however only because she has dressed as a man. In Wesker’s play we see how Portia becomes the voice of reason, she says that “I would not carry a sword in one hand and scales in the other. That image always seemed to me ambiguous. Is my sword held to defend the justice my left-hand weighs? Or is it poised threateningly to enforce my left hand’s obduracy.”<sup>238</sup> In this phrase Portia is alluding to the symbol of Lady Justice in order to portray how she feels that the justice system is unfair, and that a verdict is decided before the trial even begins. “I am not a thing of the wind, but an intelligence informed by other men informed by other men informed! I grow.”<sup>239</sup> This is a statement that advocates how society is in control of its own fate, and how education and progress are the only things that can change this. Therefore, she is critical of the blindfold that Lady Justice commonly adorns, that stands for impartiality by saying that this is not accurate or how society truly works.

Jessica is the other main female character in both plays. In both works she has a rebellious spirit, particularly in regard to her father; Shylock. In Act Two, scene three of *The Merchant of Venice*, Jessica tells “*Launcelot the Clown*”<sup>240</sup> that “Our house is hell”<sup>241</sup> and that “though I am a daughter to his blood, I am not to his manners.”<sup>242</sup> The “h” sounds which are repeated in this monosyllabic phrase highlight how the actor portraying Jessica should emphasise her mood of anguish and distress at sharing an abode with her father. The latter statement portrays how she has to resign herself to the fact that she will always be Shylock’s daughter

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<sup>236</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 80.

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>238</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 96.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>240</sup> Wesker, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 30.

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

biologically, but she will never be his daughter in emotion or personality. The fact that her concluding words in Act Two, scene three are “Become a Christian and thy loving wife,”<sup>243</sup> epitomises how she will disown the way of life that she has been brought up in, in order to marry who ever she decides. In contrast to Shakespeare’s Jessica, Wesker’s Jessica is critical of her father’s studious nature, she tells her Aunt Rivka that “Oh I respect scholarship, but there is a world outside the covers of a book, isn’t there?”<sup>244</sup> This is a rhetorical statement revealing how she wants to gain freedom from her father’s philosophical ideas, ideas she finds ultimately “oppressive.”<sup>245</sup> In comparison to Shakespeare’s Jessica she too rebels against Judaism as in Act One, scene six when referring to Henry the Eighth she says that the “rabbis should have been ashamed of themselves helping an English king to divorce his wife.”<sup>246</sup>

In *Shylock* the main reason for the tension between Jessica and her father is how her father continues to exert control over her. She criticises the patriarchal nature of Renaissance society by asking if a woman only becomes “whole”<sup>247</sup> when she is “taken from the possession of her father to the possession of her husband”<sup>248</sup> meaning that women are only considered important in their capacities as either mothers or wives. Both playwrights make this visible in their respective plays, in Act Two, scene five of *The Merchant of Venice* Shylock imperatively tells Jessica “my girl, Look to my house.”<sup>249</sup> In Act One, scene four of *Shylock* the following interaction occurs: “Jessica: I must attend to the food. Please excuse me. Roderigues: I will join you. Forgive me, everyone, I’m dying of thirst. Shylock: Thirst! My goodness. Look at me! Jessica, the citronade. Jessica: (*leaving*) It’s on the table

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<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>246</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 51.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 33.

father.”<sup>250</sup> Therefore, both playwrights present how their respective Shylocks predominantly view Jessica as a female whose main concern is domestic duties. When Shakespeare’s Shylock tells Jessica to “look to my house”<sup>251</sup> it represents how he ultimately owns the property and that she is a glorified servant. This is something which Wesker brings to the fore in his play as Jessica questions the issue of property ownership with “to whom does a house belong? Only the father? Not even the mother? And if not the children and the mother, then how must their relationship be described? As temporary occupants?”<sup>252</sup> Through the repetition of rhetorical devices in this phrase, Jessica is deliberately venting her frustration at not having equality with men, instead having to be dependent upon them for the roof over your head. She says satirically that her father has provided her with “teachers to nourish and exercise my mind,”<sup>253</sup> whilst he “continues to exercise control.”<sup>254</sup> Therefore, she cannot understand why her father has decided to educate her to the highest standard if she will never be able to utilise her knowledge due to the limitations placed on women in this society. What follows is a tense interaction between Jessica and Shylock, which culminates with Jessica abruptly saying “Tell her, tell her! Tell her nothing more- *Jessica storms out. Shylock is shocked.*”<sup>255</sup> The melodramatic repetition in this interaction is reminiscent of the closing scene of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll House* (1879). Ibsen’s play portrays the disintegration of the marriage between Nora and Torvald Helmer amidst the patriarchy of nineteenth century Norway. The concluding stage direction of the play is that “*The street door is slammed shut downstairs,*”<sup>256</sup> which symbolises how Nora abandons her marital home and neglects role as a wife. When Jessica “storms”<sup>257</sup> out on her father she should have the same vivacity as Nora,

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<sup>250</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 28.

<sup>251</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 33.

<sup>252</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 51.

<sup>253</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>256</sup> Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll’s House* (Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, London, 2013), p. 104.

<sup>257</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 52.

Wesker's use of sibilance with "*Shylock is shocked*"<sup>258</sup> portrays how his daughter showing her dismay has taken him by surprise, the verb "storms"<sup>259</sup> also implies that Jessica is now beyond her father's control.

Despite Jessica's strong-willed nature against her father, unlike the Jessica and Shylock that is seen in *The Merchant of Venice*, she does show genuine affection towards her father. This heightens our sense of sympathy for Wesker's Shylock. In Act Two, scene four, she openly defends her father and the nonsense bond which ends up costing Shylock dearly, she figuratively tells Lorenzo and Bassanio that "I'm raw. My rhythms still belong to the Ghetto. I can't slip so quickly from God to God like a whore."<sup>260</sup> The sexual simile at the end of this phrase portrays how Jessica feels uneasy at giving up her Jewishness in favour of Christianity. By comparing herself with a "whore"<sup>261</sup> she is suggesting that neglecting one's religious heritage is cheap and immoral, and the term "raw"<sup>262</sup> suggests that she finds it difficult to disguise what she is. In contrast, Act Three, scene five of Shakespeare's play sees Jessica telling "*Launcelot the Clown*"<sup>263</sup> that she "shall be saved by my husband"<sup>264</sup> who has "made"<sup>265</sup> her "a Christian."<sup>266</sup> She also tells Launcelot that she would rather be a "bastard"<sup>267</sup> child than the legitimate child of her father, a statement epitomising her shame at being Shylock's daughter. Therefore, the Jessica of Shakespeare's play resigns herself to a new life following the Christian faith and disregarding the Judaism which she associates with her father. On the other hand, Wesker's Jessica and her final opinion on her faith is left undecided at the conclusion of *Shylock*, however the following interaction between Antonio

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<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>263</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 65.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.*

and Portia suggests otherwise: “Antonio: But *which* place will she take? There’s no father’s house to return to. Portia: But there is a Jerusalem, where he can be followed.”<sup>268</sup> Portia implies that they will both make the “pilgrimage”<sup>269</sup> to Jerusalem, a city of pivotal importance to Judaism, unlike Venice where they are forced to “need”<sup>270</sup> “laws”<sup>271</sup> to “remain”<sup>272</sup> Jerusalem is a city where they can be at ease with their identity. Sicher writes that “The Jerusalem of the Trilogy has faded from utopian dream to the traditional place for old men to die.”<sup>273</sup> However, I feel that this is far too flippant a statement that does not take into consideration the fact that Shylock has been ostracised by Venetian society, and this is the sole cause for him wanting to go to Jerusalem in the first place.

In Act Two, scene five of Wesker’s play the following interaction between Jessica and Shylock occurs “Shylock: Go! Leave me! Jessica: I *will* go, but I will never leave you. *Jessica leaves in tears. Shylock reaches out to her. Too late.*”<sup>274</sup> A heartfelt exchange between the two characters which is brimming with melancholy as it shows how this father-daughter relationship is being put under immense strain. The language which Wesker uses in this interaction creates a sense of inapt timing and loss with “*leaves,*”<sup>275</sup> “*reaches,*”<sup>276</sup> and “*late.*”<sup>277</sup> Furthermore, as this specific scene draws to a close it is made blatant of how Jessica regrets how she has previously treated her father as she finds the “*tender moment*”<sup>278</sup> between Sherlock and Portia “*unbearable.*”<sup>279</sup> In the final scene of the play Jessica does not speak at all, instead Wesker’s staging portrays how she feels isolated and unhappy after seeing how

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<sup>268</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 100.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>273</sup> Sicher, “The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker’s “The Merchant,” p. 61.

<sup>274</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 96.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid.*

the fate of her father transpired, she “*stands aside*”<sup>280</sup> whilst the other’s enjoy food and each other’s company. She also shows disappointment towards her love interest Lorenzo as she “*ignores him*.”<sup>281</sup> This again is a notable departure from Shakespeare’s play where Jessica and Lorenzo share a loving, playful exchange with each other “In such a night Did young Lorenzo swear he loved her well.”<sup>282</sup> The Jessica that Shakespeare creates is unnervingly carefree about the humiliation which her father has just endured at the hands of the Venetian legal system, this would be unsettling for an audience to watch regardless of what century the play is being performed in.

### Conclusion

In conclusion to this chapter I want to reiterate my final thoughts on Wesker’s version of Shakespeare’s play. Yes, I believe that Wesker’s main motivation for writing this play was both out of personal frustration and his resentment at the literary canon’s tendency to “whitewash”<sup>283</sup> Shakespeare. *Shylock* was a deeply personal endeavour for Wesker as he felt “responsibility towards the image of the Jew,”<sup>284</sup> in that he desired to obliterate the “ugly image”<sup>285</sup> created by Shakespeare from the mind of any audience. However, I do not believe that Wesker’s play is solely on Jewish persecution, but also how if you belong to a minority group in society that you will automatically not have equal opportunities as far as education is concerned. This would have been an issue which Wesker himself had a vested interest in due to him being the creative director of Centre 42 between 1960-1970, with the main objective of making the arts more accessible to the working class in society. I also think it is important that an awareness exists to the fact that *Shylock* was first performed in 1977, an era

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<sup>280</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>282</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 87.

<sup>283</sup> Sicher, “The Jewing of Shylock: Wesker’s *The Merchant*,” p. 58.

<sup>284</sup> Arnold Wesker, *The Birth of Shylock and the Death of Zero Mostel* (Quartet Books, London, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*

when Wesker's own career was faltering due to his falling out of favour with the Royal Shakespeare Company over their refusal to perform his play *The Journalists*. It is perhaps no wonder that Wesker was motivated to write a new version of one of Shakespeare's plays in order to expose the hypocrisy of The Royal Shakespeare Company, as they wouldn't give performing *The Merchant of Venice* a second thought despite its outdated depiction of the Jew as a figure who relishes "sacrificial flesh"<sup>286</sup> and is wholly driven by money with statements such as "A pound of man's flesh taken from a man Is not so estimable, profitable neither, As flesh of muttons, beefs, or goats."<sup>287</sup> This is a statement in which Shylock uses animals in order to completely disregard the importance of the crucifixion, by implying that material value is always greater than spiritual value.

Holland himself refers to Wesker as an "anglo-jewish playwright"<sup>288</sup> in his introduction to Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, the fact that Holland feels the need to mention Wesker's racial denomination is representative of how there is still a problem within the British Literary Canon. It shouldn't matter what denomination Wesker belonged to, the fact is that Shakespeare's depiction of race in *The Merchant of Venice* is harmful to contemporary society because it inevitably permeated with anti-Semitism and superiority. Wesker's Shylock is an autodidact, a character who thrives amongst the books in his "study,"<sup>289</sup> but who is also fully aware that whilst others such as Lorenzo possess a "university trained mind"<sup>290</sup> his is the "ghetto's."<sup>291</sup> The "walls"<sup>292</sup> of the ghetto which Rivka refers to in Act One, scene three would be better described as barriers between one religious denomination and the other. However, in Act One, scene seven Wesker's stage directions create a tangible

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<sup>286</sup> Wesker, "Shame on you Shakespeare."

<sup>287</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 21.

<sup>288</sup> Holland, *Introduction*, p. xxi.

<sup>289</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 15.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

sense of Shylock's passion for education and progression: "*Shylock tells his story with mounting excitement and theatricality, using whatever is around him for props, moving furniture, food, perhaps even people, like men on his chessboard of history.*"<sup>293</sup> The fact that Wesker mentions a "chess-board"<sup>294</sup> symbolises how the only factor which can truly alter a society is the people who are in it; it is within their control, the physical appearance of a chessboard is significant to this also. The multi-coloured nature of it represents how society should become more accepting and tolerant so as racial segregation is abolished. Shylock's characterisation is epitomised through the short excerpt which precedes Wesker's play, an excerpt which reads that "I do not use despair, for it is not mine, only entrusted to me for safe-keeping."<sup>295</sup> This epitomises Shylock because it implies that life should be lived to the full because our time to do so may be limited. This is a poignant addition to the template of this play, because at the conclusion it is made clear that Shylock's time to do so was indeed limited and cut short by the irrationality of the justice system: "Perhaps now is the time to make that journey to Jerusalem. Join those other old men on the quayside, waiting to make a pilgrimage, to be buried there-ach!"<sup>296</sup> The "ach"<sup>297</sup> symbolises Shylock's unhappiness at how his light-hearted mockery of the law has backfired so greatly upon him, so much so that the main thing he lived for has been taken away. Therefore, I think that it is fair to assume that in Wesker's play Shylock is being as good as executed. Which conveys why Wesker associates Shakespeare's play with the Jewish Holocaust, because just as a Nazi firing squad would execute a Jew, so too did those interrogating Shylock on trial take away his reason for living. Therefore, I agree with a statement from Penny Gay who writes that "it is virtually

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<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>295</sup> Wislawa Szymborska, Taken from *Wesker's Historical Plays*.

<sup>296</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 97.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*



impossible in the post-Holocaust world to see Shylock as anything other than tragic,”<sup>298</sup> the key term in this statement being “post-Holocaust,”<sup>299</sup> something which Shakespeare was unable to have foreseen or predicted when constructing his Shylock.

In terms of the representation of women in *Shylock*, I have analysed both Jessica and Portia in line with Shakespeare’s play. My conclusion on this would be that both playwrights represent women who are strong and freethinking. However, I believe that Portia and Jessica as constructed by Wesker, are true representations of 21<sup>st</sup> century and not Renaissance women at all, as Leeming writes the “twentieth century’s changed opinions”<sup>300</sup> inevitably affected the plot of Wesker’s play. Specifically, in the character of Jessica he shows someone who does not conform to the institute of marriage. In comparison to her Shakespearean alter-ego, yes, she still “runs away with a gentile”<sup>301</sup> but not because Shylock is a “miserly old tyrant”<sup>302</sup> but because he is an “over-possessive”<sup>303</sup> “loving”<sup>304</sup> father. However, he is a loving father whom she later sides with against her gentile lover Lorenzo, whereas Portia wants to make her own choice and not wholly abide by what her father envisaged for her. The key difference is the trial scene because in Wesker’s play Portia does not have to disguise herself as a man in order to gain admission to the court. She is able to influence the outcome as a woman and not as a cross-dresser. In Act Two, scene five Shylock himself tells Portia that “You have a future, young lady, I tell you, a great future.”<sup>305</sup> However, the fact that she admits at the conclusion of the play that she will have to abide by her father’s “will,”<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Penny Gay, *The Cambridge Introduction to Shakespeare’s Comedies* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008), p. 55.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> Leeming, Commentary on Arnold Wesker’s *The Merchant*, p. xxii.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

which states that she should allow her marriage choice to be decided for her, conveys how her life like Shylock's will ultimately become a "fight against"<sup>307</sup> adversity.

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<sup>307</sup> Leeming, Commentary on Arnold Wesker's *The Merchant*, p. xxxi.

“What, what is there more?”<sup>1</sup> Conclusion.

This thesis has covered four main topics in relation to Wesker’s body of work. In the introduction I explained how I chose these topics because there is a scarcity in criticism to these aspects of Wesker’s work. The above quotation is the last phrase said in *The Kitchen* and I feel that it is apt in relation to my conclusion. It is applicable to my thesis as a whole because I have demonstrated that there will always be more topics that need examination because of the progressive nature of his work. This means, that although some of his pieces have been written as far back as sixty years they are still as applicable to us in 2020 as they were when he wrote them. This is because when seeing them performed or read, what anyone will be simultaneously aware of is the present current affairs that surround us now are what surrounded us then too. Political unrest and instability, unemployment and gender equality are to name only a few of the issues that occupy Wesker’s body of written work.

In the first chapter of the thesis I argued how food plays a diverse role within Wesker’s work. It is used in order to accentuate a character’s emotions. It can represent familial love and unity and it can purely be something which the character in question enjoys! Samantha of *The Mistress* uses food and specifically chocolate to convey how she feels about the complex nature of her personal life: “He has this idea for a new diet of citrus fruits and honey in the morning and yoghurt and honey in the evening. And it’s very good. I’ve tried it. But I’ll never be any good at diets, I’m too curious to be disciplined or moral about anything!”<sup>2</sup> Sarah and Mrs Bryant of *The Trilogy* series of plays embody maternal love against the odds: “Want some biscuits? Have a piece of cake. Look, cake I made specially for you-your favourite”<sup>3</sup> and “Well, shall we have a little cup o’ tea while we’re waitin’? I’ll go put the kettle on.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, Taken from *Wesker’s Social Plays* (Oberon Books, London, 2009), pp. 85-86.

<sup>2</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 75.

<sup>3</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 70.

[*Goes to kitchen*].”<sup>4</sup> In the case of both Sarah and Mrs Bryant food causes natural social barriers such as class, education or race to become null and void as food is something which everyone can and will enjoy. These female characters highlight the universality of food. The enjoyment of food is never better represented than in Wesker’s short story entitled “Pools” published in 1971 in the collection *Six Sundays in January*. In this work Wesker’s salubrious style of writing highlights the comfort and pleasure that the main female character, Mrs Hyams, receives from preparing food for others despite the fact that they offer little affection to her to combat her loneliness: “She spent all day preparing the evening meal which that week consisted of a barley soup and a sweet smelling *chuland*, to be followed by a trifle...”<sup>5</sup> and “Before sitting down Mrs Hyams took out a bowl of fruit and nuts and sweets and asked if they had had enough to eat.”<sup>6</sup> Mrs Hyams’ enjoyment of feeding others emphasises the selfless nature of her personality, which evokes pathos from those who read this short story as they see a female character who appears to give infinitely yet seems to receive little in return. The “e” sounds in the latter phrase heightens the sense that Mrs Hyams is always looking to do more to help people, which is also highlighted by Wesker’s repetitive use of the word “and.”

In the analysis of *The Kitchen* in chapter one I explained how Wesker’s “*kitchen*”<sup>7</sup> is a microcosmic model of society itself. The play itself has a cast of thirty, a cast of this size helps to evoke how everyone in society has their own individual and unique role to play, in comparison to any dramatic production. The opening stage direction of the play itself reads that “*There is no curtain. The kitchen is always there. In semi-darkness.*”<sup>8</sup> The fact there is “*no curtain*”<sup>9</sup> is significant to how this play and Wesker’s work as a whole is interpreted. In

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<sup>4</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, p. 136.

<sup>5</sup> Wesker, “Pools,” Taken from *Six Sundays in January* (Johnathan Cape Ltd, London, 1971), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>7</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

the theatre the curtain is traditionally viewed as the dividing line between illusion and reality, in other words to encourage escapism for the audience. In my view Wesker removes the curtain from this specific play to form a “bridge between actor and audience,”<sup>10</sup> therefore encouraging the audience to feel that they are participating in the play. However, in this conclusion I want to home in on the role of the “TRAMP”<sup>11</sup> and comment on how this character is significant in relation to the entirety of Wesker’s body of work. A tramp is defined as “a person who travels from place to place on foot in search of work or as a vagrant or beggar.”<sup>12</sup> This definition reminds us of a comment which Wesker made and which I referred to in the Introduction to this thesis which was that he experienced a certain period of time in the “Wilderness.”<sup>13</sup> By referring to a “wilderness,”<sup>14</sup> Wesker suggests exclusion, isolation and a lack of shelter, in comparison to his Tramp. The first words said by the Tramp are ““Scuse me, Chef (*Tapping his knee.*) war disabled, I don’t usually ask for food but I lost me pensions book, see, I don’t ask but...”<sup>15</sup> The audience, when first introduced to the Tramp, will base their opinion of him according to his appearance and his poor grammar. However, he then conveys his specialised gastronomical knowledge with the following: “Watcha making? Spaghetti Boloinaizeeee? That’s good-Italian food. Do you put bay leaves in? Good with bay leaves, not the same without. Bay leaves, red peppers, all that stuff.”<sup>16</sup> Wesker makes an astute social observation through the Tramp which is that society has become so preoccupied with red tape formality that we have lost sight of what is really of value. In comparison we see in Act Three, scene one of *Chicken Soup with Barley* how Sarah

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<sup>10</sup> Dr Sarah Weston, “Reframing Historical Protest in the Community Play,” Performance and Protest Conference held at Magee College, January 10<sup>th</sup> 2019.

<sup>11</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Edited by Angus Stevenson, Third Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010).

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Sweet, “Arnold Wesker: Did Trotskyists kill off the best Seventies play?” *The Telegraph*, 16<sup>th</sup> May (2012).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, p. 72.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

is “sitting by the table struggling to fill out an official Government form – she talks a lot to herself.”<sup>17</sup> A comparison can be made between Sarah and the Tramp due to the fact that they have both been people who have contributed to a society that now appears to be oppressive towards them. The former with the dedication that she has shown to her family whilst also contributing to the economy through her job and the latter as a person who defended his country in the Second World War and yet whose identity is now wholly defined by his homeless existence. Sarah and the Tramp have become outcasts in comparison to Wesker who faced exclusion in terms of his career. Therefore, perhaps in his opening stage directions to *The Kitchen* Wesker was foreseeing his own time in “semi-darkness”<sup>18</sup> from the 1970s onwards which saw a decline in the number of his plays performed in the United Kingdom and literary critics failed to fully recognise his later work to the same extent that *The Trilogy* had been recognised. This marginalisation of Wesker can be compared to how the Tramp is treated in *The Kitchen*. Peter imperatively says to the Tramp to “Take these cutlets and go, quick, whisht!”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, to disappear back into the “wilderness”<sup>20</sup> of the night with the hope that no one will notice that he was even there or indeed that he ever made any contribution of note.

The second chapter of the thesis analysed how Wesker’s representation of women evolved from the 1950s through to 2011. I decided that this topic should be separated into two sections due to the fact that women are massively important to Wesker’s *oeuvre* as a whole. Overall, my analysis has brought me to the conclusion that Wesker’s representation of his female characters evolved in direct proportion to the society in which they lived. This meant that for example Sarah, Sonia, Betty and Matty all had to adhere to what an early-mid

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<sup>17</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy* (Penguin Books, London, 1979), p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> Wesker, *The Kitchen*, p. 11.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Sweet, “Arnold Wesker: Did Trotskyists kill off the best Seventies play?”

twentieth century English society had conventionally set for them both in terms of career expectations and their roles as women within the family framework. In my view Wesker illustrates this most effectively through the language of Betty with “Me-I chased and screamed him around the globe, took emotional risks, asked unfashionable questions. Fatal! Loud and lavish in a steely, sparse land, Fatal! But to him they gave a knighthood.”<sup>21</sup> Betty’s comment embodies how different standards were deemed acceptable for different genders, Betty’s phrase informs us of how it was ok for her husband to have multiple affairs and as a result a number of illegitimate children but it would not have been ok for her to behave in the same way. My interpretation of Wesker’s disabled female protagonist is that she is the embodiment of the lost opportunities and the constraints imposed on the women of that specific generation, women such as Matty, Sarah and Sonia. In the opening stage directions of this specific one-woman play the centre of the stage is occupied by an “*electric wheelchair*.”<sup>22</sup> The effect of this is that the wheelchair has supplanted any life that Betty once had as it has now come to define her much to her frustration. The title: *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* is also apt because it conveys how this is a female character whose identity has not been allowed to fully flourish. Isolation becomes invisibility which can be said of all of the above female characters, due to the fact that they suffer a loss of identity. Isolation becoming invisibility could also be said of our author, as David Cameron can quantify fully for us as he failed to even recall who Wesker was when Jeremy Corbyn paid tribute to him in the House of Commons. In terms of his female characters however, a loss of identity can be caused by a number of things, loss of identity due to marriage and motherhood, but mainly due to the constraints that society places upon them as a whole. A term which recurs repeatedly in *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* is the term “Handicapped,”<sup>23</sup> Betty has

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<sup>21</sup> Wesker, *Whatever Happened to Betty Lemon?* Taken from *One-Woman Plays* (Penguin Books, London, 1989), p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

been labelled with this due to her winning the award of the “Handicapped Woman of the Year,”<sup>24</sup> a title which she conveys disregard for “The Season’s Paraplegic Princess, pah pom!”<sup>25</sup> The alliteration Wesker uses in this phrase emphasise how Betty’s wheelchair has not caused her larger than life mental capacity to be mellowed, her reference to a “Princess”<sup>26</sup> also causes the audience to question why it should be considered unconventional that a Princess can be “paraplegic.”<sup>27</sup> What we realise at the end of this play is that Betty’s handicapped status did not begin with the physical impairments that old age will inevitably bring but that she has been handicapped her whole life because of her gender. This can also be applied to Matty, Sarah and Sonia as analysed in chapter two.

Samantha pulling “*out a bottle of Jack Daniels whiskey,*”<sup>28</sup> and “*a box of chocolates*”<sup>29</sup> from the drawers in her desk visually shows now in the latter years of the twentieth century for some women the workplace has displaced the home as the main priority. We should also note the type of food and drink associated with each of these two women. In the case of Sarah the following interaction between her and Ada typifies her mentality: “Sarah: Ada? Ada? You here? Go inside, Daddy’ll make some tea. Supper will soon be ready. [*Appears cheerfully from kitchen with all the signs of a cook about her. Kisses Ada.*] Got a nice supper. Ada: What nice supper? Sarah: Barley soup. I left it on a small light all day while I was at work. [*Returns to kitchen.*]<sup>30</sup> First, this is an interaction which emphasises Sarah’s ease within the domestic sphere, second, the fact that she does a full-time job and also makes the effort to prepare a meal for her family conveys how she multi-tasks because she is both the breadwinner and the matriarchal figure within this family and third, she makes “Barley

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>30</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 37.



soup”<sup>31</sup> which she prizes with curing Ada from diphtheria as a young child. Barley soup is also a nutritious, staple, wholesome choice of food which also occupies a pivotal place within Jewish cuisine. Samantha on a different note works into the night whilst indulging in the bottle of “*Jack Daniels*”<sup>32</sup> and a “*box of chocolates*,”<sup>33</sup> food and drink which are commonly associated with luxury and not nourishment or sustenance. One observation I did make when analysing *The Mistress* is the alcohol and the chocolate are used by Samantha as a means to make her numb to the anxiety and unhappiness that she is feeling. In a summation of these two examples what can be ascertained is that despite not having the money and fame that Samantha has that Sarah is more content with her life. In contrast Samantha is not due to her feelings of dissatisfaction with her personal life, lack of family and of roots. Therefore, even though society has evolved and the role of women has too this does not mean that Wesker’s representation of women evokes more happiness.

Act One of *Chicken Soup with Barley* sees the Kahn family facing the threat of Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts and their right-wing supremacist ideology which, if successful, could have caused them to be driven from their home. Yet fifty years on, Samantha is a successful business owner who people are now dependent on due to her talent as a dress designer, she also specifies that one client in particular is “rich”<sup>34</sup> conveying that Samantha must be earning a good income from her craft. Therefore, Wesker shows how fifty years on from Sarah in *The Trilogy*, Samantha’s parents were also “*Eastern European emigrés*”<sup>35</sup> informing us of how Samantha’s origins are of those of people who have faced exile from their own country yet she is making a substantial living for herself in a different country which she does not have any roots in.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 66.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

The excerpt from the Book of Deuteronomy included in the 1989 Penguin Books version of *The Mistress* says that “On Passover night the youngest child asks, ‘Wherefore is this night different from all other nights?...’ And the father replies, ‘Once were we slaves in Egypt, and the Lord our God brought us forth from thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm...’”<sup>36</sup> The reference to the Jewish festival of the Passover is significant to this play in more than one way, at the conclusion of the play phrases recur which evoke a sense of finality such as “this night is judgement night”<sup>37</sup> and “tonight of all nights.”<sup>38</sup> My interpretation of Wesker’s deliberate reference to the Passover and Samantha’s Faustian battle of wills is that she is successful yet unsure of her identity as a woman. A theme not uncommon in Wesker’s overall representation of women. In the original *Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe, Faustus in comparison to Samantha has also risen in social status to be “graced with Doctor’s name”<sup>39</sup> despite his parents being “base of stock.”<sup>40</sup> Yet Faustus isn’t satisfied with his life at present and he practices magic in order to gain what he believes is godly power “Tis magic, magic that hath ravished me.”<sup>41</sup> The fact that “ravished”<sup>42</sup> is the only word in this statement with two syllables while the others are monosyllabic heightens the sense that Faustus has felt unable to fight against the unrelenting force of “magic.”<sup>43</sup> Similarly, the following phrase said by Samantha which is that “I had worked my alchemy to lose him deep inside me,”<sup>44</sup> conveys how she too refers to supernatural forces. Both Marlowe and Wesker through language connotating penetration and

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, Taken from *Renaissance Drama: An Anthology of Plays and Entertainments*, Second Edition (Blackwell Publishing, Malden, Oxford and Victoria, 2000), p. 201.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 66.

subordination such as “alchemy”<sup>45</sup> and “magic”<sup>46</sup> equate the supernatural with sexual immorality. Both Faustus and Samantha show an affinity with alchemy, however at the conclusion of Marlowe’s play Faustus faces his judgement and finds himself begging God for forgiveness despite his staunch Atheism throughout this morality play “My God, my God, look not so fierce on me!”<sup>47</sup> A monosyllabic statement which epitomises Faustus’ desperation for God to have mercy on his soul. At the end of Wesker’s play Samantha’s battle of wills reaches a dramatic climax with the stage direction that “*she puts her hand on the hot iron,*”<sup>48</sup> a disturbing action of self-harm and pain which restores her equilibrium and banishes the dummy Ninotchka from saying anything more, which indicates that she has successfully defeated her “Evil Angel.”<sup>49</sup> The repetition of “h” sounds in this stage direction emphasise the sharp nature of the pain experienced by Samantha in this graphic use of staging. Furthermore, the fact that she touches the “hot iron”<sup>50</sup> signifies how she punishes herself for her sexual immorality and at the ending of the play we see how her main focus is to donate to the many charity appeals that are sent to her office as a possible means of redemption from her impending “judgement”<sup>51</sup> “Amnesty International...Jews Against Apartheid...Christian Aid... ‘Dear Samantha Milner, to you the suffering in Africa may seem never ending. Horrors that cry out for help. Your help. And sometimes you almost wish you could forget. Until...’”<sup>52</sup> The ominous conclusion to this one-woman play portrays how we should not judge others, as regardless of ability, fame or fortune everyone will be judged in equal measure.

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<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, p. 204.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 226.

<sup>48</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 77.

<sup>49</sup> Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, p. 203.

<sup>50</sup> Wesker, *The Mistress*, p. 77.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

Lack of cohesiveness between the family is evident when making a comparison between the *The Trilogy* and *Denial* this is represented most succinctly through Wesker's use of language. In Act One, scene two of *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* a pregnant Ada tells her husband Dave Simmonds that "We'll teach the children to look at things won't we Dave? I shall make it into a sort of game for them. Teach them to take notice, [*with mock pomp*] Don't let the world pass, you by, I shall tell them- [*breathing deeply*] breathe, I shall say breathe deeply and fill your lungs and open your eyes. For the sun, I shall say, open your eyes for that laaarge sun."<sup>53</sup> In this section from *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, expectant mother Ada is associated with excitement, hope, new beginnings and progress and the sibilant phrase above represents how she wants to provide her children with warmth, whilst encouraging them to be open-minded and self-sufficient rather than kept in sheltered darkness; emphasised by Ada's repeat referrals to the "sun,"<sup>54</sup> the archetype of heat, light and illumination. However, in scene fourteen of *Denial* Jenny conveys her anger at having "a home, a family"<sup>55</sup> and "a future"<sup>56</sup> and yet losing it "I want to kill, kill, kill! Wrecked, wrecked, wrecked."<sup>57</sup> The melodramatic repetition of the words "kill"<sup>58</sup> and "wrecked"<sup>59</sup> is a clear distinction from the image of stability which is shaped by Ada's language in *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, rather in this scene from *Denial* we see how the female character of Jenny feels that her relationship with her children has become irretrievably damaged and fragmented. The alliteration Wesker uses in this example heightens the sheer level of anger which the actor portraying Jenny should make blatant at this point in the play. John Nathan in his review of a performance of *Denial* peculiarly writes that it should serve "as a paen to

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<sup>53</sup> Wesker, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, p. 174.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 171.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

loving parenthood.”<sup>60</sup> The fact that Nathan uses the term “paen”<sup>61</sup> mirrors scene twenty-one of the play when Jenny’s accused parents Matthew and Karen disagree over the lyrics to a nursery rhyme which they sang to Jenny as a child “Karen: No, darling. The last little piggy went ‘wee wee wee wee wee wee all the way home! Matthew: It went ‘wee wee wee wee wee wee wee wee’ not ‘inky pinky ponky poo’?”<sup>62</sup> The fact that Wesker directs that the two parents should argue over the lyrics to a child’s nursery rhyme conveys how this latter twentieth century society has distorted the simplicity of childhood with its so-called contemporary ideas. This unspoilt simplicity is conveyed through Matthew and Karen quoting from a nursery rhyme and also through the character of Ziggy Landsman’s account of how he likes spending time with his granddaughter. “We draw pictures and colour in colouring books. I get more pleasure out of it than she does, and I kiss her and bite her and stroke her and hug her and hold her and dance with her. I can’t get enough of her. She’s a delight and she’s delighted.”<sup>63</sup> For an audience member or reader of this play in 2020 there is clear ambiguity in Wesker’s choice of language in the above passage, verbs such as “kiss,” “bite,” “stroke,” and “hug” all suggest a quasi-erotic tone. The fact that he repeatedly refers to the child by the personal pronoun “her”<sup>64</sup> has the effect of tricking the audience, because they forget that Ziggy is talking about a child and not an adult woman. Therefore, there is ambiguity in as to how far affection between a parent and their child should go because in the language which Wesker uses it is difficult to see the difference between erotic, sexual love and familial love. Furthermore, the last section of the passage ends with “I can’t get enough of her. She’s a delight and she’s delighted.”<sup>65</sup> The fact that Ziggy pointedly says that the child

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<sup>60</sup> John Nathan, Review of *Denial*, Taken from *Jewish Chronicle*, 25<sup>th</sup> May (2012).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Wesker, *Denial*, p. 201.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

is “delighted”<sup>66</sup> portrays how the child enjoys this amount of affection just as much as the adult. Overall, my final opinion of this play is that Jenny felt an immeasurable amount of love as a child and she has found that the love she has experienced as an adult cannot be compared to it. The rhyme which Matthew and Karen are of course referring to is “This Little Piggy went to Market.”

In *Denial*, Wesker represents the fractured society foreseen in *The Trilogy*, in Act Three, scene two of *Chicken Soup with Barley* we see how Harry and Sarah who are now living in a “L.C.C. flat”<sup>67</sup> have Cissie around to visit who makes the comment that “There’s always something happening in these flats. Last week a woman tried to gas herself.”<sup>68</sup> The fact that Cissie uses the word “always”<sup>69</sup> suggests that these flats built after World War Two to provide residents with practical homes as well as a sense of community are now notorious for anti-social goings on and cannot be compared to the comfort which the Kahn family previously lived in pre-World War Two. It is also important to note that in Wesker’s collaboration with the artist John Allin we see an illustration which Allin did of one of these new “Tenements!”<sup>70</sup> an illustration which depicts these new flats as diverse as symbolised through the multi-coloured nature of the picture, communal and safe as all of the children playing in the illustration are under supervision and in an enclosed space. The illustration is accompanied with the text written by Wesker which reads “Surrounded by family, closed in, protected...not of course your flowered enclosures, but still, a private space. Privacy, for working-class families, in those days!”<sup>71</sup> Wesker’s text therefore presents a somewhat cleansed depiction of what life was perhaps really like living in a council tenement, the “p”

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<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, p. 57.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Arnold Wesker and John Allin, *Say Goodbye: You May Never See Them Again* (Jonathan Cape, London, 1974).

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

sounds in the aforementioned phrase highlights Wesker's feeling that this new form of housing will cause the propulsion of future generations who have the same roots as him. Our author conveys through his collaboration with Allin a sense of pride for where he comes from which the reader is informed of from the first passage of text from this work "sentimentality? That's looking back with dishonesty."<sup>72</sup> Money was another item that post World War Two attitudes changed towards, in Act Two, scene two of *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* the character of Esther says rhetorically, "who buys anything outright these days anyway,"<sup>73</sup> which is an irresponsible attitude to have concerning money however the fact that she says "these days"<sup>74</sup> in comparison to Cissie's comment about the flats suggests that this is the norm, that Post World War Two people bought things with money that they did not have. Therefore, both Cissie and Esther's comments act as indicators to the audience informing them that society's attitude has changed and not for the better both in terms of attitudes in relationships and as to how money is also viewed. We should also note that in Act Two, scene three of *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* Ronnie thoughtfully asks "you still think it'll come, the great millennium?"<sup>75</sup> This phrase epitomises life itself due the fact that life is all about time and waiting, as Ronnie symbolises by referring to Sarah as a "patient old tigress."<sup>76</sup> His animalistic use of language is being used to highlight how "fierce"<sup>77</sup> and "passionate"<sup>78</sup> Sarah is as a person, and to convey how much she puts into life yet it does not seem to give her a lot back. She is a character who doesn't want to face up to the reality of her situation and try to move forward.

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> Wesker, *I'm Talking About Jerusalem*, p. 202.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of English*, Edited by Angus Stevenson, Third Edition (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2010).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

The fourth and final chapter of the thesis is a study of Wesker's *Shylock*, a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. In an interview with Robert Skloot from 1974 Wesker says that one of the motivations for writing this play was due to the "big oil embargo"<sup>79</sup> between the Arabs and the Israelis in 1973 where the Arabs wanted all major countries to stop trading with the Israelis or else they would "ban supplies of oil."<sup>80</sup> Wesker then goes on to say that "with everyone kowtowing"<sup>81</sup> he could sense a "feeling of encroaching antisemitism."<sup>82</sup> The insinuation which Wesker is making in this statement is that antisemitism did neither begin nor end with the Renaissance but it is still as prevalent a problem into the twenty-first century today. My interpretation of Wesker's *Shylock* is that he uses it in order to expose how harmful Shakespeare's play truly is, yet, in Northern Ireland on the examination boards of AQA and CCEA *The Merchant of Venice* is still included in the GCSE specification for English Literature. In my view it is illogical to teach this play in our classrooms to our citizens of the future due to heavily antisemitic and racist comments which are repeatedly made and accepted in this play such as "a gentle riddance. Draw the curtains, go. Let all of his complexion choose me so"<sup>83</sup> and "Certainly the Jew is the very devil incarnation."<sup>84</sup> These are two statements which encourage racial abuse and generalised prejudice, with language which suggests inclusiveness such as "all"<sup>85</sup> and "certainly."<sup>86</sup> Language which depicts how no matter what sort of human being they are if they belong to a specific denomination then this is enough to discriminate against them. In his interview with Kirsty Young for *Desert Island Discs* on 17<sup>th</sup> December 2006 Wesker says that the "all

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<sup>79</sup> Robert Skloot and Arnold Wesker, "Interview: On Playwrighting," *Performing Arts Journal*, Volume 2, Winter (1978), p. 42.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Penguin Classics, London, 2011), p. 40.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.



important”<sup>87</sup> review of any play on Broadway comes from *The New York Times*. When looking to the review from *The New York Times* of *Shylock* from 1974 it states that “there is not much use seeking comparisons between Arnold Wesker’s new play ‘*The Merchant*’ and Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*.”<sup>88</sup> I disagree with this assertion about the plays of Shakespeare and Wesker because in my thesis comparing the two plays brought me to realise how we should observe how society progresses through the literature that we study. First, in Shakespeare’s play what is seen is a society which makes the Jew a complete pariah; a person who is universally disliked, “a stranger cur.”<sup>89</sup> Aggressive, uncivilised and uncontrollable. Whilst in Wesker’s play we see how Shylock has evolved into a character whom the Christian members of this Venetian society do socialise with “now you’ll stay for food, you must eat with us.”<sup>90</sup> Once again, food is not only something for sustenance but something which maintains the emotional bond between human beings. However, one thing that both Shylocks do have in common is that they are both ostracised within each of the societies that they live in. Therefore, our author who has been referred to as a “unique outsider,”<sup>91</sup> succeeds once again in not “going with the crowd”<sup>92</sup> as it would have been very easy to give his rewriting of Shakespeare’s play a commercial, closed, happy-ending where the character of Shylock is accepted by Venetian society and all’s well that ends well. However, this does not happen, and in my view Wesker does this in order to portray society as authentically as he can, therefore he demonstrates that unless in a utopia no society will sadly ever be fully cleansed of discrimination and prejudice. The key comparison that we have to make between Shakespeare’s time and Wesker’s time is that sectarianism is something which will never be

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<sup>87</sup> BBC *Desert Island Discs*, Castaway: Arnold Wesker interviewed by Kirsty Young, Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> December (2006), Taken from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0093tst>.

<sup>88</sup> Richard Eder, “Stage: ‘Merchant’ Intelligent but Weak,” *The New York Times*, New York, 17<sup>th</sup> November (1977).

<sup>89</sup> Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, p. 19.

<sup>90</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 30.

<sup>91</sup> BBC *Desert Island Discs*.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid*.

considered anachronistic and something which will always exist within society. Sectarianism is also something that Wesker when writing *Shylock* was acutely aware of as he wrote in a journal entry that “I shall never forget reading about a social worker who, before he was killed in Belfast, described the violence as ‘The beery hatred that is handed down from father to son.’”<sup>93</sup> Therefore, by writing this phrase Wesker is implying that sectarianism spurns from an irrational, senseless form of hatred and it passes down from generation to generation.

In this final chapter I challenged how literary critics referred to Wesker himself, first Peter Holland, in his introduction to the 2011 Penguin Classics version of *The Merchant of Venice* writes about the “Anglo-Jewish playwright Arnold Wesker.”<sup>94</sup> Why does Holland feel the need to identify Wesker’s Jewishness at all, why should this be considered important to the interpretation of this play. Holland insinuates that the main reason for Wesker’s dislike of Shakespeare’s play is because he feels an affinity with Shylock because of Shylock being a Jew also. Instead, he portrays Wesker as an angry, irrational figure who overreacts and not as a human being who disagrees with one race deeming itself superior and persecuting another. In her article for *The Sunday Times* Julia Llewellyn Smith writes that when she first meets Wesker, in appearance he is the very opposite from the “flailing Old Testament Prophet”<sup>94</sup> that she had imagined he would be. The fact that Smith refers to Wesker in this manner conveys how she is adhering to a Jewish stereotype, due to the fact that she refers to the “Old Testament,”<sup>95</sup> which relates to a comment made by Louis Jacobs who writes that “no Jew, no matter to which denomination he belongs will speak of the Hebrew Bible as ‘Old Testament’ since he does not believe that there has been a ‘New Testament.’”<sup>96</sup> Smith’s referral to Wesker

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<sup>93</sup> Wesker, *The Birth of Shylock and the Death of Zero Mostel*, p. 11.

<sup>94</sup> Peter Holland, Introduction to *Merchant of Venice*.

<sup>94</sup> Julia Llewellyn Smith, “I used to call myself a Socialist-now I don’t know what it means,” *The Times*, Wednesday November 2<sup>nd</sup> (1994).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Louis Jacobs, *A Concise Companion to the Jewish Religion*, Article on the Torah (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999).

could be interpreted as derogatory due to the fact that it simplifies his Jewishness by insinuating that she thought he would be a caricature of a Jewish man. Her use of the verb “flailing”<sup>97</sup> also suggests that Smith expected Wesker to be physically unpredictable. Both comments from Holland and Llewellyn-Smith can be interpreted as patronising due to the fact that they depict Wesker as overly sensitive and unnecessarily overreactive. It is a pity that critics view Wesker through a different strength of English focal lens than Shakespeare as he says that he feels as “fiercely English as I do Jewish.”<sup>98</sup>

In my thesis, the character of Shylock epitomises this phrase said by Wesker as is seen repeatedly in his play. Phrases such as “I love them, those old men, their cleverness, their deeds, their wide-ranging talents. Feel it! Touch it!”<sup>99</sup> And “the word! Unsuspected! Written! Printed! Indestructible! Boom! It thrills me!”<sup>100</sup> The repetition of the exclamation mark in each of the phrases quoted emphasises Shylock’s dynamism for literature and how he becomes “animated”<sup>101</sup> by what books offer. The former statement from Shylock has sensory language in it with “feel”<sup>102</sup> and “touch,”<sup>103</sup> language which portrays how paramount books are to Shylock’s life. Furthermore, Shylock is also representative of those who are “doomed”<sup>104</sup> but “rage against the dying of the light.”<sup>105</sup>

Shylock’s passion for individual betterment is reminiscent of the last scene of *Roots*, the second play of *The Wesker Trilogy* where the character of Beatie protests about “the slop singers and the pop writers and the film makers and women’s magazines and the Sunday papers and the picture strip love stories- that’s who come along, and you don’t have to make

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<sup>97</sup> Smith, “I used to call myself a Socialist-now I don’t know what it means.”

<sup>98</sup> BBC *Desert Island Discs*.

<sup>99</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, Taken from *Wesker’s Historical Plays* (Oberon Books, London, 2012), p. 16.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>101</sup> Skloot and Wesker, “Interview: On Playwrighting,” p. 41.

<sup>102</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 16.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

no effort for them.”<sup>106</sup> In this excerpt Beatie conveys the demeaning manner in which the working-classes in society are treated through the mediocrity of the arts and literature which they are offered. However, she then continues by saying “the whole stinkin’ commercial world insults us and we don’t care a damn. Well, Ronnie’s right- it’s our own bloody fault. We want the third rate- we got it! We got it! We got it!”<sup>107</sup> The melodramatic repetition of “we got it”<sup>108</sup> in this example expresses that it is up to those in society to change society, however if those in society include Beatie’s family from *Roots* and Lorenzo from *Shylock* then hope is futile. Futile due to staging such as the following from *Roots* that the “*murmur of the family sitting down to eat grows as BEATIE’S last cry is heard. Whatever she will do they will continue to live as before. As BEATIE stands alone, articulate at last.*”<sup>109</sup> She stands “alone”<sup>110</sup> whilst they “live as before.”<sup>111</sup> Similarly, in Act One, scene seven of *Shylock* Lorenzo imperatively tells Shylock “don’t forget,”<sup>112</sup> which adds to the demeaning way in which Shylock is treated as Lorenzo’s words could also mean make sure you “don’t forget”<sup>113</sup> your menial status within society. It echoes a comment that Wesker makes in his interview with Young for *Desert Island Discs* where he says that he feels uneasy about “people who wear cloth caps to show where they’ve come from,”<sup>114</sup> therefore the hat carries such importance in the play due to the fact that it foreshadows how this society will turn against Shylock due to his religion. No matter how enthusiastic Shylock is about “knowledge”<sup>115</sup> the sheer ignorance of people in this society such as Lorenzo who pitifully believes that “a man can be strong and happy with *no* knowledge, *no* art”<sup>116</sup> prevents him

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<sup>106</sup> Wesker, *Roots*, Taken from *The Wesker Trilogy* (Penguin Books, London, 1979), pp. 147-148.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 60.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> BBC *Desert Island Discs*.

<sup>115</sup> Wesker, *Shylock*, p. 87.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

from ever ascending in status. There is also substantial irony in the comment which Lorenzo makes above due to the fact that he has a “university trained mind,”<sup>117</sup> therefore Lorenzo has gone through tertiary education yet it is autodidactic Shylock who demonstrates a greater aptitude for the scriptures as is exemplified through the following interaction “Lorenzo: (*With evangelistic fervour.*) ‘They are not humbled even unto this day, neither have they feared, nor walked in my law, nor in my statutes, that I have set before you and before your fathers.’ Thus sayeth Ezekiel. Shylock: It was Jeremiah...”<sup>118</sup> This is of course no coincidence due to our author also priding himself on being an autodidact.

Through the topics covered within the four chapters of this thesis I have endeavoured to show how Wesker is a prolific writer over five decades. The works which have been referred to and researched in this thesis have given me a broad cross-section of the topics which he covered. One observation I can make is that he does not shun topics due to them not being politically correct or not commercial. Instead Wesker is a writer who will always be relevant regardless of the century as was shown through my study of *Shylock*. He is a very human writer, a writer who relishes the complexities faced by humanity on a daily basis. He does this by presenting characters who are paradoxical, characters who are unwavering when it comes to their belief in an ideology or in their career yet when it comes to their relationships with others they are exposed and vulnerable. In order to do this frequently he shows how they are isolated within the modern world in which they respectively live. Isolation is a human emotion that Wesker is very familiar with himself due to his marginalisation within the literary canon as was illustrated through critics who are preoccupied with his religion rather than the quality of work which he produces and how it is reflective of the society in which we live today. Antisemitism, child abuse, gender inequality, racism and the welfare system

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<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

would be to name just a few of the subjects that Wesker repeatedly tackles and has shown that he is not afraid to be on the unpopular side of a debate. In all of the characters which I have analysed in this thesis there is a common thread and that is that they all have something or someone which helps them to maximise their lives. Whether books, a political doctrine, a loved one or a cause they are all living life “on the stage.”<sup>119</sup> They are complete contrasts from the “cardboard cut-outs” that Wesker loathed so much. My reference to cardboard in this instance is not accidental, cardboard is a material that is associated with boredom, rigidity and sterility, three words which fittingly describe Prime Minister David Cameron’s tribute to Wesker in the House of Commons on 13<sup>th</sup> April 2016, one day after his death. It is uncomfortable to watch Cameron’s futile attempt at scuppering some half-hearted phrases of sympathy together in order to give the impression that he knew who Corbyn was actually talking about. This is both troubling as it implies that Wesker has no legacy at all of any note within the British literary canon, however it also shows how this thesis is making a contribution to fill the void that exists in regards to his career post 1970s. However, what this thesis has not ignored is the complexity that is involved with Wesker’s career, it has not dwelt on the works that were largely well received but it has deliberately analysed the later works that critics are so keen to condemn to a forgotten section of his library of work. It has provided a non-biased account of Wesker the writer, a writer who evolved with the times, a writer who challenged what was seen as both fashionable and politically correct and a writer who was sternly against the notion of writing to create a lucrative, secure branding for himself, perhaps if he had of believed in that Cameron would have known who he was.

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<sup>119</sup> Wesker, Note to Actors and Directors of the *Trilogy*.

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