HOMOSEXUALITY AND CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY IN MARK RAVENHILL’S WORK

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1 INTRODUCTION

Given that theatre can nearly always be interpreted as a comment on or an elaboration of reality, one may wonder what the development of British drama at the turn of the twenty-first century contributes to contemporary society. The unbridled violence and the shocking sexual images of ‘in-yer-face’ theatre conquered the British stage in the 1990s. Sarah Kane, the pioneer playwright of this new theatrical sensibility, illustrated the close link between reality and theatre by means of her final play, 4.48 Psychosis (1999). It deals with psychological problems and functions as a suicide note from the author herself, because she committed suicide shortly afterwards. In what follows, another ‘in-yer-face’ playwright, Mark Ravenhill, will be brought into focus. Born in the same period as Kane, he is influenced by the social and political circumstances of the second half of the twentieth century, that is to say the conservative regime of Margaret Thatcher. Together with his homosexual nature, this has inevitably shaped his writing. In the second chapter, Mark Ravenhill and the characteristics of ‘in-yer-face’ theatre will be presented. In the third chapter, four of Ravenhill’s plays will be analysed more thoroughly, in chronological order: Shopping and Fucking, Handbag, Some Explicit Polaroids and Mother Clap’s Molly House. These are the four major plays in Ravenhill’s oeuvre that deal with homosexuality. Yet, it is impossible to narrow down the viewpoint to homosexuality only. The abundance of other themes related to contemporary society is interwoven or has even merged with the homosexual aspect. Therefore, all characters and their problems will be analysed separately. In a fourth and final chapter, the four analyses will converge and an answer will be formulated to the question if it is possible to find some guiding principles or general characteristics in this selection of Ravenhill’s work, with particular attention to homosexuality.
2 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

2.1 Mark Ravenhill

Mark Ravenhill was born in 1966. During his youth in a suburb of south London, he attended after-school drama classes and even wrote a small play. After his A-levels, he studied Drama and English at Bristol University. Since he was not an outstanding actor, he decided to direct student productions. After his student days, he first became administrative assistant at the Soho Poly. Later on, he became drama-teacher and freelance director. In 1993, his Close to You was played at the London New Play Festival. Three years later, Max Stafford-Clark directed what became Ravenhill’s most famous – and notorious – play: Shopping and Fucking. By means of workshops with the entire cast, the play acquired its definite shape just before the first performance.\(^1\) His later plays – such as Faust Is Dead, Sleeping Around, Handbag, Mother Clap’s Molly House, Some Explicit Polaroids – are equally controversial, but caused less consternation.

As Ravenhill indicates in TheatreForum, there are two main reasons why he started writing in 1993. First of all, it was the year in which his homosexual boyfriend died of AIDS (88). Secondly, the James Bulger murder also urged him to write. Two ten-year-olds, Jon Venables and Robert Thompson, ‘kidnapped’ three-year-old James Bulger from a shopping centre. They abused him and kicked him to death, after which they left him near a railway. A few years later, Ravenhill had a conversation with a novelist who admitted that his motive for writing was the Bulger murder. As Ravenhill states in TheatreForum, this conversation made him aware of a major impulse for his writing: “How could I have never spotted before that I was someone who had never written a play until the murder of James Bulger? And it was the Bulger murder that prompted me to write? And that I’ve been writing ever since the murder” (87).

In most of his plays, Ravenhill focuses on the absence of reliable ideologies and the link between sex and consumerism. Sexual transactions, omnipresent in contemporary British society, are emphasised, whereas political viewpoints are neglected or entirely left out. By means of violent encounters and explicit representations of gay sexual intercourse, Ravenhill wants to shock the audience and trigger reflection and response. Caridad Svich considers this shock technique as a reference to another major playwright: “Like Joe Orton, to whose anarchic spirit he is often compared, Ravenhill revels in unnerving his audience and crossing

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\(^1\) This short biographical introduction is based on Aleks Sierz’ In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today (122 – 124). Henceforth, all mentions of Aleks Sierz will refer to this book, unless indicated otherwise.
boundaries of authority and moral license in order to expose the licentiousness of his age” (90). In TheatreForum, Ravenhill himself mentions that he is inspired by David Mamet, Brad Fraser and contemporary North American fiction, more particularly, “[t]he bored, drifting, drug addled neurotics depicted by Jay McInnerny [sic] and Douglas Coupland and Dennis Cooper, depicted with irony and a submerged sense of moral disgust” (89). Nevertheless, Ravenhill’s work is not exclusively a product of present-day developments and trends. Svich describes the mixture of past traditions and contemporary society as follows: “Influenced by ancient Greek drama, the plays of Oscar Wilde and contemporary pop culture, Ravenhill is poised as a somewhat Foucault-like dramatist who documents with wit and veracity straight and gay culture alike” (90). He is inspired by sources as diverse as “Wilde, Euripides, Goethe and Schnitzler” (Svich 90). Ravenhill’s work has roots in classical as well as in contemporary theatrical traditions, which may explain the internalised opposition between sensualist and moralist impulses (Svich 90).

After the turn of the millennium², Ravenhill experiments with form and abstract themes, which differs greatly from his earlier work that depicted contemporary British society. Product (2006), for example, “is both a satire on our post-9/11 attitudes to terrorism, and also a minutely observed reflection on the limits of language and form to capture contemporary reality” (Wikipedia).

2.2 In-yer-face Theatre

Mark Ravenhill belongs to the playwrights of what Aleks Sierz calls “in-yer-face” theatre.³ This is not a clearly delineated movement, but rather a theatrical sensibility. Mel Kenyon clarifies that “[t]here’s no movement. [The new playwrights] are all completely individual. But there is a moment”⁴. The main aim of these new writers is to make the spectators react to the moral problems discussed in their plays. It is no longer possible to simply enjoy watching a play without being provoked and feeling the need to respond. Although Howard Barker calls this new trend the “Theatre of Conscience and Criticism” (96), he attributes the same characteristics to it as Sierz:

² This paragraph is entirely based on <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Ravenhill> (17 May 2009).
³ The following theoretical framework and historical overview is mainly based on Aleks Sierz’ In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today.
In the old theatre, the actors offered the play as a salesman displays his product. . . Thus the audience became customers, whose satisfaction was the necessary end of the performance.

In the new theatre, the audience will offer itself to the actors. It will relinquish its status as customer and abandon its expectation of reward. When it ceases to see itself as customer, it will also cease to experience offence (67).

Barker is not the only one to attribute a different name to the same theatrical development. In-yr-face theatre is also called “New Brutalism”\(^5\), “Theatre of the Urban Ennui”\(^6\) or “New Nihilism”\(^7\).

The shock method is used to offend the spectators and, consequently, forces them to look at theatre from a different point of view. Sex, addiction, violence and the crisis of masculinity are explicitly shown, not only to provoke reaction, but also to reveal a deeper meaning to the audience. What is represented on stage is confrontational and harsh. Nudity, for example, is displayed explicitly and is connected with emotional vulnerability instead of freedom or liberation. Moreover, in-yr-face playwrights use direct, filthy language. Words like “fuck” and “cunt” figure prominently in their plays. According to Barker, “the word ‘cunt’ operates both as the most extreme notation of abuse and also the furtherest [sic] reach of desire, and not only in male speech” (30). In-yr-face theatre transgresses boundaries and challenges moral values. As Sierz states, “it also taps into more primitive feelings, smashing taboos, mentioning the forbidden, creating discomfort” (4). The pioneer of this new writing is Sarah Kane, whose *Blasted* questions for instance the link between gender and sexual abuse.

Ken Urban argues that it is not violence which is the predominant characteristic of in-yr-face theatre, but cruelty. In line with Antonin Artaud’s philosophy, he defines cruelty as “the violent awakening of consciousness to the horrors of life that had previously remained unconscious, both unseen and unspoken” (362). The main difference between violence and cruelty is that the latter can bring about change (363). Urban connects the notion of cruelty with nihilism. He reformulates Nietzsche’s definition as follows: “Where one expects to find something – a god, a higher power, a unity, a reason – one instead finds an absence” (365). Vera Gottlieb called this the “death of ideology”\(^8\). Nihilism is the most painful aspect of in-

\(^5\) Boles, William C.
\(^6\) Sara Freeman cites Benedict Nightingale.
yer-face theatre because it lacks closure. Open and ambiguous endings cause eternal uncertainty for the audience. Urban summarises this wry feeling by referring to Heidegger’s notion of “Verwindung”: “the tragic’s exploration of nihilism performs a ‘twisting’ or ‘turning’ of pain into potential joy, but it is never pain’s overcoming” (370).

Barker emphasises the role of the individual as opposed to the audience as a whole (47). In this way, each interpretation of the play is equally valid: “The theatre is not a disseminator of truth but a provider of versions” (Barker 45). This trend of individualism can also be found in the subject matter of in-yer-face plays. Wandor9 explains that “[s]ocial and urban fragmentation move into the theatrical space” (236) and consequently, theatre displays “the atomised relationship between the individual and a bleak world” (237).

However, this shocking theatre is not an entirely new concept. Already in ancient Greek tragedies, cruelty and suffering were a common occurrence to “purge the bad feelings of the audience” (Sierz 10). Later on, the Jacobean Tragedy of Blood continued this trend by staging abominable and frightening scenes. Censorship, introduced in 1737, banished all plays containing images of homosexuality, violence, nudity, or lesbianism. During the sixties, the number of shocking and confrontational plays increased and in 1968, censorship was abolished. In the same year, the American musical Hair was staged to demonstrate the newly acquired liberty. The following years showed a clear change in the sensibility of the audience: cruel sexual scenes were not considered shocking or outrageous any more. In the 1970s, feminism was put forward as the new theatrical challenge. A great deal of plays in the 1980s staged “the brutality of life for women under Thatcher” (Sierz 28). The 1990s were the culmination point of this evolution towards more shocking, exaggerated theatrical images. As Sierz enumerates:

If drama dealt with masculinity, it showed rape; if it got to grips with sex, it showed fellatio or anal intercourse; when nudity was involved, so was humiliation; if violence was wanted, torture was staged; when drugs were the issue, addiction was shown. While men behaved badly, so did women. And often the language was gross, the jokes sick, the images indelible. (30)

This short historical overview indicates that provocative, shocking theatre cultivates a long history. But what particularly gave rise to in-yer-face theatre, was the social and political context of the second half of the twentieth century. Most in-yer-face playwrights were born

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9 Unless indicated otherwise, all references to Michelene Wandor’s work are taken from Post-War British Drama: Looking Back in Gender.
between 1965 and 1970, which means that they consciously experienced the conservative regime of the Iron Lady, Margaret Thatcher. Moreover, they experimented with ecstasy or were immersed in dance culture and underwent the consequences of the Fall of the Berlin Wall and of the war-images from Iraq (Sierz 237). They feared as well that "the new Labour government was, in fact, going to betray its socialist principles as surely as Bill Clinton’s New Democrats had in the United States, and that, after the Thatcher years, the empty spin of New Labour would lead to no adequate political response or redress" (Reinelt 311). Tony Blair was obsessed by the idea of Britain as the new place to be. Ken Urban defines the period of Cool Britannia as follows: “when Britishness became Britain’s favoured fetish” (355). John Gross states that New Labour “elevat[ed] the commercial to the ideological” and generalised “supermarket language to a whole society” (Urban 356). According to Sierz, this period of political crisis was the cause that “New writing had rediscovered the angry, oppositional and questioning spirit of 1956, the year of the original Angry Young Men” (xii). Janelle Reinelt calls this theatre “political” because it addresses and criticises contemporary social, political and moral problems (311). The consequence of the political turmoil in the nineties for theatre was a stagnation or even a diminution of subsidy. Most in-yer-face plays were staged in the Royal Court, controlled from 1993 until 1998 by Stephen Daldry. Urban summarises Daldry’s management as follows: “do lots of new work, do it for short runs so that houses are full every night, always invite important people, and if a play bombs, remember that it will close before the Court loses too much cash” (357).

In ‘In Yer Face’ in Bristol – a report of a 2002 conference about British Drama in the 1990s – Aleks Sierz presents four lines of development after the first vogue of in-yer-face theatre: “[O]ther styles such as magic realism; new fusions of writing, music, dance, and physical theatre; writing for bigger stages; and, perhaps, reinventing a radically alternative fringe theatre whose practitioners could squat empty properties and put on shows outside the official and highly commercialised theatre system” (91). In-yer-face theatre clearly is not a thing of the past, but rather an incentive for further exploration of theatrical possibilities.
3 Analyses of the Plays

3.1 Shopping and Fucking (1996)

Mimi Kramer categorises Shopping and Fucking as belonging to “the subgenre of so-called smack-and-sodomy plays, in which drug use is rampant and sex is graphic, brutish and usually anal” (71-72). And indeed, all these elements are included in the episodic plot of Ravenhill’s most famous play. Shopping and Fucking shows the audience a glimpse of the life of Mark, Robbie and Lulu. Mark goes to a drug rehabilitation centre and returns with the message that he swears off all emotional commitment. However, when he meets the teenage prostitute Gary, he cannot repress his feelings. Meanwhile Lulu witnesses a robbery, but instead of intervening, she steals a chocolate bar. Robbie has to sell three hundred Ecstasy pills for Brian, but – absorbed in a pacifist dreamlike vision – he gives them away for free. Lulu and Mark then start a telephone sex line, aiming to earn three thousand pounds in order to pay off their debt. Gary proposes to give them the money they need if they penetrate him with a knife, which is his ultimate wish of acting out his stepfather’s sexual abuse. Afterwards, Brian returns the money to Robbie and Lulu, because they have adopted his philosophy that “Money is civilization”. The play ends with the image of Mark, Robbie and Lulu eating a microwave dinner, closely together as an intimate family.

Shopping and Fucking caused great commotion, mainly because of its explicit title. In accordance with the Indecent Advertisement Act of 1889, the title became Shopping and F***ing (Sierz 125). This censorship had a reversed effect; it only made the play more attractive and successful. The prudishness of the title forms a strong contrast with the violent sexual scenes. However, as Peter Buse indicates, “the most shocking word and activity in the title of Shopping and Fucking is not the last one, but the one that goes uncensored, the seemingly banal, everyday one, ‘shopping’”.

The first word in the title points to the fact that, nowadays, everything is for sale and consumerism seems the new religion, as Brian illustrates by saying that “[f]or the right sum – life is easier, richer, more fulfilling” (8). Even human life is for sale, as becomes clear from the shopping story in the beginning. Mark bought Lulu and Robbie from a man in the supermarket: “Well, says fat guy, they’re both mine. I own them. . . . Yeah, yours for twenty” (3). Two variants of this story appear further on in the play: the disco version where Lulu and Robbie try to force this fantasy on Gary (76) and the futuristic version where Mark buys a mutant slave (87). An attentive spectator will notice the shocking detail that Mark has to pay thirty quid to lick Gary’s arse (23), which is only ten quid more than what he paid for Robbie
and Lulu. In comparison, at that time, ten quid was what Mark needed for his taxi. Another important incident with regard to consumerism, occurs when Lulu witnesses the robbery at the Seven-Eleven and she does not intervene to help the girl behind the counter. Peter Buse interprets this as follows: “What horrifies her most is not that she did nothing to help, but that she used the attack as an opportunity to steal a TV guide and a chocolate bar. The most hideous offense [sic] is not the failure to help a fellow human being, but the transgression against the rules of consumption most of us so automatically obey.”

The play is deeply rooted in British society of the 1990s, which is made clear by the names of the protagonists, parallel to the members of the then popular pop group Take That (Sierz 130). The spectators of the play, while being full participants of the capitalist and consumerist society, are consequently faced with Ravenhill’s implicit criticism of market-driven culture. He denounces the present-day possessiveness and greed by shaking awake his contemporaries with violent stage images. The vomiting of Mark at the beginning of the play can be analysed, according to Buse, as “the antithesis of consumption, an absolute rejection of the imperative to consume”. According to Leslie A. Wade, the violence onstage also “stems from the postmodern modalities of alienation” (114). Elizabeth Kuti refers to the recurrent images of the Bulger murder to explain these violent outbursts: “[T]he video cameras, the shopping centre, the murdered innocent, the onlookers and participants in a violent death” (458).

The same observations can be made with regard to the second word in the title: ‘fucking’. Sex is also commodified and has lost its connection with love. Mark for example, prefers to pay for impersonal sex with Gary rather than to make love with Robbie. In the drug rehabilitation centre, he offers Wayne money because he wants to lick his arse. Later on in the play, the same thing happens again, but with Gary, a fourteen-year old rent boy. Sexual interaction is mostly sudden and inappropriate. When Robbie sits “bruised and bleeding” (32) in the emergency waiting room, Lulu “slips her hand into Robbie’s trousers and starts to play with his genitals” (32). After an afternoon of shopping, Mark asks Gary to satisfy him orally in the fitting room at Harvey Nichols:

MARK. Suck my cock now. Take you home later.

GARY. There’s a security camera.

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10 In fact, Lulu only stole a chocolate bar. The TV guide was stolen by another customer.

11 Elizabeth Kuti applied Aristotle’s tragic structure to Shopping and Fucking by Mark Ravenhill and Blasted by Sarah Kane. She describes these plays as “rejuvenating tragic form in the terms of ‘our own culture’: the telly, the tabloids, the shopping centres, the faceless hotel rooms, the security cameras” (464).
MARK. Doesn’t matter. (55)

The reaction of Mark illustrates that sex is no longer a private business to be confined to the bedroom. On the contrary, it has become a banal, everyday act without meaning. This is reinforced by the behaviour of Lulu during her job interview. When Brian instructs her to take off her jacket, she’s reluctant because she hides two stolen meals underneath it. When he then asks her to take off her blouse – which is totally unnecessary to prove her acting capacities – she does so without hesitation. Wandor remarks that “the chief and most intense mode of interchange between the characters is sexual, and that mainly male homosexual” (228). The violent penetration of Gary by Mark and Robbie illustrates this, as well as the sexual stories in the play (the sexual abuse by Gary’s stepfather, the imagined sexual intercourse between Mark and Fergie in the toilet, etc.). Sierz interprets the preponderance of sexual elements as follows: “The sex act was often seen less as an exploration of liberating eroticism than of a desperate attempt to communicate” (179).

Both elements of the title are closely intertwined and sometimes even put on a par with each other, or as Michael Billington puts it, “[S]ex had become a negotiable transaction and shopping had acquired a tangible sexual excitement . . .” (361). The instances of prostitution (when Mark pays Wayne or Gary) are a clear example of this sexual commodification. Aleks Sierz notices a number of “distorted mirror images” relating to consumerism and sexual pleasure: the toilet story about Fergie is preceded by the ‘lick and go’ sex in the rehabilitation centre; Lulu’s concern about individual meals is reflected by Gary offering two ‘Pot Noodles’ to Mark; Robbie is attacked with a plastic fork, whereas Lulu watches a robbery with a real knife; Robbie’s anarchic ideas are countered by Brian’s belief in capitalism; Mark prefers unemotional sexual intercourse, while Gary consciously wants it to be painful (129–130). The intimate relationship between ‘shopping’ and ‘fucking’ is put forward in some other parts of the play as well. When Mark visits Gary, the latter offers his client the choice between porn and cocaine. He assures Mark that it is included in the price. Later on, they use Gary’s ‘fucking’ to their advantage: they can afford to go shopping because Gary systematically steals the credit cards from his customers. However, this can also give rise to a negative experience. Lulu, for example, is shocked when one of the callers of her telephone sex line admits that he is masturbating while watching the video of the robbery in the Seven-Eleven. This again illustrates that the recent developments in consumerism can be sexually arousing. Nevertheless, Billington remarks that it does not necessarily have a negative connotation by stating that “conspicuous consumption could be transformed into a peace-offering and signal a kind of fragile redemption” (361). He
illustrates this by referring to the final stage image, where Robbie, Mark and Lulu are sharing a microwave dinner, which is a stereotypical symbol of contemporary consumerist society.

Consumerism and explicit sexuality are two characteristics of British society in the 1990s that all personages in the play share. Nonetheless, they also have their own specific concerns, as becomes clear from a more thorough examination of each character separately.

Mark went to a drug rehabilitation centre, but was kicked out for breaking the rule that personal relationships are prohibited. He returns to his everyday life with the ideal of avoiding personal commitment. After having kissed Robbie – which is the first transgression of the rule, but certainly not the last – Mark explains his way of thinking to his former boyfriend. Robbie, however, does not fully understand this new idea:

MARK. Because actually I’d decided I wasn’t going to do that [i.e. kiss Robbie]. I didn’t really want that to happen, you know? Commit myself so quickly to ... intimacy.

ROBBIE. OK.

MARK. Just something I’m trying to work through.

ROBBIE. … Work through?

MARK. Yeah. Sort out. In my head. We’ve been talking a lot about dependencies. Things you get dependent on.

ROBBIE. Smack.

MARK. Smack, yes absolutely. But also people. You get dependent on people.

Like … emotional dependencies. Which are just as addictive OK? (15)

Wandor compares Mark’s way of speaking to “the language of psychological insight, very different from the fragmented, street argot of the rest of the play” (227). She gives the example of Mark’s explanation for his distantness from Gary:

MARK. I have a tendency to define myself purely in terms of my relationship to others. I have no definition of myself you see. So I attach myself to others as a means of avoidance, of avoiding knowing the self. . . . if I don’t stop myself I repeat the patterns. Get attached to people to these emotions then I’m back to where I started. (30–31)

Lulu applies the same self-analysis – though in a less extreme form – during her job interview: “I have good instincts. That’s one of my qualities” (6) and “Although of course I can also use my rational side” (7). These two qualities are clearly opposite, so perhaps she is exaggerating or even lying in order to get the job.
Mark’s solution to avoid commitment and intimacy is to deal with sexual intercourse as a businesslike transaction, without any emotional involvement: “More of a … transaction. I paid him. I gave him money. And when you’re paying, you can’t call that a personal relationship, can you?” (16). Robbie calls this “Lick and Go” (17), which again illustrates the commodification of sexuality.

When Gary tries to tell his personal story of sexual abuse by his stepfather, Mark refuses to listen. He repeats his ideal of sexual transaction several times, but nonetheless fails to fulfil it. Gradually, he becomes more and more attached to Gary. When Gary finally remarks that Mark has fallen in love with him, the latter wants to “try to develop a relationship that is mutual, in which there’s a respect, a recognition of the other’s needs” (54). After this well-considered description in therapy language, Gary rudely answers that he “didn’t feel anything” (54). This seemingly pessimistic denouement nevertheless contains a spark of hope: despite all effort to keep distance and avoid commitment, Mark still falls in love. Love is depicted as a genuine power that overrides all human efforts.

Gary is introduced to the audience as a rent boy who is very concerned about how old he looks. Parker Rossman indicates four reasons why under age boys agree to have sexual intercourse with adult men (147–149). First of all, the financial aspect lures them into the prostitution network. Moreover, the money-argument can be used to hide the fact that the boys themselves retrieve sexual satisfaction from the act. In Shopping and Fucking, Gary toughly negotiates about the price and later on, it is revealed that he steals credit cards from his customers. Secondly, the boys appreciate the respect and the affectionate relationship with the adults. This need for friendship and confirmation may stem from a lack of tenderness and fatherly warmth. Gary certainly suffers from this last problem. He never mentions his father and the boyfriend of his mother sexually abuses him. It is true that Mark at first maintains a certain distance, but when Gary cries Mark comforts him kindly. The fact that they go shopping together means that a genuine friendship comes into being. Thirdly, Rossman mentions the “need and desire for adventure” (148). Yet for Gary this reason is not valid, because it all seems a daily routine for him. Fourthly, the sexual satisfaction is also an important element. At first, it seems that Gary is not aroused by the sexual acts with Mark. Later on, however, Gary satisfies Mark orally without asking money for it, which shows that he does not consider it as a job but rather as a personal pleasure.

Gary is branded for life by his stepfather’s sexual abuse. Andrea J. Nouryeh signals that in the 1970s this subject breaks out of the domestic sphere thanks to feminism (49).
Consequently, when the audience discovers the traumatic past of Gary, they are not overly shocked. In *Ogdensburg State Mental Facility Manual on Trauma*, Nouryeh found a list of traumatic consequences: “reaffirmed feelings of helplessness, vulnerability, loss of safety, and loss of control” (Nouryeh 50). It is true that Gary at first seems quite confident about himself, but he also expresses the wish to be adopted by a rich man who will take care of him, which implicitly reveals the preceding characteristics. Nouryeh cites psychologist Jennifer Freyd who explains that memory loss frequently occurs when the victim has an emotional bond with the abuser (Nouryeh 52). Gary, however, feels no attachment to or emotional dependence on his stepfather at all. Hence, his response to the sexual abuse is not memory loss. On the contrary, he talks about it openly and tries to overcome his trauma by acting it out with Mark’s help.

Gary proposes to pay off Robbie and Lulu’s debts if they help him to act out his traumatic fantasy. Aleks Sierz remarks that this “gang-rape” is “consensual” (127): Robbie asks Gary multiple times if this truly is his wish. When Mark is penetrating him, Gary imagines that Mark is his stepfather:

> GARY. Are you him? Are you my dad?
> MARK. No.
> GARY. Yes. You’re my dad. (81)

Mark starts hitting Gary, because he does not want to be compared to his stepfather. Robbie refuses to go on when Gary asks to bring his fantasy to a conclusion like his stepfather does: “He fucks me – yeah – but with a knife” (82). Gary is fully aware of the possible consequences and despite this he wants to go on:

> ROBBIE. It’ll kill you.
> GARY. It’s what I want. (82)

Gary tries to tempt them by calling them names and appealing to their financial agreement: “When someone’s paying, someone wants something and they’re paying, then you do it. Nothing right. Nothing wrong. It’s a deal” (83). Sierz notices that Gary at first sight is the victim, but the others are victims as well because they cannot easily withdraw their promise (131). Mark finally agrees to go along with Gary’s wish. He does not even protest when Gary says “He’s got no face in the story. But I want to put a face to him. Your face.” (83), whereas a few moments earlier this was a sufficient reason to hit him. Appreciative of

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12 Note that Gary is talking about his ‘father’ here, rather than about his stepfather. Nevertheless, when he first tells about the sexual abuse, he refers to “my mum’s bloke” (30) and explicitly states that he is not his son. The reason for this deviation will be explained further on.
Mark’s gesture, Gary promises him a reward: “Do it and I’ll say ‘I love you’ “ (83). This sudden willingness of Mark might be explained by Robbie and Lulu’s desperate need for money, which is in line with Mark’s vision of sexuality as a transaction. Another explanation might be that he used coke a few moments before the acting out starts. The stage directions indicate that “Mark takes coke from Gary’s pocket and retreats” (79). Elizabeth Kuti comments on the “absence of stage directions” (462) regarding the ending of Gary and Mark’s acting out. The director has to decide how he tackles this horrible event. Gary’s absence in the final scene may refer to his death or to the fact that he’s wounded but still alive.

The instrument of Gary’s dangerous fantasy, the knife, appears several times before the acting out. Lulu witnessed the girl behind the counter of the Seven-Eleven being stabbed with a knife. When Robbie describes the circumstances of his beating, Lulu insist that a knife was used. Even though Robbie clearly told her that there was no knife involved, she keeps inserting it in the story. Gary tells Mark that he lashed out at the woman in the council. Mark suggests that he attacked her with “a knife or something” (39). When Mark and Gary come home, Lulu offers to share her meal: “I can get an extra plate. Plate. Knife. Whatever” (60, emphasis added).

Ravenhill seizes the opportunity of the sexual abuse story to criticise social services. Gary goes to the council to report his stepfather’s abuse. The woman behind the desk simply inquires if his stepfather uses a condom (which clearly is not the case) and ask Gary to give him a leaflet. The inability and unwillingness to take drastic measures provoke a rage in Gary which he works off on the woman. Another element that points to the insufficient measures of social control is Gary’s age issue. Already at the first encounter with Mark, Gary asks how old Mark thinks he is and how old Mark wants him to be. Mark thinks he is sixteen or seventeen, which is under age and consequently makes their sexual act a pederast offence. When Mark asks him to satisfy him orally in the changing room, Gary admits that he is only fourteen. Perhaps the presence of a security camera made him uncomfortable and forced him to reveal his real age.

Given that Gary is only fourteen years old and that his stepfather abuses him, it is not illogical that he expresses the need for a caring and protecting father figure. He already voices this desire on the first encounter with Mark: “There’s a bloke, right, rich bloke, big house. Wants me to live with him” (24). He presents his dream as a fact, but it is obvious that he sometimes distorts reality. In the same scene, he says that he often wins on the arcade downstairs: “You gotta know which ones to play otherwise all you get is tokens. I’ve a lucky
streak me” (23). At the end of the scene, however, he admits that he is not a gifted gambler: “I owe him downstairs – can’t live on tokens” (25). He repeats the story of the fictitious man after telling Mark the story about the social services. Mark realises that the benefactor is invented and assures Gary that he is not the one to take care of him, which is in line with Mark’s ideal of distancing himself and avoiding commitment. Donald L. Loeffler refers to Irving Bieber’s study Homosexuality: A Psychoanalytical Approach to indicate the link between homosexuality and the lack of a father figure: “The fathers were distant and indifferent, or hostile, or ambivalent towards the son. . . . The son had not been provided with an adequate male for identification” (157). Gary expresses this need for a father figure very clearly: “I want a dad. I want to be watched. All the time, someone watching me” (31). His desire is not for tenderness but for someone who sternly controls him: “I’m not after love. I want to be owned. I want someone to look after me. And I want him to fuck me. . . . And, yeah, it’ll hurt. But a good hurt” (54). Thus, the acting out of his ultimate fantasy near the end of the play is not aimed at overcoming the sexual abuse by his stepfather, but to make up for the lack of a father figure. The desire to be owned is echoed in the fantasy of Lulu and Robbie about a female master and her slave (80) and in Mark’s story about the mutant slave who begs to keep him imprisoned: “Please. I’ll die. I don’t know how to … I can’t feed myself. I’ve been a slave all my life. I’ve never had a thought of my own. I’ll be dead in a week” (88). Indeed, Gary is not the only one to long for a father figure. Wandor points to the “suspension between child- and adulthood” (229), which accounts for the dependency on others and the need for stable authorities. Already in the first scene, Lulu refers to Mark’s promise: “And you said: I love you both and I want to look after you for ever” (2). Mark, however, cannot cope with his addiction and goes to a rehabilitation centre: “Someone has to sort me out” (4). He leaves his responsibilities for Lulu and Robbie behind, although he returns after a short escapade with Gary. For Robbie, the essence of everything is a father, whereas for Brian the core of life is money:

BRIAN. Because, at the end of the day, at the final reckoning, behind beauty, behind God, behind paradise, peel them away and what is there?

. . .

ROBBIE. Well – a father. (46)

Aleks Sierz sees the crisis of masculinity reflected in three characters: “Gary, the abuse victim who wants to die; Mark, the emotional dependent who is also a junkie; Robbie,
the bisexual” (130). Indeed, there is an indication that Robbie and Lulu were a regular heterosexual couple before Mark bought them at the supermarket:

ROBBIE. Still love you.

LULU. Haven’t said that for a long time. Wish we could go back to before.

Just you and me. (29)

In the present triangular ‘family’, Robbie seems to be more attracted to Mark. There is a short sexual scene between Lulu and Robbie in the emergency room. She starts masturbating him, but he loses his erection. Except for this scene, Lulu seems to be devoid of sexuality.

Robbie is also the one who delivers the most quoted speech in *Shopping and Fucking*:

I think … I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by.

And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenments. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we’re all making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we’ve each got one. (64)

This elegy reminds most theatregoers of the famous speech by Jimmy Porter in John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956), which expresses the “uncertainties of post-war life, and the fragmentation of personal and family life” (Wandor 47):

I suppose people of our generation aren’t able to die for good causes any longer. We had all that done for us, in the thirties and the forties, when we were still kids. . . . There aren’t any good brave causes left. If the big bang does come and we all get killed off, it won’t be in aid of the old-fashioned grand design. It’ll just be for the Brave New-nothing-very-much-thank-you. About as pointless and inglorious as stepping in front of a bus. No, there’s nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women. (45)

Michael Billington stresses that Ravenhill belongs to a group of writers that constitute the “disillusioned post-Thatcher generation struggling to make sense of a world without religion or ideology” (360). Elizabeth Kuti remarks that “Robbie’s list of ‘big stories’ covers the crucial stages in the development of western drama (and indeed civilization) – from Greek tragedy, to Enlightenment rationalism, to Brechtian socialism: none of them, Ravenhill implicitly suggests, available modes for the playwright of the late twentieth century” (460). Robbie does not only denounce the lack of reliable ideologies, but he also provides a
solution: the creation of small, personal stories. Indeed, the play is full of separate stories: the shopping story and its variants; the toilet story about Mark having sex with Fergie; the robbery of the Seven-Eleven; the beating of Robbie when he is giving away drugs; the different patterns of telephone sex, etc. All characters have a private ideology or a personal way of coping with the loneliness and isolation of contemporary society. Lulu for example, adheres to stories in quite a rigid manner. She asks Mark to retell the shopping story and instructs Robbie to narrate his beating in the form of a story with the prototypical ‘bad gang’. After witnessing the robbery, she becomes disillusioned and realises that life is nothing like a story world: “I mean what kind of planet is this when you can’t even buy a bar of chocolate?” (26). Mark, due to his drug addiction, feels confused about the purpose of life: “I used to know what I felt. I traded. I made money. Tic Tac. And when I made money I was happy, when I lost money I was unhappy. Then things got complicated” (31). Although he tries to protect himself from the harsh world by avoiding commitment and seeing sexuality as a transaction, he cannot restrain himself from preaching the virtue of love to Gary: “Because, I don’t think that you have ever actually been loved and if the world has offered us no practical … “ (79). Brian clearly adheres to the old values of capitalism. His slogan is: “Civilization is money. Money is civilization” (85). He cleverly anticipates the present-day loss of belief to make capitalism attractive to Lulu and Robbie:

You know, life is hard. . . . We work, we struggle. And we find ourselves asking: what is this for? Is there meaning? . . . We need something. A guide. A talisman. A set of rules. A compass to steer us through this everlasting night. Our youth is spent searching for this guide until we … some give up. Some say there is nothing. There is chaos. We are born into chaos. But this is … no. This is too painful. This is too awful to contemple[sic]. This we deny. (84)

Gary belongs to the group who adhere to the idea that there is nothing worth believing in. Religion preaching mutual respect is hypocritical, as Gary indicates with reference to one of his customers belonging to the “God Squad”: “We’re at it [i.e. the sexual act] and he kept going on about Lamb of Jesus. Hit me. I give as good as I took” (22). There is no indication in the play of a possible ideology for Gary. Nonetheless, he uses the ideologies of others to get what he wants. He appeals to Mark’s idea of transaction and to Lulu’s belief in stories to convince them to go on with the consensual rape: “When someone’s paying, someone wants something . . . It’s a deal. . . . Pretending isn’t it? Just a story” (83). Robbie’s ideology is diametrically opposed to that of Brian. His belief in peace and generosity is inspired by a pacifist vision when he gives away the ecstasy pills for free:
I was looking down on this planet. Spaceman over this earth. And I see this kid in Rwanda, crying, but he doesn’t know why. And this granny in Kiev, selling everything she’s ever owned. And this president in Bogota or … South America, And I see the suffering. And the wars. And the grab, grab, grab.

And I think : Fuck Money. Fuck it. This selling. This buying. This system. Fuck the bitching world and let’s be … beautiful. Beautiful. And happy. (37)

In spite of this noble idea of anarchy – a hallucination probably caused by using some ecstasy pills himself – Robbie is almost immediately drawn back to contemporary reality, i.e. the money-culture. He works hard to collect the money needed to pay off his debts and agrees to help Gary in return for money.

The contemporary lack of a reliable ideology and a universal set of values is the main reason why making choices is perceived as incredibly difficult if not impossible. The first moment where a simple choice is perceived as an insuperable dilemma occurs when Robbie asks a customer if he prefers a hamburger with or without cheese. The man is not able to choose and attacks Robbie with a plastic fork. This scene might remind the audience of Joe Orton’s Entertaining Mr Sloane (1964), where a similar attack with a toasting fork is staged (Wandor 80). Leslie A. Wade remarks that the image of the fork is twofold: on the one hand it represents the “progress of civilization” for example when Robbie feeds Mark with a fork at the end of the play, but on the other hand it also incorporates a “malevolent aspect” which is made clear by the attack mentioned earlier (113). The difficulty of making a decision is a recurrent issue in the play, for example when Lulu is inside the Seven-Eleven: “So I go in but I can’t decide which one [i.e. bar of chocolate]. There’s so much choice. Too much. Which I think they do deliberately” (26). What Robbie denounces is the overall feeling of loneliness caused by the lack of ideologies or protecting father figures, which is the most shocking aspect of the entire play. As Sierz points out, “[t]he scenes of overt sex or explicit violence were not as disturbing as the feeling that the characters were lost, somewhat clueless, prone to psychological collapse, vulnerable to exploitation” (129).

Brian is a character who grew up in a time when there were still ‘big stories’. Also, he had a father who introduced him to the core values of the world. Consequently, Brian has taken over his father’s ideology, which is capitalism. In Brian’s first appearance in the play, as well as in his final one, he talks enthusiastically about the story of The Lion King. He is fascinated by a lyrical scene about the “Cycle of Being” in which the son succeeds his father as a king. This mirrors the passing on of capitalist ideology from his father to himself and
perhaps to his son. Brian is the one who provides Lulu with the task of selling three hundred ecstasy tablets. Since Robbie distributed the pills for free, he grants them seven days to collect three thousand pounds. He shows them a video of a man being tortured to prove that, if they do not succeed in gathering the money, he will not recoil from killing them. In this way, he forces them to value money. At the end of the play, he smartly tries to convince them to opt for capitalism as a fixed ideology by referring to his father’s outlook on life: “Son, the first few words in the Bible are … get the money first. Get. The Money. First” (85). Brian, however, is of a younger generation and already questions this seemingly universal truth. But, failing a better option, he chooses to adopt and preach this truth: “It’s not perfect, I don’t deny it. We haven’t reached perfection. But it’s the closest we’ve come to meaning. Civilization is money. Money is civilization” (85). In this way, Brian functions as a father figure for Lulu and Robbie, teaching them the basic values and techniques to survive in contemporary society. In conformity with the accepted pedagogical standards, he lets them experience the importance of money. When they understand Brian’s capitalist message, he generously returns the money to Robbie and Lulu, just like a parent rewards a child with a sweet or a small compliment.

Nevertheless, Brian not only stands for capitalism, but also for refined sensitivity. Wade distinguishes three ethical viewpoints in the play: Brian “as the mouthpiece for humanism in the traditional sense”, Robbie “Fuck Money” and Ravenhill himself propagating “radical freedom and the imperative to self-create” (111–112). Brian cries while watching a video tape of his son playing the cello. The music evokes a delicate and indescribable feeling: “You feel it like – like something you knew. Something so beautiful that you’ve lost but you’d forgotten that you’ve lost it” (43). Underneath his severe businesslike exterior, Brian is a sensitive man, mourning for the lost paradise: “Because once it was paradise, you see? And you could hear it – heaven singing in your ears. But we sinned, and God took it away . . .” (44). Nevertheless, the capitalist aspect of his personality dominates. According to Brian, money is the motive “behind beauty, behind God, behind paradise” (46). The musical education of his son, for example, is only possible because of Brian’s financial support.

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13 Wade enumerates some characteristics of this radical freedom: “no moral compulsion or social obligation”, “indifference to legal, moral or religious codes” and “coherence according to the logic of the marketplace” (112–113). This corresponds to what has been examined so far, that is to say the lack of ‘big stories’ and the commodification in contemporary society.
Lulu is the only woman in the play and she immediately attracts attention because of her concern for food. The play begins with Lulu trying to convince Mark to eat from a carton of takeaway food. During her job interview, Brian discovers that she has stolen two ready meals. She is so enthusiastic about the individual prepared portions that she does not have the heart to divide them when Mark returns from the rehabilitation centre. Her obsession with food takes an extreme shape when she pulls out the telephone wires in order to have a peaceful meal, even though their telephone sex line is a matter of life or death. Yet there are extenuating circumstances for this insane act: her last caller confronted her with the traumatic witnessing of the robbery. Thus, food may have a consolatory effect on her. She describes the wonderful variety of meals as if she is worshipping the food: “Come on you’ve got the world here. You’ve got all the tastes in the world. You’ve got an empire under cellophane. Look, China. India. Indonesia. In the past you’d have to invade, you’d have to occupy just to get one of these things . . .” (59). When Mark, Robbie and Gary are fighting, she tries to protect her object of worship, rather than stop the fight. The other characters are also aware of the value of microwave dinners. Gary offers two Pot Noodles to Mark as a sign of their comradeship. In the final scene, Robbie suggests to eat together. The final stage image depicts Lulu, Mark and Robbie sharing dinner. The fact that Lulu is prepared to share her meal offers hope for a better future. Sarah Kane’s Blasted (1995) ends in a similar way: Cate feeds Ian and he expresses his gratitude. In Edward Bond’s Saved (1965) – which is an important source for another play by Ravenhill, Handbag – Mary is also serving food.

Lulu does not only provide food, she is also the one who holds the ‘family’ together. Sierz notes that, “[i]nstead of showing families, many plays showed groups of ill-assorted people, often held together only by their problems” (181). In the first scene, Robbie denies these problems by ignoring Mark’s complaints:

MARK. I’m so tired. Look at me. I can’t control anything. My … guts. My mind.

ROBBIE. We have good times don’t we? (2)

Family ties are very loose and distant. When Brian asks if Lulu knows who her parents are, she answers: “Of course. We still … you know. Christmas. We spend Christmas together. On the whole” (8). Gary described his mother as “a slag” (55). Robbie presents Lulu and himself sarcastically as the happy Flintstones family: “I’m Barney, this is Betty. Pebbles is playing outside somewhere” (60). Nevertheless, the ‘family bond’ between Robbie, Mark and Lulu is reinforced at the end of the play. Together, as “a defensive cohort” (Wandor 229), they are able to defeat Brian. The other outsider, Gary, also strengthens their comradeship.
Boles remarks that Gary’s death – although it is uncertain if he really dies – is “cleansing” (134) and he establishes the parallel with the story of the Lion King, where the murder of the uncle also restores social order (133).

Nonetheless, the fact that this nuclear family is able to survive is mostly thanks to Lulu. Her motherly care for the household partly fills the void of the absent father figure. When Robbie lost his job, he takes it for granted that Lulu will come up with a solution. Before he leaves to sell the ecstasy pills, she gives him a detailed explanation of what to do:

LULU. Look there’s just one rule OK? That’s what they reckon. If you’re dealing. There’s just rule number one. Which is: He who sells shall not use.

...  

ROBBIE. Course not. Rule number one. I’m a big boy. (29)

She is the one to keep cool when Gary, Mark and Robbie are arguing: “Let’s sit down shall we? Let’s all just sit. . . . So let’s be adults” (61). She even simplifies her language when she speaks to the fourteen-year-old Gary, just like a mother who adapts to child language: “You’re the protag – you are the central character of the film?” (65, emphasis added). Even though Lulu supports the entire family, she may be left out, as Wandor suggests (228), without altering the play too much. All in all, Lulu may seem a decent and obedient housewife. Yet at one moment, she harshly criticises Robbie and homosexuality in general: “Boys grow up you know and stop playing with each other’s willies. Men and women make the future. There are people out there who need me. Normal people who have kind tidy sex and when they want it. And boys? Boys just fuck each other” (37). Loeffler, citing Paddy Chayefsky, signals a possible explanation for her outburst: “Each woman has a common belief that she alone can straighten out a homosexual” (124). Lulu is frustrated because Robbie lost his erection – “Gone limp on me” (34) – a few moments earlier and now she realises that Robbie will never choose heterosexuality.

Ravenhill sketches the influence of sexual commodification and consumerism on a restricted set of characters. Three of them have homosexual intercourse: Robbie, Mark and Gary. Robbie had a bisexual or even a heterosexual relationship with Lulu, but has now entirely turned to homosexuality. He grasps the impact of a life without ‘big stories’, without guiding universal principles and notices that most of his contemporaries lose themselves in small private beliefs, whether or not these prove successful. Mark is clearly homosexual. He believes in the virtue of genuine love, but decides to approach sex as a transaction to protect
himself from the cruel contemporary world of emotional bareness. No matter how many times he repeats his view of commodified sexuality, he cannot resist the love he feels for Gary. They have homosexual intercourse, but the audience is not certain that Gary is truly homosexual. It is also possible that the homosexual partner only replaces the absent father figure. All in all, Gary is the most enigmatic and depressing character of the entire play, because of his lack of values or beliefs and his destructive death drive. There are two more characters. Brian is a somewhat older man who is absorbed by capitalism. Since he has a son, he probably is heterosexual, although he never mentions his wife. Lulu was in love with Robbie, but later on in the play she becomes devoid of all sexual connotations. This is in line with her role as a mother figure: children do not think of their parents as sexually active beings.

On the whole, homosexual men may represent themselves as “I’m Adam and you’re Adam” (49) but they are certainly not living in Paradise. Brian and Lulu are at peace with themselves and certain about their role in contemporary society, whereas Robbie, Mark and Gary seem to be completely lost. Despite the optimism at the end – sharing food as a symbol of friendship – the homosexual characters are depicted as unable to deal with present-day problems, as opposed to the heterosexual figures.

3.2 Handbag (1998)

Mark Ravenhill’s Handbag consists of two different narratives: a contemporary and a Victorian one. The Victorian plot is an invented prehistory of Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest. Colonel Moncrieff and Constance comply with the Victorian standards of high society where everything is formal and impersonal. Consequently, they entrust their newborn child to Miss Prism, an incompetent nanny who is only interested in the manuscript of her novel. Augusta keeps her sister Constance company and is obsessively occupied with getting married. Cardew, a possible homosexual paedophile, searches for his escaped boy, Eustace. In the end, Prism arranges to give the baby to Cardew by exchanging similar handbags.

This chapter is remarkably shorter than the other analyses. With reference to homosexuality and contemporary society, Handbag is as essential a play as the other three, but the word limit obliged me to curtail. This chapter contains a plot summary and mentions the major themes. For a more thorough examination, I refer to my Ba-paper “The Difficulty of Adult and Parental Responsibility in Mark Ravenhill’s Handbag”.

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In the contemporary plot, a lesbian couple (Mauretta and Suzanne) and a gay couple (David and Tom) become parents by means of artificial insemination. During the pregnancy, David betrays Tom by having sexual intercourse with the drug abuser Phil, and Suzanne betrays Mauretta by kissing Lorraine. Because both couples do not have sufficient time to take care of the child, they hire Lorraine as a nanny. But she neglects the baby and eventually kidnaps the child to form a family together with Phil. In the end, the baby dies because of a breathing problem, while Phil tests if it is still alive by poking it with a burning cigarette. Sierz quick-wittedly indicates that the meaning of homosexual couples as parents is twofold. On the one hand, “the realm of what society considers ‘natural’ has no monopoly on bringing up children,” yet on the other hand, “by making the whole experiment a disaster, he also plays into the hands of those who believe that only married couples should have children” (142). Consequently, a major moral issue in the play is the difficulty of parental responsibility. Moreover, several characters are not mature enough to cope with contemporary society, not to mention with parenthood.

The juxtaposition of these two different plots and periods has some interesting effects. As De Vos states, “[t]he formality and politeness of Victorian society is juxtaposed with contemporary frankness and directness” (49). This opposition makes the language of the modern plot even more shocking. Furthermore, as Sierz states, the confrontation of these two periods aims at “questioning the idea of progress” (143). De Vos justly comments that “[i]n the course of a century, the social relation between employer and employee does not appear to have gained in humane quality. Not only is Lorraine exploited, but she is also humiliated by having a camera monitor her” (50). Clearly, the play also deals with the general condition of present-day life. Thus, Handbag not only deals with problems related to parenthood, but also includes universal aspects of contemporary society, such as commercialisation and commodification.

3.3 Some Explicit Polaroids (1999)

In Some Explicit Polaroids, Mark Ravenhill intertwines the lives of two different generations. The first plot line focuses on Nick, who is released from prison after being incarcerated since 1984 for attempted murder on Jonathan. Helen – Nick’s former partner in anarchic rebellion – has now established a firm reputation as a local councillor and wants to sever all possible links to her past. The second plot line displays the lives of Tim, Victor and Nadia. Tim bought a sex slave, Victor, who is only concerned with his beautiful body and
obsessively flees all negative feelings. Nadia has sexual intercourse with men to avoid loneliness. Tim has AIDS and eventually dies. In the end, the younger generation is dispersed, whereas the older generation reconciles after a peaceful confrontation between Nick and Jonathan.

Even though Polaroid pictures do not constitute an important prop, Ravenhill incorporated this popular invention in his title. Aleks Sierz indicates that, “[t]he idea of the Polaroid camera, with its instantly gratifying but short-lived images, worked as a powerful metaphor for nineties pop culture” (145). Victor asks Nadia if she wants “to take Polaroid” (77) as a souvenir for their time together, although he himself is convinced that he will quickly forget their shared experiences. Already at their first encounter, Victor refers to this type of pictures: “My brother he like to photograph me, you know? Polaroid? Since I was fourteen. Polaroid of my body” (10). He feels not ashamed or prudish at all, since he offers Nadia the Polaroids without hesitation. The fact that these are nude photographs – and even worse, child pornography – might explain the presence of the adjective ‘explicit’ in the title. Another interpretation might be that the different ideologies and worldviews are not presented in a subtle way. Sierz states that the characters are “walking points of view” (148). Indeed, there is a clear opposition between two generations: the middle-aged characters of Nick, Helen and Jonathan have a different system of values and beliefs than the younger characters of Tim, Victor and Nadia. Within these two generations, each character has his own way of coping with contemporary society. The stories of the two generations resemble the intertwining plotlines of Handbag, although here, they are set in the same time and space.

3.3.1 The Younger Generation

The general circumstances in which the younger generation struggles to survive are similar to those expressed in the contemporary plots of the other plays. In Me, My iBook, and writing in America, Ravenhill admits that his plays “report upon, maybe even critique, a world of globalised capitalism”. Nick’s first contact with contemporary society, after fifteen years of prison, shockingly illustrates this:

NICK. Kid in the lift tried to sell me smack. Must have been about seven. I said: ‘You shouldn’t be selling drugs at your age.’ And he said: ‘How else am I gonna buy a PlayStation?’

HELEN. There’s a lot of that goes on. (1–2)
Parallel to *Shopping and Fucking*, drugs and violence are put forward as salient symptoms of present-day life. These dangerous circumstances are stressed by the story of Helen’s mother:

My mum. Living up here. Half the time the lift doesn’t work. Which in some ways is a blessing. They stink of piss and there’s needles on the floor. So she takes the stairs. Seventy-five and she’s climbing fifteen flights of stairs. You don’t know who’s there. Muggers. Dealers. You take your life in your hands. Year before she died she was mugged three times. That finished her off. (50–51)

The younger generation in *Some Explicit Polaroids* is no longer involved in political activism. They rather focus on a hedonistic lifestyle, or as Caridad Svich puts it: “Personal gratification and pleasure have usurped political idealism” (90). Tim glorifies happiness and optimism:

The story’s got a happy ending. That’s something you’ve got to get used to. We’ve reached ‘They all lived happily ever after’ and we’ve gone past it and we’re still carrying on. Nobody’s ever written that bit before but we’re doing it. This is the happy world. (38)

He is worried about building up a routine and avoids attributing meaning to separate experiences. For example, when Nadia is once more abandoned by her boyfriend, Tim tries to cheer her up as follows:

Nothing’s a pattern unless you make it a pattern. Patterns are only there for people who see patterns, and people who see patterns repeat patterns. So we don’t look for that. We see each day as a new day and we say ‘Hello new day’. (48)

Another important trait of the younger generation’s attitude to life is the individual responsibility, as Tim explains: “We’re all responsible for our own actions okay? We don’t blame other people. That’s very nineteen eighty-four” (39). This overall atmosphere of happiness, however, is only a cover for the deeper feeling of being lost in contemporary society, which reminds of Mark, Robbie and Lulu in *Shopping and Fucking*. Later on in the play, each character will realise the futility of the ‘happy world’ mask and their inner self will come to the surface.

Tim presents himself as “one hundred per cent pure trash” (11) on his personal homepage. He bought the Russian Victor as his sex slave: “I downloaded you because you
wear little shorts and you gyrate to trash. Because you are trash” (53). This idea echoes the commodification of sexuality in *Shopping and Fucking*. Tim, parallel to Mark, refuses all commitment or loving feelings: “Good boy, because I warn you, you feel anything, you’re out okay?” (15). Tim proclaims the philosophy of the ‘Happy World’ and places himself in the centre of attention:

TIM. A lot’s happened since nineteen eighty-four. A lot to catch up on.

NICK. I suppose there must be.

TIM. Well my balls have dropped for a start. Nineteen eighty-eight that was. And I started shaving. Nineteen ninety. (37)

Nevertheless, Tim shatters his extremely optimistic illusion by refusing to take his pills: “I don’t want to hear all that stuff. All that stuff we keep telling ourselves. I’m happy, you’re happy. We’re okay. I don’t want to hear it” (55). The medication slows down his physical decay, but burdens him mentally at the same time: “I used to know everything and that’s what those fucking pills have taken away from me” (59), whereas a few moments earlier he qualified the pills as “fucking marvellous” (38). The different stages of the deterioration process gives him certainty, which he needs more desperately than health: “And sure, it was a fucking tragedy. My life was a tragedy and that was frightening and sad and it used to do my head in. But I knew where everything was going” (58). This loss of control also causes an identity crisis: “Suddenly I was nobody. When you’re ‘Person Who Is Dying’ and they take that away from you then you’re ‘Person Who …Blank, Blank, Blank’ “ (67). He even reverts to the values of the older generation in search for a stable grip on reality: “I want communists and apartheid. I want the finger on the nuclear trigger. I want the gay plague” (58).

Svich presents Tim as “a victim of the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and 1970s” (91) because he is HIV-positive. Tim’s death echoes a personal experience from Ravenhill’s life: his boyfriend also died of AIDS. Svich adds that “Tim and his death serves as a locus of liberation and understanding among the characters” (91). Indeed, Tim’s death incites the other characters to reflect upon their lifestyle and to bring about change. Even when he is dead, Tim holds on to the principle of no loving commitments, as he tells Victor: “Maybe I need you or I need someone. To stop me being alone. Alone with this. (Indicates his erection.) But don’t confuse that with love” (68). Only after Victor has irrevocably left the corpse alone, Tim is able to admit that he loves Victor. Pretending to live in the ‘Happy World’ and maintaining an emotional distance – Tim’s two most important values – consequently prove to be insincere and unreliable.
Victor is described by Svich as “one of Ravenhill’s light comic creations – a disco-loving, Russian rent boy” (91). The comic touch is introduced from the moment Victor arrives at the airport. Several times during his first conversation with Nadia, he misunderstands English expressions due to his Russian descent:

NADIA. I think you’re a very beautiful person.
VICTOR. You like my body?
NADIA. On the inside. Beautiful on the inside. (9)

Of course, you can also explain these miscommunications as a result of Victor’s superficiality. Indeed, he interprets everything in sexual terms:

NADIA. Well I think that’s fantastic. No I do. To be open.
VICTOR. Yes. Open. Hungry hole.
NADIA. To possibilities. (10)

Victor sees the world as “totally crazy” (9) and attaches a great deal of importance to his body: “I’ve got a fucking fantastic body. I could have been in porno. Body like this I could be huge porno star. Guys go crazy for my body” (9). Another example is his first direct address to Nick: “You like my body?” (36). He also admits that he adores trash: “I like it when everything is trash. Trash music, trash food, trash people” (11). In this way, he resembles Mark from Shopping and Fucking who bought Robbie and Lulu, whose former owner stated, “. . . they’re trash. Trash and I hate them” (3). This aspect appears to be important since it is repeated in the variant of raping Gary. Victor also parallels Mark in his ideal of avoiding commitment. His sole objective in life is to have fun and to stay on the superficial level of relationships: “I’m a crazy guy, you know, and I just want to have fun, just want to enjoy … Why do these guys fucking lie to me? Loving, spiritual, vulnerable, ill. Fuck this” (12). He refuses to accept that he has a more profound significance for Tim – “Nothing means anything, okay?” (12) – and wants to escape in a fairytale world of pleasure: “Please not serious” (47) or “You promised happy world” (48).

Nonetheless, just like Mark in Shopping and Fucking, he cannot prevent feelings of love and tenderness to emerge when Tim refuses to take his pills: “I can’t help this … I feel … I want you to get better. I want you to be with me” (53). This gradual attachment is also illustrated by Victor’s aversion for decaying bodies. At first he resolutely states “I don’t want to be near ill people. They have ugly bodies” (15). Later on he dutifully feeds Tim the pills and becomes more and more worried. In the hospital scene, he begs Tim to take his medicine
because he does not want to lose him and cannot stand a body with “[d]ry skin, warts” (58) as Tim describes the next stages of his AIDS-disease.

However, Victor never fully loses his extreme self-adoration. After Tim’s death, he focuses only on himself and neglects Tim’s hardship of a life with AIDS: “Fucking selfish fucking bastard. What about me? Make me suffer like this. This is not what you were supposed to do. Supposed to make me happy. Not make me suffer. I don’t want to feel this” (65). He then starts hitting the corpse and begs Tim to reciprocate his love: “Please say you love me. I don’t care whether it’s true or not. I don’t care whether you are lying to me. Please. I just want you to say it” (66). The following shocking stage image, where Victor masturbates Tim’s corpse, is a “powerful image of futility” (147) according to Sierz. It saddles the audience with mixed feelings of shame and confronting voyeurism.

The pointlessness of pretending to be happy dawns on Victor after Tim’s death: “Fuck this Happy World okay? Big fucking lie” (72). He cannot cope with this painful truth. Consequently, he decides to start a new ‘Happy Life’ in Japan and leave this negative experience in London behind. He recommends Nadia to do the same: “You forget me tomorrow. Close your eyes and you won’t be able to picture this face” (77). He already expresses his Japanese fantasy upon his arrival in London: “I really like the idea of Japanese guy. For one hundred days every year he will keep me in cave” (10). The desire to be owned is acted out during his stay with Tim, who treats him like an animal – “Sit, SIT. (To Nick.) You have to be firm with them” (37) – or like a little child – “Wait. Daddy’s talking” (37). His idealistic outlook of being a model and a television host in Tokyo also incorporates his famous death: “And one day I will take many drugs and die in the snow in the mountains” (76). Tim’s ghost, however, predicts a less pleasant future for Victor. In a vision, he describes an earthquake that will destroy Victor’s apartment building and leave him without food or water for three days.

Victor’s desperate clinging to the ‘Happy World’ and his vision on socialism might be explained by his youth, marked by the rigid regimes of Marx and Lenin:

> Everything falling to pieces. The buildings ugly and falling down. The shops ugly, empty. The ugly people following the rules and then mocking and complaining when they think that no-one is listening. All the time you know it is rotting, but all the time ‘Everything is getting better. Everything is for the best. The people are marching forward to the beat of history.’ This lie. This deception. This progress. Big fucking lie. (40–41)
Svich notes that the insertion of Victor’s character, a Russian go-go dancer, “allows Ravenhill to expand his societal critique beyond Britain. . . . erosion is everywhere. There are no frontiers left” (91).

The absence of frontiers and clear delineation is also exemplified by Victor’s sexual identity. He deliberately blurs the distinction between homosexuality and heterosexuality in a slightly erotic scene with Nadia: “I like women. I’m not afraid of women. I can fuck women” (56). Together with Nadia, he even seems to scorn homosexuality: “Fuck these gays, yes? Scared of the woman’s bodies” (57). Fuelled by helplessness and anger because Tim refuses to take his pills, they conclude that gays are ill and frightened people. In this way, Nadia resembles Lulu in Shopping and Fucking. Victor can make love to women as well as to men, which may demonstrate his bisexuality. Still, the only person who really attracts him is himself. He is obsessed with his own body. Victor consequently cannot be categorised as homosexual nor as bisexual. Although he is more attracted to men, his only true love or religion is narcissism. All the same, the death of Tim forces him to reconsider for a brief moment the meaning of life: “There’s got to be more than this. What is there? This is … animals. What makes us better than animals? Revolution never saved us. Money never saved us. No love. I want more than this” (69). He comes up with a solution, but his homosexual inclination prevents it, which again arouses contempt for homosexuality: “What is it? Children? To have a child? Is that what save us? I can’t have a child. Fuck this gay. Fuck these men and their fucking together” (69). All in all, the obsolete ideal of a ‘Happy World’ and the worshipping of his body do not prevent Victor from being painfully confronted with reality.

The character of Nadia resembles Mark in Shopping and Fucking because her language reminds us of typical therapy speak. Her first words in the play already illustrate this:

> Because we all have our own journeys that we’re travelling. Each of us has our own path and, of course, we can’t always see the path, sometimes it seems like there’s no sense in anything, you know? But of course there is. Everything makes sense. (8)

She continues by commenting on her own insecure position in society: “Nothing’s fixed for me, which is cool in a way. Sometimes you just have to let yourself be open to possibilities before you can really choose, you know?” (10). In the same way, she analyses Tim’s personality: “I don’t think Tim always values himself. But actually, Tim is a very
beautiful person. A very loving person” (11). However, it is not easy to maintain a positive attitude in a society without ‘big stories’ or guidelines for morally correct behaviour. To succeed in her objective, she uses several strategies. First of all, she ignores negative comments: “I’m not listening to all this negative . . . Because I’m open, I’m at peace with myself . . . “ (14). Secondly, she tries to live in the present and banishes negative experiences from her thoughts. After Nick saved her from being beaten up by Simon, she says, “Oh. Hi. I’d just filed you away. In here. Past tense” (17). She explains the reason for her ‘intentional’ forgetting: “I’m letting that go. I’m not going to hurt myself by holding on to those feelings. That would be hurting me” (23). Simon, Nadia’s boyfriend, has beaten her several times before, but she keeps protecting him:

NADIA. He had a difficult childhood.
NICK. He’s not making much of a go at being an adult.
NADIA. He’s doing the best he can with the knowledge that he has. (18)

Again, Nadia uses therapeutic vocabulary to explain away his behaviour: “But if you look inside … Simon is frightened and Simon was expressing his fear in the only way he knows how” (23). Simon cleverly abuses Nadia’s naivety by parroting her therapy speak while asking for forgiveness: “I’m really trying to work though [sic] this … control issue or whatever it is. I’m really … I want to understand why I have this need to hurt you” (20). Later on in the play, Nadia explains why she remains attached to Simon: “Anything to be with someone. You want my body? Fine. Just stay with me a few hours. And Simon? Simon’s hitting me. But I’m with someone. Bleeding but somebody’s there” (70–71). She considers Simon as her last resort to company and consequently forgives his aggressive behaviour.

Nadia refuses to see society in black and white categories, which is again a way of defending Simon:

NICK. So? Ex-boyfriend? Ex-husband? / Pimp or …
NADIA. Oooo … labels, labels. Simon’s a friend who I shag once in a while. If we’re in the mood. (17)

Later on in the play, she opposes once more to Nick’s categorizing and justifies Simon’s violent outbursts:

NICK. Simon is a sexist bastard.
NADIA. He is a child inside. And we’re all children inside. (23–24)
Nevertheless, Nadia herself also thinks in fixed categories. She analyses Nick as “a frightened” and “angry person” (20) whereas she herself is “a nice person” (21). Victor also narrow-mindedly attributes labels. He continues to call Nick ‘Mr Socialist’, even though the latter explicitly stated that he does not adhere to socialism anymore.

To avoid loneliness, Nadia has sexual intercourse with Nick. His criminal past does not deter her. He only has to assure that he is not a rapist or a paedophile. Even when he admits that he attempted murder, she is not discouraged: “But you’ve moved on. You’re a changed person and … that’s cool” (27). Further details are of no importance to her, which is in line with her strict division between past and present: “I don’t want to find out anything. The past is gone, okay?” (27). During this conversation, Ravenhill suggests that she might have been abused by her father: “I’ve never met a paedophile. Well, only my father. But I don’t count him” (27). When Nick leaves her, she collapses emotionally for the first time: “I think this is a pattern. People walking out. People abandoning me” (48). Tim tries to cheer her up with happy pep talk and Victor puts make up and a wig on Nadia, but her reaction is: “Hello new day. Hello me, hello Tim, hello Victor … No I can’t” (48). This is the first indication that a ‘Happy World’ might not be the best solution to tackle contemporary society.

Nadia’s encounter with Jonathan runs parallel to that of Nick, that is to say they both intervene when Simon is beating Nadia. In order to keep Jonathan near her, Nadia tries to seduce him in a manner that reminds of Victor: “Do you want to go to bed with me? I’ve got a great body. And I bet you’ve got a great body too” (61). The same superficiality occurs when Nick tells her that he dislikes his own body due to the scars that Nick caused. Her answer is: “I’ll kiss it better” (64). Jonathan launches the definite reversal within Nadia’s worldview. He is not aroused by her body and tells her that “I’ll kiss it better” is an immature expedient. He triggers off her real feelings and thoughts: “Everything is terrible. Nothing means anything. There’s nobody out there. I’m alone in the universe” (62). After this insight, she decides to change her lifestyle: “Well, I’ve learnt from this. I’m going to be on my own and I’m going to learn to do that. Hours of … days of … no one else” (71). She clearly communicates this to Nick: “I don’t need the bullshit. And I don’t need you anymore. What I want is to be on my own. Anything else is just running away. Deal with the nasty stuff okay?” (77). When Victor is leaving for Japan, Nadia abandons her method of wiping out the past as soon as possible. Although Victor says he will forget her immediately, she answers: “I’ll remember. I want to remember” (78). Once more, the ‘Happy World’ ideology proves
inadequate to deal with contemporary society and a need for deeper meaning comes to the surface.

Parallel to *Shopping and Fucking*, the woman is the most stable character. All three younger characters have their own problems, but Nadia is the only one who really takes a fresh start. Tim dies and Victor flees to Tokyo to begin a life similar to the London disaster. Nadia seems to have grown out of her “new-age ‘inner child’ philosophies” (Svich 90) and is now able to cope with the difficulties of contemporary society.

### 3.3.2 The Older Generation

With reference to the older generation in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Svich indicates that the theme of the play is the “mourning for socialism’s values” (90). As Robbie already suggested in *Shopping and Fucking*, the generation that grew up under Thatcher’s regime lacks ‘big stories’ or clearly delineated ideologies. Sierz remarks the parallelism with Ernst Toller’s *Hoppla, wirleben!* (1927), which also describes the return of a political activist and how his former friends have resigned themselves to conforming to contemporary society (144). Nick is released from prison and still feels the old vigour for militant action against the “big targets” (8): “The police, the … multinationals …. The arms dealers … the dictators. / They’re out there and you and me, we’ve got to stand up and …” (24). Helen’s worldview, on the contrary has changed from youthful idealism to a more realistic worldview: “I was twenty. Everyone was a fascist or a scab or a class traitor. ‘Eat the rich.’ We used to chant that, I mean what the fuck did that mean – ‘eat the rich’?” (5). She even mocks their former actions: “So, what you going to do to me? Firebomb through the letterbox? Picket the entryphone. Or maybe you’re going to kidnap / me and do all sorts of terrible things to me?” (2). Nevertheless, in her youth she was convinced that violent action was the only way to guarantee equality and justice. Jonathan elaborates on this idea, by quoting her manifesto “A guide to destroying the rich” (33): “‘We will start with individuals. One by one we will capture them, we will capture their children. There are a thousand years of injustice to reverse. When we strike it will be with a deadly cruelty which will wipe out a thousand years of suffering.’” (33).

Besides nostalgia for lost socialist values, Svich observes the tension between the older and the younger generation: “Where political urgency and rage once dominated a culture, Ravenhill sees a society passing time, unable to rouse passion for any kind of protest. Personal gratification and pleasure have usurped political idealism” (90). Tim often compares
1984 – the year when Nick was incarcerated – to contemporary society. AIDS, for example, was then called the gay plague and those who were infected died within six months, whereas nowadays you can live up to fifteen years with the disease. Tim tries to understand the bitterness of the older generation by referring to the circumstances of their youth: “Communists, apartheid, finger on the nuclear button” (39). Nick reacts by commenting on the senselessness of contemporary life: “Nothing’s connected, you’re not connected with anything and you’re not fighting anything” (43). The globalisation of contemporary society clashes with the need for stability of the older generation:

VICTOR. The world is not so big you know? There’s the same music, the same burgers, the same people. Everywhere in the world. You can keep moving all the time and still be in the same place.

NICK. I want a place I can be. Ignore the world. Look after someone I love. I want a home. (73)

Helen comments on the gradual change from idealistic socialism to contemporary, market-driven culture: “Communities disappear. Greed and fear everywhere. Start off with a society and end up with individuals fighting it out. Fucking terrible” (50). Svich summarises the transformation in society as follows: “The political anger once voiced explicitly by the characters through protest and immediate social action is now displaced through acts of physical and psychological violence” (91). Helen voices the overall feeling of despair and fear for a complete collapse of safety in society:

Everything gone. Not all at once. Not some great explosion. Not one day you can see what’s happening and fight back. But so gradually you don’t see it. Long, dull pain. Every now and then thinking: ‘How did we get from there to here? How did we let this happen? It can’t get any worse.’ But it does. On and on. (51)

Nick is an activist advocating zealously socialist values. He was incarcerated in 1984 for attempted murder on Jonathan. According to Nick, it was an act of loving support for his former girlfriend Helen, whose father was fired by Jonathan: “You said: ‘That Bastard is the scum of the earth and someone should kill that bastard’ “ (4). Helen, on the contrary, glosses over her harsh words by appealing to her young naivety. After fifteen years in prison, Nick immediately visits Helen. He broaches the difficulty of reintegration: “I’ve only just got out. I don’t understand anything now” (5). At the end of the play, he admits to Jonathan that he felt more secure in prison and consequently has tried to be arrested again:
I found myself thinking: Fuck, I wish I was inside again. Last few days. I’ve been standing there. Watching police cars. Hanging around parked cars when there’s police around. Setting off the alarms. Wah wah wah. Come on please. Put me away. One of you has got to save me. (80)

These lines also indicate the incompetence of the police, one of the social institutions Nick opposed to before 1984. He deplores Helen’s loss of anarchistic beliefs and cannot understand her willing conformism: “And what about the big targets? Why are there shitty estates? Why are they there in the first place? / You should be going for the big targets” (8). He cruelly criticises her function as a local councillor as being ineffective and futile: “You’re doing fuck all. Just rearranging the same old shit backwards and forward, that’s what you’re doing. And you call it politics. Just as meaningless as the rest of us” (52). Nick’s socialist fury is reinvigorated by Simon’s beating of Nadia: “You’ve gotta fight back” (23). He generalises Nadia’s situation and infers a socialist statement from it: “Men. You can’t let them … you’ve got to make a stand” (23). Nick’s anger is a major theme in the play. Sierz remarks that, “Nick’s anger echoes both the Angry Young Men of the fifties and the Angry Brigade urban terrorists of the early seventies. Yet, significantly, he kidnapped and tortured Jonathan in 1984, a year that recalls both George Orwell’s dystopia and the last Miners’ Strike” (146). The superficiality and ideological emptiness of the younger generation frustrates Nick. When Nadia laughs at his anger, he vehemently answers: “It’s not funny, it’s not … it’s not funny when … because Simon is a symptom, Simon is … when all the time they can smack you in the mouth” (24). He compares her to a “sleepwalker” (24) who is unaware of the surrounding chaos and violently starts to shake her awake. He counters Tim’s view of a ‘Happy World’ by pointing out his possible hidden feelings: “Maybe it’s not like that. Maybe there’s terrible things. Maybe there’s injustices that make you angry, that make you want to protest … make you want to …” (39). Thereupon, Tim declares his view of the older generation: “I look at people who were around in nineteen eighty-four. And I see bitter people. I think you must have spent so much time being angry that it’s left you all hard and bitter, and now there’s no way for you to deal with today” (41). Nonetheless, as Sierz points out, not all anger in the play is political (146): other sources of anger are Tim’s terminal disease, Jonathan’s scars, and Simon’s difficult childhood.

Nevertheless, Nick’s world not only consists of anger and militant action. His love for Helen or Nadia is another major influence on his personality. He tells Helen how important she is for him: “If I can’t take care of you, then I don’t mean anything” (52). When she rejects him, he turns to Nadia. Nick only wants to have a home and somebody to take care of.
He is, for example, worried when Nadia is ten minutes late. Tim thinks this is a characteristic of “obsessive and dangerous people” (36). His concern for Nadia sharply contrasts with his comment on Helen’s bachelor life in the beginning of the play: “I think that’s a good choice. Not to tie yourself down like that. Keep your independence. Play the field a bit when you fancy it. I think that’s a really good choice you’ve made there” (2–3). Nick still knows the elementary rules of gallantry. He is enraged when he sees Simon beating Nadia: “I don’t like to see a bloke do that to a woman” (16). Moreover, he has difficulties accepting Victor’s sexual explicitness. When Victor seductively dances around Nick, the latter dryly answers: “What’s wrong with him?” (35).

Svich considers Nick’s return to civilization as a “Darwinian survival” (92) and qualifies the younger generation as “a quasi-Greek chorus” (92). Indeed, the presence of Nadia, Tim and Victor stresses the difference in worldview of both generations. Nick cannot understand how the younger generation sustains the illusion of happiness while Nadia is bleeding. He goes on to comment on the unnaturalness of Tim’s medication: “Inside you there’s chemicals fighting virus fighting your body fighting …” (43). Nadia is happy to turn a blind eye to her bruises by putting on make up, whereas Nick considers this as a deceit:

NICK. But it won’t make them go away.

NADIA. Out of sight. (45)

Nadia suggests drugs as a solution to Nick’s pessimistic temper. Victor countenances this idea by adding, “Yes. Much better than socialism” (46). Nadia consciously resists the piteousness and melancholic mood of the older generation: “So, what? All the old stuff people used to programme themselves with – I’m a victim, I’m poor. Same old patterns?” (55).

All the same, Nick tries to let go of his anger and his activist vigour. He admits to Helen that experiences like shopping or cleaning also can be satisfying: “You’re right. The old days. Always looking at the bigger picture. Everything part of the struggle, the class war … Forgot the little stuff” (49). Later on, he decides to stop looking for a deeper meaning and to adopt the superficial lifestyle of contemporary society: “Maybe that’s where I got it wrong. Maybe nothing means anything. Maybe that’s what I was running away from. So fuck. I’ll be meaningless. Yeah, I’m going and I’m gonna be totally fucking meaningless, alright?” (52). It is remarkable that, within the same scene, Nick changes his opinion three times. First he wants to take care of Helen, but when she refuses his attention, he criticises her ‘petty’ job as a local councillor. At the end, he acquiesces in present-day superficiality. In scene ten, he even renounces socialism and becomes fully absorbed in the ‘Happy World’: “Yeah. Every
day is a new day. Take responsibility for ourselves. Not let the world get to us” (72). He uses Nadia’s therapy-speak when he tells Helen that the incident with Jonathan is in the past and must be forgotten: “Yeah. If I’m going to change and … change and grow as a person then I’ve got to let all that go” (74). When Nadia abandons Nick, Helen quick-wittedly parodies his words: “I think she’s changing and growing and letting you go” (75). All in all, Nick’s struggle against present-day political passivity failed and consequently, he accepts contemporary society with all its shortcomings.

Svich describes Helen as “a shadow character that functions as object of former desire, and possible role model” (92). Just like Nick, she was a socialist activist and the writer of “A guide to destroying the rich”. Nowadays, she works as a local councillor and has ambitions of becoming an MP. The release of Nick confronts her with her anarchistic past. She considers their actions of 1984 as sins of her youth: “That was … It was a child” (33). After Nick’s incarceration, she gradually adapted to modern customs and gave up her radical socialist values. She admits that this change was not self-evident and she even thinks “prison must have been fucking heaven compared to what it’s been like out here” (50). It was a slow process of omitting her former beliefs one by one: “And you start to make concessions. Alright – I’ll let that one go. Maybe that was an unrealistic goal. Maybe I’ll have to take that on board. You can’t be fighting all the time. You get so fucking weary of always being angry” (51). Her new device is: “you don’t look for the bigger picture, you don’t generalise” (6). When Nick wants to take up the thread of their bond – both in love and in political rebellion – she refers to her adaptation and transformation to explain why he has become an outsider in her world: “I don’t need you Nick. I’ve got nothing in common with you. I’ve cut bits out of myself. Bit by bit, another belief, another dream. I’ve cut hem all out. I’m changed. I’ve grown up. I’m scarred” (51–52). She is scarred emotionally by the loss of her socialist ideology, whereas Jonathan – her enemy – is scarred physically by Nick’s violent attack.

Helen works as a local councillor, which sharply contrasts with her old vigour and opposition to conservative political actions. Her task is to coordinate the bus hours, at which Nick obviously sneers. Helen justifies her project, but her reference to commerciality (‘the shops’) only encourages Nick’s sarcasm: “To you. Maybe to you. But if you’re stuck on some shitty estate and the only way to get out, the only way to get to the shops is a bus / and at the moment there is no bus, then no it’s actually very important actually” (7). Helen further defends her cause by pointing to the futility of their former actions: “We’re actually making
people’s lives better. What did you ever do/ Nick? What did we ever do? Sure talk, talk, talk, march, march, protest. Ban this, overthrow that, but what did we ever do?” (8). Later on, she passionately describes her motivation for her job in a way that resembles the old socialist enthusiasm:

And now finally there’s a chance to do something. Too late for anything big. Too much lost for any grand gestures. But trying to pick up the pieces. Trying to create a few possibilities for the bits of humanity that are left. I’ve seen those bastards fuck up the country all these years. Now I want to do something about it. (51)

However, her future function as an MP is threatened by Jonathan’s search for Nick. Consequently, Helen desperately tries to convince Nick to talk to his former victim, purely out of self-interest: “He only has to mention this to someone in the Party and I’m not going to make the approved candidates list. I’ll be a ‘troublemaker’ “ (50).

Although Helen seems to be successful in professional life, she has more troubles with her love relationships. Her bisexual nature becomes clear in the very beginning of the play. She had a relationship with Finnoula for a few years and “[t]here’s been a few blokes / as well” (3). Already in the first scene, the ambiguity between Nick and Helen becomes apparent. Helen prefers not to reconnect with her past, but she admits having “a few of the old feelings” (6) and they even kiss. During the entire play, Helen unconsciously plays a game of attraction and rejection. When Nick seems to privilege Nadia over Helen this duality surfaces in an angry and jealous reproach by Helen:

Alright then. Alright. Ruined everything. With your gestures. Your anger. So, leave me to live with that. And you see if you can hold on to Nadia. But it looks to me like Nadia is a child and I don’t think she’s going to want you for very much longer. But hey – it could be fun for a while. So change and grow – you cunt. (76)

Nevertheless, the final scene shows the reconciliation between Nick and Helen. She even calls him “my hero” (83). She reveals her true inner feelings to Nick: when she wakes up, she sometimes feels unsatisfied with her present condition and wants “to change everything” and to “smash everything up” (84). During the entire play, she opposes Nick’s obsolete activist socialism. In the end, Nick has reversed his values and lost his angry vigour. Helen, however, repeats several times the desire to return to Nick’s youthful activism:

HELEN. Fucking old. But you … I want you to be angry.

NICK. I can’t do that anymore.
HELEN. Nobody does that anymore. I miss that.
NICK. I can’t be your memory.
HELEN. I want to make you into what you used to be. (84)

Parallel to *Shopping and Fucking*, the play ends in a hopeful manner: Nick and Helen kiss. Svich sees this as a double symbol: on the one hand, as “the beginning of a relationship rekindled” and on the other hand as a “possibility for a new societal playing field: peace” (92).

Jonathan is opposed directly to Nick and Helen because of his capitalist ideology:

... you see the beauty of … the way money flows, the way it moves around the world faster and faster. Every second a new opportunity, every second a new disaster. The endless beginnings, the infinite endings. And each of us swept along by the great tides and winds of the markets. Is there anything more thrilling, more exhilarating than that? (63)

Nick tried to stab him to death and this incident has left scars all over his chest. Logically, when Nick is released from prison, Jonathan wants revenge. He tries to trace Nick by manipulating Helen and Nadia. When he encounters Helen for the first time again since fifteen years, he hides his true identity. He presents himself as an advisor for the House of Commons. In the same scene he announces that the end of the world is near, which gives the impression that he is insane. By mentioning drugs and the rehabilitation centre, he tricks Helen into believing that he is a junkie. Only at the end of this scene does he reveal who he is and what their link in the past is: “No, Helen, I don’t want ten pounds, Helen. Don’t be so fucking stupid. I mean do I look like a junkie? You’re going to have to sort out the bullshit from the truth if you want a future in Government. Where’s Nick?” (34). He does not settle for apologies, but wants to avenge the injustice caused by Nick physically: “Very fashionable now, sorry, isn’t it? Sorry we bombed your embassy, sorry about that famine, sorry we injected you with that virus and observed you as you died. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Well it doesn’t fucking work, okay? It won’t work” (34). To find Nick, Jonathan not only blackmails Helen, but also manipulates Nadia. Just like Nick, he rescues her from being beaten up, which shows that they share the same values from the past: “I was passing. Couldn’t just walk past and see a woman being attacked like that. Although now of course so many do” (60). Nadia denies that she is in love, but Jonathan knows that she is dating Nick: “I can’t stand a liar. If there’s one thing I can’t stand it’s an untruth” (61). Paradoxically, he himself does not always handle the truth very strictly, for instance when he takes on different roles during his first encounter
with Helen. He tries to evoke compassion in order to discover where Nick is hiding: “These are the scars you see? This is what Nick did to my body. This is why Nick was in prison. Where is he?” (64). Nadia indeed pities him and suggests to “kiss it better” (64). Although the younger generation considers this a valuable solution, Jonathan is enraged by it: “Don’t be so fucking stupid. That’s not going to work is it?” (64). Jonathan appears as a manipulative, insincere and unpleasant character. Therefore, the audience sides more with Nick. Jonathan resembles Brian from Shopping and Fucking because they both adhere to the capitalist ideology and blackmail people to achieve their objective.

The penultimate scene depicts the confrontation between Nick and Jonathan. Svilich describes it as follows: “Two exhausted lovers meet on the battlefield of socialism and capitalism and do not even have the energy to fight it out” (92). Jonathan feels the anger and hate towards Nick fade away when he sees how prison and the confrontation with contemporary society have disparaged him.

JONATHAN. I’d imagined someone angry and threatening and …

NICK. It’s not a trick. Look at me. I’m not gonna fight back.

JONATHAN. And someone worth fighting. And I’m looking at someone … weak. Lost

Nick’s pitiable character even gives rise to feelings of comradeship and sympathy: “Pretty terrible place, the world, isn’t it? When you actually have to live in it” (79). Jonathan is lyrical about the period before 1984: “Nostalgia’s a tricky bitch isn’t she? But really now, just at the moment, I feel rather nostalgic about the time we spent together” (80). Nick apologises, but Jonathan does not consider that necessary anymore and resorts to charity: “You look terrible. Would you like to take a shower? We’ve got a splendid shower just through here” (80). This generosity confuses Nick: “It was much easier. Before. When I hated you. I knew where I stood” (81). Jonathan even shows understanding for Nick’s idealistic social activism:

I think we both miss the struggle. It’s all been rather easy for me these last few years. And I start to feel guilty if things come too easily. But really money, capitalism if you like, is the closest we’ve come to the way that people actually live. And, sure, we can work out all sorts of other schemes, try and plan to make everything better. But ultimately the market is the only thing sensitive enough, flexible enough to actually respond to the way we tick. (81, emphasis added)
The audience starts to adjust its negative impression of Jonathan, because of his kind behaviour. Jonathan invites Nick on a trip to Eastern Europe, where he plays the generous benefactor to compensate for the money he earned, profiting from the Western government: “So, I’m doing what I can in Eastern Europe. Schools and hospitals and rehab centres. We’re really doing things. Oh – little flash of hatred in your eyes” (82). Jonathan admits enjoying to be treated as “a demi-god”, but he adores even more the envy and hate from the less wealthy and influential people: “. . . but still: that little flash of hatred in all of them. And I don’t quite now [sic] why that is. But I rather like it” (82). The original impression of Jonathan as insincere and not likeable is confirmed at the end. The short passage of generosity might be just another role-play.

Klaus Peter Müller refers to Rorty to account for the role-switching and the alterations in personality or worldview of all characters: “Thus, the individual person changes when he or she tells a different story about his or her own life and self-understanding. . . . Seen from this perspective, life is formed no longer by a single centre, but by a network of interdependent centres which have to be constantly recreated” (12). Indeed, contemporary society no longer offers a single stable ideology as guiding principle. Identity is rather fluid and consists of multiple aspects that can be added, left out or exchanged.

The younger generation of Some Explicit Polaroids believes in a ‘Happy World’ and adheres to a ‘trash-and-pleasure’ worldview. Nonetheless, in the course of the play, it becomes clear that this ideology is not an apt response to contemporary culture. All three characters deviate from their original point of view. Tim prefers death to a superficial life for the sake of appearances. Victor is confronted with the painful reality of Tim’s disease. He cannot control his feelings of love and flees to Tokyo in order to start a new life. Thus, Victor’s sudden confrontation with reality does not alter his world view drastically. Nadia abandons her deceiving therapy speak after a harsh confrontation with Jonathan. She drops the mask of eternal happiness and probes deeper into her true feelings. Parallel to Lulu in Shopping and Fucking, Nadia seems to be the only one of the younger generation to bring the existential quest to a happy end. The homosexual personage of Tim resorts to death and bisexual/homosexual Victor runs away from the problems.

As for the older generation, the former duality of capitalism versus socialism is not adequate anymore in present-day society. Nick’s strong belief in militant socialism is diminished by his initial incomprehension after his release from prison. He attempts to recover his socialist vigour, but only discovers anger and bitterness. He abandons socialism
and tries to adopt the ‘Happy World’ ideology of the younger generation. In the final scene, he has learned to cope with the abundance of influences and ideologies in contemporary society. He stops generalizing and only focuses on a happy home together with his true love, Helen. During Nick’s incarceration, Helen left behind all her past socialist values. She completely conforms to contemporary society. In the final scene, however, she reveals her unfulfilled longing for the old days, when anger and militant action were preponderant. She ends up in a heterosexual relationship with Nick, which is also a symbolic return to tradition. Thus, her bisexual escapade might reflect an attempt to conform to modern culture, where sexual identity is fluid and experimental. It is significant that Nick, the truly heterosexual personage, is the only one of the older generation to find genuine tranquillity.

Jonathan, contrary to the other characters, does not evolve at all. He was a capitalist in 1984 and still is nowadays. His presentation as a benefactor in Eastern Europe is only a misleading change in worldview, because he admits enjoying the jealousy and hatred in the eyes of the poor people. All in all, Jonathan is the most enigmatic figure of the entire play. Even his sexual preference remains a mystery. Nadia’s body does not arouse him and there are no indications that he feels attracted to a male character.

### 3.4 Mother Clap’s Molly House (2001)

*Mother Clap’s Molly House* is characterised as a play with songs. Parallel to *Handbag*, it contains two separate plot lines that intertwine at some points. The main focus is on the eighteenth century phenomenon of the ‘molly houses’. Mrs Tull runs the tally shop after her husband’s death. Her gay apprentice boy and some of his friends inspire her to turn it into a molly house. This story line sketches a fairly authentic image of eighteenth century homosexual life. The second plot line is situated in 2001. It depicts contemporary homosexual life, more precisely a sex orgy. The entire play constitutes a social and historical overview of different types of homosexuality. Moreover, it touches upon the issues of motherhood, family life and commercialisation of sexuality.

*Mother Clap’s Molly House* is interlarded with songs, reminiscent of Bertold Brecht’s ‘alienation’ methods which make the audience ponder the ideas uttered in his plays (Wandor 148). Ravenhill’s songs, moreover, serve a specific function within the play, parallel to the ancient Greek chorus. The play opens with a mythological/religious justification and celebration of commercialism, which is one of its major themes:
When at first Our Father mighty
Made the Earth and Sea and Skies
Then Our Father great and mighty
Made Man and gave him Enterprise. (5)

The next comments sung by the chorus – at the beginning of each scene – foreshadow what will happen in that scene. Ravenhill makes this even more obvious by putting it in italics: “And The Widow Carries On” (18), “The ‘Prentice Led Astray” (27), “A Bargain With A Whore” (35) and “The Widow Finds New Trade” (41). In the first act, the language of the songs is pompous and the subjects are mythological. Ravenhill wittily employs classical deities and adapts them to the homosexual context. He mentions Phoebus, the god on the sun-wagon, who was also the most prominent homosexual deity in ancient Greece. Moreover, he puns on the double meaning of ‘prick’, as a puncture or as a taboo word for penis:

The prick of Eros’ arrow’s sweet
It enters swiftly in
And once sweet prick is known to man
His pleasure can begin. (27)

The first act ends with an ecstatic praise of the molly house: “Our promised land. / Rejoice! Rejoice!” (55). The Christian God and the mythological Eros are brought together and love is, once more, commodified:

GOD.
Morality is history
Now profit reigns supreme.
EROS.
And love can speak its name out loud
Now business loves a queen (56)

The high-flown language starts to decay and more vulgar expressions emerge: “This is a marriage / Of purse and arse and heart” (56) or “Shit on all those who call this sodomy / We call it fabulous” (56). This vulgarity culminates in ‘Mother Clap’s Maggot’, which is nothing more than a sequence of the word ‘fuck’ (73). The opening song of the eight scene, ‘Pleasure’, is entirely rooted in contemporary society. It mentions present-day sexual licentiousness and loss of intimacy: “You wanna touch me? I gotta think about that / You wanna take me? OK” (79). The line “Go sister, you’re such a ho sister on video sister” (79) reminds the contemporary audience of the 2001 version of ‘Lady Marmalade’, the title song for the movie Moulin Rouge. The following lines resemble modern rap lyrics: “Make me sing
Miss Thing / With your ring a ling a ling a ling” (79). This might refer to Tina’s piercing of her labia. The song concludes with the hedonistic carpe diem motive: “Now is how I wanna be” (80). The final song in the play mingles high-flown language with the word ‘fuck’. It stresses how ephemeral love is contrasted with the eternity of commercialism: “Enterprise shall light your darkness / Business must go on” (103).

3.4.1 Eighteenth Century Plot

As in many of Ravenhill’s plays, commercialism and the commodification of sexuality form a major theme. The deities of love (Eros) and enterprise (the catholic God) watch over both the eighteenth century and the contemporary world. Mark Steyn remarks that the god of commerce is “if not gay, certainly misogynistic. ‘Arse will always triumph over c*** [106],’ he declares” (35). Georges-Michel Sarotte states that few homosexual men participate in commerce because the business world is “agressivement hétérosexuel” (193). Indeed, in Mother Clap’s Molly House, two women are concerned with commercialism, Mrs Tull and Amelia.

After Stephen Tull’s death, his wife has to administer the finances of their dress shop. Stephen did not explain to her how to work with a ledger, so she is desperate: “Oh, Martin. Figures is hard, in’t they? You make anything of that?” (6). Mrs Tull comments on God’s predilection for commerce: “No – good Lord in’t gonna carry off man of industry, man of business. It’s the makers, it’s the savers, it’s the spenders and traders who are most blessed. In’t no love like the Lord’s love of business” (10). Stephen Tull was torn between the two deities of the play: “And I try. God says: Make money. But Eros says –“ (11). He taught his wife to think of society in terms of commerce: “ ‘My love, the rest of the world is either customers or thieves. And as long as we make sure the customers fill our purse and the thieves dun’t snatch it, then what do we care for them?’ “ (20). Mrs Tull finds out all by herself how to run the dress shop. However, her entrepreneurial enthusiasm is already tempered by her first customers: “Not the Big I Am now, am I? Oh, Martin. Numbers dancing again. What we gonna do? I can’t bargain with a whore. Whores is hard” (40). This reverse does not prevent her from transforming into a merciless businesswoman. When Amy is bleeding and enfeebled after her abortion, Mrs Tull shows no empathy. She is angry because Amy has spoiled the dress and she charges “extra too for late return” (49). When Mrs Tull discovers her apprentice boy with some friends dressed as women, the idea of hiring
dresses to homosexual men crosses her mind: “And I shall hire to ‘em. A shilling a dress a day. That’s my price. Take it or leave it. . . . Whores are finished and I’m moving into mollies” (54). Mrs Tull does not approve of the homosexual sexual acts, but in commerce one must always remain neutral: “For that is the beauty of business. It judges no one. Let your churchman send your wretch to Hell, let your judge send him to Tyburn or the colonies. A businesswoman will never judge – if your money is good” (54). Even more explicitly, she states: “I shall turn my head away when prick goes into arse. And I shall look to my purse” (55). Whereas she abhorred sodomy at the beginning, she gradually grows accustomed to it: “But it’s pleasure to them and that’s enough for me” (79). The following lines clearly illustrate Mrs Tull’s attitude towards her homosexual customers: “Dun’t need me mollies a-skipping and a-fucking around me no more. Good game while it lasted and it filled me purse fit to bursting” (105). Her main goal was commercial, but nonetheless, she feels some affection for the men, which is made clear by the affective possessive pronoun ‘me’. Steyn states that “eighteenth-century London . . . discovers the lucrative gay market – what Britain now calls the ‘pink pound’ “(34). Indeed, Mrs Tull earned enough money with her molly house to move to the countryside: “I’m renting the house and the business for a good price, see? . . . So I drove her hard and now we can stretch to a bit of land” (104). She acquired a thorough knowledge of commerce and was thus able to bargain with a prostitute, contrary to her first acquaintance with the business world.

Amelia is the head of the brothel and she hires her girls’ garments in Mr Tull’s tally shop. When Amy – Amelia’s latest gain – reveals that she is still a virgin, Amelia is only interested in the commercial benefit: “Maidenhead too? Oh Lord, in’t He smiling down on me today. Got a Sir Somebody willing to pay twenty guineas to feel a hymen snap and see the blood come” (13). Sex is for sale and Amelia controls the price. Her sole preoccupation is her prostitution business and she pays no attention to emotions of others. For instance, while all characters are mourning around Mr Tull’s coffin, she asks Mrs Tull if there will be “new stock for the shop” (20). When Amy is pregnant, only the financial aspect matters to Amelia: “Well, that’s spoiled goods now, innit? Fresh in with a bloom, I thought, but no – belly on her already. Thass you price halved, girl. Stupid, stupid child” (38). She plans to kill the baby, because it is a blame for business. However, Mrs Tull agrees to lower the cost of hiring a dress as long as Amy keeps the child. This reverses Amelia’s view on the pregnancy:

AMY. But I don’t want an infant.

AMELIA. Good for business, girl, you’re having it. (40)
Amy is a mouthpiece for the commodification of sexuality: “It’s a grand day when a girl finds her body in’t just eating and shitting, in’t it? Day when a girl discovers she’s a commodity” (14). She does not consider prostitution as an unusual job: “Ain’t no lust in a whore. Just business. Thass why God smiles on ‘em” (15). The link between God and commercialism is once more reiterated.

Caridad Svich notices that “Mrs. Tull is the heart of Mother Clap’s Molly House in the same way Mother Courage is the heart of Brecht’s epic play” (94). Indeed, she is the central character of the eighteenth century plot. As mentioned above, she incorporates the values of commercialism. Moreover, she touches upon the subject matter of motherhood and thus establishes a link with Handbag. Mrs Tull’s multiple miscarriages left her longing for a child unfulfilled: “Heart said kid. Head said kid. Just Body could never hold on for more ‘an a month” (16). Instead, she mothers her apprentice boy, Martin, as Stephen indicates: “You spoil him with soft tongue. Can’t make him your infant” (15). Martin cleverly applies this in order to encourage Mrs Tull’s economic responsibility for him and for the shop: “Mrs Tull, you gotta … I’m looking to you. I in’t Man, I’m Boy. Boy needs protecting, guiding, boy needs … Look after me. Thass your duty” (25). Thomas Orme, the apprentice of Philips and Kedger, remarks that Martin behaves as if Mrs Tull is his mother. When Martin denies this, Orme adds: “And she should like to be your mother” (31). This short conversation is the only occurrence of the word ‘mother’ without capital M. Perhaps this is not intended. Anyhow, the rest of the play raises the mother figure to a more special status. Mrs Tull takes on different mother roles as well. When Princess tells her why he wears his mother’s dress, she substitutes for his dead mother: “Thass right. Thass my dress, son, and you got no right’ “ (22, emphasis added). By starting a molly house, she automatically becomes a mother figure for all mollies. Susan – Martin’s molly name – needs mother Tull to explain the bodily changes of a pubescent girl: “Body’s changing, Mother. Tities starting to grow. There’s hair between my legs. And there’s blood coming out of me. And I needs Mother to show me what to do” (52). Kitty – Thomas’ molly name – also acknowledges her new mother: “Oh, Mother, don’t you know your Kitty Fisher? The poorhouse and how they took me away from you? All me life I’ve been a searching and a searching and now I’ve found you. Oh, Mum, Mum” (52). Mrs Tull plays along with the game and answers in a thrilled way: “Lord. How many children I got?” (53). She decides to leave her barren self behind and to immerse herself in pleasure and motherhood: “Tull’s dead and buried see. From this day on all shall call me Mother” (55). Quickly, the mollies invent a nickname for her: ‘Clap’, which is a slang word for gonorrhoea.
Mrs Tull’s desperate longing for a child is illustrated by her attitude towards the pregnant prostitute, Amy. Although Mrs Tull tries to convince Amy of the beauty of motherhood, the latter prefers abortion: “Mother’s instincts? Don’t want Mother’s instincts. I in’t a fucking animal” (38). Mrs Tull’s passionate plea originated in her own experience: “Cos there’s women as spend their whole lives praying and praying for infants to come. Praying right to the day when their body dries up and Nature passes ‘em by and there in’t no hope left. So just you mind that” (39). Mrs Tull and Amelia reach an agreement: Amy will not have an abortion if Mrs Tull hires her dresses cheaper. Yet, Amy broke her promise. Consequently, Mrs Tull is furious, both because of the abortion and the dishonesty of Amy: “So kill it? Reach up into your belly and rip it dead? Well, miss, it’s pain eternal for you. That’s Nature’s cursing you, that’s Lord cursing you and – yes – that’s me cursing you too” (50). Princess remarks on her cruel behaviour towards Amy: “Mother in’t body and babies. Mother’s in your acts” (51). Mrs Tull excuses her heated reaction by referring to the implacable duality of motherhood and business. Princess thereupon speaks harsh words: “There in’t nothing of Mother in you. And maybe there never was” (51). Mrs Tull collapses emotionally and invokes her deceased husband to console her.

The ‘Birthing Scene’ in the molly house, organised by Mrs Tull, again shows her obsession with motherhood. Susan gives birth to a wooden doll and Kitty has to fulfil the role of caring father during the labour: “Kitty – glad tidings of great joy I bring to Earth. / You ever heard of how a virgin once gave birth?” (75). The religious reference to the birth of Jesus adds to the high-flown character of this experience. Susan (Martin) goes along with the game, but Kitty (Thomas) avoids the seriousness of parenthood: “Oh no. Didn’t want molly house so it could all be marrying and babies. (To Martin.) Sorry, love. But there in’t no pleasure in that. (To Lawrence.) Will you dance with me, sir?” (76). In line with Thomas’ reaction, Michael J. Bailey notes that “like straight men, gay men are less interested in children than women are” (99). Indeed, Martin also remarks that the birthing game was only a projection of Mrs Tull’s desire: “Baby? Thass not what I want. . . . Can’t make me into what you want to be” (77). Ravenhill notices that the influence of the Bulger murder is still present: two young boys and a neglected baby. However, he adds that there is a alteration of

15 This might also be interpreted as an implicit critique of contemporary society. Most mothers have a full-time (or at least part-time) job and consequently cannot be fully focused on their maternal function.
16 Mrs Tull envisages to strengthen the bond between Susan and Kitty by means of a shared experience, that is to say pregnancy and birth. The failure of this attempt may be interpreted as a critique of present-day (a)morality: more and more couples have children in order to save their relationship.
the subject: “But it’s a game. The baby’s a doll. And Martin looks after it” (TheatreForum 90). At the end of the play, Mrs Tull leaves the wooden doll behind, which is a symbolical abandonment of her motherhood dream. She contents herself with a childless life on the countryside, together with Matthew and Martin.

Parallel to the theme of commercialism, not only Mrs Tull is an important character with reference to motherhood. Amelia also takes on the role of a mother figure for her prostitutes. When the new candidates arrive from the country, she says “Come to Mother” (12). She pretends to be Amy’s guardian angel in the city and tries to replace her biological mother: “Well, I’m Mother now” (13). Nevertheless, Amelia only cares for the girls in a commercial manner. When one of her girls, Mary, was pregnant, Amelia carried out the abortion. When Cranton asks Amelia if she can help Amy, she answers: “If she pays the price I might” (39). An abortion means double profits for Amelia: she receives money to carry out the abortion and by avoiding the pregnancy, the price for a prostitute does not decrease.

Steyn notes that the eighteenth century plot largely is “historically grounded: a ‘pregnant’ boy gives birth to a doll – a routine popular in male bawdy houses of the day” (35). Indeed, the secluded society of the molly houses was an eighteenth century reality. Homosexuality was illegal in the United Kingdom until 1967. Consequently, for homosexual people, the molly houses were a way to escape the extreme disapproval of society and a “space within which men could express and explore a tabooed sexuality” (Wandor 127). Parker Rossman defines this semi-hidden society as a subculture. This umbrella term can be subdivided in ‘underworlds’ and ‘undergrounds’: “If such a subculture is purely criminal and exploitive, it is called an ‘underworld,’ if it has some revolutionary aspects and values, it is an ‘underground’ “ (34). Although Rossman discusses the pederast underground, his explanation is equally valid for the homosexual underground of molly houses: “Sexual repression incites secret rebellion which creates the environment which encourages undergrounds” (34). Moreover, he notices that most undergrounds develop into a “criminal underworld” (34) or a “counter-culture” (34) – as is the case with homosexuality. All in all, this homosexual underground presents several advantages for its members. First of all, the contradictory feelings of homosexuality – torn “between homosexual desire and the manifest disapproval of the world” (Bray 98) in eighteenth century England – were justified. In line with this argument, Rossman remarks that “[f]or some pederasts the underground is a source of similar self-acceptance and self-control as the result of psychiatric therapy” (205). Secondly, the molly houses were places where like-minded souls could protest and rebel
against dominant society. Thirdly, Alan Bray notes that the molly houses had a double function in society: “they must have restricted the spread of homosexuality at the same time as they secured its presence” (102).

Ravenhill’s sketch of the molly house is quite accurate and conforms to Alan Bray’s study about molly houses in general. The character of Mother Clap might be based on the historical Margaret Clap (Bray 81), who controlled a homosexual tavern in the eighteenth century. Moreover, Steyn remarks that Rictor Norton’s text Mother Clap’s Molly House may have inspired Ravenhill’s historical plotline (34). Furthermore, the characters of Thomas Orme and Amy are linked by their name to two important witnesses in the trial against the molly houses: Thomas Newton and Ned Courtney, both male prostitutes (Bray 90). After her abortion, Amy – a former prostitute – dresses as a man, takes on the name of ‘Ned’ and assists Mrs Tull in the molly house. Thomas Orme, dressed as Kitty Fisher, presents himself as a male prostitute at the end: “Here we can jig and drink and fuck. And anyone of you as wants Kitty Fisher can have me” (109). Moreover, the historical figure of Thomas Newton is dubiously linked to the Moorfields, which are also called “Sodomites Walk” (30). Although homosexuality is illegal, gays “persist in publicly seeking new partners” (Loeffler 121), for example in the area of the Moorfields, as Orme explains:

Oh yeah, you take a piss up Moorfields. Take a piss against a wall and all of a sudden there’s one man to the left of you and two to the right of you and they’re all taking a piss too. And then one man’ll reach out and play with the other one’s prick. And t’other man’ll reach out and touch your prick. Don’t you think that’s frightening? (30)

Mother Clap’s molly house offers a safe possibility for these men to meet. Because of the entrance fee, the house is purified of poor people: “Oh, nothing up Moorfields nowadays. Well, nothing but the poxed and prickles. So come and welcome to Mother’s” (69).

Bray observes three main characteristics of molly houses: drinking, singing and dancing (84). These items are also present in Mother Clap’s Molly House. Firstly, there is a profusion of beer. Loeffler notes that many homosexuals face the problem of alcoholism (153). Secondly, the abundance of songs reflects the general joyful atmosphere. Thirdly, some dances are mentioned, e.g. ‘Mother Clap’s Maggot’ (73) and ‘Amelia’s Maggot’ (110). Svich interprets this as a “Dionysian release of the body: the sheer celebration and power of

17 Note that prostitution was more preponderant in the seventeenth century homosexual brothels. Bray states that “prostitution, while an important part of homosexual life in seventeenth-century London (and again in the nineteenth century), was only marginally significant in the eighteenth century” (85).
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The song that accompanies ‘Mother Clap’s Maggot’ is a song of praise that urges the mollies to enjoy these bodily delights until death: “So we’ll fuck til the day when we’re finally fucked” (73). Another important element in the attraction of molly house was the possibility to have sexual intercourse in a safe place: “And if you wanna take your paramour in private, take ‘em to a room, lock the door and find your pleasure there, then Ma says: Good. And here’s the key” (74). The constant change of sexual partners confuses Princess: “Thass wickedness. Thass sodomite way. Fuck ‘em once and then find another” (68). S/he is disgusted by their sexual greed: “Last night alone saw him a-petting and a-bundling with three of ‘em severally and then – jug of beer later – three of ‘em together. Can’t get badder than that” (68). For Orme, however, this is the foundation of the molly house: “Just – we must fuck who we will. Else what’s the point of a molly house? Might as well be Man and Wife like rest of the world” (71). Indeed, Bailey found “approximately 30 to 50 percent of gay men to be attached at any one time, compared to approximately 75 percent of lesbians and even higher percentage of heterosexuals” (87).

Bray also comments on the distinctive jargon of the molly houses, in particular “heterosexual terms turned to new and ironic applications” (86). Richard Dyer notes the paradox within this system: “[I]n stereotyping the dominant groups apply their norms to subordinated groups” (30), whereas the gay community reinforces this domination by accepting the same norms. Bray enumerates some examples, all clearly present in the play: “The room in a molly house where couples were able to have sexual relations was the ‘chapel’, and the act itself ‘marrying’ or a ‘wedding night’; similarly a ‘husband’ was a sexual partner” (86). Loeffler adds that homosexuals often use female names (169). Indeed, all mollies take on a female pseudonym: “All have names at Mother’s. China Mary, Primrose Mary, Garter Mary, Orange Mary, Pomegranate Moll. . . .“ (71). Martin becomes so absorbed by his female alter-ego that he forgets his true nature: “Ain’t no Martin no more, Mum. Hanged hisself from a beam after breakfast. Says to me: Susan, tell the mistress I love her, but I can’t stand this world no more. And I says: ‘I shall’, as the rope tightened round his neck” (52).

Bray states that some homosexuals even lived in the molly house as lodgers (82), as Orme indicates: “Let’s all play families. And we’re living in the molly house” (49). As is shown by this line, Orme considers it a necessity to have a family: “Lord intended each of us to have a father and a mother and if Nature don’t provide ‘em, we must do what we can” (34). He points to the absence of parents who are open to homosexuality to account for the obscenities at Moorfields: “No home. Mother and Father wun’t have ‘em. So – out into the
night and … grope away. Give ‘em a home and that’d all be different. Let you molly be a family. Let your molly be Father or Mother” (31). However, lodgers are not the only customers in molly houses. Bray clarifies that “it cut across social classes and was composed of individuals drawn from the whole spectrum of the lower and lower-middle classes” (86). Even married men visited the homosexual underground. The pig-man Gabriel Lawrence, for example, considers it as a cheap satisfaction for his sexual desire: “Look, I in’t really bothered about lads. The only reason I – excuse me – fuck lads is cos woman’s needy and whores want paying” (89). Loeffler explains that heterosexuals see this as “an easy form of sexual gratification” (105). Lawrence adds that his wife always needs a reason for sexual intercourse. Mrs Tull’s answer supports Loeffler’s statement: “Well, I’m Mother Clap. And Clap – let’s just say I’ve give up ‘love me’ and ‘give me infant’ “ (89). During the sexual act itself, Martin (alias Susan) play the feminine role, begging Lawrence for some tenderness. Lawrence, on the contrary, prefers to keep it impersonal and only wants to satisfy his sexual need:

MARTIN. But there’s always kisses here. See, if you’re working down there, I like to feel you in here too.

LAWRENCE. And if I’m working down there, I don’t want to feel nothing up here, see? So turn over. (93)

Mrs Tull presents her molly houses as follows: “Tonight rules is left at the door. What do you wanna be today? Maid or man? You decide. Husband or wife? You choose. Ravished or ravisher. Thass for you to say” (74). This may refer to the choice of dress, but mostly it indicates the continuum of possible behavioural roles for homosexual people. This continuum contains the poles of masculinity and femininity, corresponding to the stereotypes of respectively butch and femme. Loeffler refers to Sigmund Freud and Albert Ellis for an explanation of this fluid duality. Freud claims that everybody is born bisexual. He interprets homosexuality as “a desire to experience both maleness and femaleness” (Loeffler 21). Albert Ellis divides homosexuality in two main elements: “sexual desire and sex-role inversion tendencies” (Loeffler 101). Not all homosexual men enjoy dressing up as women, just like not all heterosexual men who like women’s clothes feel attracted to men.

Already in the Old Testament, cross-dressing was forbidden and characterised as a sinful deed: “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman’s garment; for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God” (Deut. 22:5). Nevertheless, dressing as the opposite sex is a universal and historical given. For
example, John Osborne’s *A Patriot for Me* was attacked by the censor because it staged a drag ball and a cross-dressing scene. Wandor indicates that cross-dressing possibly evokes erotic arousal (172), which is one of the reasons for its continued existence throughout history. She adds that it is often linked to a homosexual underground (172), as is also the case in Osborne’s play. Ravenhill’s predilection for cross-dressing may be inspired by the pantomime performances which he attended during his childhood. He boldly states that “the cross-dressed shall inherit the earth” (*That’s Entertainment?* 328). In the play, Princess wonders why mollies cross-dress, if not for the pleasure of the garment itself: “In’t one of you understands how to carry a dress. If all you want’s a jig and a fuck then why rig up as woman, eh?” (67). Indeed, the particularity of the mollies is that they do not try to deceive; they are clearly men in women’s clothes (Bray 88). Viviane K. Namaste clarifies the three elements of the umbrella-term ‘transgender’: cross-dressers, drag queens and transsexuals (1). The difference between the first two categories is that cross-dressers wear women’s clothes “for erotic gratification”, whereas drag queens are performers in homosexual clubs (Namaste 1). The mollies obviously belong to the first type. Orme incites the others to express their repressed desire by exclaiming several times “Come dress and play” (48). In fact, role-playing is equally arousing for Orme as cross-dressing. In the fifth scene, he convinces Martin to act out the games of ‘Kitty and the Butcher’ and ‘Susan and her maid’. There’s always an aspect of power struggle involved: Kitty and Susan cannot, for example, be neighbours because that would mean that they are equal. One could think that the most powerful role is reserved for the butch, whereas the submissive role belongs to the femme. However, Orme argues that roles should be switched from time to time: “But you can’t be Butcher all the time. Sometimes you must be Kitty” (44). This role-play, however, is not restricted to gay subculture. Heterosexual people also enjoy acting out stories with unequal balances of power. The prostitute Amy, for instance, wears a shepherdess costume and acts as an innocent young girl: “Lost sir lost sir searching high and low / looking for my sheep sir – oh where did they go?” (16). Lawrence asks Martin to grunt like a “big old sow. Titties hanging down and all them little pigs sucking on you” (94). He clearly is in a more powerful

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18 The following page numbers refers to Wandor’s article “Cross-dressing, Sexual Representation and the Sexual Division of Labour in Theatre.”

19 Note that Amy resembles Victor (*Some Explicit Polaroids*) in the admiration for her own body, in particular her vagina: “Oh, fetch a mirror and let’s look at my little marvel” (14) or “Cunt. Cunt. Cunt. In’t I got a wonderful cunt?” (17). She is obsessed in a narcissistic manner with her own body: “Oh, the smell of me. Oh, the taste of me” (17).
position: “There’s a slaughterman, takes away hogs that are a bother, you know that? . . . So. You a good pig or a bad pig?” (95).

The mollies are not the only characters in the play that cross-dress. Princess Seraphina is a man in a dress. However, he is not homosexual. Marjorie Garber remarks that transvestism is a “disruptive element” (177) because it reflects “a crisis of ‘category’ itself” (178). The initial response of Mr and Mrs Tull illustrates the incomprehensibility of a man wearing woman’s clothes. Stephen immediately concludes that Princess is homosexual: “Or molly or mary or ingle. Whatever you are” (9). Mrs Tull rigidly separates masculinity from femininity, for instance when she tells Martin that “Man was put on this Earth to work” and if his does not conform to this standard, he “gets awful womanish” (34). Another example is that, when Stephen dies, she knows nothing about the financial aspect of the business simply because she’s a woman. Princess does not fit into her neatly divided pattern: “And I’m saying: no. See – good Lord made two natures. Him. Thass man. And then – bit of his rib – woman. Thass me. There in’t no room for third sex. You’re against Nature” (9). Princess explains why he wears his mother’s dress: “See, when I’m dressed in trousers I get awful vicious. I think the whole world’s against me and I strike out with my fists. But in a dress –“ (9). He presents himself as “a character”, which emphasises that he is playing a role. Contrary to his open-mindedness concerning cross-dressing, he is rather narrow-minded about the mollies and their sexual activities: “It in’t natural” (54). Nonetheless, he assist Mrs Tull in the molly house, not only out of financial necessity but also because Mrs Tull appeals to his earlier made promise: “Any time you want me, you just call out: Howdeedo, and I’ll come running” (23). Of course, he still disapproves of the obscene behaviour of the mollies: “And you, miss. Got my eye on you. Prancing about after paramours, lifting them skirts. That in’t right. Dressed up fine and fine you must be” (67). Gradually, Princess becomes attracted to Mrs Tull: “What a man likes is to be around a woman. . . . Mrs Tull, I’ve been watching you” (77). She immediately objects, referring to his ambiguous nature: “What would I been kissing? Man, woman or hermaphrodite?” (77). Princess answers that he is “a blank” (78) and that he will be whatever Mrs Tull wants him to be. In the next scene, he enters in men’s clothes: “In’t Princess no more. Stopped all that now see. Gone back to me real name. William” (97). Yet Mrs Tull has learned to accept both his masculine and feminine side and abandoned her rigid division of sexes: “And I want … hermaphrodite. Want all of ‘em” (99). Perhaps she showed disapproval for Princess’ deviant nature because she was not familiar with this phenomenon. Once it crosses the path of her life, she accepts his cross-dressing. Princess proposes to wear “somedays skirts, someways breeches” (103). Mrs Tull agrees with
his feminine side by answering: “And I shall turn my hand to husbandry and you can take in sewing” (104). This change of traditional male and female roles is foreshadowed in the fifth scene when Mrs Tull discovers Amy, who ran off without returning the dress. Mrs Tull handles her rough and without pity, whereas Princess functions as a typically feminine mild-tempered moderator.

The third type of cross-dressers in this play is the female-to-male cross-dresser. After her abortion, the prostitute Amy starts wearing men’s clothes and becomes ‘Ned’: “And since Ned chopped at his hair and slipped into his breeches he’s been a great help. Although his temper’s awful fierce – so mind him” (70). At the end, she is wholly absorbed in her male role and suggests to accompany Mrs Tull to the country in order to protect her: “Country in’t the place you think it is. Country’s hard. Thieving and raping in the country same as here. You’re gonna need a man looking over you in the country” (108).

### 3.4.2 Contemporary Plot

The depiction of a sex-orgy in the twenty-first century constitutes a minor part of the play. Only three of the eleven scenes are dedicated to contemporary homosexual life. As Alex Vass remarks, Ravenhill gives a social overview of “all the clichéd gay characters”: “an old camp queen in a leather harness who videos the proceedings; the young, naive boy from Liverpool; and the overdrugged metropolitan yuppie couple”.

Tina and Charlie are a heterosexual couple, whose dreams are entirely opposite. Charlie’s ideal, for example, is to have children and to raise them in the country, whereas Tina does not care for children and dislikes the country-side. Her only preoccupation is piercing her body. Therefore, Charlie calls her “The Iron Lady” (57), which also refers to the Thatcher regime of their youth. Charlie wonders what the reason for this obsession could be: “The only time she’s happy is after she’s done a piercing. Then next day she’s all moody again and she starts planning the next one. I mean, what’s it all about?” (81). He explains that all her former boyfriends have beaten here, whereas he tries to give her everything she wants. However, this has a reversed effect: “It’s always you choose, babe, you decide. But I can’t choose. I just wanna pierce myself. To pass the time. And it doesn’t mean anything. Nothing means anything, does it?” (100). These last words are exactly the same as a line of Victor in Some Explicit Polaroids. Both Victor and Tina suffer from the present-day phenomenon of ‘ennui’. Charlie does not understand this term, which allows Ravenhill to insert an aspect of humour in the play:

> WILL. Ennui.

> CHARLIE. No. She gets bored easily. (60)
Charlie’s limited vocabulary is already mocked earlier in the play:

TINA. Homophobic.

CHARLIE. She dun’t like poofs. But I tell her: poofs, they got it sorted. (59)

This line indicates another major characteristic of Tina’s personality: she hates homosexual people and more particularly their sexual behaviour and their wealth: “I hate your big houses. . . . Fucking sticking your fists up each other. Fucking disgusting” (65). Nevertheless, the homosexual community is important for the heterosexual couple to survive. Charlie deals drugs to save for his house in the country-side. Homosexual people are his best clients: “Not like before, is it? . . . Poofs running the country now, in’t there? Do all my business with the poofs” (60). Charlie seems to appreciate homosexual people, but he calls them ‘poofs’ which shows his lack of respect. In the end, Edward even saves Tina’s life by applying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Instead of thanking him cordially, she indifferently answers: “Right. Right” (101). All in all, the heterosexual couple does not seem to enjoy life to the full. Charlie’s dream is rather unrealistic, given that Tina does not agree with his plans. As for Tina, she is emotionally barren and seems to be world-weary. When Charlie took her to a fetish club, she was not excited or aroused. She rather found it tedious. Moreover, there is no indication of any tenderness or genuine love between them at all. On the contrary, Tina even says: “I can’t stand you touching me. / I hate that” (65).

Besides the heterosexual couple, the contemporary plot comprises two stereotypical homosexual couples. Edward and Phil are the more experienced couple in terms of gay sex parties: “We go to quite a lot of these things. We’re old hands so to speak. Always worth travelling for a good bit of action. Isn’t that right, Phil?” (63). They bring along a collection of sex toys and a camera. Edward is a dominating character, who wears a harness and “motorcycle boots” (66). Phil warns Tom about Edward’s sexual behaviour: “Watch out if you fuck him. Back-seat driver. Up a bit, down a bit. Faster. Slower. I have to gag him” (63). Edward is clearly a more masculine homosexual, because he takes the lead in sexual intercourse. Men who rather take the receptive role are generally spoken more feminine (Bailey 84). Although Edward’s filming has a voyeuristic and sensationalist aspect, it is also an important indication of his will to dominate. He pretends to be the director of other people’s lives. Moreover, he remarks that “most people find it an enormous turn-on” (63), which reminds us of telephone sex scene in Shopping and Fucking. Edward wants to be in control, both in sexual activities and in daily life. Nevertheless, he is not as powerful as he pretends to be. Phil mentions that he stays with Edward because he is HIV-positive: “And, well, you don’t like to leave them when they’re at death’s door, do you?” (82).
Josh and Will live together, but do not have sexual intercourse anymore. When Tom asks Will if Josh is his boyfriend, he answers: “God, that’s a difficult question” (84). Their relationship is unbalanced: Will admits that he loves Josh, whereas Josh constantly plans to travel abroad and live with other men. Nevertheless, Will remarks that “it never happens”, which may indicate that Josh has feelings for Will too. Will tries to convey an important message to Josh, but he is continually interrupted. Perhaps this weighty consideration is what he tells Edward at the end: “Don’t you want to say: You’re mine. And I want you to myself and I can’t stand this fucking around. It’s killing me” (102). Contrary to most homosexuals, Will expresses the desire for monogamy, in accordance with the heterosexual norm. Apart from this, Tom and Will are the classic example of a contemporary homosexual couple. Although Josh is emotionally more sensitive, Will is the more feminine partner in general. For instance, his sole preoccupation is that his guests will leave stains on the sofa. Furthermore, they are deep-rooted in a culture of porn, sex and drugs. However, they lead a double life, rigidly separating their sexual activities from everyday life. Josh, for example, has some piercings, but “not [in] the face, you know. Work” (58). These two lives can be entirely opposite, as Josh’s anecdote about the porn star illustrates: “I would have slept with him only I had a flight the next morning and he had to get up early for church” (60, emphasis added).

The third stereotype is Tom, a bachelor who has recently moved to London. Living in the city has drastically changed his life. Sarotte notes that the possibilities for homosexual people in small villages are limited: “trois solutions s’offriront à lui : afficher ses mœurs et risquer l’opprobre, voire la violence physique ; se mettre au diapason et devenir la proie d’une frustration délétère ; ou fuir vers la grande ville” (176). Tom explains why he has chosen the final solution: “All them years stuck at home listening to me dad: Fucking poofs this, fucking queers that. And I thought: You’re history, you. Cos I’m a poof, but I in’t telling you. Oh no. One day I’m just gonna up and go” (86). Loeffler considers the city as a “protective shield” (20) for homosexuality. Indeed, the anonymity of the city gives Tom carte blanche to explore his homosexual identity. He analyses his urban transformation in a therapeutic manner, which reminds of Nadia in Some Explicit Polaroids: “Well, I know this is mad but I feel like Old Me was living in the Olden Days. History and that. Really, really old-fashioned. All scared and no sex and no drugs. And now there’s New Me – and I’m like

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20 In a more recent study, Bailey makes the same observation: “A gay adolescent in a small, conservative community might have no potential sexual outlet. If he is in a large, urban setting, he almost certainly will” (36).
totally Today. I’m Now” (64). Later on, the resemblance with Nadia becomes even more explicit: “Basically, I’m a very positive person; So I’m not going to let this get me down. I’m going to learn from this” (100). Like the younger generation in Some Explicit Polaroids, Tom adheres to the ideology of the ‘Happy World’ or the “Global Disco Family” (101) as he puts it. He summarises the main elements of his new life: “Clubs. E [i.e. drugs]. Shagging all sorts of blokes” (64). This is his “first actual live-sex party” (65) and therefore, he is excited and nervous. When he sees Tina, he immediately panics: “Oh. Is there gonna be women? Only I – “ (61). To overcome his shyness, he takes refuge in drugs. Feeling rather confident, he tries to seduce Will. Although Will is not interested, he does enjoy the oral sex with Tom. All in all, the other characters do not really appreciate Tom’s presence. They prefer a superficial life and consider Tom’s slightly more profound vigour as trivial and only “good for a laugh” (86).

3.4.3 Intertwining of Both Plots

As in Handbag, all actors – except for Mrs Tull and Princess – play a double role. In this way, Jen Harvie notices the link between Amy’s unprofessional abortion and Tina’s unkempt labia piercing. This might indicate that one cannot thwart nature: the body must remain pure. Martin and Tom, played by the same actor, are opposed in a spatial manner: Tom comes to the city, whereas Martin leaves for the country. Thus, the city has altered from an unpleasant necessity to the present-day place to be. Stephen Tull and Edward present another interesting link: both are infected with a venereal disease, respectively pox and HIV. Whereas this was lethal in the eighteenth century, nowadays medication can conceal the symptoms and even postpone death. Still, Edward takes his responsibility. The danger of contagion forces him to experience the sex party in a passive way, that is to say as a spectator or a cameraman.

Apart from the role-doubling, the two universes of the play come together at some points. At the end of scene six, the “flat melts away and becomes the molly house” (66). The following scene ends in a similar way: some “men in their underwear” (78) enter the molly world; Phil and Josh have sexual intercourse during Princess and Mrs Tull’s conversation. In the final stage image both plots fully fuse together: “The dancing becomes more and more frenzied. Eros joins the dancers. The Mollies start to take their clothes off. The music turns

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21 These double roles are: Stephen Tull/Edward, Martin/Tom, Amy/Tina, Kedger/Charlie, Philips/Will, Orme/Josh and Gabriel Lawrence/Phil.
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into techno. The molly house becomes a rave club as the light fades to nothing” (110). The ecstatic dancing again refers to the Dionysian, irrational energy of the play (cf. above).

The juxtaposition of both plotlines demonstrates the “loss of exuberance” (Svich 95). In the eighteenth century universe everything was merry and joyous. Even Stephen’s funeral is a festive occasion for the guests, as Amelia makes clear: “Dance ‘til you drop. Drink ‘til you reel. More beer” (19). This extreme positivism sharply contrasts with the dull and gloomy atmosphere of the 2001 generation. Steyn formulates this as follows: “The playfulness of the molly house is wholly absent. Sex is joyless relief, mechanical copulating, jaded brutish humping” (35). Indeed, sexual intercourse has become a banal, everyday activity. Phil and Josh even exchange some small talk during the act:

PHIL. How you doing?
JOSH. Yeah. Great. (80)

Ravenhill may be voicing the ‘ubi sunt’ theme. Where are the glorious days of the eighteenth century, when sex was still exciting and genuine love existed? Steyn concludes that “gays have so commodified and trivialised sex that they have rendered it loveless” (35). It is true that commodification and commercialisation already began in the eighteenth century. Even so, the molly houses possessed a vibrant energy that is lost in contemporary society.
4 CONCLUSION

All in all, these four plays are closely linked and contain similarities both in form and in content. With reference to the formal aspects, the use of two intertwining storylines is obviously one of Ravenhill’s trademarks. Handbag and Mother Clap’s Molly House both consist of two historically and spatially separated plots. This is emphasised by actors playing double roles. Phil and Mrs Tull however have no doubling personage, which may be seen as a sign of their importance. Both plots gradually fuse together to climax in a significant final tableau. In Handbag, the intertwining is accomplished by Phil’s hallucination after a drug injection. Phil and Cardew resort to the twilight zone between both plots in order to fulfil their deepest longing: Cardew becomes a protecting father figure for Phil, whereas Phil fills in the absence of the lost boy, Eustace. In Mother Clap’s Molly House, the transition between both plots is more artificial: Phil and Josh suddenly enter the molly world without any explanation or surplus value. The final stage image, where naked mollies and modern characters dance together, ultimately brings both universes together. Some Explicit Polaroids also contains two sets of characters that are clearly separated: the younger and the older generation. However, they live in the same world and interact more naturally and smoothly. Contrary to the previous two plays, both generations do not fuse together in the end. Nick and Helen develop a close relationship, whereas the younger characters are emotionally scattered and spatially dispersed: Victor goes to Japan, Nadia stays in London and Tim is even
relegated to the realm of the death. Clearly, the older generation, or at least Nick and Helen, are presented as superior. Finally, one could discern two sets of characters in Shopping and Fucking. On the one hand, Lulu, Robbie and Mark can be seen as a unity, a sort of ‘ménage à trois’. Gary and Brian, on the other hand, are the outsiders who threaten this precarious family, but also strengthen the bond of this threesome. Again, the two sets of characters do not flow together in the end: Brian disappears out of their life and Gary might even have died. The original friendship of Lulu, Robbie and Mark is victorious.

As for the subject matter, certain details or even larger issues figure prominently in these four plays. First of all, the influence of the Bulger murder is a continuity throughout the discussed plays, except for Some Explicit Polaroids. Gary is abused by the trio of adult-children (Lulu, Robbie and Mark), the baby in Handbag is kidnapped by Lorraine and Phil (who both aspire to be mature, but behave irresponsibly) and the wooden doll is neglected by Orme and Martin (although here the murder is already transformed in a game).

Secondly, most plays end in a hopeful manner. The eighteenth century plot of Mother Clap’s Molly House, for instance, offers a view of genuine love between Mrs Tull and Princess. The modern plot is less overtly optimistic, but still does not leave the audience with a wry feeling. The bleeding of Tina stopped and she is less averse to homosexual people. As mentioned before, the dancing as a final stage image is a Dionysian release of the inner vitality. Some Explicit Polaroids inspires hope for a happy future between Nick and Helen. For the younger generation, however, the outcome is not fully positive, although one could argue that the confronting experiences have released them from their trivial superficiality. Nadia in particular has left behind the false ideology of a ‘Happy World’ and is now able to cope with contemporary society. Handbag at first sight has a completely pessimistic closure: one baby ends up dead in bin bag, the other is given away to a paedophile. However, Cardew is also the only truly caring character among the Victorian personages, which may indicate a rather roseate future for the baby after all. Shopping and Fucking ends with a return to the nuclear ‘family’ of Lulu, Robbie and Mark. The confrontation with the intruders (Brian and Gary) has made them stronger and brought them closer together.

Thirdly, several plays contain references to food. In Shopping and Fucking, Lulu’s main concern is the impossibility to share microwave dinners. However, intimately linked with the previous aspect, food also offers a glimmer of hope, for instance when Lulu, Mark

Note that this structure resembles the prototypical scheme in many of Harold Pinter’s plays, where an outsider threatens the safety of some characters in a room.
and Robbie feed each other. Lulu has finally overcome her obsession. This reminds of Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, which ends with Cate feeding Ian. Food as a symbol of consolation recurs in the other plays as well. In scene thirteen of *Handbag*, after the baby has been kidnapped, Tom enters with food and says: “I thought we should eat. You need to eat something” (70). In *Some Explicit Polaroids*, Tim buys sweets and cherryade as a welcoming present in order to reassure Victor.

Fourthly, the issue of motherhood – or the more general context of parenthood – is foregrounded in several plays. *Handbag* clearly treats the difficulties of parenthood, and in particular motherhood. The Victorian standards obligate Constance to entrust her baby to a nanny, rather than provide for it with comforting motherly warmth. The modern plot exemplifies that mothering has not improved over the ages. Mauretta, the biological mother, does not succeed in providing an adequate and reliable childminder for her baby. Lorraine not only neglects the child, but needs maternal protection herself. She wears her mother’s knickers, lives in her mother’s apartment, and removes the cheese from her pizza like her mother did. She wants to resemble her mother because she cannot cope with life in her own way. In *Shopping and Fucking*, Lulu acts as a mother figure for Robbie and Mark, by providing food and rectifying their mistakes. *Some Explicit Polaroids* does not contain any direct reference to parenting. Nadia, however, wants to fulfil the forgiving motherly role for Simon, her violent boyfriend. Nick is a father figure for Nadia, because he learns her how to cope with contemporary life. Similarly, Brian is a father figure for Robbie and Lulu. *Mother Clap’s Molly House* contains multiple references to motherhood. Princess, parallel to Lorraine, wears his mother’s dress to conceal his immaturity and vulnerability: “See, I thought couldn’t keep hiding behind them skirts” (98). Martin, similarly to Phil, wants to be sheltered: “I in’t Man, I’m Boy. Boy needs protecting, guiding . . .” (25). Mrs Tull, who was never able to have children of her own, accepts Martin as a substitute son. In the same way, Cardew considers the orphans as his children. Further on in the play, Mrs. Tull becomes Mother Clap, the mother figure for all mollies. Orme, Philips and Kedger act as a happy family, although they are not relatives. Amy, similarly to Moncrieff, regards mother’s instinct as something for animals exclusively. The most striking image of parenthood is the mock birth: parental responsibility is seen as a game which can be picked up or abandoned at any time. The juxtaposition of both plots displays a paradoxical attitude towards protective parenting: the mollies are enthusiastic about Mrs Tull as a mother figure, whereas Tom flees away from the suffocating fatherly control. All in all, the absence or incompetence of parents
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is a major theme in Ravenhill’s plays. Each character either longs for parental guidance or tries to offer parental comfort and protection.

Fifthly, the majority of Ravenhill’s characters switch positions or reverse their values during the play. In this way, the story functions as a process of revealing their true identity and overcoming former obsessions. In Shopping and Fucking, Lulu agrees to share her food and Mark abandons his theory of love as a transaction. The betrayal-scene in Handbag shows how Suzanne and Lorraine gradually change positions. At first, Suzanne is only focused on her work, while Lorraine wants to establish a more personal bond by constantly offering Suzanne a piece of pizza. When Suzanne finally accepts it, Lorraine achieves her goal: “You’re involved now” (17). The turning point occurs after Suzanne has kissed Lorraine. Now Lorraine is the more objective person. She “didn’t mean tongues” (18) and does not want Suzanne to stop filming. A similar encounter takes place with Phil and David, the latter becoming dependent at the end. In the Victorian plot, Phil and Cardew illustrate this reversal. Phil seems to be in control of the situation, but when the baby stops breathing, Cardew becomes the more powerful one by refusing to help Phil. Some Explicit Polaroids shows a general reversal of values in all younger characters. They stop believing in the fairy-tale dream of a ‘Happy World’. However, only Nadia is able to extend this switch in a positive manner. She realises that extreme positivism cannot cover up present-day misery and gradually learns to cope with it. The other characters, Tim and Victor, are not as vigorous and flee respectively in death and to Japan. As for the older generation, Helen and Nick clearly switch positions. After dissuading Nick of his belief in militant action, Helen herself resumes the socialist anger, whereas Nick resigns to the changing society. Jonathan does not change his capitalist ideology, but abandons the idea of revenge when he sees Nick’s deterioration. With reference to Mother Clap’s Molly House, Mrs Tull undergoes the most remarkable transformation. At first she condemns all forms of gender deviation, but towards the end she even falls in love with Princess, a cross-dresser. Princess, however, adapts his life style: he decides to wear male and female clothes alternately. Martin also abandons his molly identity and opts for a normal homosexual relationship on the countryside.

Apart from the above mentioned details, the sense of loss and contemporary uprootedness is a major theme in Ravenhill’s work. All four plays are at least partly set in present-day society. Drugs, violence and explicit sexual images are omnipresent in Ravenhill’s theatrical world, as in most other ‘in-yr-face’ plays. The media is a controlling force which constantly invades the character’s privacy. In Handbag, the few moments of
(sexual) contact are continuously interrupted by mobile phones and pagers. Typically, most characters work in advertising and Mauretta and Suzanne even monitor their nanny by means of video cameras. The camera as an intrusive element can be found in the three other plays as well. Lulu mentions that the robbery is registered by a security camera. Edward takes pleasure in filming sexual intercourse, which should be the most intimate and private bond between two people. Victor unashamedly distributes his naked Polaroid pictures to Nadia or on the Internet. Several homosexual characters also created a personal homepage to come into contact with like-minded spirits. In _Mother Clap’s Molly House_, Tom, for instance, comments: “I’m wild. Up for it at compuserve dot com. That’s my address. Which gets me quite a lot of attention actually” (61).

Ravenhill draws a typical sketch of Britain in the 1990s: it was “a bleak place where families were dysfunctional, individuals rootless and relationships acutely problematic” (Sierz 238). The most salient consequence of this general post-modern condition is the commodification of love and sexuality. In this regard, _Shopping and Fucking_ appears as a programmatic play. Mark idealistically sees love as an impersonal transaction. Several characters use their body or their sexual energy for economic purposes: Lulu strips during her job interview, Gary is a teenage prostitute, Robbie and Lulu start a telephone sex line to earn three thousand pounds, etc. Closely connected to this commodification is the theme of consumerism: everything is for sale, even intimacy and love. In this respect, Brian is an exemplary character. He preached the virtues of money, materialism and capitalism. In _Handbag_, Phil stresses the commercialisation of sex when he demands “twenty quid” (15) for his sexual services. Moreover, at least one partner of each couple has a sexual affair with a stranger: fidelity has become old-fashioned. Sexual intercourse is no longer the cherished and intimate act between two lovers. The use of the body as an economic instrument is illustrated by Victor, Tim and Nadia in _Some Explicit Polaroids_. Thanks to his body, Victor finds a Maecenas who pays for his journey and his daily support. Furthermore, he earns some money by working as an erotic dancer in a night club. Victor’s body is no longer a private treasure; it has becomes a public property. Tim is prepared to pay for sex, as long as it stays impersonal. Nadia places her body at the disposal of anyone willing to keep her company for a few hours. The same characteristics can be found in _Mother Clap’s Molly House_. The prostitutes are an eternally recurring indication of commercialised sexuality. Mrs Tull profits from the sexual desire of homosexual people. The mollies are willing to pay, as long as they can indulge their passions. The commodification and commercialisation of sexuality cannot be rendered more explicitly that by joining the God of enterprise with Eros, the god of love. Similarly, the
contemporary generation uninhibitedly deals with sexual intercourse. Edward, for instance, casually tells Josh that Phil is “a fantastic fuck” (102), in the same way one would recommend a particular shop or a brand of clothes. Sexual intercourse is put on a par with shopping.

Immediately linked to the commodification and commercialisation of sexuality is the loss of genuine love. As mentioned before, sexuality and love have become a banal, everyday reality, rather than an intimate and sincere feeling. The Victorian characters of Moncrieff and Constance are excellent examples of a relationship without love or deeper connection. Most bonds in the contemporary plots are also kept as impersonal as possible. Nonetheless, Ravenhill subtly inserts a few instances of genuine love, such as the spark between Mrs Tull and Princess. Still, most of these hopeful elements have a downside too. Because this emotion has become rare, Martin asks Mrs Tull to explain his feeling: “I hurt all the time. Is that love?” (72). Later on, love is also associated with the stinging feeling of jealousy. At the end of Some Explicit Polaroids, the relationship of Nick and Helen may seem idyllic at first sight. Still, the first sign of instability already appears when Helen admits that she wants Nick to return to his former anger. Thus, she is in love with a false image, because Nick definitively left his militant vigour behind.

Besides the earlier mentioned themes, Ravenhill creatively inserts gender-related aspects. He depicts a bleak picture of the gay community, although he is homosexual himself. Most gay characters have a pessimistic worldview or lack the prospect of a roseate future. Each homosexual figure has his own obsession. Gary’s ultimate fantasy is to act out his stepfather’s abuse as a possibly fatal penetration with a knife. Mark desperately wants sexuality to be an impersonal transaction. Tim and Victor are faced with the same obsession. After a confrontation with reality, the outcome for these three characters is entirely different. Whereas Mark can fall back on his nuclear family, Tim and Victor take refuge respectively in death or in another country to escape the utter loneliness and impossibility of their ambition. In Handbag, Mauretta and Tom are both obsessed with their baby for wrong reasons. Mauretta wants to raise the child on her own, because she does not trust anyone else. This is an evolution opposite to Lulu’s food obsession. The reticence about sharing the baby aggravates towards the end, whereas the diminution of Lulu’s possessiveness offers an element of hope. Tom sees the baby as a last resort to save his relationship with David, which resembles the game with the wooden doll to bring Orme and Martin back together. Another similarity between Martin and Tom is that they are both rejected after giving their partners a
second chance. Tom cannot be alone, just like Nadia, who offers sexual intercourse in return for a few hours of intimacy. After the kidnapping, the world of the biological parents collapses. Tom voices the desire to be a child with a sheltered life instead of a responsible parent, which exactly converges with Gary’s desire. However, Gary is more marginalised or desperate than Tom, because he even takes his imaginary father figure for real. Lorraine applies the same technique. Her imaginary protector is an exaggerated, more wealthy version of Phil. In *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, all homosexual characters suffer from the so-called ‘urban ennui’. Their sexual debauchery has lost its vibrant quality; sensation and excitement have become faint remembrances of a distant past.

Nevertheless, the division of characters according to their sexual preference is not as one-sided as the preceding paragraph suggests. Ravenhill nuances this pessimistic worldview by inserting a more positive sketch of some homosexual men. Robbie, for instance, is able to rectify his mistake of giving away ecstasy tablets by establishing a telephone sex line. However, he is largely dependent on Mark for love and on Lulu for practical guidance (e.g. when he lost his job, he is convinced that Lulu will find a solution). His bisexuality might account for this mixture of responsible and irresponsible behaviour. Cardew experiences homosexual love for the orphans, although it is not clear if he turns it into sexual acts. He is the only true carer in the Victorian plot of *Handbag*, but there are indications that he is a paedophile and that he will continue his illegal activities in another village. Thus, both Robbie and Cardew are depicted in a more positive manner. However, they are an ambiguous blend of positive and negative aspects. The only truly positive homosexual characters in these four plays are the mollies. Their vibrant life-style, the dancing, the exuberance and joy all indicate their happiness and optimistic worldview. Several valid reasons can be imagined: the secrecy of the molly houses and the cross-dressing might add to the excitement, or the fact that the eighteenth century homosexual is not yet hit by the fear of venereal diseases.

Ravenhill consciously included some problematic heterosexual figures as well. In the Victorian part of *Handbag*, each character has a personal problem or obsession. Moncrieff’s sole concern is to conform to the impersonal standards of Victorian society. Constance is a classic example of a wife who is subordinated to her husband. Augusta is obsessed by the need to get married; she is willing to accept any bachelor. Prism is absorbed by fiction; she

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23 The homosexual mollies are not the only characters that feel more at ease in clothes of the opposite sex. Amy, the prostitute, feels comfortable as Ned in men’s clothes. Princess’ anger disappears when he wears his mother’s dress. Mrs Tull falls in love with the variety of gender roles (masculine, feminine or hermaphrodite) that Princess can take. She even proposes to switch household roles: she will fulfil the more masculine tasks.
has become a mirror image of Gustave Flaubert’s ‘Mme Bovary’. The contemporary plot contains some problematic characters as well: Lorraine and Phil. These are marginalised figures, unable to cope with present-day problems. Phil seems to be worse than Lorraine: irresponsible, drug-addicted, and desperately longing for a father figure. By having anal intercourse with David, he tends towards homosexuality. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the baby chokes (accidentally, because of a breathing problem) when Phil is left alone with it. This interpretation is in line with the pessimistic fate allotted to homosexual men in Ravenhill’s plays. The 2001-episode of Mother Clap’s Molly House depicts a heterosexual couple in equally miserable circumstances as the homosexual participants in the sex orgy. Charlie and Tina suffer from a sense of loss and boredom. Their future is not roseate either, because of their opposed and irreconcilable dreams. One could argue that Nadia in Some Explicit Polaroids belongs to the category of unhappy heterosexual characters. Even so, the confrontation with Jonathan transforms her and she thus becomes able to cope with contemporary misery. Jonathan might be compared to Brian, not only because they both believe in capitalism, but also because they are father figures for the younger generation. In Me, My iBook, and writing in America, Ravenhill admits that his “characters tend to have a nostalgic hankering for a time when there was a stern father figure looking over them, a time when we weren’t expected to make so many choices for ourselves” (134). Similarly, Lulu and Mrs Tull are mother figures for their contemporaries. It is remarkable that the motherly caring role involves a loss of gender identification. Lulu is no longer seen as a sexually attractive woman. Mrs Tull even explicitly states: “Oh, I in’t woman, love, I’m Mother” (88).

All in all, it would be too broad a generalization to conclude that Ravenhill’s homosexual characters are pessimistically sketched, as opposed to the more positive and normative heterosexual figures. It is true that, apart from the mollies, all homosexual characters lack an optimistic worldview. Even so, one must take into account that these characters all grew up around the 1990s, in the post-Thatcher generation, just like Ravenhill. The marginalised heterosexual couple, Lorraine and Phil, also belongs to this generation. The other heterosexual characters either figure in the historical plot or belong to an older generation (Nick, Helen, Jonathan and Brian). Consequently, it is logical that the homosexual characters (and Phil and Lorraine) are negatively influenced by the commodification of sexuality and the loss of genuine love. Thus, rather than pleading for or against homosexuality, Ravenhill focuses on the difficulties of contemporary life. This conclusion is confirmed by his other plays: they do not necessarily deal with homosexuality, but they are
always thematically linked with the problems of contemporary society. **Totally Over You** (2003) deals with the obsession of young girls to become famous and to belong to the glamorous world of celebrities. **Product** (2005) displays the preparations for the terrorist attack of 9/11. **The Cut** (2006) is a political allegory which reminds of George Orwell’s **Nineteen Eighty-Four**.

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**WORKS CITED**

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