

78. Shifting from Post-Truth to Truth in Jonathan Lichtenstein's *The Pull of Negative Gravity*

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Abstract

The concept of post-truth, popularised especially in 2016, exerts its influence across various areas from everyday life to diplomatic relations. Although its use and examination have notably increased in the last decade, the concept was used in the early years of the twenty-first century. For instance, during the 2003 Iraq War, both politicians and the ordinary public as well used this concept and produced both pro-war and anti-war post-truth discourses. Additionally, playwrights have represented post-truth discourses in their plays, both challenging prevailing political discourses and conveying their own messages through theatrical productions. One of these works, which scrutinise the post-truth discourses regarding the Iraq War, is Jonathan Lichtenstein's play *The Pull of Negative Gravity* staged at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 2004 and published by Nick Hern Books in the same year. The play deals with the financial, familial and psychological difficulties of a Welsh farming family who sends one of their members to the Iraq War. The soldier's experience of war and military service is glorified through post-truth narratives prior to his return from Iraq. However, upon his paralysed return from the war, the family members are compelled to face the undeniable realities, and all those positive discourses are replaced by factual truths. Thus, the play conveys to its audience/reader the message that emotionally-charged post-truth imaginations can be challenged through visible and objective realities. Considering such viewpoints, the objective of this article is to examine both how Lichtenstein's play unveils the post-truth discourses in the society concerning the Iraq War, and the strategy it follows to contend with such discourses.

Keywords: Post-truth, Iraq War, Welsh drama, Jonathan Lichtenstein, *The Pull of Negative Gravity*

Jonathan Lichtenstein'in *The Pull of Negative Gravity* Oyununda Hakikat Sonrasından Hakikate Geçiř

Öz

Özellikle 2016 senesinde oldukça popülerleřen hakikat sonrası kavramı gündelik hayattan diplomatik ilişkilere kadar birçok alanda etkisini göstermektedir. Her ne kadar son on yıl içinde kullanımı ve incelenmesi oldukça artmış olsa da kavramın yirmi birinci yüzyılın başında da kullanıldığı gözlemlenmektedir. ÖrneĖin 2003 Irak Savařı sırasında politikacılar ve sıradan halk da bu kavramı kullanmış ve hem savař yanlısı hem de savař karřıtı hakikat sonrası söylemler ortaya çıkarmışlardır. Bunun yanında, oyun yazarları da oyunlarında post-truth söylemleri yansıtmış ve tiyatro eserleri aracılıĖıyla hem mevcut politik söylemlere karřı çıkmışlar hem de kendi söylemlerini aktarmışlardır. Irak Savařı hakkındaki hakikat sonrası söylemleri irdeleyen bu eserlerden biri de Jonathan

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Lichtenstein'in 2004 yılında Edinburgh'daki Traverse Theatre'da sahnelenen ve aynı yıl Nick Hern Books tarafından basılan *The Pull of Negative Gravity* adlı oyunudur. Oyun, bir ferdini Irak Savaşı'na gönderen Gallerli çiftçi bir ailenin maddi, ailevi ve psikolojik sıkıntılarını anlatmaktadır. Asker Irak'tan dönmeden önce savaş ve askerlik hizmeti tecrübesi hakikat sonrası söylemlerle yüceltilmektedir. Fakat savaştan felçli bir şekilde dönmesinden sonra aile fertleri inkâr edilemez gerçeklerle yüzleşmek zorunda kalırlar ve tüm o olumlu söylemler yerini gerçeklere bırakır. Böylece oyun izleyicisine/okuyucusuna duygu yüklü hakikat sonrası tahayyüllerle, gözle görülür ve nesnel gerçekler aracılığıyla mücadele edilebileceği mesajını iletmektedir. Bu perspektiflerden yola çıkarak, bu makalenin amacı hem Lichtenstein'in oyununun Irak Savaşı hakkında toplumda oluşan hakikat sonrası söylemleri nasıl gün yüzüne çıkardığını hem de bu söylemlerle mücadele konusunda nasıl bir strateji izlediğini incelemektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: hakikat sonrası, Irak Savaşı, Galler tiyatrosu, Jonathan Lichtenstein, *The Pull of Negative Gravity*

Considering the primary sources on post-truth, discussions on the concept mainly focus on the 2016 American Presidential Election and the Brexit Referendum of the same year. However, the emergence and theorisation of the concept date back to an earlier time. Ralph Keyes theorised post-truth in his book *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life* published in 2004 when post-truth discourses and related strategies were already employed, particularly by politicians. For instance, in relation to the 2003 Iraq War, American and British politicians were delivering post-truth speeches to influence the masses in line with their political agendas. Some of those speeches contained pro-war sentiments while others displayed anti-war approaches, but the common point of both sides is that they used emotional appeals from time to time to inform people in line with their own ideology. Politicians have realised that people's perception of truth is shaped by not only objective facts but also deceptive information they tend to accept. Keyes indeed criticises this kind of deception and people's tendency to accept those emotionally-charged narratives. He analyses the manipulation of truth rather than outright lying, and the attempt to trivialise or disguise truth with various expressions, which he defines as post-truth. As the concept of post-truth has developed and been added more definitions, also the literature produced during and after the years of the Iraq War can be analysed from various perspectives of post-truth studies. One such work is Jonathan Lichtenstein's play, *The Pull of Negative Gravity*, which portrays the sudden collapse of the militarist post-truth discourse accepted by ordinary people within a family. In this context, this article analyses the transition from post-truth to truth in Lichtenstein's play, explores ways to challenge post-truth, and argues that challenging post-truth discourses may be achieved through exposure to visible and objective reality.

The early twenty-first century witnessed an increase in the number of the plays written by British and Irish playwrights that focused on the Iraq War. These plays have been analysed and discussed within the context of national identities from time to time. However, there is a lack of academic attention towards the works approaching the Iraq War from a Welsh perspective. One of those underrated plays is Jonathan Lichtenstein's *The Pull of Negative Gravity*. In this play, Lichtenstein scrutinises the social impact of the Iraq War without explicitly touching upon the war policies. As Octavio Roca (2005) notes, "[w]ithout once taking sides about the catastrophe in Iraq -- without bringing up politics at all -- *The Pull of Negative Gravity* manages to portray with angry clarity the brutal, ineffably sad reality of lives destroyed by a war as bogus as it is cruel" (par. 7). In this respect, Lichtenstein does not concentrate "on the actual events of the war, but on its consequences on individual lives thousands of kilometres away from the zone of conflict" (Starck, 2006, p. 67). This approach allows the play to focus on the emotional

impact of the post-truth discourse and its role in shaping people's perception of the Iraq War. Thus, it successfully conveys its devastating effects on both personal and social levels.

The production history of the play is marked by several achievements. It first premiered at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh in 2004 (Cotterell, 2019, p. 138). This initial performance was produced by the Mercury Theatre Company, with Gregory Thompson (Gupta, 2011, p. 99). The first performance of the play already caught the attention of the critics, and the play earned the prestigious 2004 Fringe First Award at the Edinburgh Festival (Blankenship, 2005, p. par. 1). It has also been studied by researchers due to its sincere portrayal of the emotional impact of the Iraq War on ordinary people.

In relation to Lichtenstein's motive for writing the play, Lynne Walker (2004) shares a remarkable note: "More soldiers commit suicide during and after a conflict than are killed by enemy actions. This is the bald statistic opening Jonathan Lichtenstein's programme note for his gripping new play, *The Pull of Negative Gravity*" (par. 1). This statistic is the force that paved the way for the emergence of the play. In this sense, it can be safely stated that the play mainly deals with the psychological cost of war, rather than its physical, political or economic costs. Moreover, even though Lichtenstein draws attention to the statistic of the suicide cases in the army, his narrative extends beyond that single issue. On the other complex themes of the play, Veronica Lee (2004) states that "Lichtenstein's starting point was the high suicide rate among soldiers in modern conflicts, but he tries too hard to evoke sympathy and raises too many issues - sibling rivalry, parental inadequacy, the harsh economics of farming - that he neither satisfactorily develops nor resolves" (par. 4). The wide range of issues listed by Lee proves the play's thematic richness.

Throughout the play, Lichtenstein portrays how the Iraq War adds more difficulties to the struggles of Welsh farmers, therefore, providing a perspective on the status of an ignored folk. In relation to this matter, Laurence C. N. Cotterell (2019) notes that "Lichtenstein's play connects the Iraq war with the exploited means of production of the Welsh hill farmers. As such, Lichtenstein's naturalistic text is unusual in dramatising the rural society and Iraq war both in the context of state exploitation" (p. 140). The story centres around the family of two brothers, Dai and Rhys. They flip a coin to decide who will enlist in the military to financially support the family. Dai loses the coin toss and leaves his family and fiancée to join the war in Iraq. He fights abroad not to protect his homeland or family; indeed, "the war in Iraq is initially seen by the members of a Welsh family as the last hope to rescue their heavily indebted farm" (Ali, 2015, p. 171). In this respect, the play portrays from a Welsh perspective the desperation of individuals to make dangerous decisions and personal sacrifices for the survival of a farming family.

The play also explores the emotional turmoil within the family caused by the war. The military conflict causes a coldness among the family members who do not have strong personal ties. As to this dissociation within the family, Cotterell (2019) observes that "[t]he war bisects the family and Vi seems to despise philandering son Rhys for not being Dai" (p. 139). Although Dai represents the morality of the traditional farming people, Rhys displays characteristics of cultural and moral decadence. The latter is not interested in continuing the family business and hopes to leave their life with poor living conditions in a traditional farm. Vi's resentment towards Rhys due to his unfitting behaviours is evident in her statement that "[i]t should have been Rhys who went. The army might have knocked some sense into him. Then this farm might not be in such a predicament" (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 6). In accordance with the post-truth perception of the military, the army is seen as a place where traditions, morality, loyalty and discipline are thought, whereas the soldiers, including Dai, are stripped of their values in the war zone.

Another noteworthy fact about the play is that the political figures and controversies surrounding the Iraq War are not explicitly mentioned. As Jack Zink (2005) puts it, “[t]here’s never a mention of George Bush, Tony Blair or WMD, yet the political backdrop seems a palpable presence. Lichtenstein’s story, however, is about the devastation visited on individuals by any war” (par. 4). The family is indeed not concerned with the necessity of the British invasion of Iraq. The entire story focuses on the cases of personal devastation and human suffering caused by the war.

In the context of the play, the concept of post-truth is a significant theme to study. The term post-truth, as defined by Oxford Dictionaries, means “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (“Word,” par. 2). The definition emphasises the shift from valuing objective truth to prioritising personal beliefs and the perspectives that address one’s emotional state; that is to say, if a piece of information suits people’s existing beliefs, people tend to feel an emotional affinity with that information and accept it as truth without verifying it. Therefore, in a communication with post-truth messages, apart from the sender, the receiver also is responsible for any deception due to their willingness to readily accept the message. In this regard, Lisa M. Osbeck and Stephen L. Antczak (2022) assert that “[t]he emphasis in calling this era one of ‘post-truth’ is not on the human tendency to make mistakes that inadvertently impact our status as rational agents; rather it is the ‘willful ignorance’ employed when we do not know whether something is true but assert it to be so because it is consistent with our feelings. Consistency with our values or concern with comfort may underlie reluctance to examine the evidence base of our beliefs and to confine ourselves to communities of like-minded others that share and validate our views” (p. 424). This deliberate neglect of objective facts in favour of beliefs and feelings often results from the comfort people find in these beliefs and feelings that do not challenge their already-existing opinions and perceptions.

In *The Pull of Negative Gravity*, Lichtenstein firstly illustrates the extent and consequences of post-truth in the life of ordinary Welsh farmers. He portrays Rhys, Vi and Bethan’s test with beliefs and objective truths about the soldiers’ condition in the Iraq War. Until Dai returns from the war zone, the others cannot be fully aware of the concrete reality of the war and its destructive physical, psychological, and emotional consequences on individuals, as they wilfully disregard these impacts and tightly cling to post-truth imaginations regarding the heroism of the soldiers fighting in Iraq. For instance, even in the absolute presence of burned, paralysed, and deceased soldiers in the hospital, the characters envision and accept as reality the fantasy of a returning soldier who remains unscathed, untarnished, unaffected psychologically, and unwavering in fulfilling his duties. As Elena Dotsenko (2010) points out, “Lichtenstein attempts to shock us into an awareness of the emotional continuum between domestic catastrophe and the real war consequences” (p. 16). By creating such a contrast between the reality and the imagination, Lichtenstein draws attention to the destructive effects of post-truth discourses and reveals how emotional appeals can overshadow reality and manipulate public perception, especially in the context of war.

Besides causing the physical exploitation of lands and loss of lives, war also destabilises established notions of identity and nationality. Janina Wierzoch (2020) explains this, noting, “[w]ar obliterates individuality and calls into question established categorisations. The helicopters flying in from the battlefields signify a transgression of the border of home, symbolically challenging its definition of ‘us,’ of belonging” (p. 125). In its indiscriminate destructive force, war blurs the boundaries of identity. This distortion of identity is observed better when nationality is considered as a social construct. For instance, the definition of who or what constitutes the “enemy” is a matter of subjective interpretation and can be

manipulated to serve specific agendas. Lichtenstein's play offers a striking illustration of this ambiguity in a scene in which Bethan takes care for a wounded individual whose identity is uncertain. She says, "[y]ou know they think you might be the enemy. There's no matching DNA profile. We picked you up by mistake. It happens. You're an Iraqi" (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 56). The wounded individual, who might have been picked up mistakenly, is now potentially identified as an "enemy" merely based on the assumption that he is an Iraqi. Bethan's statement shows how labels such as "friend" or "enemy," "us" or "them" may be adopted, based on manipulation or mistaken information. In this sense, Lichtenstein demonstrates how the manipulation of truth can influence perceptions and identities. He reveals how post-truth discourses can distort reality and lead individuals to base their understanding on emotions and beliefs rather than proven facts.

Bethan's hopeful imagination presents a relevant case of the emotional and personal base of post-truth, as well. As a hospital nurse, Bethan is a first-hand witness to the fatal realities of the war. As Wierzoch (2020) notes, "Bethan, a hospital nurse, witnesses the defacing effect of battle on her soldier patients even before her fiancé comes back disfigured" (p. 124). Yet, despite these severe encounters, she chooses to imagine her fiancé, Dai, in a vivid and hopeful state rather than an agonising one. As to people's preference to believe in positive scenarios in terms of post-truth, Ignas Kalpokas (2019) states that "a claim must be true simply because people believe in it (i.e. it has been asserted effectively) or because people *would like* to believe in it" (p. 11). Imagining Dai in a miserable state would be highly wounding for Bethan; therefore, rather than facts, she prefers to embrace post-truth fantasies. She imagines Dai entering "*the kitchen dressed in perfect white pyjamas with his arm in a sling and one of his legs a plaster*" (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 28). This daydream reflects her desire to avoid considering the brutal aspects of the war. The white pyjamas contrast with the harsh realities of the battlefield, symbolising a peaceful ambiance she longs for. By envisioning Dai in this state, Bethan demonstrates a powerful aspect of post-truth: the ability to create an alternative reality that parallels people's emotional needs and personal beliefs. In a world where the emotional burden of war is too harsh to confront, clinging to romanticised notions and untruthful perceptions offers relief for those who cannot cope with overwhelming realities. The allure of post-truth imaginings lies in this psychological comfort they bring. That is why the household is shocked when Dai returns home from war paralysed, for they are forced to shift from a comfortable post-truth to the disturbing truth.

In relation to the daydream scenes, it is also significant to consider the directors' choice of lighting, music and stage props that may add more to the presentation of the post-truth imaginations by the characters. For instance, besides the stage directions creating an atmosphere of domestic peace when Bethan imagines Dai's return, "Rich Simone's deceptively simple sets, Meredith Lasher's unassuming costumes, and Travis Neff's magical lighting admirably intertwine with Richard Jay Simon's pitch-perfect direction" (Roca, 2005, par. 3) at an off-Broadway performance in 2005, and the post-truth visualisation of Dai's homecoming is further highlighted. In his review of the performance, Roca (2005) notes that "[t]he imagined homecomings -- one for each of the players in the soldier's stor[y] -- follow the logic of a dream and show the proud young veteran in a kilt, covered in medals, bathed in the stage's gentle violet light" (par. 4). Despite the miserable news from the battlefield, the characters envision the soldier's homecoming as a triumphant return exciting honour and admiration.

As to another performance, Timothy Ramsden (2004) comments on the intermingling of reality and fantasy in the staging of the play, stating "[t]hese themes are seamlessly, and richly, interwoven as past and present, reality and fantasy, intertwine revealing character strengths and flaws through both script and Gregory Thompson's flawlessly-acted production" (par. 4). It can be inferred from Ramsden's words

that Thompson, as well as Lichtenstein, blurs the lines between truth and post-truth, and demonstrates the influence of post-truth perceptions on the characters' understanding of the war. In relation to the fact that the directorial choices enrich the play in presenting of the emotional depth of the characters, Mark Blankenship (2005) suggests that "the staging is more fluid than the script" (par. 6). Thus, besides the critical subject plot and themes of the play, the directors' staging techniques serve as a useful tool for presenting the concept of post-truth. They visually reveal the characters' emotional engagements and reinforce the impact of post-truth discourses on their perception of the war.

Since post-truth provides people with psychological relief, it is also consciously or unconsciously utilised as a defence mechanism. When individuals' settled views are confronted with new facts, they may tend to ignore or avoid those facts in order not to face the discomfort of questioning the rationality of their existing beliefs. Regarding one's preference to challenge facts instead of beliefs, Lee McIntyre (2018) states that "[w]hen a person's beliefs are threatened by an 'inconvenient fact,' sometimes it is preferable to challenge the fact. This can happen at either a conscious or unconscious level (since sometimes the person we are seeking to convince is ourselves), but the point is that this sort of post-truth relationship to facts occurs only when we are seeking to assert something that is more important to us than the truth itself" (p. 13). Similarly, in *The Pull of Negative Gravity*, Lichtenstein touches upon this internal struggle that arises when individuals are confronted with possibilities that challenge their post-truth perceptions. For instance, when Rhys brings up the possibility of Dai's not returning from the war, Bethan desperately tries to evade such disturbing opinions:

RHYS. If he doesn't come back?

BETHAN. If he doesn't come back?

RHYS. It might happen.

BETHAN. He will come back.

RHYS. I could wait years for you,

BETHAN. When he comes home.

RHYS. What if he comes home in a body bag?

BETHAN. No.

RHYS. It's possible.

BETHAN. I'm clinging to him. His hands. His eyes. His mouth. (Lichtenstein, 2004, pp. 20-21)

Rhys's questions challenge Bethan's optimistic imagination and force her to confront the potential realities. However, her response reveals her deep emotional attachment to her preferred version of truth. She insistently clings to her romanticised vision of Dai's noble return. The dialogue between Rhys and Bethan demonstrates that when people feel strong emotional affinity with a thought, such as maintaining hope for Dai's well-being in Bethan's case, they might take that thought as truth and ignore or avoid facts that contradict their own discourses.

Similar to Bethan, Vi yields herself to post-truth imaginations about Dai, too. Upon hearing the fact that Dai returns from Iraq wounded, she spontaneously adheres to the belief that he only suffers minor injuries and will be returning home safe and sound:

VI. There's been an accident. He's been injured but only slightly. He's coming home!

BETHAN. Injured?

VI. I spoke to his Sergeant, you know, the one from Swansea. He's fine. He's having a checkup, that's all.

BETHAN. He's alright?

VI. Yes.

BETHAN. Have you spoken to him?

VI. No. He's in hospital. They're just keeping him under observation. He's fine. He'll be home in two weeks. (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 27)

Vi's wilful effort to challenge the reality of Dai's injuries aligns with McIntyre's observation that individuals embrace post-truth when they prioritise a view which is more important to them than truth itself. Consequently, these examples from the play successfully demonstrate how characters feel strongly about their own post-truth interpretations and reveal the profound impact of personal beliefs and desires on their acceptance or rejection of factual information. The playwright, thus, depicts the tension between clinging to hope, love and a desired outcome and facing unsettling truths.

Another significant point Lichtenstein represents in the play is the post-truth perception of the army and military by society. Through the dialogues concerning soldiers and the institution, he points to people's emotionally-charged preconceived opinions about those concepts. To illustrate, Vi's statement about Rhys and the army that "[i]t should've been Rhys who went. The army might have knocked some sense into him" (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 6) reveals the perception of the military as a disciplined institution that may imbue people with a sense of purpose and responsibility. Vi's belief reflects a common notion that the military can transform individuals for the better. She implies that Rhys's participation in the army instead of Dai could have altered his character and created a more favourable outcome for the family and the farm. This perspective reflects how emotions and personal beliefs can shape one's perception of the military. In another scene, Bethan's approach to a wounded soldier shows similarity with Vi's perspective. While comforting the patient, she says,

BETHAN: It'll be difficult for you now, there's no doubt about that. It's uphill from here but everyone's ever so proud of you. You know that, don't you?

You served your country in Iraq. And now you're here. For better or for worse. (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 14)

Bethan's opinion is noteworthy in illustrating social pride associated with military service. Her statements manifest a prevalent belief that serving in the Iraq War is a point of honour and pride, regardless of the circumstances. The impulse to heroicise soldiers who fight in the war, by ignoring the realities of the war and accepting this stance as truth, indicates the prevalence of post-truth in society.

After revealing the characters' tendency to accept emotionally-charged views as truth, Lichtenstein presents a crucial turning point challenging the post-truth discourses of the characters. This turning point is the moment when Dai returns home. Due to his paralysed body and mind, the idealised images of him as a heroic soldier are shattered. In this respect, Starck (2006) notes that "[h]is return from the war, hoped and longed for by the women and his brother Rhys, turns out not to be the happy event they have anticipated, but rather a shocking confrontation with the cruel reality of war" (p. 68). The characters, who had been deceived by their emotionally-engaged post-truth discourses, now have to face an undeniable truth. Their confrontation with the visible truth of Dai's physical and mental disabilities forces them to question the socially-constructed truths about the army and military. Thus, the playwright illustrates the deception caused by post-truth discourses and exposes the contrast between emotionally-driven perceptions and the tangible truth.

The scene of Dai's return begins with Vi, Bethan and Rhys joyfully dancing to a variety of songs. Bethan selects a CD and Vi expresses her enthusiasm about Dai's response to the welcome party, exclaiming, "Oh he'll like that. Tuneful, innit? He can dance to that, can't he? We could all dance to that, it's got a rhythm" (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 35). However, as Dai enters the scene in a wheelchair, paralysed and having difficulty to speak, their dancing abruptly comes to an end. They realise the contrast between their expectations and the visible truth of Dai's condition. The stage direction "*They stop dancing*" (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 35) indicates the sudden disruption of their post-truth discourse and the compelling impact of the visible truth on their perceptions. Dai's disabled body stands as a concrete indicator of the war that was perceived as a vague and distant concept before. Exploring the significance of this enlightening moment, Julian Boll (2013) states that "Dai's paralysed body represents the war which had been abstract and not actually present before Dai returned. Imagining his return, the members of the family envision him radiant (Lichtenstein 2004: 28–9), brave (30–2) and untouched (32–3). Instead of corresponding to this established image of the returning hero, Dai's damaged form documents a war which Britain joined while still convinced of gaining an easy and heroic victory, but which has been drawn out" (p. 60). The reality of the concrete consequences of the war forces the characters to put their idealised perceptions into question. Dai, therefore, serves as an impressive proof of how post-truth discourses can deceive and manipulate people, which proves the importance of the visible truth to realise the deception of emotional appeals.

As Dai witnessed dreadful images and experienced paralysing occasions in Iraq, he needs a coping mechanism to defy the nightmarish visions of the war; therefore, he turns out into an individual who desperately clings to a post-truth rhetoric about the military. Regarding Dai's struggle to articulate the horrors he witnessed or perhaps intervened in Iraq, Suman Gupta (2011) states that "[t]he horrors Dai has witnessed, and perhaps perpetrated, in Iraq are hinted at by his inability to describe what he has seen: at one point, in a moment of frustration, all he is able to come up with is a stream of expletives" (p. 99). His inability to speak of his experiences reveals the psychological cost of the war. In order to cope with the truth of such difficulties, Dai attempts to adopt post-truth illusions that may relieve his psychological pains. When Rhys expresses his regret that Dai went to war, Dai responds with enthusiasm. However, as the conversation continues, Dai reveals the factual reality of the battle zone and describes his sexual encounters and the absence of rules in the war:

RHYS. His grave? It looks fine, I'll take you there. Bethan planted some forget-me-nots. Another time, alright? I'm sorry.

DAI. Why?

RHYS. I'm sorry that you went. To the war.

DAI. Army's brilliant.

RHYS. Is it?

DAI. Fucked so much. Blow jobs. All the time. Lovely. Soft gentle cunts.

RHYS. Did you?

DAI. All the time. Surprised?

RHYS. Yes.

DAI. Me too.

RHYS. You just said . . .

DAI. That's there . . .

RHYS. Yes but . . .

DAI. Different.

RHYS. Is it?

DAI. War. No rules.

RHYS. Bloody hell. (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 57)

Dai's quick change of mind in this dialogue highlights the contrast between his idealised perception of the military experience and the harsh truths of the actual war. According to Ralph Keyes, people often portray their military experience in ways that align with their desired impressions and perceptions. He argues that deception is a fundamental aspect of creating an impression, especially when individuals present themselves in a positive light, stating, "[a]mong strangers and semistrangers, what sociologists call impression management kicks in. Deception is an integral part of that effort. According to students of dishonesty, one of the leading motivations to tell lies, especially about ourselves, is wanting to 'make a good impression'" (2004, pp. 44-45). Therefore, they may fabricate or exaggerate their military experiences. As Keyes (2004) furthermore notes, "[i]t is on the field of combat dreams that male imaginations soar. In Britain, 'veterans' feign service in the Falklands, the Persian Gulf, or defusing bombs in Northern Ireland. Both Iraqi wars will certainly produce their share of ersatz warriors" (p. 72). In accordance with Keyes's arguments, Dai hopelessly tries to romanticise his military service in order to make a positive impression of his experience. Through Dai, Lichtenstein presents how individuals may embrace idealised perceptions and narratives of the Iraq War, even when they are aware of the facts that may disprove those perceptions and narratives.

In the play, also the socially-constructed relationship between masculinity and military service is questioned and deconstructed within the context of post-truth. Lichtenstein challenges the traditional notion of masculinity associated with the military. To illustrate, this exploration is demonstrated in a scene when Bethan checks a burnt soldier's wounds. The scene reads as follows:

"She checks his penis.

God.

BETHAN *leaves*" (Lichtenstein, 2004, pp. 14-15)

This brief scene shatters the conventional notions of strength and potency which are commonly linked to masculinity and military machismo. Bethan's verbal response and her following departure offer an insight into the realisation of truths and the both physical and emotional expense of the war. The wounded soldier's sexual vulnerability contrasts the established notion of masculine soldier which contributes to the post-truth perception of the military. Lichtenstein's inclusion of this scene encourages the audience to scrutinise such preconceived assumptions with a more discerning perspective. For another example, after returning home as a soldier whose injuries have left him far from whole, Dai finds himself unable to fulfil the expectations of potency and manliness. As Wierzoch (2020) marks, "[h]is injuries turn him into an inarticulate, crawling 'animal' rejected by his bride. Dai's maimed body prevents the consummation of their marriage, shattering hopes for the continuation of the family line" (p. 124). Dai's miserable condition directly challenges the archetypal image of soldier as a symbol of health and masculinity. The following dialogue between Dai and Bethan, for instance, reveals this confrontation of preconceived notions:

BETHAN *kisses him. She caresses him. DAI comes.*

DAI. Oh. Sorry.

BETHAN. Oh my God.

DAI. Sorry.
 BETHAN. It's nothing.
 DAI. I sorry.
 BETHAN. It's all over the dress.
 DAI. Never. Mind.
 BETHAN. It's hired you know, it has to go back tomorrow.
 DAI. Sorry.
 BETHAN. It's nothing.
 DAI. Sorry.
 BETHAN. Don't worry. I'm flattered.
 DAI. I do.
 BETHAN. I said it's nothing.
 BETHAN *gets dressed and exits.* (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 48)

His injury not only deprives him of his ability to carry out his responsibilities as a husband but also hinders the continuation of the family lineage. This state of deprivation, therefore, strips him of his sexual identity. His regretful expression "sorry" implies his internalisation of the loss of masculinity. Despite Bethan's assurances that his untimely climax is "nothing," the social norms of masculinity leave him with a sense of inadequacy.

With the loss of his former identity as an able son, brother, prospective husband and soldier, the once idealised figure of Dai undergoes a dramatic downfall in Bethan's mind. Although she was once proud of him when he marched off to Iraq, she no longer finds herself unable to be with him. Her confessions to Rhys, who is now mentally and sexually healthier than his brother, make it clear: "I waited for him and now he's back and I've tried but I can't. Surely you can see that. It's you. I love you. I want you, you know that" (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 51). Her preference for Rhys over Dai shows her breaking loose from the past illusion. She furthermore expresses her feelings for Rhys, saying, "[a]s soon as I saw him, I knew it was you I needed. It's not his injury. It's you" (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 51). The fact that she now desires Rhys marks the end of her emotional attachment to the romanticised image of the soldier Dai. The reality of Dai's disability ends her illusions, which demonstrates how Dai's disability can challenge and dismantle post-truth perceptions.

The play also interrogates the post-truth perceptions about the army, the Iraq War and heroism on another level. Through a dialogue between Vi and Dai, the audience/reader is allowed to realise a soldier's experience. Vi asks about the people he killed and whether it haunts him, and he unveils his horrific actions and describes how far the post-truth imaginations about the war are from the objective facts:

VI. Did you kill people in Iraq?
 DAI. Yes.
 VI. Does it haunt you?
 DAI. Yeah.
 VI. I suppose it was you or them.
 DAI. Yeah.
 VI. If the crowds moved towards you, you shot at them.

DAI. Yes.

VI. Women, children. It was the only thing you could do. Afterwards, you saw their bodies swelling in the sun. There they are. No one, really. Just in the way.

DAI. Yes.

VI. You've seen things no one should see; done things no one should do?

DAI. True.

VI. I sent you.

VI *prays*.

Dear God. I ask for your mercy. In my hour of need. I ask for your forgiveness. I do not presume to come to your table. We are not worthy so much as to gather crumbs... (Lichtenstein, 2004, pp. 63-64)

As Vi voices her regret for sending him to war, she becomes a representative of a society sending their younger members into an armed conflict without adequately realising its traumatic consequences. The dialogue also proves that the post-truth visions of heroic soldiers are merely socially-constructed, so is the exaggerated virtue attributed to fighting a war. Additionally, when Dai discloses his horrors and states that he remembers everything (Lichtenstein, 2004, p. 64), it echoes as a similar contradiction to the commonly-accepted image of a brave and strong soldier. The revelation of such objective truths can be considered as a significant criticism of the post-truth perceptions of the army and the military experience. Dai's haunting memories of the innocent women and children killed in Iraq exhibit the trauma that soldiers experience even after returning home. His fear and Vi's sense of guilt, therefore, expose the post-truth illusion of glorified military service.

In conclusion, Jonathan Lichtenstein's *The Pull of Negative Gravity* is a significant play touching upon post-truth discourses within the context of the Iraq War from a Welsh perspective. Although the play has not been studied sufficiently in academic studies, it is a valuable piece due to its contribution to the criticism of post-truth and its searching for the ways to challenge the fabrication and manipulation of truth. Additionally, since most significant theatrical works concerning the Iraq War emerged in 2005 and 2006, Lichtenstein's play, staged and published in 2004, can be considered as one of the pioneers in this field. The play focuses on the lives of a neglected community in British society: the traditional working-class Welsh farmers, living on the fringes, residing in remote areas, distant from the comforts of big cities or industrial regions, and struggling with challenging financial circumstances. Through an exploration of the impact of post-truth discourses on this particular community, Lichtenstein reveals how such discourses can deceive people from different layers of society, even those on the margins. From this perspective, the work can be considered not only as a piece of theatre but also as a socio-cultural analysis. Although they may be few in number, the characters can successfully represent different views and post-truth discourses in society regarding the Iraq War. In order to protect themselves from the unbearable psychological impact of the war, they prefer to cling to perceptions that provide them with emotional comfort. However, with the involvement of one of them, Dai, in the war, those comforting thoughts they take refuge in are challenged. Due to the physical and psychological injuries he receives in the war, Dai's body and mind become tangible markers of the destructive reality of the war. When he returns home, the other characters can realise that their constructed reality consists only of romantic fantasies. In this respect, displaying society's emotionally-driven post-truth discourses, Lichtenstein seems to suggest that such deceptive imaginations can be challenged by facing the visible and objective facts.

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