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The Problem of Parenthood as a Constructed Role in Mark Ravenhill's *Handbag* (1998)

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Abstract

Mark Ravenhill's *Handbag* (1998) explores parenthood across two intersecting periods: the Victorian era and the contemporary era. The play presents a lesbian and a gay couple attempting to have a baby in the contemporary setting while juxtaposing their experiences with a Victorian family, whose rigid societal norms shape their parenthood roles and views. Through employing actors in double roles, Ravenhill draws parallels between past and present by focusing upon differences and continuities in societal expectations. Despite changing norms, the characters in both eras end up with performing dysfunctional parenthood roles. The play is examined through Judith Butler's "the concept of gender", explaining how gender roles are social constructs and how individuals are oppressed to conform societal expectations. Ravenhill criticises the notion of family, describes how characters force themselves into predefined roles dictated by society, and finally reveals the complexities of family and identity through challenging conventional perceptions of parenthood and exposing the constraints imposed by cultural norms over time. The societal norms and rules of the Victorian setting serve as the primary force in defining and shaping parenthood. On the contrary, Ravenhill deconstructs these traditional norms and reconstructs the family unit with two mothers and two fathers for a baby in the contemporary era. Although introducing alternative rules and expectations, the contemporary setting is not devoid of challenges. This study aims to illustrate how the fundamental struggles of starting a family persists across time even though it is possible to change the members of the family unit throughout Ravenhill's play.

Keywords: *Handbag*, parenthood, gender, Victorian era, family

Mark Ravenhill'in *Çanta* (1998) Oyununda Kurgulanmış Rol Olarak Ebeveynlik Sorunsalı

Öz

Mark Ravenhill'in *Çanta* (1998) oyunu, ebeveynlik olgusunu birbiri ile kesişen Viktoryen ve modern dönem olmak üzere iki farklı zamanda ele alır. Oyun, bir yandan çağdaş dönemde bir lezbiyen ve bir gey çiftin bebek sahibi olması çabasını konu alırken öte yandan da bu deneyimleri Viktorya dönemindeki bir aile ile karşılaştırmaktadır. Viktorya dönemi ailesinin ebeveynlik rolleri ve bu rollere bakış açısını oluşturan katı toplumsal normlar, modern dönemdeki çiftlerin deneyimleri ile yan yana sunulmaktadır. Oyundaki aktörleri çift rollerde oynatan Ravenhill, toplumsal beklentilerdeki değişimler ve sürekliliklere odaklanarak geçmiş ve günümüz arasındaki

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paralellikleri gözler önüne sermektedir. Değişen normlara rağmen, her iki dönemdeki karakterler de ebeveynlik rollerinin işlevsiz hale dönüşmesi gerçeğinden kaçamamaktadırlar. Cinsiyet rollerinin nasıl toplumsal olarak inşa edildiğini ve bireylerin toplumun beklentilerine uymak zorunda kaldığını gözler önüne seren oyun, Judith Butler'ın "toplumsal cinsiyet kavramı" çerçevesinde ele alınmaktadır. Ravenhill, aile kavramını eleştirmekte, karakterlerin nasıl toplum tarafından dayatılan belirli rollere kendilerini hapsettiklerini tanımlamakta ve geleneksel ebeveynlik algılarını sorgulayarak kültürel normların zaman içerisinde dayattığı kısıtlamaları gün yüzüne çıkararak 'aile' ve 'kimlik' kavramlarının karmaşıklığını eleştirmektedir. Viktorya dönemi toplumunun normları ve kuralları, ebeveynliğin tanımlanmasında ve şekillendirilmesinde başlıca güç olarak hizmet eder. Buna karşılık, yazar bu geleneksel normları yapıbozuma uğratarak çağdaş dönem kurgusunda bir bebek için iki anne ve iki babadan oluşan bir aile birimi yeniden inşa eder. Alternatif kurallar ve beklentiler sunmasına rağmen, çağdaş dönemdeki kurgusal alan zorluklardan yoksun değildir. Bu çalışma, Ravenhill'in tüm oyunu boyunca aile üyelerinin değişmesinin mümkün olmasına rağmen bir aile kurmanın temel mücadelelerinin zaman içinde nasıl sürdüğünü göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Çanta*, ebeveynlik, cinsiyet, Viktoryen dönem, aile

INTRODUCTION

As a prominent figure of in-yer-face theatre, Mark Ravenhill's *Handbag* (1998) juxtaposes two different periods—the Victorian era and the contemporary era—that parallel and intersect with each other. Ravenhill's play, in the contemporary setting, presents a lesbian and a gay couple that come together to have a baby. Simultaneously, the play introduces a Victorian setting in which the concept of family is analysed by depending upon the expectations of the society. Both settings explore the perception and dys/functionality of parenthood within the family structure. Except for Phil, who does *not fit in* the societal norms for specific reasons, all the characters in both the Victorian and contemporary settings are performed by the same actors in *double roles*. This theatrical choice prompts the reader to compare their behaviour and attitudes across the two parallel worlds. Ravenhill leads the readers to think over why these characters end up performing dysfunctional parenthood roles in spite of the different expectations, norms, and rules of Victorian and contemporary societies. Judith Butler defines the concept of gender that is particularly relevant for analysing how parental roles are perceived in the play, as it explores how gender is *constructed* and how these constructed roles demand specific expectations on individuals.

1. THE CONCEPT OF GENDER

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler argues that the concept of gender is not a fact but a product of repeated acts that blurs the line between illusion and reality. As a social construct, gender compels individuals to believe in its naturalness and necessity. It can be comprehended as an agreement "to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions" (Butler, 1999, p. 178). However, this idea is curtailed because the constructed nature of gender norms forces individuals

to perceive them as natural and unchangeable. Butler further refers to the gender as a performative act/action that requires repeated enactment, reinforcing and re-experiencing socially established meanings until they turn into "a ritualized form of legitimation" (Butler, 1999, p. 178). In the article "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", this performance, as a public action, is influenced with the purpose of maintaining gender within a framework—one that "the body becomes its gender through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler, 1988, p. 523). Yet, because gender norms are "phantasmatic, impossible to endure" (Butler, 1999, pp. 178-179), they cannot be completely internalized or fixed as a rigid pattern. Gender, a culture-bound concept, evolves over time according to the perception of society and that is why it cannot be internalized nor be fixated within a rigid pattern. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler describes: "Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized" (2015, p. 42). Ravenhill illustrates how Victorian society constructs and naturalizes the gender roles of parenthood within the framework of its time. On the contrary, contemporary society within the play *deconstructs* these roles by replacing the concept of traditional parental figures with a gay couple and a lesbian couple. As a literary example, Sarah Woodruff in *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) *deconstructs* the concept of Victorian woman, who is expected to conform to societal norms—such as refraining from walking alone in the woods and accepting a marriage proposal, particularly from a prestigious male figure. Furthermore, the film adaptation (1981), created by the screenwriter Harold Pinter, of John Fowles's novel parallels this deconstruction by juxtaposing off-stage scenes set in the modern era with filmed scenes depicting the Edwardian era. Through the dual representation, the film adaptation mirrors the Ravenhill's use of *double* roles, bridging the Victorian and contemporary periods. This approach allows the reader/audience to simultaneously compare and contrast both eras, finally reinforcing the notion that gender is a social construct shaped by evolving societal expectations across different periods. Returning to *Handbag*, Ravenhill does not merely present the differences between two eras; he primarily concentrates upon the problematic nature of parenthood especially when individuals are forced into rigid societal roles though being pushed into a predetermined role to *fit in*.

2. IN-YER-FACE THEATRE

Mark Ravenhill uses an alternative title for *Handbag*: *The Importance of Being Someone*, drawing his inspiration from Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) that parodies the moral dualism of a Victorian man. The protagonist, Jack Worthing, is found in a handbag and adopted as a baby by Thomas Cardew, who has a direct influence upon the improvement of Jack's economic and social status in the society. Jack invents a fictional brother, Ernest, in another city, using him to escape from his burdensome social responsibilities. Moreover, two female characters, Gwendolen and Cecily, idealize marriage to a Victorian gentleman named Ernest, believing that such a name guaranties absolute confidence. Nonetheless, Jack is portrayed as unreliable and prone to deception. In *Building Legitimacy: Political Discourses and Forms of Legitimation in Medieval Societies*, Wilde's play and Victorian society are described as,

> The play introduces [...] the pivotal point of its social critique: the importance of social status deriving from the class structure. What evidently mattered in Victorian society was not *how* but *who*. [...]Victorian society appraised the external signs that help to define the individual; the adornments that embellish –rather than comprising– the personality. (Fuente & Antonio, 2004, p. 139)

Ravenhill tries to deconstruct Victorian society's obsession with the classifications by replacing "Ernest" with "Someone" in his play's title. Alex Sierz (2001) discusses this shift, stating that *The Importance of Being Someone* suggests that "identity is no accident, but rather a quest and construct" (p. 141). This change not only alters the emphasis on class division but also underscores identity as a product of social construction.

In *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, it is noted that Ravenhill adopts of role-doubling from Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979) in which two acts are set in different periods: one in British colonial Africa (in the Victorian era) and the other in contemporary London. Churchill not only portrays two distinct periods but also incorporates themes of race, colonialism and power, illustrating how individuals are compelled to *perform* societal roles within an oppressive system rather than express their true identities just like performing gender as a social construct. Likewise, Ravenhill challenges the readers to consider, "how much have we moved on since 1890?" (Sierz, 2001, p. 142). In *Handbag*, juxtaposing the fictional Victorian era with the contemporary era, Ravenhill structures double roles as follows: Tom-Cardew, Lorraine-Prism, Suzanne-Constance, Mauretta-Augusta, David-Moncrieff. The *only* character that is not doubled is Phil, as he does not belong to a specific era due to different reasons. Unlike the other characters, Phil is an outsider and a problematic character who does not *fit in* the society. As part of a contemporary family dynamics, Mauretta and Tom are the biological mother and father, but they share parental roles with their gay and lesbian partners, David and Suzanne. The actor playing Cardew also plays Tom, reinforcing the theme of role-doubling. Even though Tom is the biological father, he only provides his sperm to be injected into Mauretta's womb and becomes a dysfunctional father in terms of responsibility. In contrast, Cardew serves as a guardian for a group of boys, one of whom is lost. The notion of guardianship recalls Plato's *Republic* (380 BC) in which he proposes the abolition of traditional families and wants to replace them with guardians who would impose the individuals shared emotions to create a societal unity (pp. 323-325). In a way, Plato ideologically builds a society without the concept of parenthood. Ravenhill subverts this structured concept of parenthood by introducing possible varieties to analyse the progress. Cardew feels responsible for his lost boy, Eustace; on the contrary, Tom, the biological father of the baby, plays no role in the contemporary family unit. For Lorraine-Prism double, both are presented in caregiving roles and both serve as a nanny/wet nurse in their respective time periods. Prism, as a Victorian character, prioritizes the manuscript of her novel over the well-being of Moncrieff and Constance's baby while Lorraine is emotionally and deeply attached to the baby of Tom-David and Suzanne-Mauretta couples. As a result of the strict societal norma of the Victorian era, the reader might expect Prism to fulfil her duties more diligently than Lorraine. Yet, Ravenhill deconstructs these assumptions by presenting contrasts. The parallel between Suzanne and Constance double stems from their shared inability to bond with their babies. As a lesbian mother, Suzanne holds the title of "Mummy," yet the readers do not acknowledge her

as performing the maternal role. Conversely, Constance, the Victorian mother, forces herself to connect with her baby despite lacking maternal affection. In *The Emotional Absent Mother: How to Recognize and Heal the Invisible Effects of Childhood Emotional Neglect*, the term of being "reluctant mothers" in regard to childcare is discussed in Chapter 6:

> Cultural context also plays a part. Particularly before the 1970s, most women didn't perceive that it was an option to not be a mother. It was the expected life course for a woman to marry and have a family, whether this was her natural inclination or not. The result of this (then and now) is that women become mothers who are not really suited to the job. They are, as one woman put it, "reluctant mothers." [...] Caring for children wasn't "their thing." (Cori, 2017)

Just like in Cori's quote, the problematic arises when a woman discovers herself as a reluctant mother especially after having a child. Hence, Constance, who can be categorised within the women before the 1970s in the given quote, lives in a Victorian setting in which women are expected to bear children disregarding whether they are emotional available to be so. That is why Constance can be perceived as a "reluctant mother" as Cori refers; however, her cultural context does not allow her to understand this as a choice rather than a biological necessity. Through all these, Ravenhill emphasizes the notion that biological motherhood alone does not inherently foster maternal emotions. Another significant pairing, Mauretta and Augusta, illustrates similar struggles; Mauretta (a biological mother in the contemporary setting) is trapped between societal expectations and being a "reluctant mother". Meanwhile, Augusta is in the pursuit of marriage with a Victorian man; however, she feels also stuck between being a mother and not being able to perform this role. Not only that but also Augusta experiences an identity crisis; though born and raised Irish, she rejects her background in the pursuit of acceptance as a Victorian woman, seeking marriage with an Englishman. Finally, David and Moncrieff are doubled due to their shared tendency to abscond from their fatherly responsibilities. Moncrieff hides behind Victorian norms that dictate emotionally and physically distant parental relationships, reflecting family dynamics defined by class division. Similarly, David rationalizes his avoidance of paternal responsibilities. Through these double-character dynamics, Ravenhill critiques the *constructed* nature of parenthood and its inherent dysfunctionality within social and cultural context.

3. THE PLAY: THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY AND THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

In the Victorian era, the concept of family is closely linked with childbearing, reinforcing strict gender roles defined by the society. As noted in *A Companion to 19th Century Britain*, family is defined as, "The nineteenth century was a time of dramatic demographic growth, the experience of 'family' was often structured by class, and always by gender. 'The family' was the site for a series of organizing narratives about men, women and children and the nature of the relations between them" (Williams, 2004, p. 9). As mentioned in the introduction in which Chris Williams reflects the main perspective of Shani D'Cruze's chapter "The family", family was defined within this structure, a notion that Ravenhill reflects through the portrayal of the Victorian family unit, especially Constance and Moncrieff while expecting to have a baby. Children serves a societal function, acting as indicators of "a father's manliness and a successful marriage" (D'Cruze, 2004, p. 256). Having a

child is closely connected with the patriarchal foundation of the era, dictating that "The Victorian child is the by-product of an internalized patriarchal and middle-class morality" (Grassi, 2011, p. 74). In the play, Moncrieff demonstrates this oppressive, patriarchal archetype, reflecting the strict family structures of Victorian society, as explicitly stated in the text:

> *Enter* **Constance**, *heavily pregnant*.
> **Constance** Mr. Cardew.
> **Moncrieff** No, my love. This is not proper.
> **Constance** I thought I heard voices.
> **Moncrieff** You must stay in your room.
> **Constance** Confinement is unbearable. I am so lonely.
> **Moncrieff** It is your burden. (pp. 165-166)†

Moncrieff emphasizes the inappropriateness of his wife's desire to leave her room because she is in the final stage of pregnancy. He even refers to Victorian values that impose psychological burdens on women, compelling them to obey the rigid norms of the era. In this way, Moncrieff serves as a spokesperson for Victorian men, presenting the societal expectations placed upon women:

> **Moncrieff** [...] we men can play billiards in the billiards room, smoke in the smoking room and relax in the library. And the ladies [...] well the ladies have their own worlds too.
> [...]
> **Moncrieff** And then there is the world of childhood. Which is your burden. (p.169)

He categorizes Victorian society into three groups: men, women and children. According to Moncrieff, children are perceived as "women's burden," a notion deeply rooted in the constructed gender roles of the era. Moncrieff perceives that the whole responsibility of parenthood is only related to the women, and he clearly abscond from his parental role, and it should be noted that this is the perception of "fatherhood" in this specific period. However, analysing all these from a contemporary perspective, it can be stated that family dynamics among the parents and child are inseparable and more importantly the child cannot be acknowledged as a "burden" in a family unit. Returning to the text; when Constance, in a moment of self-reflection, decides to breastfeed the baby, Moncrieff panics, exclaiming that his wife should "not do the duty of an animal" (p. 224). Moncrieff's final words in the play further emphasizes the constructed roles assigned to men and women in Victorian society, "**Moncrieff** Now we will go about our business [...] And from time to time the child will be shown to us and we will be shown to the child. And so the proper degree of affection between parent and child will grow" (p. 224). As a father figure, Moncrieff emphasizes the belief that adults should maintain a certain distance from their children according to the expectations of Victorian society. This perspective is explored in *Daily Life in Victorian England*, which examines the nature of parent-child relationships during this period, "Victorians worshipped motherhood and family values, most mothers did not do much childcare [...] Upper-class parents delegated the entire care of children to a nurse (or "nanny") [...] Children were separated from adults to give them a

† Throughout the article, all page numbers cited without accompanying the name of the author refer to the primary text, Mark Ravenhill's *Handbag*.

sheltered and structured routine and to train their character" (Mitchell, 1996, p. 146). In the text, Moncrieff also criticizes his wife for believing she "thinks she can be everything to the child" (p. 170). The fundamental issue of the Victorian period is that society hardly ever questioned or evaluated the constructed parental roles regardless of being reasonable or not. As Butler describes, this situation can be defined as "a ritualized form of legitimation" (p. 178).

Constance, however, recognizes the problematic family nature of the expected distance between parents and children in Victorian society. In spite of this awareness, she remains oppressed by Moncrieff who is a representative of the male-dominated culture in the play. It is possible to state that she is the only character who aims to criticize both the family concept and her own role as a mother. Unlike what the society expects and imposes upon her, Constance wishes to define motherhood on her own terms—choosing to breastfeed and feeling affection while holding her baby in her arms. In a conversation with her sister Augusta, Constance reflects on their own mother and explores the general impact of the societal constructs:

> **Constance** But still, she's our mother.
>
> **Augusta** Really, this modern mania for acknowledging one's parents after birth seems to me to be quite senseless.
>
> [...]
>
> **Augusta** Although you of course will be an excellent mother.
>
> **Constance** Yes. This is of me. This came from me.
>
> *She picks up the baby.*
>
> Nothing. I feel nothing. (p. 202)

Augusta criticises her mother for defining herself through her Irish nationality, a heritage which Augusta harshly rejects. As a result, she argues that it is illogical to claim parenthood only based on biological ties. On the contrary, when discussing Constance's experience of motherhood, Augusta completely takes a different stance. She praises Constance as an excellent mother, despite Constance's suffering of not feeling maternal in her own way. Toward the end of the play, Constance continues to force herself to *feel* emotionally connected to her baby:

> **Constance** This is mine. This came from me. What it feels, I shall feel. Here. Here. Give me the child.
>
> [...]
>
> Come here. Let me feel something.
>
> *She takes the baby.*
>
> And now, of course, it should flow through me. Now I should feel overwhelmed by a mother's love.
>
> **Phil** What do you feel?
>
> **Constance** Nothing. (p. 223)

In Victorian society, the concept of parenthood was governed by strict expectations for both mothers and fathers. The expectation of motherhood is closely associated with a natural emotional bond; nonetheless, this assumption is a cliché, as emotional attachment develops *over time* rather than occurring as an automatic reply. However, the Victorian perception of parenthood largely disregarded this notion, placing emphasis only upon the physical needs of infants while neglecting their emotional needs and development process. Speaking broadly, this tendency reflected a core

shortcoming of Victorian society, prioritizing surface-level roles and identities—whether as a mother, husband, or moral adult—without completely acknowledging the complexities of individual emotional experiences. In *Family Ties in Victorian England*, "Middle-class mothers might have relatively little to do with the physical care of the young, and fathers still less [...] the children [...] were expected to remain in it [the nursery] except when invited into adult spaces [...] a ritual that might occupy only an hour or two a day" (Nelson, 2007, p. 51). This ideology is fully reflected by Moncrieff, whose character illustrates these strict structures to the reader. In contrast, Constance functions to challenge these norms, demonstrating to the reader that it *is* possible to think beyond the constructed family roles of the time. Among women of Constance's class, physical care for a baby was not an expected maternal duty.

As another Victorian character in the play, Prism is the nanny of Constance and Moncrieff's child. Prism is an intriguing character, as she is more invested in writing her novel rather than fulfilling her role as a caregiver. In Oscar Wilde's play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895), Miss Prism is famously associated with carrying a baby in a handbag, symbolizing her complex role. As a nurse, she is taking the responsibilities of a mother, yet paradoxically, she is responsible for the baby's loss as well. According to Ravenhill, his inspiration for writing *Handbag* comes from e central question, "What would have happened if [Miss] Prism, in Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1895) had left the baby in the handbag and the novel in the pram *on purpose*? "I just started from that image" (qtd. in Grassi, 2011, p. 74). Ravenhill's Prism identifies herself as a novelist, a creator of a work. This parallels the role of a mother, as both writers and mothers are creators in their own right. Nonetheless, rather than embracing motherhood, Prism relocate that role onto her manuscript. She tells Cardew that she will put the baby in the handbag and the manuscript in the pram, a reversal that completely highlights her priorities. The existence of the pram can be linked to Edward Bond's play *Saved* (1965), in which a group of young people start to throw stones at a baby in a pram only to prove their masculinity—despite one of them being the biological father. In Bond's work, biological fatherhood does not prevent Bond's Fred from attempting to harm and even *kill* his baby. Likewise, in the Victorian period, Prism, as a nanny, is expected to fulfil a maternal role by protecting and keeping the baby alive. However, she completely fails in this responsibility and performs this role by talking to the manuscript as though it were a child: "There. There. No damage done. You are quite alright [...]" (p. 151). This comparison underscores how much she disregards her duty as a Victorian nanny. Her function in play suggests that being a mother and having the responsibility to perform the socially constructed duties or being a nanny by performing the duties of the job are not necessarily defined by societal norms but rather personal inclinations and emotions.

Cardew serves as a father figure in the play, taking responsibility for his boys—children who can be classified as homeless, lower-class, or otherwise excluded from mainstream society. These boys, much like Phil, exist on the margins and do *not* fit in the society. Though it is implied that Cardew is a paedophile, he justifies his role through Plato's concept of abolishing the families and assuming guardianship over children. Cardew describes the society:

> **Cardew** We live in a sorry age [...] A boy cannot reach maturity in the family home. The family cloys. It crushes [...] A man will arrive [...] He realizes that he has power.

> He is a man. An older man. Elected by the community. One day he appears at the family home. The mother and father tremble [...] The stranger is here.
> And he takes the boy's hand, 'Come, come with me.'
> The boy turns bewildered and looks to his parent. What is happening? Tears roll down the parents' cheeks but they nod as if to say: You must go. You must submit.
> [...] Weeks later the boy goes home. And his parents are different and he realizes that they will do anything he says. He realizes that he has power. He is a man [...] (p. 196)

His speech reflects on the shifting power dynamics within the family after an external figure takes the child to educate. In his view, the allegiance of the child changes from the biological parent to the guardian. Cardew describes his position above the constitution of a family unit; however, he still adopts the role of a father figure to his boy Eustace who ultimately runs away. Eustace's actions imply the inherent flaws in this system of parenthood through Cardew's approach. In one sense, Ravenhill seems to create a character like Cardew to show that there are other possibilities rather than a family in raising children. However, the other possibility about Cardew ends up with being a dysfunctional father figure in his own right because he actually abuses his boys. Cardew, as a guardian, does not influence any possible change of family dynamic in terms of responsibilities and requirements. As long as the individual is bounded with societal definitions and constraints, even the alternative approaches to parenthood may end up being dysfunctional in the same vicious cycle, merely from a different perspective.

In the contemporary setting of *Handbag*, the concept of having multiple parents—two mothers and fathers—is widely accepted by Tom-David, Mauretta-Susan. At the beginning of the play, the parental figures in the contemporary era discuss their motivations for wanting to become parents. Mauretta, the biological mother of the baby, first explains her personal trauma that derives her decision as follows:

> When I was a kid my dad walked out. One day he came home and he packed a bag and he stuck his head round the door and he said: "I'm going out.' And that was it. He was gone and we never mentioned him again. But people would look at you and they'd say: "It's not right. A mum and a dad's best for a kid [...]"
> So they should be fucking pleased now. Because you, my child, will be doubly blessed [...] if one decides to pack a bag and move on you've got plenty to be going on with.
> And we love you and we want you and we're waiting for you. (p. 147)

Mauretta wants to take care of their child by providing multiple parentals. However, her speech also hints a hidden criticism towards the expectations of society. The idea of having double mothers and fathers may be rooted in the need to satisfy "they"—society. While it seems that they aim to create an unconventional family structure, subconsciously they are still calculating the response from the society as if implying the fact that it is honestly impossible to meet societal demands no matter what happens. The reader understands the anger towards society with the words "they should be fucking pleased now" (147) since this sentence hints the fact that the gaze of society does not concentrate upon the goodwill of the child but upon their power of criticizing the other. Therefore, it is proved that deciding to create such a family concept is deeply and subconsciously affected by, once more, being able to respond the society if one of them walks away

from the parental role. Tom, as the biological father of the baby, also shares his perspective on parenthood, emphasizing his desire to be a better parent than the examples he witnesses:

> **Tom** [...] Sorry. I just want everything to be [...] You see so many kids. At the end of school, the parents come and pick them up. And I watch them from the staffroom window, and they grab hold of the kid's hand and it's: 'shut up' –swipe- 'keep your fucking mouth shut'. I mean, how's a child supposed to grow, develop and grow, when there's so much anger and, and [...] ugliness? And that's why I want [...] We can do so much better than that. We can create something calm and positive. We can do that. (p. 149)

He believes that they can succeed in this endeavour. Along with Tom and Mauretta, Susan and David express excitement and optimism about being a parent. However, the attitudes of these characters shift when they are confronted with the actual responsibility of family life. Unlike the societal norms of the Victorian era, the contemporary setting allows for flexible family structures. Ravenhill underscores the idea that family dynamics and roles can be *re*defined. Nonetheless, this flexibility does completely not remove the challenges of starting a family. The expectations of society and the constructed roles continue to create a problematic ground for individuals.

David, the second father figure, initially agrees to co-parent with the other three but subtly distances himself from his parental responsibilities. At the very beginning of the play, when Mauretta suggests using David's sperm, David responds, "No. We agreed. This is Tom's [...] but Tom really wants to [...] I'm still trying to sort myself out. Tom's more [...] sorted [...]" (p. 145). In terms of his doubleness with Moncrieff, David desires to have a distance in parent-child relationship when it comes to performing parental responsibilities. Though the contemporary family unit decide to be present for the birth, David is having sex with Phil when his pager alerts him about the arrival of the baby. On the phone, David apologizes to Tom by signalling his intention of detachment, "I'm sorry I have to work [...] I'm sorry life is so complicated" (p. 172). After the birth, the baby boy, named Jack, struggles to breathe—a metaphor for the challenges of surviving in such an unstable world. David's reluctance to take responsibility starts to become evident when Suzanne suggests organizing a family day, and he is the first to make excuses. He also refuses to be called "Daddy," preferring "Uncle", a choice Tom ridicules, "Uncle David who is around when it suits him" (p. 177). Defensively, David points out that it was Tom's sperm, deflecting responsibility. As a father figure, David remains inconsistent, yet he criticizes others' parenthood when they start to question his commitment. David tells Mauretta and Suzanne that watching video cameras for eight hours a day does not make them real or responsible mothers (p. 215). While the contemporary family unit lacks social rules and restrictions like the Victorian family, Ravenhill highlights modern societal issues such as consumerism, video cameras, surveillance, and the evasion of responsibility under the excuses of their obligation to work.

Suzanne, the second mother of Jack, share similarities with David. Like him, she engages in an intimate moment with Lorraine upon receiving news of the birth. Additionally, both David and Suzanne are working for a company that uses video recording to analyse the habits and choices of their costumers by living with them for a week. Unlike David, Suzanne implies that she is aware of her parental responsibilities. However, when she and Mauretta watch the video, they witness Lorraine engaging in sexual activity while their baby cries. Suzanne reacts by stating, "[...] We can't

allow him to be neglected" (p. 211). Yet, ironically, they are the ones who put the baby in a vulnerable situation by entrusting its care to someone they barely know. Despite their initial intention to co-parent and raise the baby together, the contemporary family unit fails to acknowledge the depth of responsibility and self-sacrifice required for the journey of parenthood. Their focus remains on their obligations in a consumerist society, believing that working to secure a better future justifies their detachment. However, they neglect the emotional needs of the baby. None of the parents demonstrate genuine concern for the needs of the baby; instead, they are preoccupied with performing the duties they initially agree upon. Even in this, they fail, choosing to blame one another for being the least irresponsible parental figure.

As the last two characters in the contemporary setting, Phil and Lorraine exist outside the family unit but remain implicitly connected to the concept of parenthood. Both are problematic in different ways. Firstly, Phil is introduced as someone incapable of managing his own basic needs such as urinating on himself or watching himself bleeding. He expects David to take care of him, an ironic contrast given David's negligence towards his own child. Yet, David assumes a fatherly role toward Phil, reminding him how he feeds and gives clothes to him. On the other hand, Phil mentions a child of his own, whom he has not seen for a while. He recounts a disturbing his story in which his drug dealer attempted to abuse his child, reflecting on it with the words, "[...] you're a dad. Your instincts won't let you [...] Until. Yeah. Until" (p. 200). While this suggests a fleeting awareness of his parental role, the reliability of the story remains uncertain to the reader. However, his final words confirm his failure—his subconscious reminds him he should have instincts as a father, but his actions reveal that he hands his child over to the dealer due to his drug addiction. Lorraine, on the other hand, has a problematic relationship with her mother. After the mother's death, Lorraine unconsciously begins to replicate her mother's habits though she hates her mother. Her inability to connect with her mother might contribute Lorraine's decision to take on a motherly role as a babysitter for Jack. However, after Lorraine and Phil start to have sexual intimacy, they decide to kidnap the baby. By choosing two deeply flawed characters to form a family unit, Ravenhill highlights the instability of their dynamic. Predictably, this prediction fails as well. Toward the end of the play, Phil bathes the baby and retells his story, but with a different ending:

> **Phil** And now there's three of them. The mum and the dad and the kid. And they've got a flat. Because that's important. And the mum and the dad have got a habit. But that's alright. Listen, it's alright. And there's a dealer. He's a bad man. And he wants to do really bad things to the kid. And the dad says: 'No, I'm not going to let you do that. I'm a father. No.' (p. 218)

This story might be an attempt at rewriting the past or seeking redemption for him. Phil and Lorraine behave in a way that they succeed to create a family unit by having baby Jack. Unfortunately, their effort to become proper parental figures ends up with Phil's inhumane act when the baby begins experiencing breathing difficulties. Disturbingly, he repeatedly presses his cigarette against the baby's skin and eventually into the baby's eyes to ensure he is still alive. Phil plays a crucial role in merging the two eras at the end of the play. In the contemporary setting, Phil is the only character, belonging to the lower class, and his struggle for addiction is implicitly linked to his socioeconomic status. Ravenhill probably chooses Phil to play a role in both settings because he is

the one who does not fit in or conform the expectations of either the Victorian or the contemporary society. Even though Phil is a father, he is an inherently dysfunctional one. Simultaneously, he is portrayed as a child figure, particularly in his encounter with Cardew who calls him Eustace–his lost boy. In the contemporary society, he is an addict who is perceived to be out of the society's boundaries and norms.

CONCLUSION

Ravenhill draws a comparative analysis between the Victorian era, characterised by rigidly constructed gender roles within the family unit, and the contemporary era, which is defined with its new mode of family structures within the framework of a consumerist society and its associated burdens. Ravenhill first criticizes the norms of Victorian society, particularly its strict adherence to the parental roles defined by society. He illustrates the dysfunctionality of Moncrieff and Constance as parents, attributing their inadequacy to the class-based structure of family life in that period. In Victorian society, parental roles are structured and dictated by class divisions: aristocratic and middle-class families are expected to fulfil their parenting responsibilities through the employment of nannies and to maintain a deliberate not only emotional but also physical distance from their children's world. The societal norms and rules thus serve as the primary force in defining and shaping parenthood. Conversely, the contemporary era deconstructs these traditional norms and reconstructs the family unit with two mothers and two fathers for a baby. While this period introduces alternative rules and expectations, it is not devoid of challenges. Particularly, consumerism exert a profound influence on the lives of individuals and their approaches to the concept of parenthood. Ravenhill underscores the notion that while it is possible to change the elements and the members of the family unit, the fundamental struggles of starting a family persists across time. The nature of these struggles is shaped by different societal constructs: in the Victorian era, social norms dictate that parents must maintain an emotional and physical detachment from their children, whereas in the contemporary period, individuals frequently use professional obligations as a justification for their lack of parental engagement. Both Victorian and the capitalist societies impose their own rules and norms regarding parenthood, yet the primary issue lies in the individuals' uncritical acceptance of these norms. Rather than challenging or resisting them, these individuals internalize and employ them as justifications for their actions. Ravenhill further explores the problematic nature of starting a family, emphasizing how his characters force themselves into the societal predefined roles, ultimately questioning the feasibility of achieving an *idealized* family model in any era.

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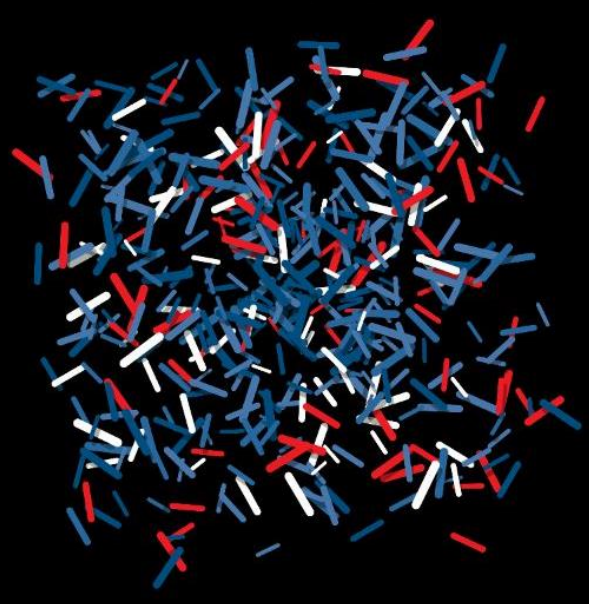

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