

Darkness explored:

reflections on violence and human nature in relation
to selected themes in Niall Griffiths' *Sheepshagger*

Jonna Vesanen
Master's Thesis
English Philology
Faculty of Humanities
University of Oulu
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Introduction

In 2013, Anthony Taaffe from Bolton, England, was fined £150 for “racially aggravated and disorderly behaviour” at a holiday park in Prestatyn, Wales. In a drunken outburst, Mr Taaffe had called the local security staff a “bunch of sheepshaggers” (Rob Williams). Although the accused tried to excuse himself by claiming that his choice of insult is in fact a “term for people living in the countryside” (Williams), not a racist slur, a quick Google search reveals that ‘sheepshagger’ is a derogatory term often applied to the Welsh. As its title might suggest, Niall Griffiths’ second novel *Sheepshagger* (2001) deals with aspects of this neighbouring tension; nevertheless, on reading the novel it becomes clear that issues relating to nationality and petty politics occupy only a fraction of *Sheepshagger’s* broad scope. In addition to conjuring up a compelling image of warts-and-all Wales, the work contains a profound and multi-layered depiction of unending cycles of violence and suffering throughout history. At the same time, while confronting its readers with a powerful tale of trauma, abuse and frustration, it also resonates with an atavistic sense of belonging foreign to most modern sensibilities. Most significantly, however, Griffiths’ novel exposes certain uncomfortable truths by turning an unflinching gaze upon the human condition and our inclination towards aggression. This is painful yet important; as the author himself puts it: “The darkness in our hearts needs to be explored” (Anthony Brockway). The purpose of this thesis is to carefully examine aspects of violence in Griffiths’ *Sheepshagger*, and analyse how these elements connect with the protagonist’s role as an outsider. Furthermore, it aims to show how the novel explores this darkness through its fictional characters and how their struggles relate to all humanity.

Sheepshagger draws its readers, to quote Griffiths, “into the human heart’s dark valleys” and confronts them with the enormity of violence by robbing it “completely of anything approaching the titillatory” (BBC Mid Wales 2). Through the story of its murderous protagonist, Ianto, *Sheepshagger* lucidly elaborates why an abused and disadvantaged individual might resort to violence; simultaneously, the novel examines the formation of intricate social dynamics that lead to aggression and exclusion. The complex interplay between violence and discrimination operates on several levels: while it is easy to understand that discrimination might lead to violence, sometimes, rather paradoxically, discrimination might also *follow* violence in order to justify it.

This is a phenomenon explored through the concept of the 'other', which refers to the process of perceiving something as different from oneself. It is a signifier of difference, constructed so that the 'self' or the 'norm' can be defined against it. However, as this thesis argues, the 'other' must be constructed – either consciously or unconsciously – and actively sustained. This concept constitutes a useful tool when examining social dynamics in *Sheepshagger*, particularly because Ianto's friends effectively categorise him as 'other' not only to explain his violent behaviour but also to silence the painful self-questioning prompted by his actions. In keeping with such themes of denial, Griffiths' novel juxtaposes the amoral ferocity of the natural world with the darker undercurrents of human psyche, offering piercing insights into the suppressed animal within us all. It is evident that issues pertaining to violence take centre stage in *Sheepshagger*; thus, as this powerful work has not yet been fully examined in this context, it seems worthwhile to do so now.

The violence in *Sheepshagger* comes in various forms – whether it is animal aggression or human brutality, historical atrocities or more modern savageries. Equally varied are the novel's attempts to uncover its irreparable consequences, in addition to illuminating, to quote Griffiths, how "violent acts come from a shrivelled soul" (BBC Mid Wales 2). In order to examine these diverse aspects of violence depicted in the novel as thoroughly as possible, this thesis utilises an interdisciplinary approach, combining relevant terminology and theories from the fields of literary studies, psychology, history, anthropology and philosophy. Given the stated focus, other aspects of the novel are treated cursorily; for example, themes relating to politics and post-colonialism are only briefly discussed – and, to some extent, these elements have already been covered by previous research. However, as mentioned above, a significant element in *Sheepshagger* is the visceral sense of belonging that is embodied by the protagonist, Ianto. To some degree, this aspect of the novel intertwines with the forces that propel the character towards violence, and, as such, is examined in this thesis.

This thesis is organised into four chapters. Chapter 1, 'Background', offers a brief biographical overview of Niall Griffiths, following his journey from a Liverpool juvenile delinquent to a celebrated writer who – in an intense, original, yet sensitive manner – depicts addicts, criminals and down-and-outs. Additionally, Chapter 1 presents a concise synopsis of *Sheepshagger*'s

storyline in addition to a summary of the novel's most important structural and stylistic aspects. Moreover, the chapter discusses Griffiths' various influences, both Welsh and American, in addition to examining the author's place in the Welsh literary tradition. Chapter 2, 'Violence', offers an in-depth analysis of the novel itself – examining various manifestations of violence, ranging from the inherent savagery of the animal world to human acts of brutality, often equally animalistic. The chapter begins with a brief background on different concepts of 'the state of nature', which, in political theory, is the hypothetical condition of human beings prior to organised societies. Chapter 2 also examines *Sheepshagger's* framing of the role of violence through the ages; by creating a fluid transition from primordial predatory beasts and brutal ancient battles to more modern manifestations of savagery, the novel subscribes to a view of violence as a perpetual part of all existence. In this context, I will also analyse elements in the novel that are connected to Wales' Celtic past – often emerging in the form of disquieting symbolism that is linked to death and violence.

Chapter 3, 'The 'other'', is dedicated to an analysis of the 'other' in *Sheepshagger*, starting with theoretical background to the concept, then introducing related ideas from the fields of literature studies, anthropology and psychoanalysis — all interconnecting with aspects of otherness. This chapter then examines how these concepts are present in *Sheepshagger* and how the 'other' is constructed in the novel. As an individual wilfully excluded by his peers, Ianto's otherness might be seen as an integral element of his role as an outsider, but, as this thesis argues, such roles are always societally constructed. Indeed, as already noted, Ianto's friends engage in processes of othering not only to make sense of Ianto's behaviour but also to justify their own acts of violence and to banish guilt. Lastly, Chapter 4, 'Darkness explored', attempts to explore the underlying nature of violence within the novel and in the world at large. This chapter begins with an introduction to the ongoing debate on nature versus nurture, discussing whether it is heredity or environment that has the greatest influence on human development. It also introduces psychological concepts of relevance to *Sheepshagger*, most significantly that of cognitive dissonance – the sense of unease that arises when two or more conflicting notions are being held simultaneously. Moreover, Chapter 4 discusses the possibility that all humanity is endowed with aggressive instincts, which the novel establishes by showing how predominantly peaceful characters gravitate inexorably towards brutality. When interviewed, Griffiths often argues that

people are aching for spiritual recognition; if there is no outlet for this, he explains, it might come out in violence (see, e.g., Gary Budden; Kenn Taylor). *Sheepshagger* can be seen to underline this view – if an individual’s desire for recognition and fulfilment is not acknowledged by society, the arising frustration can lead to the worst of consequences.

Research material

The research process has involved close reading of *Sheepshagger*; the version used here is the 2002 paperback edition published by Vintage. From the author’s numerous other novels and published works, the most relevant to themes developed in *Sheepshagger* is his debut novel, *Grits* (2000). As with *Sheepshagger*, it is set in and around Aberystwyth, and introduces a number of characters that also appear in Griffiths’ second novel. In fact, Ianto makes his first, albeit brief, appearance in *Grits*, where Essex-born Malcolm describes him in his rather uncomplimentary way: “that bloke Ianto . . . from tha mountains wiv tha buck-teeth an tha inbred drool an tha manic giggle” (Griffiths 457). As authorised biographical material on the author is practically non-existent, this thesis draws from a number of interviews, conducted between 2004 and 2015, where Griffiths discusses his work. The bulk of these can be found online, while others appear in literary journals. Particularly extensive is the 2008 interview published in *Critical Survey*, titled “Warmth and Light and Sky: Niall Griffiths in Conversation”, where the author, interviewed by Ian Peddie, deliberates on themes specific to his writing.

As mentioned above, themes related to the political and postcolonial themes of *Sheepshagger* have been examined in previous research. In his essay “Wales in a mirror: Welsh social and cultural issues in Niall Griffiths’s *Sheepshagger*”, published in *Literature in Society* (2012), Aleksander Bednarski explores Griffiths’ novel in the context of “the country’s (post)colonial predicament” (111). Bednarski’s essay focuses on the relations between Wales and England, in addition to the “Welsh self-image shaped by Wales’ (post)colonial situation” (111). As noted, *Sheepshagger*’s title alone suggests that such postcolonial tensions are present in the novel, as in reality – nevertheless, they are examined here only to an extent relevant to the aims of this thesis. Griffiths’ novel also provides an abundance of material for those wishing to examine depictions of

the interrelationship between place and human psychology; not surprisingly, such research already exists. Jon Anderson's *Page and Place: Ongoing Compositions of Plot* (2014) discusses "the geographical nature of the human condition" in contemporary Welsh literature (11). A chapter titled "At the spinning extremes of existence: the thriving boiling seething places of Niall Griffiths" examines the relations between location and identity in Griffiths' writing. Anderson's discussion starts in Aberystwyth, "[t]he homeland of the drifting class" (Griffiths, *Grits* 250), a small university town nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and the undulating landscapes of West Wales. From Aberystwyth Anderson follows the footsteps of *Sheepshagger's* protagonist, travelling the uninhabited periphery of "lanto's hinterland" (171) that he describes as the antithesis of a romanticised and harmonious image of Wales. Anderson explores how Griffiths depicts "the drifting subculture" who find meaning and beauty in the mountainous terrain surrounding them (161); Anderson then contrasts this with the "alienation and oppression" that Griffiths' characters experience "in modern life of the city" (164) – an integral theme in *Sheepshagger*.

As Griffiths acknowledges that *Sheepshagger* was partly inspired by Cormac McCarthy's *Child of God* (1973) (Budden), parallels are drawn between the novels whenever relevant for the present study. Although McCarthy's writing style is more condensed than Griffiths' often intricate prose, the novels share similarities in terms of plot, structure and narrative detail. Firstly, lanto and Lester Ballard, McCarthy's protagonist, are both taciturn outsiders in their late twenties; secondly, both are dispossessed of their family home, which triggering off a chain of events leading to their downfall. Most importantly, both these novels offer a penetrating study of social dynamics involved in violence and othering. Elsewhere, another figure similar to lanto is Iago Prytherch, the archetypal Welsh peasant created by RS Thomas, Welsh poet and clergyman – whom Griffiths affectionately calls "a cantankerous get" ("Welsh books"). It seems clear that lanto is, to some extent, modelled after Thomas' peasant figures, as they too embody a powerful atavistic connection to the land of their ancestors. The majority of Thomas' poems discussed here can be found in *Selected poems*, first published in 2003 by Penguin, in a selection made by the poet himself just before his death in 2000. It includes works from a span of half a century, starting with his first collection, *The Stones of the Field* (1946), and ending with his last, *No Truce with the Furies* (1995).

Thomas' peasant figures are also discussed in Kirsti Bohata's study *Postcolonialism Revisited: Writing Wales in English* (2004), which offers an articulate and thorough examination of twentieth-century Welsh literature. Bohata's exploration also contains a useful background to the concept of the 'other'. Moreover, she examines recurrent themes and motifs in Welsh literature, a number of which are also present in *Sheepshagger*. Similar themes in a broader context are discussed in Andrew Bennett and Nick Royle's *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (2016), a lucid and practical guide to the landscape of literary criticism. By dedicating each of the book's thirty-eight chapters to a particular topic, Bennett and Royle cover immense ground without shortcuts or generalisations. For the purposes here, four chapters have proven particularly useful when analysing *Sheepshagger*: "The Tragic", discusses theories of tragedy, offering illuminating examples of tragic villains; "Racial Difference" explores aspects of the 'other' and othering – and although these concepts are examined from the perspective of racism, the general message can be applied to *Sheepshagger*; "Mutant" offers a posthumanist approach to the human condition, arguing that such notions as 'natural' and 'monstrous' are often merely carefully constructed labels; "War" examines war literature and the violent history of the human race, contemplating the possibility that people have an innate drive towards aggression.

The Encyclopedia of the Gothic (2016), edited by William Hughes, David Punter and Andrew Smith, has also proved useful for reference – particularly the following chapters: "Abjection" by Elisabeth Bronfen, "Liminality" by Katie Garner, "Monstrosity" by Jerrold E. Hogle, and "Horror Fiction" by Gina Wisker. These have proved illuminating when examining Ianto's role as an 'other' in *Sheepshagger*, which, in turn, is closely connected to various aspects of violence in the novel. Although Griffiths' novel does not strictly speaking represent the genre of Gothic literature, its style is sometimes reminiscent of such writing – indicating why literary criticism from this area is useful. At times, however, *Sheepshagger* is harking back to more remote times, abounding in features alluding to Wales' Celtic past. In order to analyse these elements, it is important to place them in a historical and cultural context. Therefore, this thesis employs several studies from the fields of archaeology and social anthropology: *The Celtic World* (1996), edited by Miranda Green, is a comprehensive exploration of the more general aspects of Celtic Europe, while *Animals in Celtic Life and Myth* (2002) and *Symbol and Image in Celtic Religious Art* (1989), both also by Green, constitute a more detailed analysis of Celtic myths and symbols. Furthermore, *The Bog People:*

Iron-Age Man Preserved (1965) by the Danish archaeologist PV Glob is an examination of the bog bodies of Northern Europe, providing fascinating insights into social aspects of Celtic and Germanic burial traditions. Although more distantly related to *Sheepshagger*, Glob's eloquently presented study offers useful perspectives for analysing violence and othering in this novel.

As the novel's most important aspects connect with questions pertaining to man's innate aggression, this thesis attempts to approach the subject from different angles. Two books have proven especially helpful here: *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (2002) by English philosopher John Gray, and *The Blank Slate* (2002) by Canadian-American cognitive psychologist Steven Pinker. *Straw Dogs* presents Gray's pessimistic understanding of human nature, offering a posthumanist perspective on ideas such as free will and progress. In essence, the book aims at shattering the illusion that humans are separated from animals by any great gulf. Approaching his topic from a more scientific perspective, Pinker, too, engages his readers in an attempt to discard a number of widely accepted humanistic 'truths' regarding human nature. As the title might suggest, the core issue in *The Blank Slate* is the widely accepted belief that the mind of the individual is born blank before being moulded by experience. Pinker builds a compelling argument for the importance of genes in human development, offering a thought-provoking take on the issue of nature versus nurture. *The Blank Slate* and *Straw Dogs* offer different ways of looking at humanity: one presented by a psychologist with a vigorous faith in scientific facts, the other formulated by a philosopher attempting to question aspects of humanist 'faith', including our confidence in science and progress. To some degree, Gray utilises Freudian psychology in his writings – as do Bennett and Royle in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*. Therefore, this thesis also makes use of Sigmund Freud's influential work *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Although some of his ideas have lost credibility over the years, Freud's book offers a fascinating and fruitful route for exploring our inclination towards violence and its troubled relation to the demands of civilisation.

1 Background

Before an examination of the novel and its concerns, this chapter commences with a brief overview of the author. Although Barthes and others suggest that the author's background and assumed intentions should be ignored, this thesis does not completely disregard biographical information – on the basis that, in certain cases, it can shed light on the issues being explored. However, this section is kept short, acknowledging that such information is, perhaps, of secondary value when analysing works of art. The second section provides a concise synopsis of the novel, in addition to a brief account of its most important thematic and structural aspects. A third section then discusses the genesis of the novel, and Griffiths' literary influences; with special emphasis placed on *Child of God* by Cormac McCarthy – upon which, to some extent, *Sheepshagger* is modelled. The chapter concludes with a concise analysis of Griffiths' role among contemporary marginal writers, and some thoughts assessing his place in the Welsh literary tradition. Henceforth, for brevity, the signal word *Sheep* is used in all parenthetical references when quoting from *Sheepshagger*.

1.1 Niall Griffiths

Niall Griffiths was born in Toxteth, Liverpool, in 1966 (David Ian Paddy). Griffiths reveals that, in his working-class family life, story-telling formed part of his world from early on: "There were no books in my family but there were lots of stories; it was very much an oral culture" (Brockway). Like many Liverpoolians, Griffiths has strong Welsh and Irish roots, and has been particularly influenced by the oral tradition passed on by his Welsh-speaking grandparents (Taylor; Paddy). An "excitable child from a non-bookish household", he found a creative outlet in writing horror stories; an early fascination with violence which he has explained as a possible way of coping with his sense of self in a brutal and complicated world (Brockway). In addition to writing, young Griffiths absorbed "worthwhile literature" which also helped in "dealing with a terribly confusing world" (Taylor).

Aged 15, Griffiths left school and went on to a series of menial jobs – an experience that taught him that he did not want “any kind of proper job” and prompted a return to study (Taylor). After A-Levels in Birkenhead, near Liverpool, he spent the following years “bumming around” the city until he was twenty-two (Taylor). Griffiths has revealed that during this time in Liverpool he was “quite a naughty kid”: in his late teens, after a series of petty crimes, Griffiths was sent to an Outward Bound course in the rugged landscapes of Snowdonia, northern Wales (Budden). He admits that the experience, although intended as a punishment, was a favourable one, as it gave him “an alternative outlet for [his] energies” (BBC Mid Wales 2). “You can find a peace and a calmness that has nothing to do with comfort. It’s the same with finding a God”, the author explains, and elaborates: “Comfort should never come into it. Peace always does” (BBC Mid Wales 2). On returning to study in his twenties, he finished a B.A. degree at an art college in Cambridge, after which he started his Ph.D. studies in Aberystwyth (Peddie 118). However, he eventually became disillusioned with academia: “There was no real soul there, no real passion” (Peddie 118), and he gradually drifted into a world of partying and bingeing on drugs and alcohol (Taylor). Drawing from these experiences, Griffiths started writing what would become his debut novel, *Grits* (2000), which was well received both critically and commercially (Taylor). His second novel, *Sheepshagger*, was published in 2001, and, as with *Grits*, deals with the lives of outsider characters in West Wales. Since then, the author has produced six novels, three books of non-fiction and one poetry collection, his most recent novel being *A Great Big Shining Star* (2013) (“Niall Griffiths”).

In his writing, Griffiths deals with people on the margins: he gives voice to those whose stories are not often heard, endowing their lives with an epic quality (Taylor). He explains that by aligning the passage of human life with the monumental forces of nature, as in, for example, the formation of landscape and mountains, “epic grandeur” can be achieved (Budden). Griffiths admits to a fascination with the ways in which landscapes can shape a people, and especially to how Wales, “an ancient landscape of lakes and of mountains”, affects its inhabitants, “a liminal race in a liminal place” (Brockway). Furthermore, Griffiths attacks what he sees as a falsely idyllic pastoral tradition which still influences perceptions of Wales, stating that it is a fundamentally political and anti-imperialistic act to show “the rural life in its bloody, brutal beauty” (Budden). Griffiths also argues that the Welsh identity is bound up in their voice (Taylor); and, therefore, it is important to portray their language convincingly on the page. In *Sheepshagger*, as in his debut novel, Griffiths’

writing alters between passages that are either heavily colloquial or poetically rich and complex: “I was sick of minimalism”, the author recalls, “I felt . . . that the world was supercharged and that it needed a new expressive language” (Brockway). Griffiths explains that by employing contrasting registers he can show how “demotic speech carries its own poetry” (Crystal Jeans); thus, two seemingly opposed forms of language operate with similar intent.

1.2 *Sheepshagger*

Sheepshagger (2001) offers a penetrating study of violence, revenge and the role of the outcast. Set in and around Aberystwyth in the late 1990s, the novel focuses on the life of its protagonist, Ianto, a near-mute simpleton who spends most of his days in a stupor fuelled by various intoxicants. With more affinity to landscape and wildlife than people, half of Ianto’s time is spent wandering the mountainous terrain of his native Wales – the other half among friends who tolerate his almost pathological taciturnity. However, the situation begins to quickly deteriorate when Ianto’s childhood home is repossessed, and the consequent emotional agony also results in the death of his grandmother, Ianto’s only living relative. Suddenly the protagonist has nothing, while his decrepit but beloved ancestral house is being used as a holiday home by English yuppies. The contrast between “[s]cruffy skinny spotty Ianto” (*Sheep* 15), homeless and hungry, and the moneyed holidaymakers is evident. He laments: “Those bastards use it as a second home . . . an I haven’t even got *one*” (*Sheep* 20). Although this marks a point where postcolonial tensions are most tangible, Griffiths’ range is not restricted to a field of petty politics and neighbouring feuds.

In his writing, Griffiths aims at emphasising the poetry inherent in demotic speech. By contrasting colloquial passages with more intense, elaborate language, the author explains, he attempts to “highlight the fact that [his] characters have, if very little else, a certain power with words” (Jeans). Moreover, Griffiths argues that vernacular carries “a weight of nonestablishment, marginal knowledge” which standardised language often lacks (Peddie 120). However, being nearly mute, Ianto is devoid of such power with words. He is deprived of a voice and, consequently, of any true power over his fate. Furthermore, as mentioned above, Griffiths underlines that the identity of the Welsh is linked with their language; therefore, the unspoken yet powerful bond between Ianto

and his ancestral land can be seen as something other than a modern, language-focused nationalism. This sense of belonging dates back to an obscure ancient past when his ancestors, “barelegged ragged men with Ianto’s same blue eyes”, were “the only knowers of this mad land” (*Sheep* 22). In this sense, Ianto seems part of some former world, now nebulous though once real, and his visceral sense of belonging remains inexplicable to those who put a premium on national languages and man-made borders. In this context, Griffiths explains the Welsh concept of *hiraeth*:

Often translated simply as “longing” or “homesickness”, it is actually much, much more than that. It is . . . a kind of affirmative sadness, of attachment to a place so physically and spiritually profound that it can be heartbreaking, as well as a powerful spur to creation. (“Wales” 34)

There is no single word in English that fully conveys its meaning; the Portuguese *saudade*, according to Griffiths, is a closer equivalent than ‘nostalgia’ or ‘longing’ (“Wales” 34). Furthermore, the word seems to relate to his teenage experiences of finding a sense of peace in the vast landscapes of West Wales: *hiraeth*, as Griffiths explains, is to do with “calmness”, not “comfort” (“Wales 34).

Sheepshagger operates on three alternating levels, spanning nearly thirty years between Ianto’s early childhood and some years after his death. All three levels are distinct, each employing differing stylistic techniques. The majority of the novel consists of a main strand of narrative: depicting Ianto’s everyday life in the present moment, the descriptions alternate between drug-fuelled gatherings, raves and parties, and, in contrast, his aimless wanderings in the harsh yet beautiful landscape of valleys and mountains. These opposites also relate to the dichotomy that characterises Ianto: the norms and constraints of civilisation are a constant threat to his sense of freedom he experiences when roaming the untamed wilderness. The main strand of narrative also juxtaposes Ianto’s usually meek and passive demeanour with his feral and seemingly arbitrary outbursts of violence. These irrational atrocities result in the deaths of three hikers whom Ianto encounters on his wanderings – all of them, as it happens, English. By chance, the enormity of Ianto’s deeds is revealed to his friends, who, until that moment, had considered him a simple but essentially benign individual. Shocked by this revelation, they launch into a ruthlessly violent attack, and the main storyline culminates in his death.

The second level of narrative contains italicised prose flashbacks into Ianto's bleak childhood. In addition to the typeface, these sections are stylistically distinguishable through their intense, fiercely poetic and disquietingly sinister tones, often reminiscent of Romanticism and Gothic horror. These dark passages capture traumatic moments in young Ianto's life – presenting encounters with brutal and primal aspects of the world. The first flashback sets the tone for the others that follow, depicting a scene where five-year-old Ianto discovers a lamb blinded by the stabs of a raven's merciless beak:

The lamb comes bleating through the dried and tangled ryegrass, the wind lifting the innocent quiff of white curls away from its eyes where Ianto can now see there are no eyes, only holes, dark sockets red-frothed with cords hanging loose like impatient scavenger worms . . . Well-fed corvine in the twisted branches of the bare tree above cackles . . . (*Sheep* 5)

The boy feels the urge to fill the gaping holes with pebbles, “to put something where there is nothing, to bring substance upon emptiness” (*Sheep* 5), which only quickens the poor animal's demise. These glimpses into Ianto's childhood serve a vital narrative purpose – that of generating empathy in the reader and offering explanations for Ianto's later actions.

After the main storyline has presented the reader with Ianto's atrocities in graphic detail, another childhood scene offers a crucial piece of the puzzle of his tormented past. The penultimate flashback depicts ten-year-old Ianto encountering an English hiker who engages the boy in conversation. As Ianto uses the Welsh word 'mam-cu' to refer to his grandmother, the hiker sneers at him, revealing his imperialistic attitudes: “Expect every visitor to your little province to know your bloody language, do you?” (*Sheep* 229). The man's behaviour becomes increasingly invasive, and the scene unfolds as a grotesque allegory of colonial oppression:

Plundered [Ianto] feels of personality and locomotion, eviscerated, stripped bare. All those powers he is beginning at this age to feel he possesses now looted by this strange Englishman . . . The man's fingers on his chin feel rough and foreign and intrusive, yet intrusive with some strong rights of trespass, some ineffable legal backing. (*Sheep* 229)

Moreover, the Englishman calls Ianto a “dirty little sheepshagger” for trying to fend off his approaches – for daring to “reject” him (*Sheep* 232) – and proceeds to sexually molest and physically assault the boy, finally sending him flying into a nearby lake. Such scars, both physical and emotional, explain his near-mute taciturnity. Ianto remains a silent sufferer throughout his

brief existence, his trauma hidden within the depths of his psyche, and, without constructive outlets, providing fertile territory for a fixation on revenge. Finally, almost inevitably, his hidden agony results in the death of three people, who, from Ianto's damaged perspective, somehow represent the "arbiter of his misfortune" (*Sheep* 206).

The third level of narrative is solely dialogue. Ianto's friends – Danny, Marc, Griff and Llŷr, all involved in his murder – discuss Ianto's life and actions three years after his brutal demise. The friends speculate about Ianto's motives, but, partly unaware of his traumatic past, settle, with the exception of Danny, for labelling him a violent psychopath. Furthermore, as most of them grew up in conditions not dissimilar to Ianto's, they refuse to accept a bleak childhood as an explanation for his behaviour. Danny, alone, resists the convenient explanation of Ianto having been born evil. In this sense, Danny can be seen as an embodiment of Griffiths' repeated argument for the importance of studying violence (see, e.g., Brockway; Peddie; Jeans). The others, however, ignore Danny's pleas, calling him a "[w]ishy-washy fuckin liberal" (*Sheep* 200). Danny's desire to understand is constantly at odds with Llŷr, Marc and Griff's attempts to conclude the conversation by simply labelling Ianto as evil and irrational. In an interview with *Critical Survey*, Griffiths explains that Llŷr and Marc are "angry against life": the first "likes to shoot animals", the other is "angry at things being alive" (Peddie 123). Griff expresses equally nonchalant views towards violence, claiming that he is "glad" that he participated in Ianto's death, arguing that he deserves a "fuckin medal" (*Sheep* 224). Danny, on the other hand, is less narrow-minded: as the others ridicule him for his high-flying rhetoric, he counters: "I've been fuckin reading, haven't I? Should try it sometime, yew should. Might even fuckin learn something like" (*Sheep* 54).

A related example of the group dynamics in *Sheepshagger* can be found in the scene where Ianto, Danny, Llŷr, Griff, Marc and others, are sheltering from a heavy storm in Llŷr's cottage. Ianto has assumed his usual role of silent observer, while the others are having conversations that oscillate between the crude, boisterous and philosophical. After bingeing on drink and drugs, the friends are in varying states of consciousness; Llŷr has fallen asleep and the others comment on his serene demeanour. Danny remarks that Llŷr's appearance is merely an illusion, asserting that he is undoubtedly having horribly grotesque dreams:

–. . . Hieronymous fuckin Bosch, aye.
–Who? Bosch? Don't ey make power tools?
–Aye, they do, Griff, yeh.
Griff looks puzzled. (*Sheep* 133)

Although Danny is not an uneducated man, he does not use this to put himself on a pedestal. A recovering heroin-addict, Danny seems to understand that people have complex and often hidden motives for their actions. Unlike the others, he avoids labels that are reductive and essentially harmful.

1.3 Literary influences

As mentioned, the young Griffiths found reading helpful in dealing with a confusing world. One of his earliest literary influences was Welsh writer Ron Berry, whose ability to make English “attractive again” left an indelible impact on the author as a boy (Griffiths, Foreword x). In addition to rendering vernacular convincingly in writing, Berry impressed Griffiths by setting his novels in his native Rhondda Valley:

I remember reading Berry and thinking, 'My God, you can write worthwhile novels set in your own community!' I see *Grits* and *Sheepshagger* as forming part of a long tradition of experimental, innovative, marginal writing that has occurred in Wales. (BBC Wales Arts)

Indeed, *Grits* and *Sheepshagger* are both set in and around the town of Aberystwyth – in “perennially unfashionable west Wales”, to quote Brockway. Although some might argue that Griffiths’ work offers more psychological depth than his literary hero, he contends that those wishing to “explore structure and voice, to barge at the boundaries of the novel form” are “all [Berry’s] progeny” (Foreword xii). Additionally, in his foreword to Berry’s *So Long Hector Bebb* (1970), Griffiths discusses the novel’s reflections on the way society conditions people to “warp out” their “true nature” (xii). Similar themes emerge in his writing, too: he acknowledges that if society fails to meet people’s longing for “spiritual fulfilment”, to express their real selves fully, perhaps, the tension is likely to break out in violence (Taylor).

Apart from citing Berry as a “major influence”, Griffiths mentions few twentieth-century Welsh writers as literary heroes. According to Paddy, the landscapes and scenarios Griffiths creates on page are “antithetical to the romanticised Wales” propagated by Welsh authors such as Richard Llewellyn. Interestingly, in his novel *How Green Was My Valley* (1939), one of Llewellyn’s central characters is called Ianto; thus, Griffiths’ choice of name for his antihero can be seen as a satirical dig at Llewellyn’s nostalgic romanticisations. Griffiths himself explains that “the Enlightenment idea of Celtic peoples living lives of natural harmony and warmth” – which Llewellyn can be seen to represent – is “reductionist and self-serving and smug and undignified” (Ceri Shaw). Nevertheless, one Welsh author that Griffiths mentions in addition to Berry is Caradoc Evans, whose collection of short stories titled *My People: Stories of the Peasantry of Wales* (1915) caused an outrage due to its unflattering portrayal of the Welsh peasant (Katie Gramich 23). Gramich describes *My People* as “modernist grotesquerie” that destroys the image of the hard-working and pious peasant. Evans’ male characters are “greedy”, “savage” and “completely lacking in any virtue”, while their female counterparts are “gullible, uneducated, brutalised, and, often, mad” (23). It is this uncompromising, unflattering representation of the Welsh that partly accounts for Evans having been “a big influence” on Griffiths’ writing (Craig Austin). Additionally, to some degree, Griffiths identified with him after numerous readers expressed their disapproval of *Grits*: “They really did take great offense to it. So I’ve always felt something of a literary affinity with Evans” (Austin).

Other than Berry and Evans, Griffiths’ immediate literary influences originating in the British Isles are few; however, one such author is the Scottish beat writer Alexander Trocchi (BBC Wales Arts). In 2017, of Trocchi’s eighteen books, only two, *Young Adam* (1954) and *Cain’s Book* (1960), were still in print in the United States – leaving Trocchi, according to David L. Ulin, to “linger on the periphery, tangential and ignored” (vi). Written in spare, laconic style and pared of emotion, *Young Adam* is modelled on Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* (1942); however, Trocchi seems to take Camus’s emotional detachment a step further by “framing his protagonist unwilling to take, or even to acknowledge, responsibility for his actions” (Ulin ix). *Cain’s Book*, on the other hand, as James Campbell describes, is “autobiography and fiction at once, the journal of a fiend, a stage-by-stage account of the junkie’s odyssey in New York” (qtd. in Richard Seaver xx). “I have needed to use drugs”, Trocchi himself explains, “to abolish within myself the painful reflection of the

schizophrenia of my times”, to “quench the impulse to . . . live out some convenient, traditional identity of cunning and contriving” (qtd. in Greil Marcus ix). Furthermore, Trocchi explains how drugs helped him to “escape out of the prison of [his] mind’s language” and to “make it new” (qtd. in Marcus ix–x). Indeed, in his attempts to make language new again, it does not seem surprising that Griffiths names Trocchi as an influence. Although stylistically different, the two Trocchi novels discussed here also seem to share similar ideology. Trocchi’s perspective is not only “amoral”, as Ulin explains, but “actively *anti*-moral, an attack on the very notion of ethics, which Trocchi sees as capricious and impure” (ix). Although Griffiths’ world view is less nihilistic, both novelists excel at depicting alienated characters who, to quote Griffiths, are “reacting against the deadening effect of modern life” (Peddie 123).

Griffiths names predominantly American authors as influences, including Hubert Selby Jr, Cormac McCarthy and Denis Johnson (see, e.g. Peddie 127). “[T]here’s not much in Britain”, Griffiths argues, “[the] kind of engagement with society and with human life as it is beaten into shape by modern society was only really ever found in the Americans” (Peddie 127). Moreover, the author accuses much British literature of being “parochial, dull, smug” and “irreparably middle-class” (Shaw). The author explains that McCarthy’s *Child of God* was “part of the genesis of *Sheepshagger*”, as he remembers reading the novel and thinking “why has no one done this in Wales, in Scotland or Ireland?” (Budden). As we might expect then, there are similarities between *Child of God* and *Sheepshagger* in relation to subject matter, structure and theme. Both novels provide unflinching portrayals of young men pushed to the margins of society. However, in describing and exploring violence, Griffiths leaves less room for interpretation; in contrast to McCarthy’s pared-down, minimalistic prose, that allows readers to shape their own conclusions. As with Ianto in *Sheepshagger*, McCarthy’s protagonist, Lester Ballard, is deprived of his family home, an event which, in both novels, acts as a catalyst for the protagonist’s downfall; or, as Steven Frye writes of *Child of God*, denotes Lester’s descent “into a psychological abyss” (15). The depths of this abyss are threaded with themes of necrophilia – expressions of the dark, primal urges of the deeply disturbed and disconnected protagonist. In *Sheepshagger*, similar resonances can be found in the macabre scene marking Ianto’s first sexual contact: in a moment of hurried desperation, Ianto “mauls [the] yielding torso” of his dead female victim (210). However, instead of alienating these characters from us, both novels succeed in the difficult task of depicting their

protagonists with sympathy and eliciting a corresponding reaction in the reader. As Griffiths puts it, his writing is “shot through with light”, which is “evident . . . in the realistic depiction of a character” (Peddie 123). Additionally, he argues that fictional characters should “come alive in many ways” instead of being stereotypes: “I don’t want my characters to be mere ciphers”, the author explains, “so I have to humanize them” (Peddie 121–23).

Child of God and *Sheepshagger* also share a pessimism concerning human nature. Similar to the effect that *Sheepshagger* creates by depicting forms of violence through the ages – discussed in closer detail later in this thesis – *Child of God* presents violence as omnipresent throughout human history. This ubiquity becomes evident in the scene where the local sheriff and his deputy engage Mr Wade, a plain-spoken septuagenarian, in conversation. Mr Wade, who has lived through the era of vigilante groups and public hangings, is queried about the White Caps by the young deputy Cotton. The White Caps, a movement in nineteenth-century America, was part of a long tradition of groups operating in realms where “the authority of the law was either not clear or non-existent” (Richard Maxwell Brown 150). Revealing his lack of experience, Cotton declares that such an organisation sounds “like a good idea”; Mr Wade, however, disagrees and labels the White Caps as “a bunch of lowlife thieves and cowards and murderers” (McCarthy 156). Mr Wade proceeds to describe how the public hanging of two such was attended by a jubilant crowd, which prompts Cotton to wonder whether people were “meaner than they are now” (McCarthy 158). The old man remains pessimistic regarding the possibility of ethical progress: “I think people are the same from the day God first made one” (McCarthy 158).

Similar to *Child of God*, Selby’s *The Room* (1971) and Johnson’s *Angels* (1983) deal with issues pertaining to violent urges and their ultimately grievous consequences. The unnamed protagonist of Selby’s claustrophobic novel is a prisoner on remand who spends his days fantasising about revenge. Not only does he imagine inflicting pain and humiliation on the objects of his rage – the two police officers responsible for his arrest – but he also dreams up grisly scenarios where his captors revel in lewd and immoral behaviour, justifying the fate that the prisoner has in store for them. However, the man’s fantasies never materialise; instead, they wreak havoc on his already unstable psyche. Finally, nearly consumed by his hate, the prisoner welcomes the distraction

brought about by the “searing pain” that engulfs his body – and it is this “constant and all-pervading pain” that saves him from being destroyed by “the overwhelming anguish and terror of his mind” (Selby 196). Similarly, Johnson’s *Angels* – which Griffiths describes as “an amazing book” (Peddie 127) – explores themes of repression, revenge and violence. Johnson’s protagonist, Bill Houston, is stuck in a cycle of violence that seems nearly deterministic, and, after a bank robbery gone awry, he finds himself on death row. In quiet resignation, he marvels at how the simple act of pulling the trigger – “a jot of strength, a quarter second’s exertion” – can result in “a great space of nothing” where a man’s life had been (Johnson 198). The novel ends with a poignant metaphor for violence that seems appropriate to all the novels discussed above: people who are imprisoned – whether in reality or in terms of their psychological state – tell themselves stories “to pass the time it takes for the violence inside a man to wear him away, or to be consumed itself, depending on who is the candle and who is the light” (Johnson 255). Johnson leaves room for the interpretation that perhaps all frustration and aggression does not need to end in self-annihilation; Ianto, however, is consumed by his rage until there is nothing left.

1.4 Perceptions of defeat

Soon after Griffiths’ debut novel *Grits* appeared, the author became known as “the Welsh Irvine Welsh”. Paddy argues that perhaps the epithet was “inevitable” due to the novel’s “dialect-transcribed tales of drug-ridden down-and-outs”. Griffiths himself acknowledges that Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (1993) “opened the floodgates” to an abundance of marginal writing, “both good and atrocious” (Peddie 127). Additionally, the author recognises that part of his earlier success was fuelled by the notion that “Wales needs its own *Trainspotting*”; and fuelled too by notoriety, for, as with Welsh’s novel, a number of people took “great offence” to *Grits* (Austin). In 2012, in an interview with *New Welsh Review*, Griffiths notes with relief that people’s need to pigeon-hole him as the Welsh equivalent of the Scottish author has lessened over the years: “At first, people saw in my fiction drugs and dialect and, being generally idle and in need of compartments, thought of Irvine’s work”. As an established author, with a significant body of work, Griffiths now expresses a hope that “the themes peculiar to [his] work are being appreciated” (Jeans). Garan Holcombe remarks that it should not be forgotten that Welsh, too, has been “at the forefront of linguistic innovation in the novel”. Nevertheless, as Holcombe argues, “Griffiths brings to his

fiction a poetic anger, a visionary lyricism, which differentiates him from his primary literary forebear”.

Despite differences, Griffiths and Welsh share and explore similar themes concerning national identity. In *Trainspotting*, Trenton, one of the novel’s narrators, launches into a diatribe against his native Scotland:

Ah don’t hate the English. They’re just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can’t event pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. . . . What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. . . . Ah don’t hate the English. . . . I hate the Scots. (Welsh 100)

In *Sheepshagger*, related sentiments are expressed in a scene where a group of rave-goers are discussing the imminent referendum on Welsh devolution. Someone utters his hope that Wales will become “[a] nation once again”, while others remain doubtful that people will bother to vote, calling the apathy of their nation “the Welsh disease” (*Sheep* 74–75). One rave-goer offers his pithy analysis of the situation:

Moan about it in pubs, that’s all we fuckin do, or write the odd fuckin poem. Does fuck all. Tellin yew, it’s a pitiful little nation this. A fuckin boil in the ocean. I mean, the Irish kill each other, the Scots kill emselves, an us, all we do is kill time while we wait for someone else to come along an do somethin for us. (*Sheep* 74–75)

Similarly, in *Grits*, Roger, who also appears in *Sheepshagger*, admits that he pretends to hate the English simply to cause annoyance, while, in truth, it is the Welsh themselves whom he dislikes, the “Wales v. Wales fixtures” – a nation of “fuck-ups” who cannot “even play rugby enny more” (Griffiths 86).

Comparable sentiments about the Welsh uttered by a Welshman can be found in the works of RS Thomas (1913–2000), priest, poet and ardent Welsh nationalist. Thomas’ earlier poetry animadverts on the Welsh, blaming them for being complicit in the slow disintegration of their own culture. For example, in “Welsh Landscape”, Thomas describes his nation as “an impotent people / Sick with inbreeding / Worrying the carcass of an old song” (6), while, in “Reservoirs”, he bewails “the smell / Of decay, from the putrefying of a dead / Nation” (74). Additionally, Thomas depicts – not without affection – the unhealthy fixation on the past in which the Welsh seem to

wallow. In “Welsh Landscape”, the poet laments: “There is no present in Wales / And no future; / There is only the past” (5); in “Welsh history”, he remarks: “We are a people bred on legends, / Warming our hands at the red past” (qtd. in Gwyn A. Williams vii). Griffiths expresses similar sentiments in his writing: in *Sheepshagger*, Welsh rave-goers deplore the lack of contemporary heroes, concluding that “[there’s] no one” (74); in *Grits*, Welshman Roger urges his fellow countrymen to “[g]errout uv-a fuckin past” and denounces their obsession with history as a way of escaping the unpleasantness of the present (86). Indeed, as Bednarski explains, Welsh culture has “manifested the tendency to cherish the past”; interestingly, though, this past is often “associated with defeat rather than victory” (119). As Bohata has argued in regard to Thomas’ poetry, “The past is glorified but is always a picture of defeat”, as for example, in “Welsh History”, where the word ‘and’ in the line “We fought, and were always in retreat” implies inevitability – not “resistance but resignation” (16–17).

Drawing on equivalent attitudes towards the Welsh and their fixation on the past, Griffiths and Thomas have both created their own renditions of the Welsh peasant. From the 1940s onwards, Thomas reinvents the traditional peasant in the figure of Iago Prytherch, a hill farmer who makes his first appearance in the poem titled “A Peasant”, where he is described as “an ordinary man of the bald Welsh hills” with “a half-witted grin” (1). Additionally, the poem remarks that “[t]here is something frightening in the vacancy of his mind”, and his ragged and mucky clothes “shock the refined, / But affected, sense with their stark naturalness” (Thomas 1). Furthermore, as Bohata explains, Prytherch’s “subhumanity is further suggested by a muteness that is often described in terms associated with stereotypes of idiocy or insanity” (52); thus, in this sense, echoes of Thomas’ peasant figure can clearly be seen in Griffiths’ Ianto. Additionally, Bohata notes that Thomas’ hill farmers are “drooling, inarticulate wretches”, sometimes barely distinguishable from animals (52). Indeed, in the poem “Valediction”, as the farmer is “loitering with the cows”, only a small sign of humanity separates him from the bovine: “Yourself one of them but for the smile” (qtd. in Bohata 52). However, Thomas is not the only author to create simplistic peasant figures – as Bohata explains, there are a number of examples where Wales is constructed as “home to strange and atavistic peoples” (36). Nevertheless, such texts can be seen as somewhat problematic, as they are often addressed to “Anglocentric” audience (Bohata 36). It can be argued that Griffiths is fully aware of the controversial nature of such reductive representations, but can

be seen to evoke a number of ingrained Welsh, and also English, stereotypes to demonstrate how risible and harmful such simplifications can be. All in all, as Gramich argues, most of the Welsh authors discussed here, including Evans, Thomas and Griffiths, in addition to the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, have all participated in “the continual reinvention of the Celtic Peasant”, of which Griffiths’ lanto is a new and particularly “unsettling” example (28).

Finally, as Bohata explains, Thomas’ Prytherch poems tend to push the “close relationship between the man and the land he farms” to an extreme where “the boundary between the two is sometimes blurred” (56). In the poem ‘A Labourer’, Prytherch’s face carries an ageless quality, as continual exposure to the elements has rendered it “smooth, inscrutable as stone” (qtd. in Bohata 57). According to Bohata, Prytherch does not only bear “associations with the endurance of rock”, but he is also made to “fade . . . into the pastoral landscape” in a manner akin to the distancing and nostalgic effect of much Romantic literature (56–7). In *Sheepshagger*, Griffiths creates a similar mood by placing lanto in the wet peat: “lying on his back in the bog. . . Chickweed has bound itself around his legs and toadflax has infiltrated the laces of his trainers as if seeking a mate” (25). In conversation with Anderson, he explains the intended effect of depicting lanto “melting into the bog”: “the landscape just absorbs into you and you absorb into it, you become part of it” (173). Likewise, as lanto is standing “tiny above a deep valley”, the narrator wonders “how really does he differ from bird, from bush” (37). Bohata, however, criticises such approaches to the relationship between man and landscape, as the merging of the two sometimes contributes more to “the romanticized notion of the ‘noble savage’” than to any impression of these figures as “viable human beings” (57). Indeed, at times lanto seems to be presented as a pixie-like child of nature – evident, for example, as readers are invited to imagine lanto striding “twig-ribbed” through “valleys where grass sprouts under his enduring mirth” (38). By emphasising lanto’s somewhat symbiotic connection to the land Griffiths sometimes seems in danger of evoking certain ingrained romantic stereotypes of the Welsh peasant; however, the scope and depth of Griffiths’ novel ultimately ensures that lanto transcends mere stereotype, as he pulses with genuine vitality, singular identity and psychological complexity.

2 Violence

All three quotes in the epigraph to *Sheepshagger* attest to a permanently brutal world. The juxtaposed pieces span three millennia: from religious scripture dating back to 1000 BCE, to pessimistic musings from an iconic nineteenth-century philosopher, to a late-twentieth-century take on the murder ballad – a grisly subgenre of the traditional ballad form (Cave, *Lyrics* 241–70). The first comes from Psalm 58, exemplifying the fire-and-brimstone tones of the Old Testament: “The righteous shall rejoice when he seeth the vengeance: he shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked. . . . verily he is a God that judgeth in the earth”. The second, an excerpt from Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1891), sees the world as “the work of a suffering and tormented God . . . [who] wanted to look away from himself, so he created the world”. Lastly, a quote from “O’Malley’s Bar”, a song lyric from Nick Cave’s album *Murder Ballads* (1996), presents a man – “for which no God waits” – who is “marked by darkness and by blood / And one thousand powder burns”. Although God is present in all the quotes above, his role changes from omnipotent, vindictive creator, to a miserable wretch, and, finally, he is pushed to the periphery, while man takes his role as the self-righteous avenger. In addition to illustrating the diminishing role of religion in the West, Griffiths’ choice of quotes points to the perpetual role of violence in human existence. Thus, in this chapter we will examine the diverse manifestations of violence in *Sheepshagger* – but first offer a brief overview of interpretations that scientists, thinkers and philosophers have postulated regarding brutality and human nature.

2.1 Manifestations of violence

As Griffiths questions the difference between human and animal aggression, it might be useful to examine this distinction from a more scientific perspective. Firstly, ethology, the study of animal behaviour in the context of survival, underlines the role of instincts and the forces of evolutionary processes that shape them (Kenneth Bordens and Irwin Horowitz 369). This approach sees aggression as a product of the evolution, governed by “innate, instinctual motivations”; humans, too, display territorial behaviour not dissimilar to animals, as well as possessing “the instinct to fight” (Bordens and Horowitz 369–70). Secondly, as with ethology, sociobiology views aggression

as a genetically programmed behaviour aimed at ensuring survival, and both humans and animals “display aggression under various circumstances because it is part of their biological heritage” (Bordens and Horowitz 370–71). Interestingly, “a natural constraint on aggression” and “gestures of submission” are also programmed in animal behaviour, while humans, as Bordens and Horowitz point out, have “diminished the importance of conciliatory cues”, partly because our various machineries of war have rendered violence simultaneously incredibly effective and somewhat anonymous (370). In this sense, human violence can be regarded as an extreme version of that found in the animal kingdom. Therefore, as Griffiths juxtaposes animal aggression with human violence, effectively emphasising their similitude, he appears aligned with the science.

Moving from science to philosophy, in attempting to explain the origins of violent human behaviour, two thinkers, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) have marked out opposing extremes. According to Hobbes, there is no natural self-constraint and all human beings are prone to aggression (Tom Sorell). For Hobbes, the state of nature – the condition of human beings before organised societies and political association – is characterised by the “war of every man against every man”, making human existence “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (qtd. in André Munro). In Hobbes’ social contract, people trade liberty for safety by transferring the right of ruling over themselves to a governing entity, preferably a sovereign with an absolute authority (Sorell). Rousseau, however, criticises Hobbes’ idea of the state of nature characterised by social antagonism (Munro). According to Rousseau, the uncivilised man is devoid of such social traits as pride and envy; instead, the state of nature is characterised by moral neutrality and peacefulness, and even the natural desire for self-preservation does not lead to aggression, for it is moderated by an equally natural sense of compassion (Munro). Thus, in Rousseau’s theory, it is the arrival of civilisation and organised societies that corrupts man’s innate goodness – while Hobbes, on the contrary, argues that the social contract is necessary to keep a fundamental human aggression at bay so that it does not escalate into anarchy. Rousseau’s theory is closely connected to the concept of the noble savage, an idealised image of uncivilised man, who embodies the innate peacefulness of one not corrupted by civilisation – a concept glorified in the Romantic writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (“Noble savage”). Interestingly, *Sheepshagger* seems to resonate both with Hobbesian and Rousseauian understandings of man’s innate nature: it could be argued that, at times, Ianto represents a personification of a noble

savage, impelled to violence by the failure of society to meet his needs. At other times, his behaviour entirely supports a Hobbesian view. However, as the novel's epigraph seems to underline, human history is a continuous catalogue of violence; a prelapsarian paradise inhabited by noble savages remains a mere chimera.

The choice of quotes in the epigraph announces that the role of violence in the world is a central theme of the novel. One aspect of this theme juxtaposes, in order to parallel and compare, the cruelty inflicted by humans with the brutality of the natural world, the "endless drama of tiny deaths played out in miniature among the mountains" (*Sheep* 6). Flashbacks to Ianto's childhood depict moments when he is confronted with brutal and violent aspects of life, starting with examples from the animal kingdom, such as the abovementioned incident of the blinded lamb, as well as the grotesque encounter between Ianto and the English hiker, with its inevitably traumatic effect on the ten-year-old boy. Nevertheless, the brutality of the natural world is not confined to these italicised sections. Instead, the whole novel seems to be brimming with violence, death and decay. However, there is one italicised section which differs considerably from all the others, depicting seven-year-old Ianto as a noble and balanced fragment of the natural world:

And young Ianto it is who would tumble with the cubs of badger and fox, who would with the polecat low-slink deadly silent into the rabbit's den. . . . Of mountains, mud and mire is thing young Ianto made. Fern-fronds his hair, stream-spume his drool. Night-time anthracite the pupils of his eyes. (*Sheep* 28)

Ianto's mood is then described as that of "spittled mirth" as, while playing with a venomous viper, he lets the serpent coil around his "muckied fingers" (*Sheep* 28). Interestingly, in "A Peasant", R.S. Thomas employs the same wording in connection to the farmer Iago Prytherch, a recurrent symbolic figure in his poems: ". . . his spittled mirth / Rarer than the sun that cracks the cheeks / Of the gaunt sky perhaps once in a week" (1). The poem not only depicts Prytherch as a drooling simpleton with "a half-witted grin", but also merges the boundaries between man and landscape by drawing parallels between Prytherch's joyful expression, his "spittled mirth", and a burst of sunlight (Thomas 1). Bohata argues that "A Peasant" establishes the "primitive or atavistic" (51) qualities of the Prytherch figure while representing him as "thoroughly and often repulsively other" – whereas other poems represent him as something akin to a noble savage (54). However, Bohata does not wish to suggest that the dichotomy between noble savage and "uncivilized

degenerate” are mutually exclusive; instead, both elements appear in the same poems, which “elevates Prytherch beyond any narrow, individual existence” (54). Echoes of the peasant figures constructed by Thomas are certainly present in the character of Ianto; moreover, Griffiths’ protagonist also embodies the agony arising from conflict between an individual’s wish for a simpler life and the demands engendered by the modern world. The old way of life is fading away, and characters such as Ianto and Prytherch are close to becoming mere relics from bygone times.

The main function of the italicised passages is to provide childhood flashbacks representing crucial moments in Ianto’s background. These vignettes depict instances that prove to have serious repercussions for Ianto’s development and thus explain his behaviour. One flashback mid-novel illustrates how these traumas have already psychologically scarred the nine-year-old Ianto: as the boy spies on a couple having sex outdoors he mistakes their lovemaking for something decidedly more sinister. The boy is abashed, and as he experiences his first erection, it seems “as if bone has escaped or broken through” his body (*Sheep* 153). Ianto reads all this as an apocalyptic sign:

[H]e knows as he has known a thousand times before that without some heroic application of his own small will the sky above will split and rend and through will spill fire, chaos, a river of blood in scarlet waterfall . . . Ianto’s vision turns crimson and he drags a bramble branch . . . and is trashing the man’s back with this branch his tears hot on his face and the taste of his own blood on his teeth. (*Sheep* 153)

The couple laugh the boy’s behaviour off as childish naivety, which provokes the narrator to wonder: “How humanity hides its horrors. How well it masks its madness” (*Sheep* 154). A similar scene can be found in *Child of God*, where the protagonist Lester is witnessing the mating ritual of airborne hawks and interprets their coupling as fighting: “He did not know how hawks mated but he knew that all things fought” (McCarthy 160). According to Georg Guillemín, the scene reveals Lester’s “predatory rationale” and illustrates the fact that “for him sexuality represents but another aspect of the struggle for survival” (51). Guillemín continues: “Lester has fully succumbed to the predatory instincts he finds in himself and in the wilderness around him” (51). Without a doubt, Guillemín’s description of Lester could also be applied to Ianto – and such distorted outlooks suggest the presence of serious disturbance in the sexual development of these characters.

In his article for *New Statesman*, Griffiths describes the “green and mountainous heart” of Wales as a “place utterly ‘Other’ to the Anglocentric mindset”: unlike the gentrified Lake District, it is a place characterised by “mud, bone, shit, blood, rot, hawks hunting overhead, death always adjacent” (“Wales” 34). Several excerpts from *Sheepshagger* could be selected to exemplify Griffiths’ argument; one such from a section depicting the aftermath of a severe storm:

The seal festers on and the standing stones and their hacked arcana gleam secretly atop their tumulus and ticks emerge to wait on stalks for thin and throbbing skin to pass. A sheep nuzzles its stillborn, deformed lamb, moaning over its remarkable small corpse.
(151)

Pastoralism offers a false picture in contrast to a natural reality that is in fact the “endless drama of tiny deaths” (*Sheep* 6), and, as Griffiths argues, it is basically a middle-class concept promoted by Enlightenment humanists: “It’s essentially reductive, a reality denier. There is blood and pain in cottagey valleys just as there is in city alleys” (Brockway). In *Grits*, Roger presents this view: he attacks the sanitised notion of Celtic culture that tourists often hold, and, while steeped in the blood of a deer he has just killed, he argues that “[this] is fuckin Celtic culture, mun, [this] fuckin slaughterhouse” (Griffiths 72). Interestingly, Ianto’s abuser happens to have two books in his pocket: *Buddhist Scripture* and *A Pocket Guide to Celtic Britain*; thus, in addition to effecting a grotesque allegory of colonial oppression, perhaps the Englishman can also be seen to represent an approach that appropriates disparate elements of foreign cultures and merely reduces them to useful commodities. The man sneers at Ianto when the boy uses Welsh – a Celtic language – while his savage conduct strengthens the impression that he has not absorbed any Buddhist teachings on nonviolence. The obvious tension between his brutal actions and his supposed cultural interests suggests that all is convenient pretence.

In an interview with *Wales Arts Review*, Griffiths argues that the idea that humanity lives “in harmony” with nature is fundamentally false, similar to the notion that nature is “just somewhere that you can escape the rat race” (Austin). *Sheepshagger* proposes that such harmonious coexistence is a mere fallacy, and does this on scales both large and small, ranging from tempestuous thunderstorms to bloodthirsty ticks. This small arachnid, as it clings to Ianto’s neck, is, in lurid detail, a “mud-born being, tiny vampire” and “[o]ffspring of ooze, small slobbering issue of forest-floor rot” (*Sheep* 116–17). The tick inspires Ianto’s friend Danny to meditate on

definitions of good and evil: “[Ticks are] not evil. Just part of nature like, of evolution. I mean nothing natural can be truly evil. . . . Evil is when yew know-a difference between right and wrong and yew still commit the wrongness” (*Sheep* 120). Furthermore, Danny seems to acknowledge the frailty of our existence, stating that we are forced to accept the world’s “madness” and resign ourselves to the fact that “tomorrow no fuck in-a next fuckin *hour* yew could be fuckin dead or responsible for-a death of someone else” (*Sheep* 123).

Attacking the pastoral idea of peaceful coexistence with nature, *Sheepshagger* assails the reductionist tendency of depicting nature as essentially good and pure – although we could also argue that Griffiths only goes to the other extreme when portraying nature as, perhaps exaggeratedly, ferocious and gory. The term ‘naturalistic fallacy’ could be applied here, as it involves treating the concept of ‘good’ as if it is a phenomenon occurring in nature: the moral philosopher GE Moore coined the term in his 1903 *Principia Ethica*, where he attempted to prove that ‘good’ is the name of an unanalysable entity and impossible to define in terms of some natural quality (“Naturalistic fallacy”). Thus, by applying Hume’s guillotine – the philosophical argument stating that even if it is possible to prove that something is true, it never logically follows that it ought to be true – Moore aims to show that ‘good’ does not equal ‘natural’, or vice versa (Pinker 150). Additionally, Pinker describes how the naturalistic fallacy leads quickly to the moralistic fallacy: “if a trait is moral, it must be found in nature”; thus, “not only does ‘is’ imply ‘ought’, but ‘ought’ implies ‘is’” (162). So, when Danny argues that the difference between good and evil boils down to epistemological issues – *knowing* the difference – he seems to allow that it all hinges on the subjective judgment of an individual. He acknowledges that, paradoxically, “the worst evil is committed by those who genuinely believe that eyr workin for-a greater good”, and uses the Nazis and the “fuckin Tories” as examples (*Sheep* 121). Fundamentally, it seems, such issues defy fixed definitions.

Griffiths’ novel often emphasises the similitude between Ianto’s actions and the behaviour of wild animals, usually predatory ones. By juxtaposing human and animal savagery with each other, the novel questions the boundary between instinctual and premeditated acts of violence. In *Sheepshagger*, Ianto is often endowed with animalistic characteristics and behavioural patterns:

he spends nights sleeping in decrepit hovels and bone-scattered caves, he “bur[ies] his spoor” and “cover[s] his tracks” as “a wild animal would” (39), washes himself in the sea “like a strange and small cetacean, sea-mammal pale and emaciate” (49), he satisfies his hunger by “[s]napping and chewing . . . like a fox, like a goshawk, like a pike” (213), and, finally, he spots his victims “with the lurching intent that the buzzard must feel when the rabbit breaks cover below” (199), and, as he stalks his prey, creeps “snake-bellied” (86) with “eyes . . . like those of a cat at a hamster cage” (200). Bednarski sees lanto’s “predatory-animal features” as an allegory of the predicament into which Wales has fallen; therefore, lanto is “not only performing ferocious acts of vengeance, but also attempting to retain and guard what it considers his/its own” (122). Indeed, as he is stalking his final victims, lanto is “[s]ome woodland imp armoured in mire darting from tree to concealing tree, forest-flitter silent across the soft floor” (*Sheep* 200) – echoing previous descriptions of him as a noble savage or a pixie-like protector of his realm.

As the italicised sections might suggest, throughout his life lanto has been conditioned to internalise violence as his best, if not only, coping strategy. In fact, lanto’s actions seem to mirror some of the animal behaviour he witnesses: for example, as lanto adopts the disused silver mine as a repository for his brutally mutilated victims, the scene recalls one of the flashbacks where the eight-year-old lanto wanders into a shrike’s nest. After following a frog, a “[l]eaper between worlds”, the boy stumbles into the bird’s “demonic larder” (*Sheep* 90–91):

lanto . . . finds himself inside a scene which pulses regularly in his nightmares, this mausoleum silent-screaming here of small impaled beings . . . sees as he flees a thorn-speared unrecognisable and unnameable bulge of ripped meat weakly dripping old blood . . . and he understands it to be a human heart, his heart, torn and wrenched and spitted and still softly throbbing . . . The centre of himself, of his race, hopeless, bleeding. (*Sheep* 91)

The scene is brimming with sinister symbolism; the shrike’s nest represents a grotesque underworld, and the visit leaves the boy permanently scarred. lanto’s own victims are described in equally graphic manner, with the silver mine reminiscent of “an attentive grave” (*Sheep* 15) and “an underworld” (*Sheep* 251), echoing descriptions of the butcher bird’s lair.

Griffiths acknowledges that “in many ways . . . Ianto’s savagery is as natural as that of the stoat’s and buzzard’s that he regards around him” (BBC Mid Wales 2). As established in connection to the naturalistic fallacy, the word ‘natural’ contains no value judgments here. In emphasising the instinctual aspects of Ianto’s savagery, Griffiths seems to subscribe to a posthumanist view attacking starry-eyed belief in the fundamental difference between humans and animals. This is a view forcibly expressed by John Gray: “The humanist sense of gulf between ourselves and other animals is an aberration. It is the animist feeling of belonging with the rest of the nature that is normal” (17). Similarly for Schopenhauer, people and animals are all embodiments of a universal struggling and suffering energy that he calls the Will (Gray 41). “[I]n our innermost essence”, as Gray explains Schopenhauer’s view, “we are one with other animals” (41). In a similar vein, the French thinker Georges Bataille discusses the supposed “gulf” that separates “man and beast”, concluding that “primitive man saw the animals as no different from himself except that, as creatures not subject to the dictates of taboos, they were regarded as more sacred, more god-like than man” (81). The problem with such anthropomorphising approaches is, however, that we have no ways of either proving or disproving them. Nevertheless, the abovementioned arguments are presented here to illuminate how, over two centuries, important figures have questioned and continue to question generally accepted ideas regarding human nature. *Sheepshagger* questions this gap between humans and animals, it seems, to invite its readers to examine human behaviour from fresh perspectives – especially when it comes to explaining actions that stem from such visceral emotions as fear and anger.

As argued above, violence is an integral part of the world outlined in *Sheepshagger*. Both human brutality and animal savagery are depicted in an equally graphic way, which seems to suggest that the borderline between man and other species is indistinct. This is what Pinker argues as he discusses the presence of “deliberate chimpicide in our chimpanzee cousins”, which “raises the possibility that the forces of evolution, not just the idiosyncrasies of a particular human culture, prepared us for violence” (316). Chimpanzee is, of course, a primate that is most closely related to humans; even if we share similarities with them, it does not mean that we do so with the rest of the animal kingdom. Nevertheless, references to the forces of evolution are present in *Sheepshagger*: not only does the novel describe certain animals as perfect, merciless killers, but it also depicts primordial creatures, now fossilised, as having equally voracious and savage

tendencies. The novel seems to emphasise that violence, as it dates back to ancient history, has always been an inescapable part of our world; thus, fossilised Palaeozoic predators, “frozen in one instant in their incessant trawl and now caught stalking forever” (*Sheep* 14), and lanto, as he creeps towards his victim “snake-bellied” (86), represent parts of one long continuum. lanto, too, seems to understand this – while stalking his victims, he happens to notice the fossilised tracks left by worms and trilobites:

[A] gouged and flurried meeting of the two and then the worm track terminates and there is only the trilobite’s trace, first and original predator father. lanto sees these marks in his twitching eye and knows not what they are but knows fully what they signify. And if that is all he knows then it is more than enough. (*Sheep* 202)

Similar recognition is present in the scene where lanto encounters the blinded lamb: something in lanto “dashe[s] against the ancient world, which now comes at him like a whirl of swords” (*Sheep* 5). Gray acknowledges a similar phenomenon, emphasising that human beings are endowed with instincts and behavioural patterns that are much older than our species itself:

The lesson of evolutionary psychology and cognitive science is that we are descendants of a long lineage, only a fraction of which is human. We are far more than the traces that other humans have left in us. Our brains and spinal cords are encrypted with traces of far older worlds. (79)

Perhaps these traces of older worlds play a role in the silent recognition that lanto experiences as he examines the tracks of the “first and original predator father” (*Sheep* 202).

In addition to the traces of prehistoric predators, echoes of past acts of violence can be seen to take a nearly corporeal form when lanto, lying in the peat bog, witnesses a jack-o’-lantern rising from the marsh, “a wet necropolis for man and for beast” (*Sheep* 26). The flickering, ephemeral phenomenon is described as “some messenger of methane made from the rancid aftermath of some battle long forgotten, some steel-hewn bone leaching its mulch, the compost of long-rotten warriors” (*Sheep* 26). Similarly, the ground at site of the Battle of Mynydd Hyddgen in Pumlumon valley is portrayed as “fertile still with this spilled blood and mulched flesh and fuming bones” six hundred years after the carnage (*Sheep* 199). It seems that the victims of past violence are vividly remembered by the soil itself; an almost tangible presence in stark contrast to the sanitisation of atrocities in history textbooks which turn victims into numbers and statistics. Bednarski maintains that the “grotesquely exaggerated and theatrical” murder scene near the old battle site “can be

seen as a symbolic revenge and restaging of the past” (122). However, it can be argued that the scene represents more than that, as by juxtaposing past and present brutalities the novel points to the ubiquity of violence through the ages – thus the idea of ethical progress seems mere illusion. According to Gray, David Hume’s view on the history of humanity conveys a similar notion: “[He] saw humans as a highly inventive species, but otherwise very like other animals. . . . History was not a tale of progress, but a succession of cycles in which civilisation alternated with barbarism” (136). In *Sheepshagger*, Ianto’s friend Griff expresses a similar notion in his characteristically brusque way: “Dog eat bastard dog . . . it’s-a fuckin way things are and have always been . . . eye for an eye like. Says so in-a Bible, dunnit? It’s always been that way” (222). By resigning himself to the belief that world has always been predominantly violent Griff relieves himself from responsibility to explain either Ianto’s behaviour or his own equally violent deeds. Finally, the cyclicity of history is present in the scene where Ianto, after venting bitter remorse, sees the first stars appear in the evening sky: “all Ianto has known or will know, his remarkable deeds . . . will be born and born and reborn over among those far fires emanating no felt heat” (*Sheep* 215). Without ethical progress, all violent actions, including those stemming from fear, hatred and frustration, are bound to be repeated over and over ad infinitum.

2.2 Celtic elements

Alongside references to ancient battles and prehistoric predators, *Sheepshagger* employs other elements from Celtic history and mythology. Although these are not always explicitly violent, they often carry ominous connotations. They include the use of corvine motifs and the symbolism of number three, or triplism, both recurrent elements in Celtic mythology. The peat bog, too, gains special significance, as will be discussed in closer detail later, functioning as a site where the borderline between life and death becomes blurred. This connection between wetlands, death and afterlife can also be interpreted in the light of Celtic tradition. In keeping with its descriptions as “a wet necropolis” (*Sheep* 26), the bog will also be the site of Ianto’s macabre death. Accordingly, Celtic burial traditions, particularly as evidenced by ancient bodies found buried in the peat bogs of northern and western Europe, are relevant here. Though they do not play a pivotal role in the novel, the millennia old standing stones atop the disused silver mine should be noted here too. Clearly constituting a further reference to the ancient past in *Sheepshagger*, they

are depicted as “circled megaliths”, “alien both in their age and indivisible adornments” (201). Furthermore, they seem imbued with a sinister aura, serving as a recurrent backdrop for violent deeds, animal and human. Yet, the stones stand mute and hide the evidence, as it were – “thirsty porous rock” with the curious quality of absorbing spattered blood (*Sheep* 203).

According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, the raven is a “near-universal symbol of dark prophecy – of death, pestilence, and disease”, although some mythologies valorise it for its intelligence and fearlessness (“Raven”). In Celtic mythology, ravens are usually associated with the more sinister qualities mentioned above, often foretelling a future linked with death (Green, *Animals* 177–78). The raven is closely connected too with the supernatural and the “evil aspect of the Otherworld” (Green, *Animals* 180–81). There is also a relationship between battles, prophecy and ravens in Celtic tradition: the war-goddess Morrígan possesses the ability to transmogrify into a raven and tends to make appearances in this form on battlefields to prophesy doom and revel in the bloodshed (Green, *Animals* 178). In the Irish epic *Táin Bó Cúailnge*, Morrígan lands on the hero Cú Chulainn’s shoulder at his death to symbolise “the passing of his spirit” (Green, *Animals* 178). In *Sheepshagger*, the raven is a “black-beaked blinder” (250), whose “red-rimmed eye” is “drilling at the newly born or newly deceased” (4). This carrion bird is guaranteed to appear where there is death and decay. Fittingly, at the site of his final atrocities, the narrative captures Ianto trying to chase away the raven sitting on top of a standing stone:

Get gone, Mórrígan, mistress of massacre great queen of slaughter, all war and rapine in this your sable shape. On wings of ink you lay claim to carnage, steal sight and cast no illumination in your dark turn. (*Sheep* 208–9)

Alongside the direct link to Celtic history, with its personification of the raven as goddess of war, Griffiths’ poetic effusion echoes the dark and evocative symbolism of RS Thomas’ poem “Raven”: “. . . the sly connoisseurs / Of carrion; desultory flags / Of darkness, saddening the sky” (60).

As stated, the mythological raven usually appears as an ill omen, often foretelling death and misery. An equally portentous sign appears several times in the novel: the lightning-struck tree. Green explains that the ancient Celts saw natural phenomena such as rain and thunder as forces that were “apparently supernatural and capricious” (*Symbol* 2). Due to their fickle nature, they

were often associated with divinities (Green, *Symbol* 131). A relatively common motif in Gothic literature, the lightning-struck tree, and thunderstorms in general, often appear as a symbolic warning against irresponsible conduct. For example, in *Frankenstein* (1823), the protagonist witnesses lightning strike a great oak tree and reduce it to “thin ribbons of wood” (Shelley), which seems to foreshadow his future deviations into morally questionable realms of science. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), lightning splits a tree in half, an omen of troubles for the heroine who is about to accept a marriage proposal, unaware of the fact that her suitor already has a wife (Brontë). The lightning-struck tree performs similarly ominous function in *Sheepshagger*, and this sense is heightened by Griffiths’ ominous language: the eight-year-old lanto can smell “ozone in his nostrils” as a bolt of lightning reaches “spindle-fingered” to strike a blackthorn, the branches of which become “twisted in the flames like claws, arthritic fingers”(52). The “charred and twisted tree” returns towards the end of the novel just moments before lanto is exposed as a murderer: lanto notices that a raven, that other omen of ill fortune, has made its nest in the “warped limbs” of the tree, and he “smells again ozone in his nostrils” (*Sheep* 250). It seems that the omens have been present throughout lanto’s life, waiting to be realised.

The use of triplism, the symbolic dominance of number three, also binds *Sheepshagger* to Celtic tradition. A recurrent element in Celtic mythology, triplism is present in the Welsh national epic *Mabinogion*, in addition to Western European pre-Christian cult iconography in general (Green and Raymond Howell 115–16). In *Sheepshagger* it occurs numerous times: for example, lanto has three victims, and his childhood abuser calls him ‘sheepshagger’ three times. Towards the end of the novel, as lanto and his friends are roaming the hills in search for hallucinogenic mushrooms, they hear an unfamiliar, “strange, strained voice” speaking the words “I’m seein all kinds of weird things up yer” (*Sheep* 248). The words create an increasingly eerie impression as the “same strange voice” recites them again, this time eliciting a “collective shudder” (*Sheep* 252) from the group. Finally, the disembodied voice utters the words for the third time just moments before lanto’s violent deeds are revealed to his friends. The repetition here creates an eerily uncanny effect. Indeed, as Freud illustrates in his pioneering essay “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), repetition is an important aspect of this unsettling phenomenon – turning the familiar into something strangely unfamiliar, creating a sense that things are not as they seem (Bennett and Royle 40–42). Indeed, as will be discussed in the following chapter, there is a tradition of depicting the hills as uncanny in

Welsh writing. In *Sheepshagger*, the origin of the strange voice remains unexplained – perhaps it is guilt and conscience that speaks, freed from repression in the final moments of his life.

Triplism also appears in the scene where Ianto, covered in the blood of his recent victims, wanders into the cottage of an old Welshwoman. The lady washes Ianto's face three times – a Celtic blessing, according to Griffiths – and so “forgives” Ianto for his deeds (Peddie 122). Incidentally, the lady has “pale blue eyes” (*Sheep* 212), much like Ianto's, and she speaks only in Welsh; in this sense and in her relation to the mythic past, she could be seen to symbolise the ancient, lost country itself. Bednarski argues that the lady is essentially a “fantastical figure” (122): her cottage resembles “an illustration for a fairy tale” (*Sheep* 211) and she looks “like an elf” (*Sheep* 212). Moreover, as Bednarski explains, unilingual Welsh-speakers were practically non-existent by the 1930s (122); therefore, even if her monoglotism is not seen as a fantastical feature, it is definitely something exceedingly rare – rendering her a character akin to Thomas' Iago Prytherch, a relic of the past. Finally, triplism is also present in the sequence of Ianto's death: after being beaten and mutilated, Ianto is thrown “broken into the sky . . . , the carnage of him splatting into the peat bog face down and sinking”; nevertheless, “the ransacked figure” begins to “buck and twist”, and a rifle is pressed against his head and fired (*Sheep* 259–60). However, two attempts do not suffice to kill him: “the tattered scrap” starts “mewling like a newborn kitten”, and another shot, a third effort, is required to make Ianto lie “finally still” in the peat bog (*Sheep* 260).

The manner of Ianto's death brings to mind the Celtic tradition of bog burials. According to the archaeologist Glob, inhumation and cremation were the normal burial rites in the Bronze and Iron Ages, and he emphasises “a great gulf between those so buried and those who ended up in the bogs” (145). Additionally, cremation is “bound up with the belief that the soul is freed from the body with the help of fire”, after which it is able to travel to the land of the dead (Glob 145). Thus, it can be argued that, in the era of cremation and inhumation, bog burials represent an anomaly. In connection to Celtic burial traditions, Gerald A. Wait describes the belief that death is a “transitional period (not an event) intervening between this world and the Otherworld”; thus, “outcast groups”, such as criminals and murderers, would receive a different mode and place of burial in order to prevent their souls from following the “normal after-death course”, and thus

ensuring the “purity of a society’s Otherworld” (495). Although, strictly speaking, Ianto is not buried into the marsh, he is nevertheless thrown “face down” into the wet peat at the moment of his death (Griffiths 259). The circumstances of his death bring to mind a particular bog body named Lindow Man, found in the peat bog of Lindow Moss, Cheshire, in 1983 (Green and Howell 35). The body dates back to the first century AD, and it had been placed face down after suffering “two severe blows to the head which cracked his skull, strangulation and throat-slitting” (Green and Howell 35). Green and Howell conjecture that perhaps Lindow Man was executed for “some criminal, anti-social or sacrilegious [sic] act”, or that he was a human sacrifice, possibly killed “in order to avert an impending disaster to his community” (35). Finally, the significance of triplism attests to the impression that his death was somehow ritualistic. As with Ianto, Lindow Man may have been executed for his behaviour and, like Ianto, may also have been ‘killed’ three times and thrown face down into a peat bog.

As suggested above, it is likely that ancient bog bodies represent members of outcast categories denied the normative mode and place of burial. Wait argues that this was a way of keeping the abnormal souls from “polluting” the society’s Otherworld (509). Thus, bog burial might have been a form of purification ritual with the object of ensuring that the Otherworld remained untainted. Another way of interpreting these deaths is to see them as sacrificial victims; indeed, Wait argues that it is “certain” that the Celts practised human sacrifice (495). In connection to traditional purification rituals, Sherry B. Ortner discusses scapegoat ceremonies in which pollution is transferred to a victim, after which the scapegoat is expelled or killed, either in reality or symbolically. As “violence and all associated aspects” constitute a “major category of polluting phenomena” (Ortner), it is not surprising if these scapegoats and sacrificial victims are chosen because of their status as murderers or violent outcasts. In connection to *Sheepshagger*, Ianto’s death might also be seen as a related purification of the community, and, as discussed in a later chapter in connection to the ‘other’, the attempt to preserve Ianto’s outsider status is then wilfully maintained long after his death. Lester’s role in *Child of God*, however, could be interpreted differently. As Guillemin argues, McCarthy’s novel does not allow for “a classification of Lester as a scapegoat of the violent collective that first makes him into what he is, then ostracizes him” (43). Instead, Lester emerges a repentant figure who is “never indicted for any crime” (McCarthy 183).

2.3 Acceptable forms of aggression

Although Ianto's atrocities are readily condemned by his friends and the rest of the community, *Sheepshagger* also presents forms of violence that are generally accepted within the community, and pass without serious negative comment or punishment. For example, Ianto's friend Llŷr does not see anything abnormal in the pleasure he obtains from shooting animals, and rather casually he remarks that nothing is "stronger than a man with a gun" (*Sheep* 37). A similarly nonchalant attitude towards violence can be found in the scene where Ianto and a few friends, including Griff, Llŷr and Ikey, intrude into the house of English ex-hippies, whose only crime seems to be that they have the means of enjoying a comfortable life in the Principality. Contrasted with others such as the "[y]oung girls sleepin rough" in nearby towns (*Sheep* 78), they emerge as convenient scapegoats for the ills of the world. Suddenly Ianto and his friends are "overcome by dark carnival" (*Sheep* 79):

Ianto pounces . . . like a cat and punches [a man's] split nose . . . his fist sinking in mush like punching a cowpat . . . [a woman] darts and snatches a knife from the sink, but as she turns Griff hits her and she reels away, lip split, teeth red-grouted . . . Ikey is bent over a blood-soaked and comatose man ramming the spout of the dented teapot up his nostril . . .
(*Sheep* 79)

There is something primitive in their uninhibited rage, something that resonates with the fervour of the drug-fuelled rave in which they participated just hours before. Their explosive attack on the English hippies is depicted with the same supercharged intensity as their movements on the dancefloor, "the exaggerated pumping of sexuality and the stamp of danced sacrifice or entreaty enacted on the cones of surrounding volcanoes when they still smouldered" (*Sheep* 64). Thus, the display of violent territoriality seems to be a natural culmination of the "primal prow and pounce" (*Sheep* 66) performed at the rave.

Although there are certain historical factors that explain the enmity sometimes found between the Welsh and the English, the carefree conduct of the hippies is very far from the contemptible cruelty displayed by Ianto's childhood abuser, the English hiker whom Bednarski regards as "a symbol of English imperial expansiveness" (117). In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud reflects on the advantages of a "fairly small cultural circle", as "it allows the aggressive drive an outlet in the form of hostility to outsiders" (50); furthermore, he uses the hostility between the English and

the Scots as an example of what he calls “the narcissism of small differences” (50–51). Although Freud’s approach might be reductive, we can argue that now, in some respects, the neighbouring feud between the English and the Welsh falls into the same category. In the social circles depicted in *Sheepshagger*, hostility towards the old colonial master constitutes an acceptable outlet for aggression – even if it can be seen as now largely meaningless nationalistic prejudice. As Griffiths argues: “I believe that a docker from Swansea should recognise that he has more in common with a docker from say, Hull, than he does with a middle-class professional from Swansea” (Yrakha). This comment suggests a more intelligent form of prejudice, at the very least.

As noted above, some history textbooks tend to sanitise past acts of violence, turning victims into mere numbers and statistics. Offering a stark contrast to such bowdlerised versions, the scene in *Sheepshagger*, where Ianto is stalking two English hikers at the bottom of the Pumlumon valley, presents a graphically raw, albeit sensationalist, depiction of a 600-year-old battle:

[M]en led by Owain Glyndŵr slaughtered 200 Saesneg regulars and Flemish mercenaries, leaving the bodies to be mutilated by local peasant wives dismembered and gutted and defenestrated and excoriated some of these parts reputedly eaten or thrown into trees and streams, vile fruit, vile fish . . . (199)

The description of these past atrocities is followed by the hikers’ innocent though romanticised utterances on the history of the place. The man remarks, “It must’ve been a rout. A massacre”, while the woman declares that she can feel “the *pain* in this place” and argues that the ground “seems to . . . ache” (*Sheep* 199). The woman continues in an increasingly and now jarringly affected note: “We must show John and Emma this place . . . they’d love it . . . bring a picnic” (*Sheep* 199). The juxtaposition of these contrasting takes on history creates a startling effect: a place that once saw ultimate violence and suffering is reduced to a sight included in the itinerary of middle-class holidaymakers in their “expensive hiking boots” (*Sheep* 199). Thus, distance, both temporal and geographical, has the power to transmogrify atrocities into entertainment. Stripped of its grosser features and now fit material for a modern civilised audience, the violence of the past becomes acceptable.

Another manifestation of an acceptable manifestation of violence in *Sheepshagger* appears in the form of warplanes that keep “rending” and “splitting” the sky (82, 198, 215). The warplanes appear at moments when Ianto is suffering from great distress; in fact, appearing three times, they offer another telling example of triplism. The first instance takes place just moments before Ianto’s first murder: the fighter jet interrupts the tranquillity of the “unpeopled landscape”, while the “shock and throb of its passage . . . adds to the horrified hollering of Ianto’s skull” (*Sheep* 82). On the second occasion, the plane seems to act as a catalyst for Ianto’s moment of epiphany as he surveys the “immense space” of the Cambrian mountains: “A warplane rends the sky above this land and for a small second only he gets it whole, all of it complete, everything so stupid and everything so tragic. So endlessly strange. So immeasurably sad” (*Sheep* 198). Finally, a third plane appears as Ianto is overcome by guilt for the murders – out of his mind, his desperate screams mix with the “roaring . . . articles of war” above him (*Sheep* 216).

As a number of Royal Air Force bases are located in Wales, warplanes are a relatively common sight above the mountains and the valleys. However, the warplanes in *Sheepshagger* can be seen as a reference to a particular kind of Anglocentric arrogance, which is illuminated by the Welsh historian Gwyn A. Williams as he describes an event in the 1930s:

The RAF established a bombing school at Pen-y-Berth in the Llŷn peninsula. In response to protests from England at its original site, they had moved it to Llŷn over equally cogent protests from Wales, a recurring English habit over the next forty years. (283)

According to Williams, the events that followed could be characterised as “a moment of martyrdom” (283). Saunders Lewis, the founder of the Welsh Nationalist Party, accompanied by two other party members, set fire to the airfield buildings at Pen-y-Berth, after which they gave themselves up to the police “as a national and pacifist gesture” (Williams 283). Thus, the warplanes are not only reminders of the violent nature of man, but also link to a long history of colonial and post-colonial struggle.

Society thus divides violence into acceptable and non-acceptable forms – though, on closer inspection, the dividing line seems arbitrary, as, for instance, in the socially sanctioned brutality of war. The alienated and angry figures in *Sheepshagger* exist outside the neat demarcations offered

by such conventional thinking. According to Griffiths, some lives are “drenched in violence” to the extent that at times it does not even resemble violence – “for the characters it just seems like a way of expressing themselves” (Peddie 126). *Grits* portrays a number of characters who express an insouciant attitude to brutality, desperately trying to discover outlets for their energies. This often means finding an object for their rage which is deemed appropriate in their circle – whether it is the English, the police or right-wing nationalists. In *Grits*, Roger offers an extreme example of a violent character, who nonchalantly describes killing a man in a drunken brawl in Northern Ireland, where he was stationed as a British soldier. Roger uses his training as an excuse for his actions, arguing that violence is something he was “bred for”, and that “taxpayer’s money” is spent in order to teach him to “kill without fuckin mercy” (Griffiths, *Grits* 66) – another illustration, perhaps, of forms of violence potentially fostered by society. As Ianto’s friend, Roger also makes an appearance in *Sheepshagger* – and at first glance the characters might seem similar in their antisocial tendencies. However, on closer inspection Roger has far fewer redeeming qualities – Ianto, although capable of violence, has a certain undeniable gentleness, as discussed in the following chapter.

3 The other

This chapter introduces theoretical background to concepts of use in examining Ianto's role in *Sheepshagger*. The ideas discussed derive from various fields – including Gothic literary studies, anthropology and psychoanalysis – and are intertwined. For our purposes, the most important of these is that of the 'other', and, for the sake of clarity, here the word is placed in inverted commas. At its most basic, the 'other' is a construction, an imagined signifier of difference against which notions such as the 'self' can be defined (Bohata 18). Additionally, to some extent, it overlaps with the other concepts discussed here, namely those of abjection, monstrosity and liminality. The remainder of this chapter aims to apply these concepts to *Sheepshagger*, and, to a lesser degree, to McCarthy's *Child of God*.

3.1 Theoretical background

Postcolonial discourse makes the distinction between the 'other' and 'Other', after French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (Bohata 18). According to Bohata, the non-capitalised form, most commonly used in postcolonial studies, is "a recognizable but different entity, against which the 'I' or 'self' or 'norm' can be defined", and "the qualities despised, feared and covertly desired can be projected to such others" (18). To some degree, the capitalised form is also used in postcolonial discourse, where it signifies "the imperial centre of Empire itself", providing the ideological framework in which the colonised subject forms his or her identity as somehow 'other' (Bohata 19). However, Bohata claims that the 'other' might be "the most overused concept in postcolonial studies" and warns against careless application of such theories; indeed, they carry the threat of reductive universalisation and homogenisation of the 'other' (19). As this thesis aims at exploring social dynamics through which the outsider, or the 'other', is constructed in *Sheepshagger*, in addition to examining how the difference between 'normal' and 'abnormal' is delineated, the non-capitalised form of the word will be used.

Bennett and Royle acknowledge the problematic nature of othering, as by categorising one thing as the opposite of another we are simultaneously "asserting their mutual dependence" (282). For

example, in *Jane Eyre*, as Mr Rochester invites his audience to compare Jane with Bertha, his mentally unbalanced wife, Rochester is also asserting their likeness: “Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder – this face with that mask – this form with that bulk” (Brontë). Bennett and Royle observe that these women are both simultaneously imprisoned and partners for Rochester; thus, the novel is “haunted by the possibility that Bertha is not simply other but also, in some ways, identical with Jane” (282). Similarly, Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin emphasise the impossibility of defining something “beyond representation”, since all such attempts “automatically [refer] back to something known within the system” (10). No concept can be defined without placing it “in relation with other notions that will identify its meaning”; therefore, ‘other’ derives its meaning from ‘self’, and ‘otherness’ from ‘sameness’ (Harding and Martin 10). Thus, rather paradoxically, othering “corresponds to an excursion outside the system related within the limits of the system” (Harding and Martin 10). The ‘other’ can never be fully excluded, as its definition is always dependent on what might seem like its polar opposite but in fact share undeniable similarities. Bennett and Royle remark that “it is this ambiguous state of the other (racial or otherwise) that make it so threatening, so disturbing, so dangerous” (282).

The concept of the ‘other’ is closely linked to the notion of monstrosity, a recurrent element in Gothic literature in particular. As Hogle explains, the Gothic monster is the locus of “‘otherness’ from the human form, where “the most incongruous of elements” coexist, and “supposedly separate conditions blur uncontrollably into each other” (456). Hogle continues by elaborating on the social dynamics surrounding that deemed monstrous: “these figures keep allowing us to project the contradictions that we cannot resolve . . . onto ‘monstrously’ inchoate ‘others’ that we claim to be our antithesis, so that we can construct ourselves anew against them” (457). Furthermore, as Bennett and Royle underline, the monster is simultaneously natural and unnatural, which is exactly the reason why it “must be abhorred, rejected, abjected, excluded” (305). The monster is rejected, however, “not because it is entirely other but because it is at least in part *identical* with that by which it is excluded” (Bennet and Royle 305). The monster – or the ‘other’ – comes across as an anomaly that provokes the uneasy, uncanny sense of something that is strange but paradoxically familiar. The contradictions that arise from these circumstances might threaten to engulf one’s sense of self, necessitating efforts at concealing the anomaly from view or annihilating it completely (Hogle 456).

Thus, the monster is a site of paradoxes which generates abhorrence and abjection – indeed, one of the key theories of horror in particular is that of abjection (Wisker 330). As a critical term, the word ‘abjection’ was first introduced by the French psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982) (Bronfen 1), where she combines Freudian psychodynamics with anthropological studies on purification rituals (Robert Luckhurst 530). At its most basic, abjection means “rejection with disgust” (Wisker 330), where the rejected object belongs in the realm of the degrading, alien, culturally different or monstrous – or the “nonself” (Bronfen 1; Wisker 330). According to Kristeva, this separation is necessary in order to establish and preserve social identity (Bronfen 1). Abjection enables the delineation of clear subject positions, as it involves an expulsion of elements that blur the divide between ‘self’ and ‘other’ and threaten stable identities – thus, the imagined boundaries of the subject are formed in the act of rejecting the ‘abject’ (Bronfen 1; Luckhurst 530). Bronfen continues to explain that a body that is abjected “for the alleged health of the individual or the community” is “declared to be alien”, which facilitates the rejection of the abject in good conscience (1). However, the ‘abject’ and the ‘other’, as Kristeva remarks in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), are both constructs of our minds (Wisker 330).

Bronfen emphasises that the ‘abject’ is not something monstrous or unclean per se; instead, “it speaks to a threshold situation, both horrifying and fascinating” (1). Indeed, here we can detect a connection between abjection, the ‘other’ and liminality, the latter being a term derived from Latin for ‘threshold’, *limen*, used to refer to “spaces or bodies situated either on or at the recognized borders of subjective existence” (Bobby C. Alexander; Garner 401). Another concept that is closely linked to liminality is the rite of passage, a term which was coined by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in the early 20th century (Alexander). Van Gennep examined such rites and observed that they seem to consist of three consecutive elements: separation, transition and reincorporation, where the middle element, which could be seen as the in-between of a passage, is called the liminal stage (Alexander). Once the term liminality was established in the field of anthropology, it was adopted, among others, by critics of the Gothic (Garner 401). According to Garner, eighteenth century Gothic writing introduced a number of liminal spaces – for example, wild mountain ranges and hidden rooms – through which threshold situations and liminal states can be accessed, whereas, in literary developments from the nineteenth century

onward, “the human body has increasingly become a liminal site where normative boundaries are challenged” (401).

It could be argued that the monster is an embodiment of a liminal stage, as it is an entity which operates on the boundaries between normal and abnormal, strange and familiar, self and other. Diana Fuss remarks that the “alienness of these borderlands” is heightened by their proximity, not the distance, from the human: “Sameness, not difference, provokes our greatest anxiety” (3) – a rather paradoxical idea, also demonstrated in *Sheepshagger*, that is discussed in closer detail later in this study. As with Bennett and Royle, Fuss observes that the human “may be defined more by its likeness to these alien others than by its unlikeness” (3). Furthermore, as monsters and other liminal beings seem to be engulfed in a state of flux, in addition to being devoid of any fixed points of reference, they seem to elude any clear definitions, which in turn creates “an unsettling sense of incompleteness” (Garner 402). As stated, the four concepts outlined above – the ‘other’, the monster, abjection and liminality – are curiously intertwined, though valuable, tools for analysing key aspects of *Sheepshagger* and its possible literary precedents.

3.2 The other in *Sheepshagger*

Bednarski sees Ianto as an embodiment of a typical – if not stereotypical – ‘other’ (115). ‘*Sheepshagger*’, as title, ironically suggests a keen awareness of such aggressively reductive stereotypes, and an intent to challenge and complicate them. Terms of abuse, often a manifestation of othering, offer a good starting point for an exploration of Griffiths’ careful handling of this issue. In *Sheepshagger*, as Ianto’s friends talk about him some years after his death, all bar Danny are keen to label him as deeply aberrant: words such as ‘backwards’ (11), ‘pervert’, ‘sicko’, ‘psychopath’ and ‘sick bastard’ (242) are representative of their deeply dismissive lexicon. Pinker recognises how effortless it seems to be to associate health and rationality with morality, whereas assumed evildoers are branded with words such as ‘crazy’, ‘degenerate’, ‘deranged’, ‘psycho’ and ‘sick’ (313). Warning against the misleading effect of such metaphors, Pinker contends that “human violence does not have to be a disease for it to be worth combating” (314). In fact, he argues that “it is the belief that violence is an aberration that is dangerous”

(Pinker 314). Undeniably, by tending to categorise violent acts as deeds executed by deviant individuals, we obscure the possibility that all people are capable of violence. In such a way, lanto's friends are determined to label him as fundamentally and unequivocally different from themselves: in this dichotomy they see themselves as normal and reasonable, with lanto as the aberrant 'other', their irrational counterpart. However, as established above, such attempts operate within the limitations of human understanding and experience – thus the 'other' is always defined against the 'self' or the 'norm'.

With the exception of Danny, all the friends display a powerful desire to convince themselves of lanto's wickedness and difference, in order to explain his atrocities. As mentioned above, Pinker refers to a similar phenomenon when discussing the ease with which people draw parallels between degeneration, disease and violent behaviour. Indeed, it seems that the behaviour of lanto's friends exemplifies the very human tendency to draw distance between our imagined 'self' and the darker undercurrents of our psyche. The friends' desire to categorise lanto as different and aberrant – an 'other' – seems to be twofold in nature: not only do they want to abject what they deem monstrous, but they also desperately need to justify their own actions – namely killing one of their own. One strategy in *Sheepshagger* is to deny ever having been friends with lanto, indicated by phrases such as “[n]o mate of mine, that cunt . . . [n]ever did like him” (2), “[t]here was always something not quite right about him” (13) and “[a]lways said there was something wrong in [h]is head” (30). Danny sees through his friends' calumny: “Yewer just thinkin that because lanto did what he did, then yew can see wrongness in fuckin *everything* he did before that” (*Sheep* 30). The others reject the possibility that lanto's grim childhood might explain his later actions: according to Griff, “*millions*-a people have shitey upbringings and they don't turn into killers” (*Sheep* 1). The debate between nature and nurture will be examined more closely later; however, here, refuting the significance of lanto's childhood is closely tied to the processes of his othering. lanto is not the only one with a lamentably poor upbringing – but Griff in particular finds it intolerable to think that such circumstances might also explain violence on his part. Because he recognises similarity between lanto and himself, his desire to reject him is all the more intense – otherwise he would have to admit that he, too, might have done exactly the same.

As stated before, Bennett and Royle demonstrate how the categorisation of things into polar opposites is also an implication that they are in fact mutually dependent (282). Thus, as Ianto's friends are eager to draw demarcations between themselves and Ianto by devising sets of binary opposites – such as good/evil, sane/insane and normal/abnormal – they are also asserting the notion that there are some essential similarities between them which make these comparisons meaningful in the first place. However, most of them remain unwilling to acknowledge that these similarities exist; instead, they need to convince themselves that their murder of Ianto was fundamentally different from Ianto's own brutalities. In fact, Griff goes as far as to argue that he “never fuckin killed no fucker” and that he has “[n]ever been part of anyone's death”; as Ianto's death is mentioned, Griff merely shrugs it off as “different” (*Sheep* 222). Similarly, as one worries whether they are in fact the “real killers” (240), another reassures him that “[s]trictly speakin” Ianto was “the only killer” (241). Othering seems to take two basic forms: either we categorise a group or an individual as the ‘other’ because we want to discriminate against them – for example, to justify racial segregation – or we experience guilt for the poor treatment of someone and dehumanise them in order to justify our actions and feel better about ourselves. By convincing themselves that their violent actions are essentially different from Ianto's acts of savagery, they posthumously strip Ianto of his human dignity. Thus it is necessary for them to see things in simplistic binary terms and to deny the existence of Ianto's gentler side, as discussed later.

Another form of othering portrayed in *Sheepshagger* is termed animalism. Harri Roberts explains Kristeva's understanding of the phenomenon: “the discourse of animalism is itself a form of abjection, invoking a bestial realm into which qualities that cannot be assimilated by normative discourses – such as certain types of sexual and violent behaviour – can be projected and disavowed” (55). Welsh literature has a tradition of endowing people, especially women, with animalistic qualities in order to justify their oppression (Roberts 55). In *Sheepshagger*, Ianto seems to vacillate between human and animalistic characteristics, and the duality of his character is exemplified by the fact that “out of every given month” he would spend “two weeks . . . in society, with people” and the other half “wanderin over-a mountains” (54). His friends declare that he “should've been born a fuckin fox” and start jokingly listing animals that remind them of Ianto: Danny concludes that “a bird of prey's a same as Ianto was”, as there is a “capacity for chaos at odds with their . . . loneliness” (54). It seems that Ianto's ‘capacity for chaos’ is something that his

friends cannot explain without likening it to the behaviour of animals, thus further distancing him from the human.

Pinker explains that if a person's status or cleanliness is diminished and he is stripped of his dignity, "ordinary people's compassion can evaporate and they find it easy to treat him like an animal or object"; effectively, this means "flip[ping] a mental switch and reclassify[ing] an individual from 'person' to 'nonperson'" (Pinker 274, 321). Philosopher Jonathan Glover, while examining the treatment of Jews in Nazi Germany, marks the emergence of a similar phenomenon: people are dehumanised by "being thought of as animals", which is "to withdraw from them the normal distinguishing marks of respect for other humans", thus removing "the protection of human status" (338). However, we can perhaps obtain a modicum of comfort from the truth that sometimes a very small human gesture is all that is needed to switch the dial from 'nonperson' back to 'person'. George Orwell captured such a moment in explaining why, during the Spanish Civil War, he refrained from shooting a fascist soldier who was simultaneously running and trying to hold up his trousers:

I did not shoot partly because that detail about the trousers. I had come here to shoot at 'Fascists'; but a man who is holding up his trousers isn't a 'Fascist', he is visibly a fellow creature, similar to yourself, and you don't feel like shooting at him. (qtd. in Glover 53)

It can be argued that this is, on a larger scale, exactly what Griffiths' novel aims at achieving: to rescue a character from those trying to dehumanise, and to show him as an individual, vulnerable, flawed and troubled – yet fundamentally not without dignity.

In an interview with *AmeriCymru*, Griffiths explains that dignity is "not a conferred quality" but "innate in human beings" (Shaw). He continues: "People aren't simply vessels for a single outlook, nor are they simply the results of linear causation" (Shaw). The author laments how this is often forgotten in today's tabloid culture, in relation to the underprivileged in particular (Shaw). Related to this, *Sheepshagger* suggests that Ianto's friends are in no way unrepresentative in their manner of dehumanising Ianto – something evident early in the novel, as the narration scans forward to the typically distorted media coverage that follows terrible deeds:

Nondescript Ianto, remarkable only in the prominence of his ears and upper front teeth; average height, underweight, nothing like the grotesque troll the newspapers will later depict him as, no similarity with the hulking hirsute beast image that the collective fears and neuroses will be fed. . . . Scruffy skinny spotty Ianto, tiny in this vastness. (*Sheep* 15)

It is difficult not to feel empathy when reading this description, as poor Ianto seems to lack shelter, food and family – in other words, nearly everything we see as necessary for a reasonable existence. Similar empathy is experienced by Ianto's friend, Llŷr, although he too will later renounce him completely. Noticing how small Ianto looks, Llŷr observes "how thin and pathetic in the world, how reed-skinny and impotent he is in his spots and torn and mucky clothing . . . before these clean and moneyed people, occupiers of his childhood" (18).

Comparable structure is employed in McCarthy's *Child of God*, where the protagonist, Lester Ballard, witnesses the auction of his family home. He is described as "small, unclean, unshaven" (5), "a child of God much like yourself perhaps" (6), whereas the auctioneer and his audience resemble "a caravan of carnival folk" participating in a public spectacle, accompanied by beverage stands and country musicians (5–6). The auctioneer begins his sales pitch, amplified by a loudspeaker, declaring that there is "real future in this property" (7). Yet, it is a future that will exclude the now homeless Lester. Both Ianto and Lester are contrasted with people in possession of money and means, heightening the image of these men as piteous, powerless and dispossessed – as victims. Furthermore, it is important to notice that these contrasts are made before the reader is confronted with the gory details of their atrocities. Thus, the reader is invited to participate in an exercise that resists othering – once empathy is evoked it is more difficult for a reductionist process to operate – and the characters retain their humanity.

3.3 Rewards for cruelty

Othering does not necessarily end at the death of its object. In connection to the Holocaust, Glover remarks: "When victims are seen as less than human, the murderers find it hard to treat their remains with respect" (341). The writer Primo Levi, a Holocaust survivor, makes a similar observation: the treatment of dead Jews "was intended to declare that these were not human

remains, but indifferent brute matter” (qtd. in Glover 341). Something comparable can be detected in both *Sheepshagger* and *Child of God*: once the protagonists are labelled as deranged outsiders, they cannot shed this label even after their death. Distorted representations in the media, as mentioned above, are, in Ianto’s case, a clear instance of posthumous othering. Dehumanisation takes other forms too, evident towards the end of the novels when the protagonists are laid upon the pathologist’s table for their post-mortem examinations. These autopsy scenes – especially the one in *Child of God* in all its grotesque detail – call to mind some relatedly gruesome English artwork from the eighteenth century, *The Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751) by William Hogarth. The series of four engravings depict the life of the protagonist, Tom Nero, from childhood to his grim demise. As a piece of propaganda against wanton cruelty and immorality, Hogarth’s series delineates a cruel child, unrestrained by society, becoming an equally vicious adult, which, in the case of Tom Nero, leads to the gallows and to a final posthumous humiliation in the Cutlerian theatre, where his body is dissected by doctors studying anatomy (Tate Britain). Echoes of the autopsy scene depicted in final engraving of the series, titled *Reward for Cruelty*, can be found in both novels discussed here.

In *Child of God*, Lester Ballard is never convicted of any crime; instead, he is confined to a mental asylum, where he eventually dies from pneumonia. His autopsy is described in close detail, uncharacteristic of McCarthy’s typically spare style:

He was laid out on a slab and flayed, eviscerated, dissected. His head was sawed open and the brains removed. . . . His heart was taken out. His entrails were hauled forth and delineated and the four young students who bent over him like those haruspices of old perhaps saw monsters worse to come in their configurations. (184)

It is obvious here that Lester is still considered an aberrant ‘other’. The medical students examining his body with fascinated curiosity are likened to haruspices – ancient Etruscan diviners, who used to deduce the will of god by observing the entrails of sacrificial animals (“Haruspices”). The autopsy scene in *Sheepshagger* conveys equivalent sentiments:

To be . . . tacked down in forms and folders Ianto’s memory and his deeds. Diagrammed and dissected by brains no better than his, for lives no tonic to his pored over and pored over and pored over again. (260)

Griffiths expresses bluntly what McCarthy only implies: we may treat these characters as others, but we will never be truly different from them. This relates to Kristeva's argument that the 'other' is a construct of our minds (Wisker 330). "With a psychological turn", Wisker explains, "we construct and reject the strange, terrifying potential, all that we fear and desire" (330). These autopsy scenes can be seen to represent such construction of the 'other': once it is clearly defined, "tacked down in forms and folders", the 'other' can be rejected.

In *The Reward for Cruelty*, Tom Nero is dissected and anatomised as a final punishment for his crimes. Greta Olson observes that the surgeons performing the autopsy are clearly revelling in their grim task; additionally, the cauldron of boiling bones in the foreground "alludes to the anatomy lesson's being a cannibal feast" (198–99). Moreover, the final picture of the series seems to mirror certain details of the first, titled *First Stage of Cruelty*: the gleeful expressions on the surgeons' faces, their poses, and the tools in their hands bring to mind the boys in the first engraving who are taking great pleasure in torturing animals. Thus, the object of Hogarth's moral criticism is not only to expose criminality but also to attack forms of cruelty sanctioned by law, which also relates to the acceptable forms of violence discussed in the previous chapter. Hogarth's haruspex-like surgeons might be seen as a metaphor for an ultimate act of othering. Interestingly, Lester Ballard is portrayed in a manner akin to Tom Nero in Hogarth's moral propaganda: he displays signs of cruelty from an early age, both towards animals and humans, with a propensity for violence that eventually leads to a number of casualties. However, Ianto's conduct falls outside this conventional modus operandi of a psychopath – an observation which his friend Danny also makes: "he liked animals . . . couldn't stand to see one of em harmed. Strange. Like most psychos, most murderers like serve their apprenticeship killin animals, but Ianto... I dunno. Odd" (*Sheep* 33). Ianto's gentler side, however, is something that most of his friends, not to mention society in general, are trying to deny. They are desperate to find definitive explanations, ultimately a fruitless and reductive exercise: by denying Ianto his humanity, by refusing to accept the possibility that there is equivalent darkness within us all, they fail to consider violence from all perspectives – a task that Griffiths deems so important.

3.4 Liminal places and beings

As outlined above, concepts of the 'other' and liminality intertwine. The 'other' is an entity that could be considered particularly threatening partly because it can be a locus of contradictions, uncannily strange and familiar at the same time. Correspondingly, liminality is a phenomenon situated at the threshold, at the in-between of a passage, or between unfixed and fluctuating states of human consciousness, such as madness and sanity. It could be argued that Ianto is essentially a liminal being, as he seems to possess a number of apparently opposing qualities: he is silent yet not mute, gentle yet capable of extreme violence, and strangely animalistic yet undeniably human. As previously noted, his friends find it easy to compare him to animals – though their attempt to dehumanise by emphasising animal qualities is merely othering in action. They also recognise that only a half of Ianto's time was occupied among civilisation, with the other half spent roaming the mountains. In this sense Ianto is clearly a liminal character – half civilised, half wild – as well as possessed of a visceral, if not atavistic, connection with the land. In a number of ways, Griffiths certainly presents Ianto as a product of the past – his sense of belonging rooted in "the same soil his far forefathers dug in for their sustenance" (*Sheep* 22), hard pressed to find a place or purpose in the modern world, and thus a liminal figure also in a temporal sense.

Ianto appears to suffer from a type of elective mutism: he has the ability to speak but usually contents himself with the role of silent observer. His friends agree that "Ianto's usual taciturnity has something in it of the pathological", and when he does talk, his voice is "rusty with disuse" (*Sheep* 17). It could be argued that Ianto's silence is symbolic of his role as a dispossessed figure, one metaphorically devoid of a voice; however, Ianto's taciturnity does not render him a mere cipher, reminiscent of a character such as Benjy Compson in William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), whose muteness may function as a metaphor for the degeneration of his whole family. By contrast, Ianto's silence is a consequence of childhood trauma that continues to haunt him, as he does not possess the mental faculties to process his ordeals:

He remembers all this, Ianto does . . . his plunge through space into water aflame, a fall which will never end: in his head he will be forever plummeting through that sunset between mountains, over water. Of these things and of others he will tell nothing because there is no need. He never much liked talking anyway, Ianto didn't. Not really. (*Sheep* 236)

lanto chooses to suffer in silence, which then facilitates the process of othering him – as his friends have insufficient information to explain his actions. Bordens and Horowitz explain the human tendency to equate malicious behaviour with innate evilness: if factors that might explain bad behaviour are not accessible to us, it is “natural” to “disregard or slight them” (85). However, this tendency can be lessened if we have information about a person’s motivations and are willing to “make a careful analysis” (Bordens and Horowitz 85). In other words, othering is easier if our knowledge of the person in question is limited; similarly, understanding is possible only when we open-mindedly commit ourselves to it.

Thus, lanto’s friends have the need to explain lanto’s actions in black-and-white terms, which makes it easier for them to exclude and abject him. Danny, however, acknowledges that lanto was not “first an foremost” a murderer (*Sheep* 99), and that there was a “gentle side” to him as well (*Sheep* 33). This hints at liminality too, as lanto simultaneously presents contrasting characteristics – yet most friends find this difficult to accept. Danny’s suggestion that lanto might have been in love with Gwenno, another friend, is met with derision: “lanto? *That* fucker? Didn’t fuckin have it in im . . . Incapable, that cunt” (*Sheep* 99). Thus, it is easier for the rest of lanto’s friends to label him as categorically evil and thus deny him ever having possessed such human virtues as tenderness and the capacity to love. lanto’s silence facilitates the act of labelling him unequivocally evil, and ultimately this label involves the denial of all his redeeming qualities. All except Danny find it impossible to accept lanto as one of their own as it would also force them to concede, in Danny’s words, that “we’re all a mass of contradictions . . . capable of doing a horrible thing one day an a good one the next” (*Sheep* 100). According to Danny, we are all loci of seemingly opposing forces – “good an evil, yin and yang . . . [d]arkness an light” – and this is exactly “what makes us fuckin human” (*Sheep* 100). The others remain unwilling to accept what Danny postulates, choosing instead to disown lanto and reduce him to a psychopathic monster devoid of human virtues.

The dichotomy between lanto’s innate gentleness and his inclination towards violence suggest that he exists on the borderland between the wild and the civilised – and it is this liminality that leads to his rejection. His exclusion appears to be twofold in nature. Firstly, lanto is homeless and

underprivileged – in other words, an outcast: Danny recognises this, and argues that had Ianto been “higher up on-a social scale” instead of a “tramp”, Danny and the others would have been punished more severely for killing him (*Sheep* 240). Ianto’s friends are in fact similarly liminal figures, aimless in their wanderings from one drink or drug to another; a life captured in a scene where Ianto and Roger spend an inebriated afternoon together:

They leave the pub and go from gloom to glow passing between worlds like they always do, under lintels between jambs over steps these drifting figures desultory . . . From shadow to light and back again . . . this world to them is a clamour of polarities, catalepsy and blur, these states sought and discarded then sought again in restlessness perennial and inexhaustible. (*Sheep* 183–84)

This metaphor for liminality – the act of stepping “under lintels” and “between jambs” (*Sheep* 184) – is more powerful if we keep in mind that the word *limen*, from which ‘liminality’ is derived, is Latin for ‘threshold’. Being drifting members of the underclass, they occupy a liminal state, existing on the margins of society, without recognition, understanding or respect. As a member of this group set apart from the rest, Ianto’s ultimate exclusion by his friends, as well as society, is the second and most brutal part of his twofold rejection.

As mentioned above, eighteenth century Gothic writing deals with spaces through which liminal states can be accessed (Garner 401). In *Sheepshagger*, such threshold situations are indeed strongly linked with Ianto’s role as an outsider and to the duality of his character. They are also invariably connected to nature and wilderness, offering places of refuge for the protagonist. In company, Ianto is “led by the movements and imperatives of others”, but “it is when he is apart from the noisy human traffic that he can feel other whisperings in and from his heart, hear other murmurings from souls both carbonaceous and siliceous” (*Sheep* 174). In Ianto’s feverish reflections these borderlands seem akin to sentient beings, endowed with mystery and sinister presence. The landscape assumes a moral dimension as, consumed with guilt for his actions, Ianto can feel “some giant looming spirit” watching him, which is, perhaps, “the mountain itself cognisant of his deeds” (*Sheep* 250). Indeed, Bohata recognises the view of the hills as places that are “uncanny and potentially threatening” in Welsh writing (35). In *Sheepshagger* the mountains and hillsides not only represent a borderland between wilderness and civilisation but, brimming with ominous shadows and supernatural phenomena, act too as locales where the veil between dream and reality thins.

As with the representation of mountains, peat bogs in *Sheepshagger* also represent borderlands that merge the human world and the realm of the mythical. In fact, bogs could be described as liminal spaces in more than one sense. Firstly, they are often located on the margins between wilderness and civilisation, a swampy inhospitable terrain that deters wanderers – providing lanto with undisturbed sanctuary where his sense of connection with the land becomes heightened:

Here where he is outcast, here where he is no vagrant. In this place between water and earth he coughs and mutters as if in response to some fancied inquisitor:

–Fuckin *belong* yer I do... my fuckin land... my fuckin land... (*Sheep* 26)

Secondly, as they represent an intermediate point between land and water, something solid and something flowing, wetlands offer an appropriate metaphor for the liminal state between life and death. In such a way, as lanto finds himself in the safety of the peat bog, his peculiar sanctum seems is associated, in an equally liminal sense, with both womb and tomb. lanto is described as a “creature bog-born and engendered by mud and moisture” (*Sheep* 26) – or, as a friend jokingly declares, was never a child but “[d]ragged himself out of . . . [the] peat bog” (*Sheep* 253). At the same time, the bog is likened to a grave: lanto will be “known to the slitherer and the slider and the lurker in quags” until “death itself swamps him and muds him” (*Sheep* 25), words foreshadowing his death where the same bog will become his grave. Furthermore, as discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the bog’s role as a repository for “long-rotten warriors”, the bog is also described as “a wet necropolis for man and for beast” (*Sheep* 26). Thus the bog seems to simultaneously represent a womb-like sanctuary and a tomb permeated with death and decay.

The manner in which Griffiths associates bogs with both death and birth brings to mind the so-called bog poems by Seamus Heaney. Iron Age bog bodies form the subject matter of these works, as Heaney explores parallels between these ancient, remarkably preserved, sacrificial victims, and casualties of the unrest in Northern Ireland of the 1960s onwards, known as the Troubles. In “The Tollund Man” he associates the bog with the female gender, in addition to likening the millennia that the body stays buried to a period of gestation: “She tightened her torc on him / And opened her fen / Those dark juices working / Him to a saint’s kept body (Heaney 31). Similarly, in “Bog Queen”, the “plait” of the female bog body’s hair is described as “a slimy birth-cord / of bog” (Heaney 67–68); while “The Grauballe Man” likens the unearthing of a bog body to a birth: “a head and shoulder / out of the peat / bruised like a forceps baby” (Heaney 70). A related

connection between bogs, death and the supernatural is also evident in Nick Cave's novel *And the Ass Saw the Angel* (1989). As in *Sheepshagger*, Cave's work depicts an outsider who finds strange sanctuary in the forbidding swampland on the outskirts of town. Similar to *Sheepshagger*, the swampland in *Angel* acts as the setting for the death of the protagonist, Euchrid Eucrow, eventually becoming his grave. The bog acts as the final resting place for other creatures as well, such as the spooked horse who gallops into the muddy pit of the swamp, its body floating "deeper and deeper, bumping the slow moving corpses of other things – thousands of years old, preserved by the weird mud and suspended in limbo" (Cave, *Angel* 178). This too appears a forerunner of the bog in Griffiths' novel, which is the site where "house-high horned beasts were sucked lowing into this slurping swamp" (*Sheep* 26). In *Angel*, the swampland is a repository where ancient beings are "suspended in limbo" (Cave 178). The bog in *Sheepshagger* is equally a kind of limbo – an impression heightened by the appearance of the jack-o'-lantern, a phenomenon which, in popular legend, is often purported to represent a soul that has been rejected by hell ("Jack-o'-lantern").

Lester Ballard, a liminal character not dissimilar to Ianto, finds himself homeless and wandering the outskirts of society and inhabiting abandoned cabins and labyrinthine mountain caves. As with the bog in *Sheepshagger*, the liminality of one such cave is multi-layered: firstly, it is a location characterised by its seclusion; secondly, it is likened to a grave, serving as a repository for the bodies of Lester's victims; and, thirdly, it is a place where Lester vacillates between sanity and madness, hearing the voice of "some old shed self" that speaks "in the name of sanity" and tries to steer him "back from the rim of his disastrous wrath" (McCarthy 149). Towards the end of the novel, trying to escape a lynch mob, Lester becomes lost in the network of underground caves. When he manages to resurface by clawing his way through rubble and soil, it seems to mark a moment of rebirth – with Lester then recanting his life as an outlaw and surrendering himself to the authorities. According to Guillemin, Lester is "removed from the extreme margin of society that he has occupied, and this is not toward the outside, into death or exile, but toward the inside" (44). Guillemin sees the novel's ending as an "epiphanic moment" (44) that evolves into "a rebirthing experience" (47). On a related note, Mircea Eliade, historian of religion, describes the process of symbolic burial having the same "magico-religious value" as "baptism": "The sick person is regenerated; he is born anew" (143). Thus, as with the bog in *Sheepshagger* and

Heaney's poetry, the caves in *Child of God* signify a liminal space that offers clear parallels, a space of death and birth.

In addition to *Child of God*, a further novel that Griffiths has acknowledged as influential is *So Long, Hector Bebb* (1970) by Ron Berry. The protagonist, Hector Bebb, is a mass of contradictions: simultaneously, he is remarkably gentle yet quick to lose his temper. His career as a professional boxer offers Hector an outlet for his aggressions – and makes him “a man of supreme skill and blind courage” (Berry 235). However, in a burst of jealous rage, he accidentally kills his wife's lover and becomes a fugitive, and after an unsuccessful attempt to adopt a false identity he is forced to roam the hills and valleys of South Wales. Like the protagonists of other novels discussed above, Hector is an outcast who finds himself gravitating towards the borderlands between society and wilderness and towards an untimely death. However, Hector is never fully excluded by his closest friends, regardless of the fact that he will always remain a murderer in the public eye. So it is, Guillemin argues, with Lester Ballard, “at most a liminal figure, never wilfully excluded”, who is “readily incorporated into a background of misfits past and present” (43). When talking about Lester's insanity, the villagers agree that he seemed to “outstrip em all” (McCarthy 78). Nevertheless, they remain capable of discussing some aspects of his character, such as his masterly rifle skills, in admiring tones. In *Sheepshagger*, Ianto prompts no such admiration from his friends, apart from Danny as usual, who suggests that perhaps Ianto has “succeeded in some ways” because he will be remembered (244). He continues: “An int that what we all want . . .? To live a crazy life? To be remembered, remarked upon?” (*Sheep* 244). Danny's words inspire a brusque retort from Griff: “I'll put yew to fuckin death myself if I ever hear yew comin out with shite like that again” (*Sheep* 244). To intimate that Ianto's infamy is in some sense something “we all want” is to acknowledge that he might not be fundamentally dissimilar to his friends. Thus, in order to represent Ianto as an ‘other’, to wholly abject and exclude him, his friends must continue to see him in simplistic, reductionist terms.

4 Darkness explored

Sheepshagger depicts the natural world, in Tennyson's words, "red in tooth and claw" (qtd. in Pinker 242). Pre-history and history, fossils of predatory beasts and remnants of ancient battles, act as recurrent reminders of the ubiquitous nature of violence throughout time. Elsewhere, Griffiths asserts that "all ages" are "characterised by violence", and it is vital to work out why: "The darkness in our hearts needs to be explored" (Brockway). As discussed later in this chapter, the author argues that forcing ourselves to look at violence is "a sacrifice we have to make" (Peddie 126). Indeed, this is exactly what *Sheepshagger* does: it compels the reader to look at lives that are drenched in brutality to their cores. Though exceedingly graphic, it is far from gratuitous; instead, *Sheepshagger* illuminates the sense of meaninglessness and frustration that lead to aggression, in addition to showing the irrevocable consequences of the ensuing violence itself. The novel achieves this partly through its three-level narrative structure: depicting Ianto's atrocities in the present, shedding light on earlier explanatory events in the protagonist's life, and through the exploratory, questioning debate of his friends as they seek to understand the murderous past. Danny has his mind set on finding convincing reasons for Ianto's actions; however, as discussed above, the others are determined to categorise Ianto as an aberrant 'other', thus making uncomfortable explanations unnecessary. Nevertheless, it can be seen that their dispute boils down to a single issue: the thorny question of nature versus nurture, or the ongoing debate on the relative importance of heredity and environmental factors to human development. Willing as he is to try and understand Ianto, even Danny finds it difficult to accept that he, too, is capable of comparable violence – his gaze is less unflinching when aimed at the darkness within himself.

4.1 Nature versus nurture

The Latin term *tabula rasa* – loosely translated as 'blank slate' – is often erroneously attributed to philosopher John Locke. However, Locke uses a very similar metaphor in *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding* (1689):

Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper, void of all characters, without any ideas:—How comes it to be furnished? . . . Whence has it all the MATERIALS of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from EXPERIENCE.

In epistemology and psychology, the term blank slate has come to denote an original state of mental blankness prior to experience (“*Tabula rasa*”). As with the concept of the noble savage, the blank slate is often associated with the naturalistic and moralistic fallacies, and, in Pinker’s words, “Nature, including human nature, is stipulated to have only virtuous traits (no needless killings, no rapacity, no exploitation), or no traits at all, because the alternative is too horrible to accept” (162). In its simplest form, Locke’s governing idea holds that it is experience that predominantly determines our character; if we change experience, we change the person. Pinker regards the concept of the blank slate as “today’s Great Chain of Being”, in other words, akin to the Ptolemaic medieval Christian understanding of the world challenged by Galileo and others during the early seventeenth century. Pinker argues that the blank slate is a similarly “widely embraced” doctrine that is “under assault from the sciences” (138). His contrary argument proposes that genes and heredity have a vital, yet often dismissed, role in determining our behaviour – and that from fear of a fundamental and unchangeable inequality and the resulting potential for nihilism, people still cling to the now challenged concept. Nevertheless, uncomfortably situated between the possible extremes of a fixed or a mutable human nature, between genetic determinism and the possibility of willed change and development, it seems likely that it is the intricate and only partially understood interplay between nature and nurture that in fact influences human behaviour.

In *Sheepshagger*, Danny seems to subscribe to the Lockean concept of the white sheet of paper, though he does not dismiss the notion that we are born with certain inherent traits that determine how our experiences mould us:

[W]e’re all blank canvases when we’re born like an lanto, . . . he was born into a shitty world, wasn’t he? . . . An it’s not as if he was bright lad either, not as if he was born with-a mental capacity to understand [his] situation, to deal with it like. His fuckin cards were marked from the off. (158)

Paradoxically perhaps, Danny argues for the empty paper or blank slate, while simultaneously considering lanto’s fate as already genetically determined. Danny explains that lanto was “born with half a brain into no life to speak of” (158) – apparently supporting the idea that lanto’s predicament was the result of a disadvantageous and unalterable amalgam of both nature and

nurture. Danny recognises that lanto's capacities were limited, as well as acknowledging the possibility that he was suffering from traumatic experiences. Even so, Danny seems inclined to put more emphasis on the latter; or, as he phrases it: "I reckon lanto's childhood would've turned Mother fuckin Teresa into a murderer" (*Sheep* 1). Griff rejects Danny's explanation: "Hundreds, no fuckin *millions*-a people have shitey upbringing and they don't turn into killers" (*Sheep*1). Similarly, Marc argues that, by Danny's reasoning, they would "all be fuckin murderers" (*Sheep* 1). In defence, Danny reminds Marc that, despite similar backgrounds, not all experiences are identical: "His childhood wasn't-a same as yours, growin up in a nice big house in Newquay. *Your* dad was a doctor. lanto's was, what was he, a fuckin *ghost*" (*Sheep* 31). Indeed, lanto's family history seems particularly bleak: never knowing the identity of his father, losing his mother to alcoholism, then raised by his elderly grandmother, who had been widowed after the suicide of her husband. Following the repossession of his ancestral home, and the consequent death of his grandmother, lanto, already bereft, suddenly has nothing: "no family, no home, no money" (*Sheep* 11). Nevertheless, as Danny sympathises with lanto's plight, the others call him too "soft" and "liberal" (*Sheep* 11). They are determined to restructure him in monstrous terms – as an individual devoid of any redemptive qualities. They consider Danny's efforts to understand lanto as essentially futile, and though they have all shared similar backgrounds and drug-addled lifestyles, they find it unthinkable that such circumstances might lead to such extremes on their part too. Although the friends reflect on the possible causality between drugs and violence, they conclude that this is a facile explanation that only the authorities are foolish enough to believe. They reason that, by blaming drugs, the police only betray their ignorance. If drugs had made their friend a killer, the mountains would be "fuckin *full* of dead bodies", as lanto spent his days in a near-constant state of intoxication (*Sheep* 97).

In addition to sympathising with lanto's bleak childhood, Danny also understands the potential force of past traumas, and maintains that lanto was not born "fully formed as a murderer" (*Sheep* 1). He remains convinced that something especially traumatic – unknown to them – must have happened in lanto's past. Danny conjectures that lanto probably was a victim of "some sort of abuse", "[k]iddie fiddling", and perhaps these damaging experiences "made [lanto] what he was" (*Sheep* 220). Again, the others rebuff Danny's explanations, Griff arguing that regardless of what lanto might have experienced in his past, there is no "excuse in-a whole wide bastard world" that

explains his actions (*Sheep* 221). He continues: “It’s just a fuckin cop-out, mun. Yew’ve got to take personal responsibility for yewer actions” (*Sheep* 221). Although Danny is merely trying to understand Ianto’s actions, the others regard his endeavours as an attempt to excuse his behaviour. Pinker describes a view called environmental determinism, similar to that approached by Danny, which holds that the environment directly governs human behaviour: he considers the “abuse excuse” and other such explanations as the “most risible pretexts for bad behaviour in recent decades” (178), underlining that we should not confuse “explanation” with “exculpation” (179). In *Sheepshagger*, Danny understands this, but, to the others, the words are synonymous. Nevertheless, Danny tries to explain the difference: “I’m not trying to excuse what Ianto did at all, but I’m tryin to work out why he did it” (160). Or, as Pinker outlines the issue:

The difference between *explaining* behavior and *excusing* it is captured in the saying ‘To understand is not to forgive,’ and has been stressed in different ways by many philosophers, including Hume, Kant and Sartre. Most philosophers believe that unless a person was literally coerced . . . , we should consider his actions to have been freely chosen, even if they were caused by events inside his skull. (180)

To the others, understanding and forgiving seem too similar and they remain determined to label Ianto as ‘pervert’, ‘sicko’ and ‘psychopath’ (*Sheep* 242). In order to see Ianto as thoroughly ‘other’ and separate from themselves, they need to reject all explanations that allow for Ianto’s human qualities, including the suggestion that he might have been a victim himself.

To recap, Pinker argues that, coercion excluded, we should consider all actions freely chosen. While it is understandable that, for the sake of a functioning society, people should be held accountable for their actions, the idea of free will is exceedingly complicated. Gray approaches the issue from an opposing perspective:

We can be free agents only if we are authors of our acts; but we are ourselves products of chance and necessity. We cannot choose to be what we are born. In that case, we cannot be responsible for what we do. (65–66)

Though many would disagree with such a bluntly stated view, there are no simple answers to the problem. Gray continues: “Freud taught that for any human being kindness or cruelty, having a sense of justice or lacking it, depend on the accidents of childhood” (104). However, the idea that “being good is good luck” is difficult to accept, as “it goes against much of what we say we believe” (Gray 104). Gray’s and Freud’s views are not historically modern: Marcus Aurelius, Roman

emperor in the second century, expresses similar ideas in his writings, commonly titled *Meditations*. As the original text was written in Koine Greek, now a dead language, various and often differing translations have been produced: what Gregory Hays translates as “Well-being is good luck, or good character” (152) Martin Hammond renders into “Happiness is a benign god or divine blessing” (86). Nevertheless, both the translations express a sentiment that good life – whether you call it well-being or happiness – is not under the control of any individual.

As explored previously, there are numerous similarities between *Sheepshagger* and McCarthy’s *Child of God*. The latter depicts a protagonist whose predicament bears resemblance to that of Ianto – after being made homeless, Lester Ballard finds himself spiralling towards the margins of society. Furthermore, the two protagonists share equally bleak childhoods. As with Ianto, Lester is orphaned at an early age and traumatised by a particularly shocking event in his childhood, as the boy witnesses his father hanging himself. The villagers discuss Lester’s childhood: “They say he never was right after his daddy killed hisself. They was just the one boy. The mother had run off, I don’t know where to nor who with” (McCarthy 22). Thus, McCarthy, too, exploring the accidents of childhood and their impact on the development of an individual, allows, in part at least, for Lockean explanations and environmental determinism. Overall, however, McCarthy refuses any simplistic conclusions. As Robert Coles, writing in *The New Yorker*, puts it:

He simply writes novels that tell us we cannot comprehend the riddles of human idiosyncrasy, the influence of the merely contingent or incidental upon our lives. He is a novelist of religious feeling who appears to subscribe to no creed but who cannot stop wondering in the most passionate and honest way what gives life meaning. (qtd. in Frye 43)

Of course, in *Child of God*, this “religious feeling” is already indicated by the choice of title, and as with *Sheepshagger*, the novel aims to redeem a character who is unfairly marginalised by society. However, unlike *Sheepshagger*, McCarthy’s novel does not offer the reader a direct window into Lester’s traumatic childhood; instead, all information concerning Lester’s past is filtered through outside observers. Indeed, as in *Sheepshagger*, one level of narrative consists solely of dialogue – the discussions of Lester’s fellow townspeople after his committal to a psychiatric hospital. Frye, too, observes how McCarthy “[leaves] the causes that circumscribe [Lester’s] character in a dimly lit and barely discernible past” (43). On the contrary, *Sheepshagger* offers the reader brief yet

illuminating glimpses of significant moments in Ianto's past, firmly suggesting direct causality between trauma and violence.

All the writers and thinkers discussed above – Griffiths, McCarthy, Gray, Freud and Marcus Aurelius – recognise the arbitrary nature of human happiness and the accidents of childhood that mould our character. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Gulag labour camp survivor, stresses this too:

If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being . . . it is after all only the way things worked out that they were the executioners and we weren't. (qtd. in Glover 401)

Nevertheless, as Glover remarks, we must remember that different people make different decisions even under similar circumstances (402). Gray points out, however, that nearly everything in our lives is unchosen, including time and place of birth (110) – all factors that make each individual different in the first place. Glover agrees: "Character makes a difference, but character is itself shaped by genetic and environmental factors beyond our control. Self-creation is at best only partial. So, to some extent, character is a matter of 'the way things worked out'" (402). In the end, no definite assertions can be made regarding such an intricate matter as the labyrinthine question of nature versus nurture, and it might comfort to bear Voltaire's words in mind: "Doubt is not a pleasant condition, but certainty is an absurd one" (232).

4.2 Failures to accept darkness within

In relation to othering, we have seen how Ianto's friends employ several methods in order to disassociate themselves from Ianto's behaviour and simultaneously justify their own similarly violent actions. It is necessary for them to brand Ianto as fundamentally different, an 'other', in order to successfully exclude and abject him and so psychologically protect themselves. As they categorise his actions as those of a monster, they render further explanation unnecessary. These excluding processes also provide them with a retrospective justification for killing Ianto for; if Ianto was a deranged murderer, ending his life can be seen as form of justice, casting their actions in a positive light. Only Danny, wrestling with his conscience, refuses to scapegoat Ianto, and finds it

difficult to reconcile his own violent actions with his sense of self. While the others label Ianto as unequivocally evil, Danny maintains that he was a friend: "Ianto was a mate. I liked him. We all did. An yer we all fuckin jumpin up an down on-a poor cunt's head" (*Sheep* 223). Bluntly as ever, Griff argues that, instead of feeling remorse, they should be "glad" that they stopped Ianto from killing "other kiddies an women" (224). Danny remains alone in being unable to find personally satisfying justifications for his participation in Ianto's death.

The somewhat paradoxical, hypocritical stance taken by Griff and the others can be seen as an example of a response to a psychological phenomenon called cognitive dissonance. According to *Encyclopædia Britannica*, cognitive dissonance is "the mental conflict that occurs when beliefs or assumptions are contradicted by new information". To relieve the arising unease or tension people resort to a number of defensive manoeuvres: they "reject, explain away, or avoid the new information" or "resort to any other defensive means of preserving stability or order in the conceptions of the world and of themselves" ("Cognitive dissonance"). An exceptionally powerful cognitive dissonance is often generated by an idea that is in conflict with a "fundamental element of the self-concept", such as one's desire to consider oneself as a "good person" (A. Mustafa). In *Sheepshagger*, Ianto's friends wish to see themselves as decent human beings, but they need to reconcile this notion with the dark knowledge of having taken a human life. Thus, the processes of othering can be seen as coping mechanisms: Ianto "had it comin" (*Sheep* 224), therefore they did not do anything wrong. Danny, however, finds it more difficult to find equilibrium in what is essentially a socially or culturally convenient lie: instead of othering Ianto in order to allay the arising cognitive dissonance, he seeks a more complex, nuanced and honest explanation.

Another phenomenon of potential relevance here is known in psychology as the actor–observer bias. Bordens and Horowitz explain: "Actors prefer external attributions for their own behaviour, especially if the outcomes are bad, whereas observers tend to make internal attributions for the same behaviour" (85). Thus, as Wendy Stainton Rogers explains, if violence is committed by actors themselves or by people they identify with, they tend to blame the situation for necessitating their actions; if the culprits are considered as outsiders or enemies, the blame for violence is put on the perpetrators, who are often seen to express "'bloodlust' and 'psychopathic' tendencies" (393).

Thus, Ianto's friends, Danny excluded, explain Ianto's violent behaviour as the manifestation of his innate wickedness, whereas they justify their own use of violence by calling it a precautionary measure. Although Danny is unwilling to utterly reject Ianto, he too resorts to a coping strategy where the emphasis is put on the circumstances surrounding violent behaviour. Danny blames "mob rule" for making him join in Ianto's killing, claiming that he "just went along" with what the others were doing (*Sheep* 223–24). Additionally, he resorts to phrases such as the "whole frenzy of the situation", the "heat of-a moment" and "[t]emporary insanity" instead of admitting responsibility for his actions (*Sheep* 223–24). Hypocritically perhaps, Danny also blames drugs, or hallucinogenic mushrooms, for his behaviour – "I was off my fuckin head" (*Sheep* 223) – whereas, earlier, he deemed drugs as a facile excuse when it came to explaining Ianto's violent deeds. Nevertheless, psychologists confirm that, in a phenomenon called deindividuation, people can lose their self-identity and self-awareness when engulfed in a crowd (Bordens and Horowitz 302). According to American psychologist Philip Zimbardo, factors that lead to deindividuation include anonymity, shared responsibility, the novelty of a situation, and altered states of consciousness (Karen Douglas). In line with such science, in addition to blaming "mob rule" and drugs, Danny also appeals to the novelty of the situation, arguing that he did not know how to react because he had experienced "nothin even remotely like it" (*Sheep* 223–24). Before Ianto's death Danny was ranting about the "madness" of the world and how we should resign ourselves to the fact that, at any moment, we might be either dead or responsible for the death of someone else (123). In the end – however, even he is not able to face all the facts with complete honesty and to take his share of responsibility.

So, unlike the others, Danny finds it impossible to reconcile his part in Ianto's murder with his sense of himself as a good person. Joseph Conrad's novel *Lord Jim* (1900) is concerned with closely related issues, as the protagonist, Jim, also battles with a problem regarding the loss of self-awareness in the face of an unexpected situation. From an early age, Jim has cherished heroic images of the seafaring life – though, after becoming a seaman, is soon disenchanted with this formerly idealised lifestyle. The moment of disillusionment is the result of a possible act of cowardice: against all rules of the seaman's ethic, Jim abandons a shipwrecked passenger boat, leaving the people on board to their own devices. In the heat of the moment, Jim leaps into a lifeboat, only to immediately lament his actions: "I wished I could die . . . There was no going back.

It was as if I had jumped into a well – into an everlasting deep hole” (Conrad 81). As with Danny, Jim is desperate to explain his actions while trying to maintain a notion of himself as a good person. It seems that Jim’s actions do not cohere with his sense of self, which prompts him to ponder on the possibility that, instead of being a conscious decision, perhaps the jump was caused by forces outside his control. Gray discusses Jim’s attempts to “dredge from consciousness something that will end his uncertainty”: Jim is “in search of his own character”, but, as Gray pessimistically concludes, “[i]t is a vain search” (67). Gray explains the human desire to rationalise our behaviour: “We project a self into our actions because by doing so we can account for the way they seem to hang together” (72). Thus, in the case of Danny and Jim, the cognitive dissonance that follows their actions threatens to destroy their unitary sense of selfhood; in order to cope with seemingly conflicting narratives, the characters need to convince themselves that their inexplicable actions were situationally determined, not products of their personal intentions. However, it could be argued that this is just another narrative, a story we tell ourselves to allay the arising sense of unease.

Both Danny and Jim are in search of their own character; however, Gray argues, the belief that our actions express our decisions is often incorrect:

The knowing I cannot find the acting self for which it seeks. The unalterable character with which . . . all humans are born may not exist; but we cannot help looking within ourselves to account for what we do. All we find are fragments, like memories of a novel we once read. (68)

Furthermore, in order to support the sense of an unalterable character, we need to create our own personal narratives to maintain this illusion and to differentiate ourselves from animals. Gray explains this tendency: “We are *persons*, whose actions are the results of their *choices*. Other animals pass their lives unawares, but we are *conscious*” (38). He continues: “Our image of ourselves is formed from our ingrained belief that *consciousness*, *selfhood* and *free will* are what define us as human beings, and raise us above all other creatures” (38). However, as already established, the concept of free will is exceedingly problematic; Conrad seems to acknowledge this too, and, in *Lord Jim*, rejects the Lockean concept of the blank slate: “A clean slate . . .? As if the initial word of each our destiny were not graven in imperishable characters upon the face of a rock” (Conrad 134). Leaning towards a gentle determinism then, this suggests that we will do what

we will do because of the unchangeable fact of who we are – and that our stories and sense of free will and personal responsibility are simply comforting narratives.

In *Sheepshagger*, Danny remains unwilling to accept that the inclination to violence might be a fundamental element in all human behaviour, including his own. Thus, to explain his actions, Danny tries to emphasise external factors and altered states of consciousness. Furthermore, he claims he participated in Ianto's murder only because he was "so fuckin scared" of Ianto, who looked to him like "Satan himself" (223). However, Marc remarks that Danny had "a big fuckin grin on [his] face" during the attack, which, in Marc's opinion, suggests he was enjoying his moment of uninhibited aggression. As Danny remains unwilling to acknowledge this, Marc argues that he simply is in denial:

That's because yew don't want to recognise yewer own dark side. Yew'd sooner believe that it doesn't exist rather than accept-a fact that yew can be an animal as well, like-a rest of us. Like-a whole-a the fuckin human race, mun. Yewer ape underneath it all, just like-a rest of us. (*Sheep* 223)

Danny rejects the explanation, arguing that Marc has "missed [his] point entirely" (*Sheep* 223). To accept the claim that human beings are "ape underneath it all" would entail abandoning ingrained beliefs regarding selfhood and free will. However, as Gray argues: "Recent cognitive science and ancient Buddhist teachings are at one in viewing this ordinary sense of self as illusive" (70). Nevertheless, most of us are determined to see ourselves as unitary and conscious beings, whose lives are "the sum of their doings" (Gray 70). Thus, it remains fundamentally impossible for Danny to accept the fact that he is capable of killing "a mate" whom he "liked" (*Sheep* 223) – while the others avoid such problems by claiming that Ianto was not their friend to begin with. By othering the object of their violence, they manage to justify their actions to themselves.

Gray's treatise on human nature includes ideas expressed by Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), where he discusses man's ingrained aggression and how the more primitive impulses conflict with our sense of self as reasonable and rational beings (Bennett and Royle 354). Freud argues against the Rousseauian idea of the noble savage:

The reality behind all this, which many would deny, is that human beings are not gentle creatures in need of love, at most able to defend themselves if attacked; on the contrary, they can count a powerful share of aggression among their instinctual endowments. (48)

Freud continues to explain that, if we learn anything “from life and history”, it is impossible to dispute the human tendency to aggression (48). If the circumstances are right, he argues, and if the psychological “counter-forces” have ceased to inhibit our primitive impulses, aggression manifests itself and “reveals man as a savage beast that has no thought of sparing its own kind” (48). Bennett and Royle explain Freud’s understanding of aggression in modern society: civilisation requires that our “instinctual aggression is turned inward”, and thus it becomes “that kind of psychic violence of the ‘conscience’ experienced as feelings of ‘guilt’” (354). Therefore, as Freud declares, “the price we pay for cultural progress is a loss of happiness, arising from the heightened sense of guilt” (71). In *Sheepshagger*, Marc seems to subscribe to a Freudian view on man’s innate aggression; however, for Marc, this means abandoning any further attempts at introspection. Instead of making genuine efforts to explain aggression, he seems content with merely recognising the existence of our “dark side” and accepting the fact that we are “ape underneath it all” (*Sheep* 223). However, as Pinker would say, he is guilty of confusing “explanation” with “exculpation” (179). The ubiquity of violence does not undermine the importance of studying the underlying causes of aggression and its repercussions – and accepting responsibility for it where necessary.

4.3 The importance of looking

In an interview with Brockway, Griffiths discusses the role of violence in his fiction. The author emphasises that he is not a “violent man” but argues that it is important to study violence: this is the “sacrifice we have to make”, as it “justifies our place in the world”. Griffiths continues:

Like all ages, ours is characterised by violence, and I think it’s vital that we try to work out why. It makes for a sometimes pretty unhappy existence, but why should it be otherwise? People of violence aren’t happy either. The darkness in our hearts needs to be explored. (Brockway)

Pessimistically perhaps, Griffiths states that “suffering” is inevitable and that violence is a permanent part of human existence, but concludes that “[a]ll of us”, not merely writers, “need to stare at the world” (Brockway). Eight years later, in an interview with *New Welsh Review*, Griffiths continues to argue that it is “incumbent upon non-violent people” to look at violence, which

prompts the interviewer to wonder whether such people exist. Griffiths elaborates on his choice of word: “By ‘non-violent’, I meant not outwardly violent; most of us, of course, harbour dark urges” (Jeans).

Believing that humankind is forced to carry the permanent burden of violence, Griffiths contends that even the non-violent amongst us harbour “dark urges” (Jeans). In this, he echoes Freud, who writes that aggression is a part of our “instinctual endowments” (48). However, civilisation requires that we do not always follow our instinctual impulses. Otherwise, and certainly from a Hobbesian perspective, the outcome would be “war of every man against every man” (qtd. in Sorell). Nevertheless, Freud remarks that it is not easy for human beings to refrain from the “satisfaction of their tendency to aggression” (50). Yet our civilisation is “built on renunciation” (34), as we are expected to suppress our primitive impulses and harness them towards common good, via a process that Freud calls sublimation. In connection to our “dark urges”, Griffiths seems to be talking about something similar: “if we can control them, or filter them, or alchemise them into something else, then we can keep hold of that sense of objectivity vital to examining something visceral and self-defeating” (Jeans). Freud, however, warns that the act of “depriv[ing] a drive of satisfaction” – or alchemising our dark urges into something beneficial – “cannot be done without risk” (34). Similarly, Griffiths believes that “the wildness in the human” can be “[t]rained but never tamed”, and if our spiritual need for recognition is “blocked”, it will come out in a “way that makes you feel alive . . . and it could be violence” (Gary Budden).

In *Sheepshagger*, violent acts are uncontrollable manifestations of emotional agony – or, more banally, means of coping with “hard an boring existence” (*Sheep* 7). Ianto, after committing his first murder, experiences peculiar elation:

[H]e creeps Mohawk-cautious across the unpopulated peaks, disarrayed with stain and spillage he is . . . free for once and perhaps at last from guilt or need or even (strange power in his stride now, alien lift to his limbs) shame. (*Sheep* 89)

For all that, as Griffiths explains, Ianto “gets it terribly wrong”: “he embodies this kind of rootless, idiopathic rage that doesn’t really know what it is angry against” (Peddie 123). The author further explains that his characters are “reacting against the deadening effect of modern life” (Peddie

123). In his foreword to *So Long Hector Bebb*, Griffiths expresses a similar notion in connection to Berry's novel, which, he argues, presents the reader with "an exegesis of the beast in man" (xi). Griffiths suggests that perhaps the transformation of Berry's protagonist from benign to "feral" is due to the combined effect of both internal and external forces: "the consequences of Hector's innate aggression send him wild, but so does his unconscious rejection of the ways in which society forces us to warp out our true nature" ("Foreword", xii). Ianto is equally incapable of channelling his rage – and furthermore, as Griffiths remarks, Ianto's friends are "exactly the same" (Peddie 123). He continues: "Once they find the object of their rage – which is Ianto himself – they can let it go" (Peddie 123). It remains questionable whether Ianto's friends, Danny in particular, resolve anything internally through their violence. As Griffiths phrases it, violence "subtracts rather than gives" (Jeans) – and thus we might conclude that neither Ianto nor his friends can reach any true catharsis through brutality.

The dark end of Ianto's life leaves an indelible mark on his friends, as they too find themselves caught in the vicious circle of savagery stretching back to Ianto's childhood. As previously explained, Ianto's trauma is described as "a fall which will never end" (*Sheep* 236). But, instead of disappearing with Ianto, the trauma seems to find new victims like a contagious disease. As Ianto's friends stare down at his "shattered" body, it becomes apparent that they will keep revisiting this sight in their nightmares: "They've done this many times, they have, they've stood like this many times – stood in a rough wide silent circle staring down at Ianto" (*Sheep* 261). This points to a characteristic of traumatic events, the fact that they never seem to really end – a psychological phenomenon that Freud calls *Nachträglichkeit*, which could be translated as 'afterwardness' (Bennett and Royle 133). Bennett and Royle explain that as the "force and significance" of a traumatic event are only experienced later on, in a sense, the event "does not happen when it happens" (133). While it seems that Ianto's friends are easily overcome by their innate aggression, losing themselves in the crowd, the repercussions of their actions and arising moral qualms are not as effortlessly dissipated. Griffiths explains that this is exactly what he wishes to expose by making his readers look at violence: his goal is to reveal the consequences of violence and show how "the preciousness of life is destroyed irreparably" (BBC Mid Wales 2).

In an interview with *Spike Magazine* Griffiths argues that we live “in extreme times” and people are “absolutely aching . . . for some kind of spiritual fulfilment”; if society does not offer an outlet for this tension, it may discharge itself in violence (Taylor). In connection to spiritual fulfilment, Griffiths explains that, for him, finding “a literary voice” coincided with learning “to accept God” (Peddie 122). The author clarifies that he “would never try to convert anybody or evangelise”; nevertheless, in his writing he aims at highlighting the presence of a “divine spark in everybody” while depicting “life in all its shittyness and glory” (Peddie 122). In *Sheepshagger*, Griffiths explains, Ianto is “yearning and longing for some recognition from God, for some cosmic significance to his life” (Peddie 122). As discussed earlier, having committed his final and most brutal murders, Ianto wanders into the cottage of an old Welsh lady, who washes his blood-caked face three times. Then minutes later, on leaving the cottage, Ianto is overcome by agony: “he falls to his knees in the mud . . . and scoops up a handful of drenched dirt out of the saturated grass and rubs it in his hair and his face spoiling it again” and starts uttering “entreaties beseechings nonwords and nonsense” (*Sheep* 215). Griffiths elucidates that Ianto is longing for significance, “even if that means committing acts of awful violence”, but receives no “recognition” nor “judgment from God” (Peddie 122).

While discussing *Sheepshagger* in an interview with BBC Mid Wales, Griffiths explains his attempts at showing “how violent acts come from a shrivelled soul and contribute to the further attenuation of that soul” (2). He is, of course, not the first writer to tackle such issues; in connection to contemporary works of tragic literature, Bennett and Royle discuss Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), explaining that the novel involves “a lucid but terrible elaboration” of why a man called Breedlove has come to abuse his daughter (126). “By stressing the ways in which Breedlove himself had in the past been racially and physically abused”, Bennett and Royle argue, *The Bluest Eye* “provides a complex historical account of racism and violence” (126). Thus, while Morrison’s novel is tragic, “the villain is paradoxically part of the tragedy” (Bennett and Royle 126). Similarly, although capable of terrible violence, Ianto is fundamentally a victim himself; thus, it could be argued that Griffiths, too, endeavours to lucidly elaborate how brutal acts only breed more brutality. Morrison’s novel concludes bleakly: “It’s too late. At least on the edge of my town, among the garbage and the sunflowers of my town, it’s much, much, much too late” (qtd. in Bennett and Royle 126). The ending of Griffiths’ novel seems to be equally pessimistic. As Ianto’s

friends are finishing their conversation, Danny poses a question: “D’yew have any idea, d’yew know what it all fuckin *means*” – the reply is terse: “Yeh, Danny, we do. Which is why we’re goin-a pub an get lashed” (*Sheep* 263). The finishing words of the novel mark a return to the banality of everyday life: “I’m dying-a fuckin thirst” (264). Ultimately, escapism is easier than unflinching introspection; or, to quote Aldous Huxley: “If most of us remain ignorant of ourselves, it is because self-knowledge is painful and we prefer the pleasures of illusion” (161).

Conclusion

Sheepshagger delineates a world oozing brutality, trauma and frustration. In depicting an “endless drama of tiny deaths played out in miniature among the mountains” (*Sheep* 6), the novel engages in a shift of perspective, emphasising the smallness and fragility of all life. Similarly, while it represents each act of savagery, animal or human, in an unflinching manner, the novel questions and blurs accepted divisions between human behaviour and that of other creatures. In this sense, Ianto’s seemingly irrational atrocities are never truly gratuitous. His deeply traumatic past provides grim logic of sorts for his actions, and he is rendered akin to a wounded animal lashing out in agony. Yet, at times, Ianto’s predatory instincts are contrasted with his innate gentleness and his role as a pixie-like noble savage – and it is in this liminal state, at the meeting point between two extremes, where Ianto emerges as an authentic, flesh-and-blood being, transcending simplistic stereotypes. Perhaps this is the novel’s greatest merit: it succeeds in humanising, sensitively fleshing-out, a deeply troubled individual, the likes of whom are too easily excluded and abjected in modern society. *Sheepshagger* warns against reductive categorisations or convenient labels, such as ‘sick’ or ‘evil’, by demonstrating that even the most troubled and flawed have reasons for being who they are – and are always worthy of understanding and respect as fellow humans.

Sheepshagger draws its readers, to quote Griffiths, “into the human heart’s dark valleys” (BBC Mid Wales 2). As he portrays characters “reacting against the deadening effect of modern world” (Peddie 123), the author unveils society’s failure to offer them meaningful outlets, as well as showing the consequent repercussions. To some extent, Griffiths is speaking from his own experience, for as a troubled youth he found an alternative outlet for his energies and a source of inner peace when roaming the rugged landscapes of Snowdonia. Nevertheless, such peace is not always easily attained – as *Sheepshagger* so harrowingly depicts. With all the restraints and distractions that imprison them, Griffiths’ characters struggle to find a sense of purpose in the ephemeral moment of their existence. Metaphorically speaking, they resemble the little bird which Ianto observes flitting into a barn – locale of an illegal rave, alive with light, sound and motion – only to soar quickly back “into the darkness again” (*Sheep* 65). The bird’s journey is a “small slice of light and noisy activity between the two immensities of blackness” (*Sheep* 65) – a

haunting allegory of the transient fragility of all life, as well as the particular purposelessness of their own.

In *Sheepshagger*, Griffiths demonstrates that dignity is innate in all human beings. Yet, as the author laments, this is often forgotten in today's tabloid culture, in relation to the underprivileged in particular – the people Griffiths examines in his writing. *Sheepshagger* exposes the falsity of this sensationalist approach when it contrasts the nondescript “skinny spotty lanto” with “the grotesque troll the newspapers will later depict him as” (15). An example of a related treatment can be found in McCarthy's *Child of God*, where the haruspex-like medical students, in the autopsy of the protagonist, examine his entrails in search of “monsters worse to come in their configurations” (184). Such acts of othering resonate with the profoundly human tendency to draw distance between one's imagined sense of self – viewed as unitary and wholesome – and what is deemed unspeakably wicked and abhorrent. Likewise, we mislead ourselves with sanitised historical representations of past atrocities. Such whitewashing allows us to hide from the truth of humanity's perpetually violent nature, and to delude ourselves with an image of ethical progress only occasionally interrupted by aberrant individuals, groups or nations. In the end, then, hard demarcations between ‘self’ and ‘other’, or ‘good’ and ‘evil’, are perhaps nothing more than mental constructs. The need to ‘other’ is essential to this delusory process – though by categorising one thing as the polar opposite of another we are in fact establishing an entwined interdependence.

Sheepshagger establishes that the ‘other’ is a mere construct of our minds, serving complex social purposes. The novel illustrates how othering takes paradoxical form: either an individual is categorised as ‘other’ to facilitate discrimination against him – or is first treated poorly and *then* dehumanised in order to allay guilt and justify unfair acts against him. As such, for their own peace of mind, lanto's friends engage in acts of othering to posthumously strip him of his dignity. In part, this is due to an emerging cognitive dissonance: their need to see themselves as reasonable people is threatened by the dire knowledge of having killed a friend. By othering lanto they attempt to convince themselves that his killing was somehow justified. Danny, alone – representing perhaps the questioning reader – cannot accept such facile explanations, stressing

that we are all a “mass of contradictions” (*Sheep* 100). He refuses to participate in the construction of harmful stereotypes that only breed more prejudice. Danny acknowledges that the creation of such reductionist labels is fuelled by fear – and this fear stems primarily from the protective desire to suppress something dark we see in the other and dimly recognise, but often deny, in ourselves. Thus, when Danny is seeking explanations for Ianto’s erratic savagery, the others misconstrue this as an attempt to forgive him his atrocities. Ultimately, they confuse explanation with exculpation, and abhor both. Thus, in order to effectively reject Ianto and so free themselves, they need to dehumanise him and deny the possibility of mitigating circumstances.

Although he acknowledges that there is darkness and light in each and every one of us, even Danny is not able to bear this when faced with darkness within himself. The knowledge of his brutal actions threatens his own sense of self as a good person, while his genuine desire to understand prevents him from following his friends’ example and simply rejecting Ianto. Thus, as he is not ready to accept final responsibility for his actions, Danny is left blaming external circumstances for his behaviour. What he calls “mob rule” (*Sheep* 222) is indeed a psychological phenomenon known as deindividuation. As Marc points out, perhaps such tendencies are proof of disquieting similarities between humans and other animals. Nevertheless, we need to convince ourselves otherwise in order to maintain the impression that we are in control of our behaviour. Gray sees the sense of self as something we project into our actions, as it helps to maintain the illusion that each action is a conscious decision and representative of one’s imagined inner self – another narrative, another story we tell, to insulate ourselves from the confusion of existence.

Sheepshagger presents a world pervaded by interminable conflict and brutality. Simultaneously, the novel explores the human tendency to believe that violence is just an illness or an aberration, not an inherent – yet often suppressed – part of our lives. When forced to reconcile themselves to the darkness within, Griffiths’ characters attempt to allay the consequent unease by alienating the object of their rage or by blaming external factors for their behaviour. However, it could be argued that all such strategies are merely constructs of mind; convenient narratives fabricated in order to reject elements that threaten a unitary, yet illusory, sense of self. Nevertheless, the human inclination towards violence seems as prevalent as our tendency to deny it – so perhaps these

narratives serve an important purpose. In a savage, confusing world, perhaps we instinctively prefer to pretend, taking refuge in illusions to protect us from true knowledge of our own nature.

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