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**ZTRÁTA IDENTITY V KNIHÁCH IRVINA WELSHE**

**LOSS OF IDENTITY IN IRVINE WELSH'S NOVELS**

BACHELOR'S DIPLOMA THESIS

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*I declare that I have worked on this thesis independently, using only the primary and secondary sources listed in the bibliography*

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Author's signature

I would like to thank my supervisor Mgr. Ema Jelínková, Ph.D. for her advice, motivation, and encouragement while I was writing my thesis.

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## **Introduction**

The gritty realism of the lives of the Scottish working class and underclass filled with drugs, alcohol, and violence is the recurring theme of one of the influential contemporary writers, Irvine Welsh. His first, and probably the most popular of his books, *Trainspotting* came out in 1993 and marked the start of his literary career.

*Trainspotting* has been a source of interest of much research about the Scottish identity in the contemporary Scottish literature. The image of Scotland in Welsh's novels represents the disillusioned working class under the new rule of Margaret Thatcher in the end of the 1970s and later 1980s. The late 20<sup>th</sup> century was also a time of the rebellious subcultures like punk or the rave culture. These subcultures contribute to the overall image of the Scottish identity. The prequel of the *Trainspotting* called *Skagboys* came out in 2012 and gives a new insight into the social and economic changes in Scotland affecting the lives of the working class at the beginning of the Thatcher rule. This work uses the novel *Skagboys* as an important part of the analysis as it has not received nearly as much attention as *Trainspotting* since it came out.

This thesis is concentrated on the analysis of the theme of identity as found in some of Welsh's novels. This first chapter introduces the Scottish cultural and national identity with some of the important terms. The second chapter then gives a brief introduction to Welsh's work also with the socio-historical context. The final chapter gives the analysis which is separated into three main parts. The first part of the analysis is focused on the identity of the underclass living in the housing schemes on the marginalized parts of Edinburgh. The second part examines the shattered identity of heroin addicts accompanied with toxic relationships. The third part considers Scottish women as a separate subculture and tries to show how the masculine nature of the Scottish society may affect different subcultures. This thesis also raises a question about the loss of identity on the cultural and personal level, for what is the identity for, if there is nothing one can identify with.

## **1. The Scottish cultural and national identity**

The post-Union Scottish identity is marked by many cultural changes rising from its position in Europe as a part of the British state. The shift towards more Anglicised identity during the Enlightenment was even more prominent. During the period of Enlightenment, the educated middle class tried to get rid of their Scotticism from language and learn how to use English properly. The Scottish identity has been thus hard to define since the year 1707. This chapter is focused on some of the developments of the cultural and national identity in Scotland after the Act of Union. The problems of some of the marginalized groups, which rise from the hard-to-define identity, are also part of the focus of this chapter.

The first section is focused on the nature of Scottish identity and myth within the British state. Following sections then examine the problems of Scottish language as a part of the culture, and the contradiction in Scottish nature labelled as Caledonian antiszygy. Another section introduces the discourse of Clydesideism as a part of a cultural stereotype, that contributed to the image of Scotland as an overtly masculine nation. Finally, this chapter considers subcultures, and Scottish social class as important aspects in forming of the contemporary Scottish identity.

### **1.1. Scottish not British**

The self-confidence of Scots about their national identity were raised from the introduction of the Scottish parliament in 1999, according to Magnus Linklater who pointed out that majority of people considered themselves Scottish, not British in recorded polls.<sup>1</sup> The division of Scottish culture from British culture can also be interpreted as further dividing the Scottish from the English, as Britain and England are sometimes assumed more or less synonymous. As already mentioned, the Scottish hard-to-define identity was affected by the incoming English cultural trends after the Act of Union in 1707. The more anglicised society in the London-centred British state emerged in Scotland after the English language was established as the official language of Scotland. People then continually confused, and sometimes still confuse, the words “British” and “English”. The word “British” is in this context labelled by Marshall Walker by the term “weasel-word” as it can easily slip into the meaning of “English.”<sup>2</sup> Walker continues to describe the relation of Scots people

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<sup>1</sup> Magnus Linklater, *Myth & Reality: The Nature of Scottish Identity* (Saltire Society Scotland; 2013), 16.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Walker, *Scottish Literature Since 1707* (Longman; 1996) 21.

towards Britain as that “for many Scots Britain is an English company with too many shares in Scotland.”<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is associated with the fact that many non-English authors are considered English within “The Great English Tradition” proving that not only Scotland suffers this “cultural assimilation”<sup>4</sup> as it is described in McGuire. The tension between Scotland and England increased even more after the failed referendum on devolution in 1979 as pointed out in Morace:

The failure came to be understood as further proof of both English treachery – of London’s and therefore England’s power over Scotland – and Scottish cowardice, thus provoking intense debates and feelings of self-loathing, national and personal.<sup>5</sup>

The uncertainty of Scotland about its place within the British state was from a more cultural point of view caused by a cultural vacuum that was left behind after the Scottish intelligentsia moved to London and the vacuum was filled with the “deformed and regressive sub-national discourses of Tartanry and Kailyard.”<sup>6</sup>

The evolution of cultural identity which was created in Scotland can be characterised by the many attempts to revive or reassert the Scottish cultural identity. The literary criticism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century derived from nationalism and the fiction of this period became a “standard for a cultural devolution.”<sup>7</sup>

The Scottish cultural identity can be perceived from different points of view outgoing from incurred subcultures divided for example according to social, economic, or sexual identity e.g.: homosexuals, rave culture, football etc... More broadly, however, Scotland can be to some extent also perceived as a British subculture.

## **1.2. Caledonian antisyzygy**

The term Caledonian antisyzygy was coined by G. Gregory Smith in 1919 and was originally used in the sense of duality in the Scottish literary tradition. The term later expanded its meaning to the concept of a “national culture irredeemably split and deformed

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>4</sup> See Matt McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature* (Macmillan; 2009), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Robert A. Morace, *Irvine Welsh* (Macmillan; 2007), 14.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions Film, Television and the Novel* (Edinburgh University Press: 2004), 7.

<sup>7</sup> McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature* 13.

along the fault line of British/Scottish identity that relates back to the 1707 Act of Union.”<sup>8</sup> This idea of polarities fighting each other within one entity can be within the Scottish culture seen as the “fundamental division: Highland and Lowland, Catholic and Protestant, Nationalist and Unionist.”<sup>9</sup> In the literature the antisyzygy was later adopted by Hugh MacDiarmid, one of the leading figures of the Scottish Renaissance, for whom the word was according to Michael Gardiner “perfect because not only did it sound clever and scientific, no one knew what it meant.”<sup>10</sup> Some of the Scottish writers captured this contradictory nature in their novels. One of the examples can be found in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* as pointed out in Walker.<sup>11</sup>

More of a cultural disunity in Scottish literary tradition is visible in the distinct responses to the question of language and its importance in culture discussed in the following section.

### **1.3. Language as a part of culture**

The debate over the use of language in literature in the sense of cultural identity and self-consciousness can be dated back to the 1707. As stated above, the official language of Scotland was English after the Act of Union. The English not only became the official language, but it also became the necessary part of those people who wanted to be perceived as more educated. This attitude was also adopted by authors who wanted to reach the English audience. This phenomenon was even more supported by the fact that Scottish intellectuals of the period of the Scottish Enlightenment wanted to get rid of the Scotticism. Eventually the use of Scottish language became a “political affirmation of un-Englishness.”<sup>12</sup>

The Scottish literature built upon its own distinct identity, the authors like Alan Ramsay, Robert Fergusson or Robert Burns kept the Scots in their works and continued the tradition of Scottish Makars. The interest in the Scottish language was again revived during the Scottish Literary Renaissance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It was a period when MacDiarmid’s

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<sup>8</sup> Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions Film, Television and the Novel*, 118.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Gardiner, *From Trocchi to Trainspotting Scottish critical theory since 1960* (Edinburgh University Press: 2006), 19.

<sup>11</sup> Walker, *Scottish Literature Since 1707*, 15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.



sense of vernacular and nationhood projected in his poetry in which he used the Lallans, a synthetic Scots consisted of mixture of Scottish dialects.

The linguistic inheritance of Scottish people who had to speak in one language and think in another was by Edwin Muir perceived from the perspective of Smith's Caledonian antiszygy.<sup>13</sup> Muir described the difference between use of Scots and English in the way that the English is the language of the head and the Scots was the language of the heart.<sup>14</sup> Muir's solution of the problematic of Scottish writers was to abandon using the Scottish language as he believed that the problems of the Scottish writer cannot be solved by writing poems in Scots as the "Scottish poetry exists in a vacuum."<sup>15</sup> According to McGuire, Muir's claim that Scottish people feel in one language and think in another was disproved by a number of authors. Such authors who followed the trend of MacDiarmid were writing "highly sophisticated, cerebral literature in a variety of Scots."<sup>16</sup> The later works of MacDiarmid were however written in English as Walker pointed out that MacDiarmid eventually "tacitly accepted Edwin Muir's opinion."<sup>17</sup>

The rise of vernacular fiction also witnessed the rise of use of the vernacular dialects. The working class speech that "has formed one of the most energising currents in Scottish writing of the last three decades"<sup>18</sup>, was used in the literature of James Kelman, Liz Lochhead or later in the novels of Irvine Welsh. The contemporary use of vernacular speech and the choice of language as a whole in literature is important for the identity of the work. That the language is important for the national identity can be seen in a statement of James Kelman as pointed out in McGuire "Elsewhere Kelman has written 'language is your culture – if you lose your language, you've lost your culture, so if you've lost the way your family talk, the way your friends talk, then you've lost your culture.'"<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature* 49.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>15</sup> Edwin Muir, *Scott and Scotland: The Predicament of the Scottish Writer* (London, 1936), 15.

<sup>16</sup> McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature* 50.

<sup>17</sup> Walker, *Scottish Literature Since 1707*, 278.

<sup>18</sup> McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature* 51.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

The next section is concerned with cultural stereotypes which developed from the traditional Tartanry representation of the Scottish culture. It is then also shown how the cultural stereotype is viewed with the more recent discourse of Clydesideism.

#### **1.4. From Highlanders to drunken ruffians**

Stereotypes can be approached from the view of imagology which is comprised of images of communities mainly within literature. The perception of Scottish image is however in Petrie also examined in another media such as film.

The traditional Scottish culture represented by kilts, bagpipes and also the image of Highlander or noble savage is defined by the term “Tartanry”. This image was stereotyped due to the emerged industries like tourism and film in which the stereotype expanded. The Scottish cinema “expressed an urgency for debunking the myth of Tartanry and Kailyard”<sup>20</sup> as according to Sarah Neely. According to Cairn Craig<sup>21</sup> historical novels of Sir Walter Scott also supported the tartan romantic image of Scotland. This term eventually shifts towards the image of a drunk man with a heavy accent and a kilt in movies or cartoons.

The other term, which was already mentioned, Kailyard, is derived from the word meaning “cabbage patch”. This emerged into the Scottish national image from the tradition of the Kailyard school. The Kailyard school included writers like J. M. Barrie or Samuel Crockett. Their works were by many characterised as “provincial”. According to Oxford Dictionary of National Biography the works of Kailyard were identified as sentimental and nostalgic and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century became the “antithesis of the forms sought by early to mid-twentieth-century proponents of the Scottish literary renaissance.”<sup>22</sup>

The term “drunken ruffians” used in the title of this section refers to the image of a Scottish hard man associated with excessive drinking of alcohol and violence. The industrialised Scotland which was “working class in character and consequently closer to the real-life

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<sup>20</sup> Sarah Neely, “Contemporary Scottish Cinema”, in Neil Blain & David Hutchison, *The Media in Scotland*, (Edinburgh University Press: 2008), 152.

<sup>21</sup> See Cairns Craig, “Sham Bards, Sham Nation, Sham Politics: Scotland, Nationalism and Socialism.” *The Irish Review*, No. 8 (1990), 31.

<sup>22</sup> Oxford Dictionary of national Biography, “Kailyard school”, published October 08, 2009, Kailyard school (act. c. 1888–c. 1900) | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography (oxforddnb.com)

experiences of the majority of Scots<sup>23</sup> was projected by a new developed discourse which was labelled Clydesideism. This discourse expanded in 1960s and 1970s literary fiction and film. Although it seemed that it would offer “a more progressive cultural frame of reference”<sup>24</sup> it soon became “mythic and no less elegiac or nostalgic than Tartanry or Kailyard”<sup>25</sup>. The image associated with Clydesideism appears overtly masculine which is also connected to the masculine pursuits such as “football, gambling, excessive drinking and violence.”<sup>26</sup> Scotland is in comparison to England perceived as an overtly masculine nation.

This section briefly introduced terms Tartanry, Kailyard and Clydesideism which reimagined the cultural image of Scotland and led to the formation of stereotypes. Some of the stereotypes broadly appears also in Welsh’s novels.

The following sections are focused on the subcultures and communities developed during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and their relation to the Scottish identity. The importance of the social class in determining the self-identity is also subsequently pointed out.

### **1.5. Subcultures of Scotland**

This chapter defines the subculture and then introduces some of the subcultures which emerged in Scotland in the 1980s and 1990s. The focus is mainly on the subcultures which appear in Welsh’s novels and are important for the analysis part of this thesis.

Subculture can be defined as an existing group of people who have something in common and deviate from the major culture in which they exist. Subculture can be considered an emerged subgroup of people with the same interests and values; this type of subculture develops mainly among the youth. Another point of view from which subcultures can be perceived is a subculture as the marginalized subgroup. This would include for example unemployed, homosexuals, and also ethnic minorities.

In Welsh’s novels the youth subcultures would be rave culture, punk, or the young generation of football hooligans. The marginalized subcultures of Welsh’s novels include in particular junkies, and unemployed underclass. In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century an

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<sup>23</sup> Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions Film, Television and the Novel*, 17.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

urban youth subculture of non-educated delinquents “appeared in the Scottish press”<sup>27</sup> labelled by the term “ned culture”. The ned culture is associated with the image of a young criminal participating in violent acts, hooliganism and alcohol drinking.

What follows is that subcultures are also divided according to social classes. We can divide them into underclass culture, working class culture, or upper-class culture. The next section examines the class structure in Scotland during Thatcherism and the importance of class in the Scottish social structure.

### **1.6. Class**

The social class in Scotland is an important aspect through which the Scottish identity can be perceived. This section applies previous research concerned with social class in Scotland and the problems of the working class in the new unequal society.

According to Alex Law and Gerry Mooney class is important for determining Scottish social life which “have been formed by a sharpened class consciousness and class-based organisations.”<sup>28</sup> In the previous chapter the introduced term Clydesideism was described as deeply associated with masculinity. The masculinity which came from the hard labour of the working class. The working class which was “overdependent on the traditional heavy industries of coal, steel, shipbuilding and textiles.”<sup>29</sup> Some of these industries, mainly coal mining, were targeted by the new economic changes. Closing of the coal mines and the consequence of the high rate of unemployment contributed to creating a more divided and unequal society. Petrie provides the statistics of the unemployment stating that the number of people who were having a secure job by the mid-1990s was only 40 per cent, while the number of unemployed or economically inactive was only 10 per cent less.<sup>30</sup> In Douglas Fraser’s article for BBC News it is pointed out that the tragedy of the working class, in comparison with the middle class problems, is way more targeted and explored in Scottish film and literature.<sup>31</sup> This phenomenon is according to Fraser perhaps caused by the fact

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<sup>27</sup> Alexander Law & Gerry Mooney, “‘We’ve never had it so good’: The Problem of the Working Class in the Devolved Scotland” in *Critical Social Policy* 26, 10.1177/0261018306065607, 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>29</sup> Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions Film, Television and the Novel*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>31</sup> BBC News, „Middle class obscured in a Scots myth“, last updated in October 18, 2014, [Middle class obscured in a Scots myth - BBC News](#)

that many Scottish people who live in a rather middle class lifestyle tend to identify as a working class.<sup>32</sup>

The differences between the social classes were even more visible with the new housing schemes in the residential areas. Irvine Welsh depicts the realities of the housing schemes in his novels and according to Petrie this depiction of “housing schemes blighted by a mixture of poverty, complacency and the erosion of any meaningful sense of community” is one of Welsh’s powerful aspects.<sup>33</sup> The residential buildings Welsh uses in his novels is for example in Muirhouse, where he lived as a child, or the Cables Wynd House also known as “banana flats” in Leith. These overcrowded, slum-like places are in Welsh’s works accompanied by poverty and social problems like drug abuse, theft, and violence.

The Scottish self-independent identity and cultural image was important to reassure in Scotland, which was uncertain within the British state. The cultural vacuum was filled with the discourses of Tartanry, Kailyard or later by Clydesideism. These discourses as used in the film industry or other new media caused the Scottish image to be stereotyped by them.

The identity can be viewed as a way in which people perceive themselves and how they are being perceived by others. National identity can be viewed as something what is shared among people with the same cultural heritage. Subcultures as examined in the section 1.5. can be built upon another shared identity among smaller group of people with similar values.

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<sup>32</sup> BBC News, „Middle class obscured in a Scots myth“, last updated in October 18, 2014, [Middle class obscured in a Scots myth - BBC News](#)

<sup>33</sup> Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions Film, Television and the Novel*, 91.

## 2. The Socio-historical context of Irvine Welsh's novels

This part introduces some of the themes, structure and framework of Irvine Welsh's novels and its place within the contemporary Scottish literature with the focus on the "Irvine Welsh phenomenon" as examined in the work of Robert A. Morace and Cristie L. March and then also introduces Welsh's works discussed in this paper with focus on the socio-historical context of the chosen novels.

Irvine Welsh is a Scottish author born in Leith, Edinburgh which is also a place in which he sets most of his novels. Welsh along with James Kelman and other authors, is one of the writers of "The Second Renaissance" of the 1980s, which is a movement that involved "group of writers coming from, and seeking to write about, specifically working class culture."<sup>34</sup> Welsh's writing about the suburb life can be perceived as partly autobiographical as his works partly reflect his own life experiences. In an interview for the Prague Writer's festival in 2018, he stated that the character of Mark Renton is a more authentic version of himself and that he feels more confident when writing as Renton.<sup>35</sup> There are more parallels to Welsh himself like for example his part-time job as DJ and his interest in clubbing and rave culture are all present in Renton's character.

The shift from the cultural theory of Mathew Arnold towards modern cultural materialism is according to Morace the most important part of the Welsh's phenomenon.<sup>36</sup> Morace points out that as the materialism rejects the Marxist view "that cultural products can only reflect the economic system that produced them."<sup>37</sup> During his early career, Welsh collaborated with Kevin Williamson, a founder of the Rebel Inc., the independent press that was the first to publish Welsh's works. With their slogan "F\*\*\* the mainstream!", and their punk attitude towards culture, their mission was "to take sledgehammer to the literary establishment."<sup>38</sup>

Even though his first novel *Trainspotting* debuted in 1993 the events of the book are set in the 80s, the time of a rule under Margaret Thatcher as the first female British prime

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<sup>34</sup> McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature* 94.

<sup>35</sup> See Milan Vidlák, "Vyber si život" in *Časopis Šifra*, No. 11 (2018).

<sup>36</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 13.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> BBC, *Collective*, 29 November 2007, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A3583325>, as cited in McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 34.

minister. This period, that is also accompanied with the gloomy mood after the failed referendum of 1979, is also known under the term “Thatcherism”. Scotland went through many changes during Thatcherism. These changes had as Matt McGuire states “dramatic consequences for Scotland, not least within its working class communities.”<sup>39</sup> The privatization of some of the British industries or complete demise of some of the industries like coal mining or shipbuilding along with the negatively received poll tax were the reasons of the working class anxiety. Andrew Perchard with brutal honesty shows the lasting frustration of the Scottish former miner official Alex Mills in the article concerned with devolved Scotland:

Looking out over the steel-shuttered and graffiti-daubed abandoned houses in his colliery village in 1999, former miner and Nation Union of Mineworkers (NUM) official Alex Mills addressed the subject of the “plague”-of-unemployment and drug addiction-infecting his streets. To end our interview, he raised himself up to deliver a passionate indictment of the “class struggle perpetrated by Thatcher, carried on by Major,” that visited desolation on erstwhile mining villages such as his own. “At present, we have a generation of zombies,” Mills declared. “These are Thatcher’s children.”<sup>40</sup>

The new government policies in Scotland as according to Petrie “renewed sense of a distinct national consciousness forged in direct opposition to the very values that underpinned Thatcherism.”<sup>41</sup>

The generation is what divides Welsh’s novel from the novel of James Kelman as McGuire states “Kelman and Gray’s fiction focused on a working class community in the process of abandonment under the politics of Thatcherism in the 1980s. In contrast, Welsh homes in on the next generation, the disaffected offspring of the protagonists that Kelman and Gray write about.”<sup>42</sup> The identity and role of the older generation is however still important for Welsh’s characters. Their role is primarily being a father figure for the main characters. The father figures however seem to be the source of the characters disillusionment about

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<sup>39</sup> McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Perchard, “‘Broken Men’ and ‘Thatcher’s Children’: Memory and Legacy in Scotland’s Coalfields.” In *International Labor and Working class History*, no. 84, 2013, p. 78, [www.jstor.org/stable/43302728](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43302728). Accessed 9 June 2021.

<sup>41</sup> Petrie, *Contemporary Scottish Fictions Film, Television and the Novel*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 134.

their future-self. The struggle of the older generation is also pointed out later in the analysis part.

The high rate of unemployment was partly to blame for the rise of the drug addiction. The working class and underclass people felt uncertainty and self-doubt which made them to find the escape from the reality in the substance filled syringe. This statement is indicated in the interview where Welsh stated:

People did not take heroin because of sadness. They took heroin because they did not know what will happen to them, what they can do in the world, whether they will still have a job tomorrow or who will wipe their asses with them again.<sup>43</sup>

The youth culture of Britain which was according to Morace characterised by the “punk’s aggressively anti-art, DIY aesthetic and anti-bourgeois ethic”<sup>44</sup> was responsible for the “ethic and aesthetic of rave and club culture, with the cross-class use of Ecstasy.”<sup>45</sup> The “dance drug” served as inspiration for Welsh’s novella collection *Ecstasy* (1996) and is also essential for the character development of a violent thug Roy Strang in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1996). In this novel the ecstasy turns Roy to a more tolerant man befriending his gay brother after the drug abuse, however his happiness does not last long as this form of escapism cannot alleviate his guilt. The theme of drugs is analysed further in section 3.2.

From a more literary point of view, Thatcherism also affected the use of language. It affected concretely the language of class that had to be elided “from the sphere of public debate.”<sup>46</sup> The language is an important part of the culture as was pointed out above. McGuire also points out the irony, that Thatcher chose to discredit the language of class in the times when Scottish writers tried to redefine the importance of language for the national identity and started using it in innovative ways.<sup>47</sup> Welsh’s novels are filled with regional dialects or slang of junkies. The language that Welsh chose to write is the language of the underclass.

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<sup>43</sup> Translated from, Milan Vidlák, “Vyber si život” in *Časopis Šifra*, No. 11 (2018).

<sup>44</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>46</sup> McGuire, *Contemporary Scottish Literature*, 93.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.



## 2.1. Introduction to the discussed works of Irvine Welsh

The Welsh's novels operate in sort of a same "Irvine Welsh Universe" as they are connected through the characters who can appear as small cameos. The main series built around *Trainspotting* might be called "The Skagboys trilogy" which consists of *Trainspotting*, *Porno* (2002) and *Skagboys*. There is a fourth novel in this series *Dead Men's Trousers* published in 2018. This novel however moves away from the nihilist mood and topic of the alienated underclass of the previous novels, as Welsh also said in the interview "The connection with the topic and characters was strong in the time when I was writing it. The time I had written it the connection was lost."<sup>48</sup> The characters of the Skagboys trilogy like Mark Renton, Sick Boy, Frank Begbie or Daniel "Spud" Murphy serve as good examples for this paper's thesis. For the analysis of the reality of the housing-schemes in section 3.1. this paper also visits character from another novel for the fragmented personality of Roy Strang in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*.

Welsh's novels could be read in various ways. Morace states that *Trainspotting* proposes many different types of interpretation:

They could read the novel differently as well, as gritty realism, as black humour, as Scottish or as British, as postmodern or as postcolonial, as political or as post-punkishly post-political, as proof of Scottish confidence or as further evidence of the Scottish cringe...<sup>49</sup>

With this phenomenon Welsh achieved that his books, suited also for the working class or underclass, became popular among people who had never read a book before. Ironically, *Trainspotting* was found to be "the most shoplifted book in British publishing history."<sup>50</sup> The novel came back into the public subconscious after the release of Danny Boyle's movie *Trainspotting* in 1996 with Ewan McGregor starring as Mark Renton.

Welsh in his novels focuses more on the identity of the characters and their reflections about the surrounding rather than the story itself. This can be seen in how most of his novels are structured as he "splinters the narrative into a series of vignettes in which various characters frankly present their points of view."<sup>51</sup> An example of such structure is visible in *Trainspotting* in which every chapter has its own distinct narrator and different

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<sup>48</sup> Milan Vidlák, "Vyber si život" in *Časopis Šifra*, No. 11 (2018).

<sup>49</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 36.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>51</sup> Cristie L. March, *Rewriting Scotland* (Manchester University Press: 2002), 15.

characters. The composition is not always chronological and is sometimes filled with “errors.”<sup>52</sup> The chapters are therefore structured more like separate short stories narrated from a personal viewpoint of some of the characters. The place in the time of some of the events is sometimes indicated by references to pop culture like for example music.

The deviation in narration can be seen in novels *Marabou Stork Nightmares* and *Filth*. In *Marabou Stork Nightmares* the dream-like world of Roy Strang caused by a deep coma switch with episodes of perception of the present. Roy occasionally hears the voices of nurses or his parents and reflects upon his memories of his childhood that eventually lead to the cause of his coma and then his awakening. Roy is also an example of an unreliable narrator. The novel *Filth* is occasionally narrated by the consciousness of a tapeworm in Bruce’s body, which reveals us events from Bruce’s childhood. The text of the tapeworm narration is stylized to look like an actual tapeworm, and it also covers and interrupts the narration of Bruce.

A more chronological approach, that is not only more accurate in the sense of time, but more consistent in terms of story is in *Skagboys*. This novel is filled with chapters that discuss some events that affected Scotland. These chapters which are titled “Notes on an Epidemic” begin with the failed referendum of 1979. The word “epidemic” refers to an epidemic of AIDS spread primarily among heroin addicts who lent syringes between themselves. These chapters thus map the path of Edinburgh becoming the “capital of drugs” and dreaded place of AIDS.

Welsh’s novels follow the drug or alcohol-driven lives of working class or underclass protagonists, alienated from the new Thatcherite London-centred government, who found their escape in heroin and occasionally clubbing or football as there was almost nothing left for them to identify with. These characters commit petty thefts instead of work in order to get money for drugs and the maintained relationships that are toxic and destructive in its nature. The 1980s and early 1990s witnessed an emerge of a suburban punk and rave culture which in people evoked rebellious and anti-bourgeois views. The novels *Trainspotting*, *Skagboys* and *Marabou Stork Nightmares* are sources of the analysis in this thesis.

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<sup>52</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 42.

### **3. Identity in Irvine Welsh's novels**

The analysis in this chapter is divided into three major parts. These parts are focused on separated themes dealing with identities of marginalized groups of people who belongs to different subcultural branches. The analysis also focuses on different personalities of various characters who serve as a reflection of the environment they live in. The first part is concerned with the theme of underclass identity during Thatcher's government rule in 1980s. This is depicted by the reality of the housing-scheme life and problems like mass unemployment and poverty. The following part is dedicated to the protagonists of *Trainspotting* and *Skagboys* by analysing how they convey the theme of alienation and identity of junkies who use drugs as a way of escapism which eventually lead to the complete loss of their identities. The last part then examines the image of a hard-working man as proposed by the Clydesideist discourse and how this masculinity may affect the female subculture.

All these parts are connected, to some extent, by the concept of subculture as a marginalized community and also by the problems of self-identity. It also tries to answer the question of how the loss of identity is indicated in the novels through the views of members of different subcultures.

#### **3.1. Concrete and shite**

The relation of the Scots towards Scotland is reflected in Welsh's novels primarily from the point of view of the underclass protagonists, who live on the margins of the society. The life in the housing schemes is most visible through characters of Roy Strang and Simon "Sick Boy" Williamson as examined in following section including a subsection that is devoted to idea of Roy Strang as a depiction of Caledonian antiszygy. The theme of nationalism is then discussed through the anti-patriotic views of characters like Mark Renton who repeatedly denigrate Scotland.

##### **3.1.1. Identity of the life in schemes**

This section uses the characters of Sick Boy and Roy Strang as examples of the reality of the underclass' life. The things these characters have in common is that they live with their families in a local housing scheme in Edinburgh. Sick Boy lives with his family of Italian descent in the "banana", the Cables Wynd House in Leith, while Roy lives in Muirhouse. Families of Roy and Sick Boy can be described by Roy's "Yes, we were a far from

handsome family.”<sup>53</sup> Roy’s label “genetic disaster”<sup>54</sup> for his family includes a violent alcoholic father and deluded mother who has two illegitimate children and who believes in conspiracies like that the Japanese invented AIDS.

The parallel between Roy and Sick Boy can be seen in how Sick Boy’s family is as dysfunctional as his misogynistic father, who was unfaithful to Sick Boy’s mother. Sick Boy then compares his father to the others who are alcoholics and explaining that “it was generally women rather than bevvvy that provided the embarrassment.”<sup>55</sup> The misogynistic behaviour towards women is also a characteristic trait that Sick Boy inherited from his father. Sick Boy’s financial situation also does not help his family as he repeatedly asks his mother and sisters for money instead of finding a work. Sick Boy’s mantra is that he is “not employed through choice”<sup>56</sup> in contrast to Roy who eventually becomes the primary source of the income for the Strang’s household.

### **3.1.1.1. The antisyzygy of Roy Strang**

Roy’s self-identity can be examined through several polarities in his behaviour and character. There are several examples in Roy’s character which could be labelled by the term Caledonian antisyzygy. The identity is examined by the identity of subcultures in which Roy belongs and ways of how Roy solves his problems with identity by finding several possible ways of escapism. The problem with identity seems to be unresolved in the end of the novel.

Welsh provides a more detailed depiction of a gritty atmosphere of the schemes in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* as in chapter “The Schemes”<sup>57</sup> which is primarily dedicated to Roy’s childhood and his personal perception of the environment in which he lived as a child. Roy’s self-perception as an offspring of the schemes serves as a source of frustration for him. This is indicated in the novel in various situations, for example in chapter “Zero Tolerance”.<sup>58</sup> In this chapter Roy thinks about his life and the reality is that eventually one of the few things which makes him cry while he questions “Did anybody else live like us?

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<sup>53</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995; London: Vintage, 2004), 20.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Skagboys* (2012; London: Vintage, 2013), 24.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>57</sup> Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 19-32.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 195-215.

Did any cunt?”<sup>59</sup> Roy’s identity is shaped to the image of a “top boy”<sup>60</sup> through the novel until this point of his breakdown when he succumbs himself to his emotions and forgets who he even is “I wasn’t Roy Strang. I wasn’t a top boy. I wasn’t even Dumbo Strang either. I didn’t know who the fuck I was and it didn’t matter.”<sup>61</sup>

Roy’s identity as a Scottish man is further explored when he moves with his family to Johannesburg, which serves in the novel as a source of contrast of Roy’s Scottish and temporary South African identities. Johannesburg is for Roy a place where he “really meant to be rather than shitey Scotland”<sup>62</sup> and also a place to live with “ambition of a sort”<sup>63</sup> rather than in Edinburgh which for Roy “represented serfdom”<sup>64</sup> Roy’s remembering of Edinburgh reveals the picture of a city divided by a social gap as what Roy remembers is “concrete housing schemes which were populated by scruffs, but the town still somehow being run by snobs for snobs.”<sup>65</sup> The Scottish masculine identity is left behind after Roy leaves to Manchester where he spends most of his time in clubs abusing ecstasy. Drugs play only a minor role in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* unlike in other Welsh’s novels. The effect ecstasy has on Roy is that he becomes more emotional towards others and himself “I wasn’t embarrassed about being sappy”<sup>66</sup> but it also served as a tool for the matter the next section about drug abuse is concerned with, and that is escape. The way of Roy’s understanding of drug abuse is that “You can either use drugs as a validation of the joy of life or you can use them as an escape from its horrors.”<sup>67</sup>

Roy uses different forms of escapism from his working class life. One of the forms, comics with Silver Surfer, is suppressed while staying in Johannesburg. The work in Johannesburg school made Roy to “lost my urge to escape into the Silver Surfer and my other comic-book fantasies.”<sup>68</sup> The return to Edinburgh is marked by Roy’s new mantra to “take no

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>60</sup> Top Boy – a leader of a Hooligans firm

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>62</sup> Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 75.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 239.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 77.

shite from any cunt who would try to brand me a freak”<sup>69</sup> which is sealed by stabbing his classmate with a hunter knife. The hard man image is even more emphasised by taking a part of hooliganism and sexual abuse including a gang rape of Kristy. Visible urge to escape from reality of working class is also in Roy’s continuous attempts to go “deeper”<sup>70</sup> and remain in a coma, as for his coma, it represents a place of freedom where he “can do the things I wanted to do, the things I tried to do, up there in the real world.”<sup>71</sup>

Roy’s hard man image is put into contrast with an image of an ambitious student and later working man, which he uses as a cover for his bad intentions, like in the case of stabbing his classmate he uses the impression of “hard-working, intelligent pupil; university material”<sup>72</sup> to protect himself. In a similar way he is perceived by his parents after the rape trial as his mother portrays her son as “a good laddie”.<sup>73</sup> These contrasting identities also overshadows Roy’s self-perception as in chapter “Respect”<sup>74</sup> he remembers not wanting to participate on the act of gang rape while in the end of the novel it is revealed that he was the most brutal of the whole gang. Carole Jones states that to explain Roy’s violent identity “Welsh’s narrative makes him a victim of his environment and social position, of the imposition of gender roles in this context which valorises an aggressively dominant ‘hard man’ masculinity.”<sup>75</sup>

Roy’s character represents both, the identity of a Scottish working class man who grew up in a housing scheme, and also the contradictory nature of Scots. Roy’s attitude towards Scotland, coming from his experience of life of an underclass, can be perceived as anti-patriotic. This attitude is present also in other characters as examined in next section.

### **3.1.1.2. The (non)working class**

In the introduction to the Welsh’s novels in section 2.1. it was mentioned that the topic of unemployment is connected to the Thatcherism. The unemployment and dissatisfaction with the government is a recurrent theme in the novels. The novel *Skagboys* provides an

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>70</sup> Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 177-193.

<sup>75</sup> Carole Jones, “White Men of Their Backs- From Objection to Abjection: The Representation of the White Male as Victim in William McIlvanney’s *Docherty* and Irvine Welsh’s *Marabou Stork Nightmares*”, *International journal of Scottish literature*, issue 1, Autumn 2006, 8.

insight into this problem through some of the characters, but also through the short passages, as already outlined, describing some of the important events of the late 1970s and early 1980s. The novel *Skagboys* thus seems to be more politically motivated than *Trainspotting*.

On the front page the *Skagboys* novel is introduced with a known quote of Margaret Thatcher “There is no such thing as society.” The first chapter is written in form of Renton’s diary and maps the event known as the Battle of Orgreave in 1984 which was one of the miners’ strike during the 1980s. The chapter in *Skagboys*, “Journal Entry: Concerning Orgreave”<sup>76</sup> is one of the few parts of Welsh’s novels which deal with the struggle of the older generation of people affected by the Thatcher’s rule. Welsh is primarily focused rather on the so called “Thatcher’s children” and how they “survive in the current economy and society.”<sup>77</sup> These are the people born into the working class community and destined to experience the struggle of their fathers as does Mark Renton in the chapter mentioned above. Renton’s father, Davie, is the only character of the older generation who gets his own narration. In the chapter “Skin and Bone”<sup>78</sup> he remembers the Leith before the liquidation of some of the industries, namely shipbuilding in which he worked. Ewan Gibbs concerned with deindustrialization of Scotland pointed out that “Welsh portrays Davie’s despair that the social fabric of industrial society was ‘slowly but irrevocably coming apart.’”<sup>79</sup> The more of the struggle of the unemployed is uncovered to us as the novel proceeds more to the economic changes during the early Thatcherism. The contrast between the struggling generation and the youth generation that is yet to get hit by the wave of unemployment is visible in chapter “Blackpool”<sup>80</sup> in which Renton and his drunk friends get out of the pub in the Monday morning after a night of clubbing and see dismissed miners handing leaflets. Renton is despised by the view as he states “Ah couldnae look at them: ah steered every cunt ower the road oan some crap pretext.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Welsh, *Skagboys*, 3-21.

<sup>77</sup> March, *Rewriting Scotland*, 24.

<sup>78</sup> Welsh, *Skagboys*, 285 – 292.

<sup>79</sup> Gibbs, Ewan. "Synthesis.: ‘The Full Burden of National Conscience’: Class, Nation and Deindustrialization." In *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialization in Postwar Scotland*, (LONDON: University of London Press, 2021), 228.

<sup>80</sup> Welsh, *Skagboys*, 26-45.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

Besides characters like Sick Boy who is unemployed at his own discretion, there are characters who have a job in the beginning of the novel, but eventually lose it. Spud is the main source of compassion in Welsh's novels. He is portrayed as a mostly innocent fool, who is often ill-treated by others. Spud works in a furniture delivery, but his work position is uncertain. The problem of unemployment has in *Skagboys* two important points, both can be also considered prominent for the character development of Spud. The first one is the chapter "Notes on Epidemic 1", which is followed by a part in which Spud still has a job and represents the image of a working class man who tries to make money in an honest way. The other chapter is "Notes on Epidemic 2"<sup>82</sup> in which Welsh provides statistics about the rising unemployment in Scotland. This chapter ends with the statement "hundreds of thousands of young, working class people in the UK had a lot less money in their pockets and a lot more time on their hands"<sup>83</sup> which underlines the crisis of working class people during the early 1980s. In the chapter that immediately follows, and basically the rest of the novel, shows what the statement actually means for those people. Spud is found hopeless after the loss of his job. The loss of a job means for Spud the downfall into the life of heroin addict petty thief as portrayed in *Trainspotting*. It is indicated that the loss of a job meant for lots of the people succumbing to drugs and alcohol.

Welsh in chapters "Notes on Epidemic 6"<sup>84</sup> and "Notes on Epidemic 7"<sup>85</sup> shows a list from Lothian Health Board of people infected with HIV due to the drug abuse, most of them are marked as "unemployed". Several studies tried to find out if unemployment leads to drug addiction. David F. Peck and Martin A. Plant however in the cases of Lothian youth found out that unemployment is associated with drug addiction just moderately and other factors like social status or level of education must be taken into account.<sup>86</sup>

It can be suggested that Spud represents a typical victim of the new government under the Thatcher's rule. Even though it is not known what Spud's educational level is, it can be suggested that it is low from his foolish behaviour. His position of a victim is observable

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 513–515.

<sup>86</sup> See Peck, David F., and Martin A. Plant. "Unemployment And Illegal Drug Use: Concordant Evidence From A Prospective Study And National Trends." *British Medical Journal (Clinical Research Edition)*, vol. 293, no. 6552, 1986, pp. 929–932. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/29524779](http://www.jstor.org/stable/29524779). Accessed 14 May 2021.



even in *Trainspotting*. Spud's rebellious resignation to live a normal life can be seen in his new attitude towards making money. To find money for drugs he commits petty thefts as his life is accompanied by the strenuous avoidance of work as can be seen in the chapter "Speedy Recruitment"<sup>87</sup> in which Spud and Renton purposely behave as incompetent to keep getting social benefits. When Spud and Renton are on trial for theft, Spud's incoherency and vernacular speech causes him to appear uneducated. While Spud is by judge labelled as "habitual thief"<sup>88</sup> Renton adopts the higher-class language in a provocative way and fooling the judge.

The problem of unemployment with the combination of a low social status and low level of education, was one of the reasons of the rise of heroin addiction in early 80s' Scotland. The drug addiction in the section 3.2. is then examined as a newly formed subculture that comes from the punkish and nihilistic identities of the underclass youth. Nihilism is in Welsh's novels also present in anti-nationalist view, which was also outlined in the character of Roy Strang, according to which is Scotland "The lowest of the fuckin low."<sup>89</sup>

### **3.1.2. Rivalry of the Scots**

The national identity of Welsh's characters is portrayed, as already mentioned above, as anti-nationalistic or anti-patriotic. It was also stated in section 1.1. that the Scottish identity suffered by the assimilation within the London-centred Union. In Welsh's novels however, English are not the main rivals of the Scots. The main rival of the Scottish characters are Scots themselves. This is most prominently demonstrated by Renton's inner monologue that is being frequently cited and is also well-known from the movie adaptation:

Fuckin failures in a country ay failures. It's nae good blamin it oan English fir colonising us. Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. We are colonised by wankers. We can't even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonised by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don't hate the English. They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (Vintage, 2001), 62-67.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>90</sup> Welsh, *Trainspotting*, 78.

This attitude however is not shared by his younger version in the early chapters of *Skagboys* in which Renton thinks positively about himself and about his national identity “Ah’m suddenly overwhelmed by the realisation that it feels great tae be me; a young, smart, working class boy fae these beautiful islands. How blessed could a human being possibly be?”<sup>91</sup> What is important to point out is that he does not think about himself as a Scottish but rather British in this part as he refers to his homeland as “beautiful islands”. Morace also comments upon this as he states that the characters of *Trainspotting* do not “feel connected either to the nation-state of Britain or to the state-less nation of Scotland, neither do they feel connected to culture, as commonly defined, meaning high culture, but also much of mass culture, especially television.”<sup>92</sup> The only culture they participate in is rave culture or the culture of football which is part of the image of Clydesideism. The rivalry between Scots is depicted through the two football teams from Edinburgh, Hibernian from Leith, and Hearts from Midlothian. This rivalry which often leads to violence can be seen in *Trainspotting* in the chapter “Victory on New Year’s Day”<sup>93</sup> in which Stevie is attacked by the fans of Hearts for him wearing a Hibs scarf. Renton commonly does not share the hate towards other groups which rivalry sometimes comes just from their socio-geographical differences like Edinburgh and Glasgow, he nevertheless shares the hate towards the Hearts fans.

Renton’s tolerance towards the other Scots comes from his parents. His father is Glaswegian protestant, and his mother is catholic from Edinburgh. His understanding extends also to other marginalized social groups like homosexuals or handicapped people. In chapter “London Crawling”<sup>94</sup> he meets a man and spends night in the man's flat, and when Renton sleeps the man abuses him. Renton later starts to beat the man, but shortly after, he pities him and in the end of the chapter, he even thinks about sex with him, which reveals Renton’s bisexuality. This claim is also supported by the statement of Morace who states that “Renton is more self-aware, more self-critical and more self-deprecating than the others, and much less self-deluded.”<sup>95</sup> In *Skagboys* Renton is taking care of his

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<sup>91</sup> Welsh, *Skagboys*, 35.

<sup>92</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 44.

<sup>93</sup> Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting*, 41-50.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 227-239.

<sup>95</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 52.

handicapped brother, Davie, and confesses about helping him to get sexual satisfaction and explains that he did that “tae comfort him.”<sup>96</sup>

Renton can be perceived as an opposing element to the intolerance within the rest of the masculine community depicted in the novels. His sexual and national identity however seems to stay undefined to the similar extent as Roy’s identity in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. His appropriation of nihilistic point of view in *Skagboys* then leads to his descent into the drug addiction as depicted in *Trainspotting*.

This section examined the reality of the underclass life in the housing schemes depicted in Welsh’s novels. The marginalization of the underclass by the new government supports the feeling of alienation associated with anti-nationalistic views. The characters of the novels search for different kinds of escapism from this reality which is also associated with many social and economic problems such as mass unemployment. The low social status combined with low living standards creates a rough environment suitable for the rise of alcohol and drug abuse.

### **3.2. The culture of drugs**

The subculture of drug addicts is one of the most visible themes of Welsh’s novels. In *Trainspotting* the main protagonists live in the cycle of live of the junkies, the intoxication is altered by the withdrawal symptom and finding money for another dose of heroin. *Skagboys* introduces us these characters in a more self-aware way and consequently brings readers closer to understanding of their motives and reasons to choose drugs instead of “choosing life”.<sup>97</sup> The point of “choosing life” is in *Trainspotting* described as choosing what is socially accepted in the world of consumerism. The anti-social and nihilistic view is underlined by Renton who “punkishly dismisses”<sup>98</sup> the choosing life mantra. This attitude towards consumerism can be seen in the iconic sentence “Well ah choose no tae choose life.”<sup>99</sup> which was even more popularized in the pop culture after Danny Boyle’s movie.

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<sup>96</sup> Welsh, *Skagboys*, 173.

<sup>97</sup> Welsh, *Trainspotting*, 187.

<sup>98</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 47.

<sup>99</sup> Welsh, *Trainspotting*, 188.

Scotland as we see it in *Trainspotting* is different from the one, we see in *Skagboys*. In *Skagboys* Scotland is depicted as a fast-changing world in which the protagonists struggle to adapt, while in *Trainspotting* we see them struggle to live the lives assigned to them. The new living standards for the underclass changed and the environment in combination with high rate of unemployment, as indicated in the section above, formed a birthplace of drug addicts. As was indicated earlier, the culture of drug abuse among the youth in the 1980s and 1990s was associated with clubbing and rave culture. Clubbing is mostly associated with electronic music and the weekend use of dance drugs like LSD, speed, or ecstasy. In Philip R. Kavanaugh and Tammy L. Anderson it is stated that rave culture is by medical science portrayed as “a site of extensive drug consumption and personal risk, where solidarity is dismissed or dubiously acknowledged as chemically induced.”<sup>100</sup> Rave culture that caused a wave of the emergence of new musical trends is being referred to in *Skagboys* by Renton who is knowledgeable of genres like for example Northern Soul. The line between the only-weekend-drug-abuse and serious addiction appears to be thin as is indicated in the following analysis.

The social environment of residential areas occupied by underclass in which the drug subculture arouses is associated with toxic relationships and self-destructive behaviour. The protagonists of the novels living in such environment suffer from the alienation from the society and lack of self-identity. This chapter is focused on the analysis of the theme of drugs depicted in the novels. It also concerns the culture of the drug addicts through some of the known subcultures that are represented in the novels.

### 3.2.1. “Heroin be the death of me”<sup>101</sup>

Heroin is the most prominent substance of *Skagboys* and *Trainspotting*. The title of this section is a reference to the song *Heroin* released in the 1967 by American rock band *The Velvet Underground*. The reason for the use of this reference is that Lou Reed in the song provides an objective view mentioning ups and downs of the use of heroin in a similar way as Welsh does in *Trainspotting*. The work of Lou Reed is mentioned few times in Welsh’s novels as one of the Renton’s favourite artists. Welsh also refers to this song in

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<sup>100</sup> Kavanaugh, Philip R., and Tammy L. Anderson. “Solidarity and Drug Use in the Electronic Dance Music Scene.” *The Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2008, 181.

<sup>101</sup> Lou Reed, *The Velvet Underground*, “Heroin”. Accessed April 4, 2021 [The Velvet Underground – Heroin Lyrics | Genius Lyrics](#)

*Trainspotting* in the first chapter “The Skag Boys, Jean-Claude Van Damme and Mother”.<sup>102</sup>

The pain-relieving effect of heroin is indicated to be one of the main reasons for the characters to commit their lives to a drug abuse. The pain is in the beginning rather mental than physical in this context. The amazement over the short-term feeling of rapture is expressed by Renton’s words “Take yir best orgasm, multiply the feeling by twenty, and you’re still fuckin miles off the pace.”<sup>103</sup> In *Skagboys*, when Renton experiences his first dose of heroin, he describes the feeling as rather stress-relieving than “orgasmic”, “Suddenly everything that was burning in ma heid, every fear and doubt, just dissolves, ah can just feel them receding intae the distance.”<sup>104</sup> What Morace points out is that there are many reasons for the heroin addiction indicated in the novel and none of them is “definite.”<sup>105</sup>

The lives of the characters seem worthless under the heroin addiction. Their early ambitions, living standards and relationships are set aside. Spud’s addiction, as mentioned earlier, can be perceived as due to his social and educational level. There are however characters like Renton whose reasons do not seem to be so clear. The following section is focused on Renton’s downfall into heroin addiction. The section also puts up a question if the drug addict can truly lose his identity in the substance.

### **3.2.2. Disintegration of identity**

Welsh gives us in *Skagboys* a depiction of Renton’s life before the addiction. He is a student at Aberdeen University and works part-time jobs. His inclinations to the addiction are clear from the beginning as he uses drugs like ecstasy and drinks alcohol. Heroin is however for Renton “crossing a line.”<sup>106</sup> In the chapter “Blackpool” a homeless offers him heroin but Renton refuses. His obsession with heroin seems to be on the mental level after his first refusal. Renton's temptation with the drugs is indicated to be a part of his Scottish identity as he says that “Perversity and obstinacy are integral tae the Scottish character.”<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Welsh, *Trainspotting*, 3-13.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>104</sup> Welsh, *Skagboys*, 60.

<sup>105</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 46.

<sup>106</sup> Welsh, *Skagboys*, 58.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Renton's intentional termination of his relationship with his girlfriend and leaving University can be marked as a point of his total demise for the sake of heroin. Maintaining relationships and education can be considered as parts of his basic responsibilities. Renton refuse these responsibilities as he starts to feel alienated from the values of his parents and from everything that appears socially acceptable. There is a contrast portrayed in values of Renton's girlfriend, Fiona. While Fiona is a "straightpeg"<sup>108</sup> who has a clear set values and planned future, Renton avoids orderly life and lacks any aspiration. Scott Stalcup commented upon this stating:

In the original novels, both Welsh and Hornby present images of youths frightened by the prospect of adult responsibility in the bleak geographic and economic landscape of late twentieth century Great Britain, choosing to deal with it by not dealing with it, opting instead to use their respective addictions as shields from reality.<sup>109</sup>

After leaving university and breaking up with his girlfriend Renton states: "Ah was like a Quasimodo figure, the smelly, shufflin hunchback expelled fae the ranks ay decent folks, and ah fuckin well loved it."<sup>110</sup> Renton enjoys his alienation from society and from the social norms. This sort of an attack on the conventions seems to be the only part of his identity still present. The drug subculture provides him a new "deviant or alternative"<sup>111</sup> identity. Previous research on the drug addiction of an individual or small groups pointed out the addict's urge to create a subcultural identity. In T. L. Anderson and Joshua A Mott it is stated that:

Individuals will gravitate to drug subcultural groups in order to resolve their own material and non-material dilemmas or problems. In drug subcultural groups, they will find other similarly situated, a finding they may ultimately conclude is the most "intoxicating" aspect of the drug experience. Here, they will interact to create new, shared, and what they initially perceive as more favorable identities, lifestyles, and ideologies.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>109</sup> Stalcup, Scott. "'Trainspotting, High Fidelity', and the Diction of Addiction." *Studies in Popular Culture*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2008, 120.

<sup>110</sup> Welsh, Skagboys, 188.

<sup>111</sup> Anderson, T. & Mott, Joshua. "Drug-Related Identity Change: Theoretical Development and Empirical Assessment". *Journal of drug issues*, vol. 28, 1998, 300.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 300.

Renton's identity of a Scottish workin-class man is thus surpassed or even erased by the now seemingly more important, deviant identity of an addict within the drug subculture.

One of the statements in *Trainspotting* that describes relationships among the group of drug addicts is Johnny Swan's "Nae friends in this game. Jist associates."<sup>113</sup> The truthfulness of this statement is then supported several times thorough the novel. The neglect of basic responsibilities can be analysed through the behaviour of the group of addicts revolving around the main protagonists. In *Trainspotting* the death of the child, Dawn, is one of the darkest parts of the novel. The death of the innocent child represents not only how drugs affect the closest of the addict, but also how drugs take over the mind of the addicted person. This horrific incident causes an emotional strain which is then taken away by another dose of heroin. This irresponsibility of a drug addict towards others is also represented by Renton's choice to sell a dose of heroin to Tommy. This may support the premise about the rave culture mentioned earlier that the solidarity within this subculture is chemically induced.

The drug abuse as depicted in the Welsh's novels has a huge impact on the characters behaviour. The lack of sense of responsibility and urge to be socially deviated suggests that the drug abuse serves as a way of escape from the problems of their reality. The toxic state of their established relationships based on their need of drugs combined with the underclass problems examined earlier points to their issues with finding something to identify with. Drug addicts in Welsh's novels seems to gradually lose their identities while falling deeper into the addiction.

### **3.3. Effects of the Scottish masculinity on other subcultures**

Welsh's novels depict mainly lives of male protagonists. These protagonists struggle with their marginalized identities based on their class. In the novels however there are discussed problems with identity of other marginalized groups based on gender, race, or sexuality. These problems come from the fact that Scotland is in the novel depicted as overtly masculine nation. This representation of Scotland can be perceived from the view of Clydesideism which was introduced in section 1.3. This chapter is focused on the portrayal of the Scottish masculinity and its impact on different subcultures which have to deal with discrimination and finding their place within the society.

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<sup>113</sup> Welsh, *Trainspotting*, 6.

### 3.3.1. Drunken ruffians

This section refers back to the image of drunken ruffians as already mentioned. It was mentioned that football, alcohol, and violence are parts of this image of a hard man. All these traits are present in the Skagboys novels in the character of Francis Begbie. Begbie's behaviour is impulsive, and he seeks for violence even for the smallest reason. In the chapter "Trainspotting at Leith Central Station"<sup>114</sup> he beats an innocent man who just happens to go by. While Renton or Sick Boy seeks for heroin, Begbie seeks for violence. His masculinity stands out even more in his interactions with women. He has no problem to beat his wife even during her pregnancy. Begbie's behaviour against women however cannot be fully understood as purely misogynistic as he is casually violent to everyone regardless of gender.

Welsh's novels are full of senseless violence and most of the times the victims of such violence are innocent people or animals. Sick Boy in the chapter "Deid Dugs"<sup>115</sup> uses air rifle to shoot a dog just to see it turn against its owner so he can come to "help" and kill the dog. Other acts of violence include gang rape already mentioned in section discussing identity of Roy Strang, pub fights, or fights of football fans. March points out that "The prevalence of such characters in Welsh's novels and short stories both recognises and attacks such images of working class culture, exposing at once the danger and the pettiness of such claims to masculinity."<sup>116</sup>

### 3.3.2. Women in Welsh's novels

In the section 1.1. it was stated that Scotland can be perceived as marginalized within the British state. The working class was then introduced as a separately marginalized subculture. The working class was thus under a double marginalization. On the same level of marginalization were also women as according to Esther Breitenbach, Alice Brown and Fiona Myers who comment upon that:

Within this already marginalized position women are again marginalized. The double marginalization is affected by a combination of political and cultural forces within Britain,

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<sup>114</sup> Welsh, *Trainspotting*, 305–309.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 178-181.

<sup>116</sup> March, *Rewriting Scotland*, 28.



and male domination within Scotland, which again has both cultural and political dimensions.<sup>117</sup>

Being a Scottish working class woman is then another level of marginalization that is part of the concern depicted in Welsh. In Welsh's novels most of the female characters are victims of domestic violence, rape, or sexual jokes. This section focuses on two female characters, Maria and Kristy. Maria is a victim of Sick Boy's promiscuity and manipulation in *Skagboys*, while Kristy is a victim of the gang rape in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. Both of these female characters are treated as objects not only by their male counterparts, but also by their role in the novel itself. Their role seems to be primarily to reveal the misogynistic side of the male characters. These characters share similar fate. They both lose dignity due to how ill-treated they are by the men.

Maria is only 15 years old when Sick Boy manipulates with her and leads her to heroin addiction. Sick Boy's storyline in *Skagboys* with Maria includes him being a procurer.<sup>118</sup> He exchanges Maria's body for money and occasionally for a dose of heroin. He feels some guilt as he says to Renton that "She was way too young and distressed, and I can see now that ah was weak and stupid and took advantage ay somebody in a bad situation."<sup>119</sup> This slight notion of a moral redemption is however heavily contrasted by his actions in the chapter which immediately follows. Sick Boy lets a cruel ex-cop Dickinson to take advantage of Maria who is tired and almost unconscious in the chapter "Skaggirl"<sup>120</sup>. This time it is without Maria's consent and the situation is even worse because of the fact that Dickinson is the killer of her father.

Kristy and primarily her horrible fate is one of Welsh's main concern in *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. Through Kristy, Welsh draws attention to the violence against women by giving detailed brutal depiction of her rape. There is a short paragraph on the front pages of the book which says:

The material used in this book is taken from the Zero Tolerance campaign which originated in Edinburgh. Zero Tolerance is the first campaign to use the mass media to challenge male

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<sup>117</sup> Breitenbach, Esther, Alice Brown, and Fiona Myers. "Understanding Women in Scotland." *Feminist Review*, no. 58, (1998), 60.

<sup>118</sup> Procurer – a person who sells women as prostitutes.

<sup>119</sup> Welsh, *Skagboys*, 211.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-229

violence against women and children. The campaign believes that there is no acceptable level of violence against women and children.<sup>121</sup>

The trial of the gang about the rape in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* reflects another problematic of masculine society, the victim-blaming. Linda B. Bourque pointed out that:

Although many states have revised statutes governing how rapes are handled by the courts, there is debate about the effectiveness of those statutes in reducing the judicial system's tendency to "blame (try) the victim" rather than the perpetrator when alleged rapes reach a jury trial.<sup>122</sup>

Roy and all other members of the gang pretend to be the victims of Kristy's "rape fantasies"<sup>123</sup>. The court's treatment of the case in the novel seems to correspond with Bourque's statement. Welsh treats the British judicial system with strong irony which is evident in words of Roy's father right after the trial "Ye kin fuckin well say what ye like about British justice bit it's still the best in world!"<sup>124</sup> Morace states that Kristy's transformation "is not surprising given how thoroughly she has been abused, first by Lexo's crew, then by the Scottish legal system."<sup>125</sup> The consequences of the violent act and the social injustice then contributes to Kristy's identity shift from a victim to a vengeful murderer. The immediate consequence of rape on victim's self-identity is apparent in Roy's realization:

I realised what we had done, what we had taken. Her beauty was little to do with her looks, the physical attractiveness of her. It was to do with the way she moved, the way she carried herself. It was her confidence, her pride, her vivacity, her lack of fear, her attitude. It was something even more fundamental and less superficial than those things. It was her self, or her sense of it.<sup>126</sup>

Kristy's identity is reduced into a defenceless victim until she starts taking the revenge on the gang. The role of a victim is reversed and when she shows up by the Roy's hospital bed Roy's thoughts are that "She's beautiful. Thank God she's got it back. What we

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<sup>121</sup> See Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*.

<sup>122</sup> Bourque, Linda B. "Why Do We Blame the Victims of Sexual Assault?" *Contemporary Sociology* 23, no. 2 (1994): 294.

<sup>123</sup> Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 209.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 212.

<sup>125</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 114.

<sup>126</sup> Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 190.

took.”<sup>127</sup> The way Kristy responds to violence however eradicates a possibility to “conceive of an alternative, feminine response to a violence.”<sup>128</sup> The ending of the novel thus indicates that it is not easy to escape from the masculine identity.

This chapter examined the image of the Scottish hard man as described by the Clydesideist discourse. The masculinity has been proved to play a major role in the identity of not only the male characters but also the female characters.

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 263–264.

<sup>128</sup> Morace, *Irvine Welsh*, 113.

## Conclusion

This thesis dealt with the identities of the Scottish working class and underclass during the Thatcherism in the novels of Irvine Welsh. The cultural and national identity of the characters were perceived from the perspective of different subcultures occurring in Scotland.

Firstly, the Scottish cultural and national identity was introduced along with important terms such as Caledonian antisyzygy, Tartanry, or Clydesideism. These terms then served for the purpose of analysis of the identities of the characters. *Sick Boy* and *Roy Strang* were examined as examples of the underclass identities in Welsh's novels. In the analysis it was described how Welsh realistically depicts the underclass by the depiction of the housing-scheme life in *Muirhouse* or *Cables Wynd House*. The marginalization of the underclass is in the novels associated with anti-nationalism and alienation. The social and economic problems were proved to be part of their identities. This makes the characters search for different types of escape from their reality.

The next chapter then directly dealt with the most recurrent type of escapism, drug abuse. It was shown that the drug addicts who condemn the orderly life create deviated subcultures to have something to identify with. It was also suggested that drugs such as heroin makes the characters to reduce their identities only to a life of binary state; intoxication / relapse.

The image of a Scottish hard man was a concern of the last chapter. This chapter gave an example of how the Scottish masculinity directly affects different subcultures. It was suggested that female characters in Welsh's novels do not have a distinct identity. Their identities are strongly connected to their male counterparts.

The loss of identity was therefore indicated to operate on different levels. Scotland in past lost part of its cultural identity in assimilation of Scottish to British. The underclass was disenfranchised by the government to the point when their feeling of alienation led them to feel no connection with their national identity. Many of them then succumbed to drug addiction which gradually took what was left of them.

This thesis used for the analysis the more recent novel *Skagboys* which gives a new outlook on the characters of *Trainspotting*. This novel has received only a little amount of recognition and has not been an object of much analysis yet. This thesis therefore works

only with my interpretation of the novel, and it is suggested to subject the novel to further analysis.

## **English resumé**

The aim of the thesis is to analyse the theme of identity in Irvine Welsh's novels. The included novels are *Trainspotting*, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, and one of more recent novels, *Skagboys*.

To establish the general viewpoint, terms like Caledonian antisyzygy or Clydesideism are introduced along with some of the problems with the Scottish national and cultural identity. Some important elements of identity, such as language, class or subcultures, are addressed. Since Welsh's novels mostly portray the reality of the working class or the underclass, the thesis deals with their subcultures. The Scottish underclass subculture in the late 1980s consisted of drugs, clubbing, and violent activities associated with football hooliganism. The socio-historical context of the discussed novels is also introduced.

The analysis focuses on the theme of identity and is separated in three sections which separately discuss different parts of Scottish identity. The identity is perceived from different points of view, discussing various characters of the novels who often shares some of the personal traits. The term subculture is important for this work as the identity is viewed from the perspective of different subcultures. The thesis also deals with the question to what extent the identity of the characters can be considered lost.

## Czech resumé

Tato práce se zabývá tématem identity v knihách Irvina Welshe. Mezi analyzované romány patří *Trainspotting*, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, a nebo jeden z pozdějších románů, *Skagboys*.

Pro stanovení hlediska jsou představeny některé problémy se skotskou kulturou a národní identitou společně se základními termíny jako Kaledonská antiszygie nebo Clydeisidismus. Jsou řešeny některé důležité prvky identity, jako je jazyk, třída nebo subkultura. Jelikož Welshovi knihy většinou vyobrazují životy dělnické nebo nižší třídy, práce se zabývá jejich subkulturou. Subkultura skotské nižší třídy v pozdních 80. letech je spojena s užíváním drog, navštěvováním klubů, a násilím, které je spojováno s fotbalovým chuligánstvím. Welshovi knihy jsou krátce představeny společně s historicko-sociálním kontextem.

Samotná analýza se zabývá tématem identity a je rozdělena do tří hlavních částí, které diskutují odlišné části skotské identity. Identita je probrána z různých druhů pohledu, které vycházejí z rozdílných postav z knih. Tyto postavy však často sdílí některé charakterové vlastnosti. Termín subkultura je pro tuto práci důležitý, jelikož různé subkultury poskytují odlišné pohledy na identitu. Tato práce se dále zabývá otázkou, do jaké míry lze ve Welshových knihách považovat identitu za ztracenou.

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