

## **MASCULINITY AND COLONIALISM IN IRVINE WELSH'S *MARABOU STORK NIGHTMARES***

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**Abstract:** The fiction of Irvine Welsh is perhaps renowned for its exploration of ideological constructs pertaining to working class culture in Scotland, mainly his exploration of capitalism and consumption in the famous *Trainspotting* (1993). However, this article focuses on a later novel written by Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995); it considers the ideological constructs of masculinity and colonialism and how they function, not only in the cultural imaginary of working class Scotland, specifically Edinburgh, but also in South Africa.

The concepts of gender roles and how they relate to the ideologies of patriarchy and capitalism are explored, along with fundamental questions which arise due to the structure, discourse and the genre of the novel. Questions pertaining to class assumptions and divisions, due to Welsh's use of regional dialect, are analysed: how this operates as an ideological tool and a signifier of the coloniser and the colonised, and how it functions as part of Welsh's literary gendered imaginary.

**Keywords:** Irvine Welsh, *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, Colonialism, Masculinity, Violence, Scotland, Patriarchy.

### **Introduction**

This article seeks to analyse the ways in which Irvine Welsh portrays the impact of cultural patriarchal norms on working class men in *Marabou Stork Nightmares* (1995). It will focus largely on masculinity and how certain manifestations of masculinity and the gendered, cultural imaginary in the novel contribute to the hegemony and discourse of capitalist and patriarchal ideology in general. In this fictional narrative, Welsh explores the negative effects of the dominant ideologies of his society: capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism, by exploring how they impact upon working class men in Scotland. The most grotesque effects of these ideologies are drug addiction, the spreading of HIV and AIDS, gang rape, racism, sexual abuse and financial exploitation. This presentation of some of society's extreme problems would suggest that Welsh is incredibly sceptical of the dominant ideologies of his society.

When the term 'masculinity' is used in this article, it is used in reference to the cultural construction of values which combine to create an identity that functions as the archetypal male within capitalist patriarchal society. The term 'masculine' will not be used to modify a character's qualities, other than through an ideological reading of the text. When the term 'patriarchy' is used, it is used in

reference to modern male-dominated, capitalist society, so, when 'patriarchy' is used, it is implicit that a patriarchal society, in this context, is also a capitalist one.

### **Violence and Masculinity**

Roy Strang is the protagonist featured throughout *Marabou Stork Nightmares*. He is brought up on a housing scheme on the outskirts of Edinburgh city, with his 'genetic disaster' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 19) of a family. His father, 'a total basket case' (ibid.), is prone to frequent outbursts of violence and Roy gets hospitalised on one occasion after 'a bad battering fae my dad ... Six stitches above the eye' (ibid., 23) at a very young age. His father, John, also forces Roy and his older brother Bernard to box each other in the family living room because he considers Roy to be 'too uncoordinated' as a result of being permanently disabled after being attacked by the family dog, Winston, and considers Bernard to be 'too effeminate' (ibid., 29). Roy is brought up in a highly violent environment from birth, in which he stays for the majority of his life. When John encourages his own children to box each other as a form of entertainment, he is encouraging them to resort to violence in order to compensate for their apparent lack of masculine traits. It is clear from John's actions that violence is one of the main constructs of what is considered in patriarchal society as not simply a masculine trait, but as an essential element of patriarchal practice and discourse in order to gain power over others. Violence becomes the only method which Roy can use to gain power and respect, as Schoene-Harwood observes: 'The world Roy lives in is ravaged by a continuous battle for superiority and power' (Schoene-Harwood2000, 145). This is taken to the extreme on several occasions throughout the text, particularly when we learn Roy attempted to commit suicide as a result of taking part in the most violent act that takes place in the novel, the gang rape of a young woman named Kirsty.

The chapter in which Roy, as the narrator, reveals his vicious crime is aptly named 'Respect'. This act of extreme sexual violence is not simply a crime, but a method Roy and the other men who attack Kirsty employ to gain the respect of one another; '- Nice n lubricated fir ye Strangy, Ozzy smiled. – Ah'm fucked if ah'm gown in thair after youse cunts ... I shuddered, trying to keep it light. There wasn't a condom in sight. – Nae cunt shites oot, Lexo growled. I unzipped my flies.' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 184). Despite Roy's reluctance, the demand for respect and the fear of being rejected as a typical figure of masculinity is of greater concern to him than the fear of being prosecuted and any concern he might have had for the victim. The fact that the men use an act of sexual violence, as opposed to other forms of violence, to assert their place as dominant males in their social environment is also significant. This is because sexual violence asserts the male as dominant, and the

female as victimised, and therefore as a passive object. For patriarchy to succeed, women must be made to feel inferior. Rape can be employed as an ideological tool; as Naomi Wolf explains: 'if you are to subdue and suppress women, in such a way that you don't actually need to pen them in or lock them up ...you must target the vagina.' (Wolf 2012, 93). Roy appears to latch on to this ideological construct from an early age. He sexually abuses a young girl who has been ridiculing the shape of his ears shortly after enrolling at secondary school, 'I enjoyed the look in her eyes. Enjoyed having the knife at her throat. Enjoyed the power ... I stood close to her ... and started rubbing up against her until I came' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 107). He also forces a young boy to masturbate him at knifepoint. Whilst he is conscious of other boys at his school looking at him 'sort of differently' (ibid., 109), he never considers this an act of repressed homosexuality (on the surface at least), he just sees sexual violence as a method to assert his 'power'. This is perhaps intended to be a learned mode of behaviour, as the reader finds near the beginning of the novel that Roy was sexually abused by his uncle Gordon, although the true extent of the abuse is not revealed until the very end of the novel: 'GORDON WITHDRAWING HIS BLOOD-STAINED COCK FROM A FRIGHTENED YOUNG BOY BENT OVER A WORKBENCH THAT BOY LOOKING AT HIS DISCARDED BLUE SHORTS (ibid., 255). It is significant to note that, as a victim of sexual abuse himself, he still appears to use sexual violence as a tool to assert male power. Whether or not Roy's knowledge, that rape is a patriarchal tool of oppression, Welsh seems to be suggesting that Roy sexually abuses other children and women as a result of being a rape victim himself. This is problematic both theoretically and structurally, because this suggests that men who commit sexual violence are not to blame if they have been victim to it themselves. This also suggests that Roy lacks individual autonomy, which impacts on the realist structure of the novel. The reader cannot truly think of Roy as a realistic character because he appears to lack any realistic personal control. He appears singularly as a result of his ideological experiences.

However, after the rape, Kirsty does not become a passive victim. She attempts to have all of the participants in the attack against her prosecuted. The men employ a lawyer to represent them in court who states before the court appearance: 'I don't know who's put her up to this, some dykey feminist group trying to make the unfortunate wench into a *cause célèbre* ... Put yourself in my hands and we'll give her a damn good shafting, he said smugly, his smile crumbling around the edge of his mouth in realisation of a poor choice of metaphor' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 207). This demonstrates how the language representative of the legal system echoes the language and attitude of the rapists, and can be relied upon to stereotype women who do not accept their roles as passive and submissive in patriarchal culture as homosexual. The attackers are not, in the end, prosecuted;

'You raped me once, and with the help of the judge and the courts you raped me again' (ibid., 259). Welsh's use of sexually explicit language to evaluate Kirsty's treatment on behalf of the legal system seems symptomatic of a culture in which rape can be, and is, used as an ideological and psychological instrument. Kirsty subverts the attackers' expectations of her as submissive in the act of attempting to prosecute them, but she also subverts their expectations even further by performing acts of extreme violence that the men, living in a patriarchal society, did not expect her to be capable of committing. Not only does she admit to killing the other men who raped her, but she also cuts Roy's eyelids off so that he has to watch her cut his penis off and choke him with it. Roy, quite literally, has been emasculated by the very violence he thought was the key to his respect as an archetypal male in capitalist patriarchy.

There is much to be said about Welsh's use of the grotesque here. While the novel switches between modes of surrealism, with Roy's coma-induced dreams, and realism, with the narrative of his life in both Edinburgh and South Africa, the final chapter does not represent either mode of fiction. The victim of a vicious gang rape murders one of her attackers in a grotesque, surreal manner in an act of revenge. The reader, however, is not positioned in a way to consider the murder as truly victorious, because the reader also finds themselves sympathising with Roy, as well as with a woman who has been raped and her attackers acquitted. The discourse structure of the novel dictates that the reader is placed close to Roy's thoughts and experiences as he is both protagonist and narrator; 'as he is the novel's first person narrator we sympathise with him' (Short 1996, 258). His crime can never be fully condemned by the reader, as he attempted to commit suicide as a result of societal pressures placed upon him to commit violence against a woman, and is also a victim of brutal sexual abuse. Kirsty, the victim, can never be truly considered a victim as she has committed a particularly violent and grotesque murder, along with others; 'I've decided to get them all, Roy. Your mate Dempsey was just the first' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 229). Kirsty cannot get revenge without conforming to destructive masculine behaviour. To overcome patriarchy, she ultimately has to behave like a man. Welsh produces a narrative in which neither character can truly be blamed for their actions because both characters commit crimes by trying to conform to patriarchal ideals, and a narrative in which a woman cannot fully be sympathised with for being a victim of brutal sexual violence. In fact, the novel ends insinuating that they are both equal, 'We're just ordinary and this is shite. We both understand everything' (ibid., 264). What appeared to be a novel as a critique of male violence and phallocentrism perpetuated by a capitalist patriarchal society culminates in a fatalistic ending which suggests all members of society are simply victim to male violence in one way

or another. Both the characters are blameless, and the patriarchal capitalist society is blameless. Things just happen.

In light of the fatalistic culmination of the novel, it could be interpreted that the misogynistic language used throughout the novel takes on the opposite of what Welsh, at first, appeared to be achieving. The in-depth description of the rape, the constant demeaning references to women as sexual objects throughout the novel, 'I wanted a class bird, no just knee-trembling some schemie in a rubbish room. There was plenty of tackle at work, but it was mostly snobby fanny' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 116), appear to simply be a representation of society's contempt for women, which, in the end, carries no sufficient critique of such behaviour. It could be said that this novel, to female readers, is, as Welsh explains, thoroughly 'disempowering, you read it and you feel, "God, do men really hate us this much?"', the whole way they talk to women, the whole way they relate to women or don't relate to women' (quoted in Kelly 2005, 120). As the novel employs elements of realism, it could be said such language is necessary to illuminate the negative ways in which women are treated. However, the fatalistic and indeterminate ending undermines this. It seems a paradox and a major narrative flaw to highlight society's shortcomings and ideological hegemony whilst also claiming that the violence acted out on women is just 'shite'. *Marabou Stork Nightmares* seems to enact the capitalist patriarchal alienation of women and the working classes that Welsh sets out to deconstruct.

Another flaw in Welsh's narrative appears at the ending of the novel when Kirsty takes her revenge. Before her attack, she states 'The funny thing is Roy, Roy Strang, that I actually fancied you ... The only reason why I hung around with these morons was to get closer to you' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 228). The victim, admitting attraction for her rapist, is representative of an archaic narrative; as Welsh explains: 'the rape victim falls in love with the rapist and they end up marrying' (quoted in Kelly, 121), which is exactly what Welsh, as demonstrated in the latter quotation, seems to abhor and attempts not to demonstrate in his drawn out, explicitly violent, though realistic account of the attack. This is a highly misogynistic representation of female rape victims as it romanticises a situation of severe brutality. Also, there is much to be said about the dialect employed throughout the attack. When describing the rape, Roy's narration is written in an Edinburgh dialect, but later in the novel, when Roy is reflecting on the attack, his narration is written in Standard English. Elspeth Findlay offers the following analysis: 'At the moment of the rape the narrator is 'ah', a speaker of dialect. As he reflects remorsefully, he is 'I' (Findlay 2002, 6). The misogynistic, immoral Roy is working class Scottish, and the remorseful, moralising Roy is middle

class English. This appears to be a typically English bourgeois representation of Scottish men as brute, uncivilised and singularly working class.

### **Colonialism and Masculinity**

The representation of middle class Englishness as moral and Scottishness as brute and uncivilised is also explored throughout the novel in a postcolonial context. While Roy is unconscious after his failed suicide attempt, he escapes into a subconscious version of Africa where he hunts the Marabou Stork (a large, dark predatory bird), with Sandy Jamieson, Roy's own version of the Scottish football player, Jimmy Sandison. While Roy dreams of the hunt for the stork in Africa, his dialect switches from a working class Edinburgh dialect to a stereotypical middle class English dialect. He uses slang such as 'mighty' 'gosh' and 'blighter', typically used, as Schoene-Harwood points out, in adventure novels such as 'the Enid Blyton variety, further accentuated by the odd ubiquity of Merchant-Ivory picnic hampers that keep materialising out of the hot air of the savannah' (Schoene-Harwood 2000, 153). Welsh's pastiche of the form of British, or rather English, adventure novels suggests a need to assert power in a search for masculinity, and what is considered powerful in British language is a standard English dialect. Roy displays what Bourdieu describes as 'the political process of unification whereby a determinate set of "speaking subjects" is led in practice to accept the official language' (Bourdieu 1991, 44), as the official language is representative of a colonising nation, historically and globally recognised for its colonial and financial power, as opposed to Roy's own colonised nation. Weissenberger notes that Roy's own dialect, a version of Scots, 'is to be regarded as inferior to Standard English' (Weissenberger 2006, 34), most likely because Scotland is a colonised nation. Roy escapes into a world where he experiences unlimited masculine and colonial power with a companion, representative of a football player, who is an embodiment of masculine ideals of fitness and physical power, also a modern symbol of the capitalist value of the accumulation of wealth, 'Capitalism has had to graft on sporting culture, the culture of games, in order to make the pursuit of money seem a worthwhile endeavour in itself' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 46). It is significant that the world Roy escapes into is one where the supposed power lies in a Standard English accent and English colonial power.

Welsh juxtaposes the use of Standard English in Roy's fantasy world with the marabou stork, who speaks in Roy's own dialect: 'The sheer evil power of the creature emanating from its deathly eyes shook us to the marrow. -Come ahead then, ya fuckin wide-os! It squawked. I felt sick and faint.' (ibid., 15). Not only is the marabou stork representative of the destructive masculinity that Roy is subconsciously seeking but fails to destroy, it is representative of a destructive postcolonial

masculinity associated with Scottish identity. The stork produces a strong feeling of fear in Roy, which can be likened to Cairns Craig's Calvinistic dialectic: 'Fear continues to rule the human imagination and every journey back into the terrors of the primitive past' (Craig 1999, 42). Fear rules Scottish literary consciousness as a result of the oppressive effects of Calvinism, just as masculinity and the search for power rules Roy's consciousness. Roy's journey through his subconscious which confronts his masculinity is also representative of a split literary Scottish consciousness, the Caledonian Antisyzygy. His self is split between the British embodiment of masculinity as colonialism, and the Scottish embodiment of masculinity as violence and fear. The stork embodies the qualities of Roy, and is a subconscious representation of the sexual attacks he committed throughout the novel. He prays upon women and vulnerable girls and boys, just as the stork prays upon the feminine flamingo, 'Our flamingo colony has been routed, I declared. –Yes ... by the Marabou Stork' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 84). The stork is not only symbolic of the hunt for masculinity, but also the destructive power of violent masculine behaviour, symbolised by Roy's violent upbringing in Scotland, and also by a Scottish 'cultural' identity ruled by fear.

Football is Roy's favourite cultural spectacle, not because he likes the sport, but because it is an opportunity to commit violence. The outbreaks of violence caused by gangs and other violent football attendees, dubbed 'cashies', is how Roy first meets Lexo and Dexy, the other men who commit the violent gang rape: '... swallow the fear, feel the buzz ... I steamed in, swinging, kicking and biting. This cunt I was hitting was hitting me back but it was like I couldn't feel a thing and I knew that he could because his eyes were filling up with fear and it was the best feeling on earth' (*ibid.*, 134). Roy's Scottish, violent and masculine identity survives on both creating fear and thriving on it. Scottish football is represented as a spectacle of extreme violence, which could be considered as an exaggerated phallogentric display of masculinity in order to compensate for the emasculation of a colonised nation. Scottish dialect is therefore, in this context, representative of loss; a loss of national identity through English colonialism. It lacks identity.

In Welsh's earlier novel, *Trainspotting*, dialect is the empty shell of Leith Central Station where it is impossible to now spot trains: it gestures to the lost community which dialect had represented in the Scottish tradition which has now been corrupted into fearful individualism (Craig 1999, 75). Scotland has been corrupted, it seems, by a nation which is ruled by the ideologies of masculinity, colonialism and capitalism. However, it seems stereotypical of Welsh to depict the spectators of football as particularly violent, and as symbolic of the apparent Scottish proclivity for violence as a consequence of postcolonial society. Football fans of any nation can display violent behaviour. Also,

football, on the contrary, can be interpreted as almost the opposite to Welsh's portrayal of Scottish football as a method for Scottish men to commit violence. It can be seen as an opportunity for Scotland to be represented as an independent nation in an international context, albeit in a capitalist, patriarchal one.

The fact that Roy's fantasies are lived out in Africa is significant. It is perhaps not only a subconscious reference to his brief spell in South Africa as a child, and also a constant reminder of the irrepressible memories of the sexual violence he experiences at the hands of his Uncle Gordon, but because Africa is symbolic of colonialism in its most violent and exaggerated form as a historical site of damaging imperialism, and therefore patriarchal violence. During the Strangs' stay in South Africa, Roy's Uncle Gordon exposes them to the politics of Apartheid: '–I see that the Kaffirs are taking a dem good beating. –They shid ten the fucking gihns en those apes ... I stopped to listen as the news bulletin changed to the Rhodesian situation. –Botha's fucking sold out our people in Rhodesia, Gordon fumed' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 82). *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, being first published in 1995, comes after South Africa's first democratic vote in 1994, after which Nelson Mandela became President. P.W Botha previously served as Prime Minister and was renowned for his pro-apartheid stance. Rhodesia, now known as Zimbabwe, gained independence in 1980, and it is this event that is taking place as Roy turns his attention to the news. It is significant that Welsh is using South Africa as the setting for some of the novel, for it is a symbol of the violent outcomes of colonial masculinity and power, but also, the violence and racism that characterised South Africa is eventually revolted against and overturned. Welsh could be suggesting that eventually, culturally and politically violent masculine modes of behaviour will eventually be outmoded in favour of a form of politics and culture that is based on egalitarian concepts of equal rights and opportunities. Although we know the novel does not end this way, it seems significant that Welsh runs Apartheid in parallel to patriarchy and masculinity.

The setting of South Africa also has implications for Roy's class status. He changes from 'schemie' in Scotland, to a member of the white supremacy in South Africa. He could still be categorised as working class, as his parents have to undertake manual labour to provide, but they are still considered of a higher social class than their black African contemporaries who are impoverished, live in slums, and are household servants for their white masters. This transition from underclass Scottish citizen ruled by fear to privileged South African citizen has a profound effect on Roy, and it is upon his return to Scotland that he acts out exceptional scenes of violence. This is symbolic of the hegemonic power operating in Britain. The housing schemes are peripheral to bourgeois inner-city,

post-industrial culture: 'we lived in ... a systems built 1960s maisonette block of flats ... All those dull broadsheet newspaper articles on the scheme where we lived tended to focus on how deprived it was ... but I'd always characterised the place as less characterised by poverty than by boredom' (*Marabou Stork Nightmares*, 19), whilst simultaneously living under a pro-business, capitalist Thatcherite government which rewarded prosperity and class progression. Roy's community were 'being bombarded with images of mobility, power and diversity' (Kelly 2005, 105), whilst also being represented as peripheral to mainstream society. His exposure to a highly masculine and colonial culture causes frustration, as the political system he returns to oppresses working class people of all races whilst telling them they must join the pursuit for wealth and progress.

However, this representation of Scotland as class oppressive, rather than class and race oppressive, is problematic. Race is a global problem as a result of the historic slave trade. There were many Scottish slave owners who owned sugar and tobacco plantations in the West Indies and Africa. Ian Whyte maintains that:

There certainly was extensive involvement of Scots in the slave trade and on the slave plantations of the Caribbean, from the great merchant houses of Glasgow and Scots entrepreneurs in London ... to the managers and overseers who were most often at home (Whyte 2006, 41).

Scotland's involvement in the slave trade also suggests that, though colonised by England, Scotland has also been involved in colonial and imperial violence itself. The colonised also becomes the coloniser of the supposedly inferior race. While Welsh's decision to draw comparisons between 1980s Scotland and the Apartheid of South Africa paints Scotland as a non-racist country, he does explore the concept of Scotland as an imperial force itself in *Trainspotting*:

Ah hate cunts like that. Cunts like Begbie. Cunts that are intae baseball-batting every fucker that's different; pakis, poofs, n what huv ye. Fuckin failures in a country ay failures (*Trainspotting*, 78).

Renton, the central protagonist of this novel, identifies Scotland as a colonised country 'colonised by wankers' (ibid., 78), yet also acknowledges their ability to behave in the same manner as the coloniser, 'baseball-batting ... pakis, poofs', thereby oppressing those thought inferior to the political system in place. However, Welsh fails to bring this into the dialectic of *Marabou Stork Nightmares* as

he does not depict any act of racism while the Strangs are in Scotland. In fact, there are no references to any form of racial politics at all in Scotland. Welsh makes the mistake of representing Scotland as only oppressing those of the working class, no matter what race, which takes any focus away from the intersection of oppression by both race and class. In the end, *Marabou Stork Nightmares* not only has the potential to alienate its female readers by presenting horrific scenes of male violence and episodic misogynistic speech and thought, it also has the potential to alienate Scottish men by representing them as the emasculated underclass who are prone to extreme violent behaviour, stereotypically acting out of a fear characterised by Scottish cultural history.

### **Conclusion**

In *Marabou Stork Nightmares*, Welsh attempts to diagnose sexual violence as a result of the pursuit of masculinity and colonialism. Roy is violently sexually abused as a child, and is forced to attack his own brother for his father's entertainment. Roy then abuses others himself after being denied the social status of colonial superior upon his return to his colonised nation, and also becomes a football hooligan. Welsh also presents male violence as a result of ideological hegemony, rather than a result of individual autonomy. However, if ideological hegemony is solely responsible for male violence, then most men living in a society which exercised colonial and capitalist ideology would be violent. Welsh's novel functions through the stereotyping of Scottish men as violent football hooligans who cannot think for themselves. He then ends the novel claiming that things just happen. This fatalistic ending effectively takes any meaning away from the diagnoses he attempted to make. *Marabou Stork Nightmares* and *Trainspotting*, then, are the very things Welsh did not aim for them to be – having spent the entirety of both novels critiquing capitalist and patriarchal culture. They are ideological pieces of literature which ultimately culminate in endings which encourage their readers to accept their place in society.

While Welsh's novels can be categorised as Scottish fiction, as a result of their preoccupation with fear, with the thematic inclusion of the dialectic of Calvinism associated with Scottish literature and its prevalence in historical Scottish culture. His novels are also set in Scotland and written by a Scot. Welsh's novels also demonstrate the ideological changes throughout the development of modern culture. Although religion was once the most powerful and 'effective form of ideological control' (Eagleton 2010, 2140) in society, as society has become gradually secularised with the rise of scientific discovery and industrialisation, literature has perhaps taken its place.

Irvine Welsh's exploration of the negative effects of the dominant ideologies of his society – capitalism, patriarchy and colonialism – would suggest, upon first reading, that he is critical of these ideological constructions. However, the manner in which both novels culminate, essentially dictating that capitalism is bad for individual morality but we cannot do anything about it, subverts his critique of society. He is conforming to the standards of the middle classes by indulging in the exploration of social values and suggesting that the only way to survive is to adapt to the market-jungle, whilst appealing to the working classes. Literature, and therefore the work of Welsh, is a product of dominant ideologies and seeks to uphold the dominant social order. As Eagleton observes: 'Instead of working to change [their social conditions] ... you can vicariously fulfil someone's desire for a fuller life by handing them *Pride and Prejudice*' (2010, 2143), or perhaps *Marabou Stork Nightmares* and *Trainspotting*.

### **Acknowledgment**

The author and publisher are grateful for permission to quote from:

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Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting*, first published in 1993. Quotations from London: Vintage 2007.

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