Skagboys: A Protest Novel?

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Published in 1993, Irvine Welsh's novel *Trainspotting* is a novel that follows the lives of a group of characters from Leith in Edinburgh in the 1980s during the period of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government. The central characters in the novel are heroin addicts who form an underclass in society and also engage in wanton violence and crime. The novel has been described as 'challenging cosy notions of a classless society… which graphically depicts the gulf that exists between the working class and the middle classes (Lezard, 1993, np). It is a novel that clearly protests the British class system. Welsh admits that he himself was a drug addict living in Edinburgh during the period (Big Think, 2012, np). His recent novel *SkagBoys*, published in 2012, was written as a prequel to *Trainspotting* and explains how the central characters became heroin addicts in the first place. The political stance of both novels clearly set out to challenge the political environment of the 1980s. Welsh states this in an interview about *SkagBoys*: 'The novel is about the transition of the world of work to the world of no work and the drugs then fill that vacuum… with no work, no prospects, the local economy becomes a drugs economy' (Big Think, 2012 np).This highly politicised attack on the state feeds into another statement in which he gives his reason for writing the novel: 'For me it's writing about the 1980s which was a pivotal generation in Britain and America, that neo-liberal Reagan and Thatcher world which determined how our society has developed into today…I was interested in telling that story through the characters' (France 24, 2016). This dissertation will examine if Welsh's novel *SkagBoys* can be defined as a protest novel by examining the established conventions of the protest genre used by Welsh to communicate its attack on mainstream ideology and hegemonic institutions.

Protest novels, also known as 'social problem novels', have been described as 'dissenting fictions of oppression and defiance' (Moses, 2014, 217). Furthermore, they are narratives that 'cultivate in everyday life a critique and analysis that disrupts and even deconstructs cultural productions that were designed to promote and reinforce domination' (Moses, 2014, 217). This disruption/deconstruction makes them resistant and counter-hegemonic to the forces that they expose as oppressive in society. Black American novelist Richard Wright is perhaps the greatest exponent of the protest novel in the Twentieth Century. His works include the protest novels *Black Boy* (1945) and *Native Son* (1940). Both novels reveal the racism and oppression that he faced growing up and living in America in the first half of the last century. For Wright, the protest novel was a way to: 'bridge the gap between black writers and their people' (Wright, 2004, 1404). Wright believed the protest novel had a unique position in helping disenfranchised blacks to 'view society as something which is becoming rather than something that is fixed and to be admired' (Wright, 2004.1404). The protest novel's function, for Wright, was to help oppressed blacks to realise that the status quo of society could be changed, challenged, overturned. Thus, the function of the protest novel is revolutionary. Wright's view of the protest novel clearly takes its orientation from Marxist ideology, advocating the oppressed to challenge what he saw as the hegemony of the oppressive American State.

John Steinbeck is another famous exponent of the protest novel, *The Grapes of Wrath* is perhaps his best known novel. Like Wright, Steinbeck used his novel to attack the injustice bestowed on a marginalised group in society by the state, in this case mid-western migrant farmers during the Great Depression in 1930s America. The novel contains a micro level story concerning a family, the Joads, and their journey to California because of economic

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hardship. It also contains a series of interchapters which give a macro view of the migrant story and function to attack the state by expressing revolutionary thought. For example: ‘‘You who hate change and fear Revolution, keep people apart but eventually they will join and form into a mass movement… just a little multiplication that is all that is needed’ (Steinbeck, 2000, 157). This quote is very revealing because its tone reveals a threat to the American Capitalist system. The interchapters have been described as: ‘working at a different level of recognition (than the traditional narrative chapters) by expressing an atemporal, universal, sypnotic view of the migrant condition’ (De Mott, 2000, xii). Steinbeck’s skilful use of interchapters gives his novel the *Grapes of Wrath* an extra, revolutionary, dimension which is not found in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy.*

Irvine Welsh’s novel *SkagBoys*, written in 2012 and set in Edinburgh circa 1984, is also a novel which protests society, in this case the neoliberal British State governed by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government. For Welsh, neoliberalism created the environment for society to deteriorate in Edinburgh because Thatcher’s deflationary economic policy took jobs out of the economy. He stated this belief in 2012: ‘You had lots of jobs, both skilled and unskilled, and then you had no jobs… Heroin replaced work, the community fell apart’ (*New York Daily News*, 2012,np).

In *SkagBoys* Welsh uses techniques similar to those used by Wright and Steinbeck to protest against society. The opening chapter on the 1984/85 Miner’s Strike with its demands for the political hegemony to be challenged and changed follows the same narrative protest structure as Wright’s novel *BlackBoy.* The unrelenting style of Wright, who demands for the hegemony be challenged and changed is not apparent anywhere else in *SkagBoys.* The series of interchapters sporadically placed throughout *SkagBoys* are another obvious location point of protest and echo the macro-level interchapters used by Steinbeck in the *Grapes of Wrath.* Welsh also uses phonetic Edinburgh dialect in the novel to convey the thoughts of his characters. This unorthodox style could be construed as a form of protest because it breaks from the cultural norms of mainstream literature. Welsh’s novel, however, is a paradox of conflicting messages. On the one hand, he uses the opening chapter on the Miners’ Strike to challenge the state. This protest is strengthened by the interchapters which lay the blame for heroin endemic and subsequent AIDS outbreak squarely at the door of the Thatcherite government. On the other hand, Welsh does not outwardly use his characters as a vehicle for attacking the state like Wright and Steinbeck. Instead Welsh’s characters simply opt out of society. They do not protest, they accept the status quo and seem quite happy to live their lives on the margins. Roberto del Valle argues that by embracing this anomie style of marginal acceptance, Welsh’s characters form an anti-society which is ‘able to live beyond the reach of the advanced capitalist state’ (Del Valle, 2016, 132). For Del Valle and his postmodern ideology, Welsh’s characters are the last bastion of protest the against state because they do not conform and purposely live outside the all-embracing pull of Capitalism. This dissertation will evaluate Welsh’s novel *SkagBoys* to determine if it can be defined as a protest novel. Three different strands of protest will be examined. Firstly the novel will be compared to the classic protest novels of Wright and Steinbeck to ascertain if it fits into the classic protest novel genre espoused by these two key authors. Secondly, the actions of the characters will be assessed to test Del Valle’s claim that by opting out of society they are rejecting Capitalism and therefore protesting against it. The final strand will involve analysing Welsh’s use of phonetic dialect to see if it is a form of literary protest. These three strands when taken together will prove that *SkagBoys* can be defined as a protest novel.

The opening chapter in *SkagBoys* is the most protest driven episode in the novel. It tells the story of how the main protagonist in the story, Mark Renton participated in the famous battle of Orgreave in 1984, in which the striking miners were defeated by the strong-arm tactics of the police and the British State. Orgreave was the key flashpoint in the great

strike of 1984-1985. This strike has been characterized as: 'the last real chance for organized labour to successfully oppose the philosophy and destructive social consequences of *laissez-faire* market forces' (Haywood, 1997, 140). By placing Mark Renton into this key historical situation, Irvine Welsh gives his character a working-class authenticity who exudes agitation and protest. Renton, here, is an activist of social resistance, in a large group challenging the hegemony of the neo-liberal state: 'the polis riot squads are advancing towards us, drumming oan their short shields with their batons… they fukin well charge right at us, we're unarmed and outnumbered and ah'm thinkin these cunts want us deid… This isnae about policing or containment, this is a war on civilians…and ah'm wonderin how far this goes; the Chief Constable, Home Secretary, Thatcher? Wheither they gave the orders or no, they wir complicit. Anti-Union laws and big pay rises for polis when everybody else in the public sector's dosh and conditions are getting cut back… the cunts fuckin primed them for this.' (Welsh. 2012, 18/19).

This extract follows the classic Marxist model for the protest genre, espoused by Wright, where the main protagonist questions and agitates against the hegemony of an oppressive regime. The language used is typical of Welsh's prose in the novel and here the over-use of expletives helps to convey the message of anger towards the hegemonic, political system. It is, in effect, revolutionary. Yet, Welsh's paradox quickly appears when we realise that the chapter is written retrospectively by Renton from a heroin rehabilitation centre where he is receiving state funded treatment for his drug misuse. Instead of continuing to fight against the oppressive nature of the state, which he did in Orgreave, Renton is counting the days down until he can get out of rehab and return to the Edinburgh underclass and the pull of heroin: 'I'm officially no longer physically addicted to heroin. Yet at present I crave it more than ever; the whole social thing; copping, cooking, banging up and hanging out with other fucked up ghosts.. Shuffling around at night like a vampire, heading for grubby flats in run-down parts of the city, tae talk shite to other deranged, unstable losers' (Welsh, 2012, 465).

This quote suggests that the protest element of the novel has become inverted and even perhaps redundant. This is because the main character Mark is focused on getting high rather than protesting or agitating against the political hegemony. Mark's lack of engagement with resistance reflects Cathy Moses overview of how the contemporary protest genre has evolved: 'the individual subject is placed in hopeless struggle against systems of oppression and domination…in terms of the practice of resistance, the individual is assumed to be powerless' (Moses, 2014, 217). Renton alludes to this powerlessness, while also revealing an inner hopelessness: 'Naebody else has fucked me; neither God nor Thatcher. Ah've done it; destroyed the sovereign state ay Mark Renton before those cunts could get anywhere near it wi their wrecking ball' (Welsh, 2012, 378). Here Mark reveals that personal choice helped him to become addicted to heroin. Outwardly he is powerless to resist the state, yet inwardly it was his own choice to self-destruct, therefore he recognises that his personal destruction is his own fault. This admission challenges the protest genre and Wright and Steinbeck's Marxist ideological stance. This is because Mark has identified that mass political struggle is futile. Personal, inward struggle is the only thing he has left. Therefore his protest is now private and personal. It has become inverted in comparison to the confrontational, collective style of protest espoused by Wright and Steinbeck.

The lack of individual resistance is carried into the other main area of the novel that outwardly demonstrates a mode of protest, namely the interchapters entitled 'Notes on an Epidemic'. These are all short, point driven and written from a third person, authoritative position. This is in stark contrast to the long- winded intimate individuality of the first-person narrative used in the opening chapter centred around Orgreave. This mode of narration, found in the interchapters, creates an interesting divergence and clearly corresponds to Moses's argument that the individual is powerless. Steinbeck, who along with Wright, is one of the

greatest exponents of the protest novel, uses interchapters to devastating effect in *The Grapes of Wrath.* This Great Depression based novel has been described as 'a triumph of proletarian writing' (De Mott, 1989, xxxvi). The novel showcases the anguish faced by mid-western families in 1930s America who are forced to become migrants because of the economic policies of the American state. Steinbeck revealed in 1953 that he used the interchapters as a device to: ' hit the reader below the belt… to open him up and introduce things on an intellectual level which he would not or could not receive unless he was already opened up (by the main chapters) (De Mott, 1989, xii). This quotation illustrates Steinbeck's mastery at fusing the emotion of the main fictional story with his own political viewpoint which warned about the direction in which society was developing. Similarly, Welsh uses the interchapters as a vehicle in *SkagBoys* to attack the stance of the Conservative's neo-liberal state, and similarly to the *Grapes of Wrath*, they are written in a collective, unemotional, even at times passive voice. They become points of reference for resistance. For example: Following the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979, unemployment levels tripled from 1.2 million to 3.6 million in 1982, and would stay at the 3million mark until 1986…Through all the political squabbling during this era, one factor remains inconvertible: hundreds of thousands of young, working class people in the UK had less money in their pockets and a lot more time on their hands. (Welsh, 2012,139).

Welsh uses this interchapter to indoctrinate the reader into blaming the government for unemployment and by extension drug misuse. This highly politicized declaration follows Steinbeck's direction and attempts to 'hit the reader below the belt'. The message of the interchapters clearly show that Welsh clearly intended to write a protest novel which attacked the neo-liberal British state. In an interview he reiterates his belief that Thatcherism destroyed working class communities in Britain in the 1980s : 'You had lots of jobs, both skilled and unskilled, and then you had no jobs… Heroin replaced work, the community falls apart' (*New York Daily News*, 2012, np).

Another interchapter, entitled 'Notes on an Epidemic 7', is simply a report from the Lothian Health Board entitled 'Instances of Reported HIV + Cases' which provides the names of new HIV carriers for a given month, in this case March 1985. There are thirty- nine names on the list, including that of one of Welsh's characters: 'Matthew Connell, 22, Edinburgh North, unemployed father of one, intravenous drug use' (Welsh, 2012, 513). The clinical language is passive yet also conjures up an element of shock and perhaps even mild anger from the reader. It is indicative of the destruction of young lives by the Aids epidemic. However, it is here where Welsh's argument of blaming the state for the destruction of Edinburgh's working class becomes open to challenge. Personal choice and not government policy, it could be argued, wreaked more damage on working class areas which were afflicted by drug misuse. By allowing Mark to admit that he became a heroin addict through personal choice, Welsh contradicts his own argument. This inherent flaw with Welsh's critique becomes increasingly apparent throughout the interchapters. For example, in 'Notes on an Epidemic 5' he presents a version of how the AIDS virus came to Edinburgh through its first carrier: 'Andy- the Johnny Appleseed of Aids' (Welsh, 2012, 277). Welsh states that he was a member of : 'a diffuse, often fractious community, which grew exponentially with every closing factory, warehouse, office and shop.' (Welsh, 2012, 277). Here Welsh's one dimensional argument, which blames Thatcherism for the Aids epidemic in Edinburgh through the effects of neo-liberalist policy, can once again be revealed as awkward. Just because you have no job and plenty of time on your hands, does not mean you *have* to become a heroin addict. Overall, the chapter on the miner's strike in Orgreave and the use of interchapters as reference points of resistance, structurally at least, give *SkagBoys* the persona of a work of protest fiction, in the same vein as Wright's *BlackBoy* or Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*. Yet when these sections are analysed it becomes very clear that the protest element

has changed direction and become inward and impotent, rather than the persuasive and remonstrative stance that is a feature of Wright and Steinbeck's work. Welsh also allows his own characters to question his own critique. This sends out mixed signals and leads to a contradiction emerging regarding the aims of the novel. It looks like a protest novel, yet it does not read or feel like a protest novel.

The obvious points of protest which have been explored so far contrast sharply with the actions of the main protagonists in the novel, who choose to opt out of society rather than challenge or protest it. Mark Renton, for example, attends university, comes from a good family background, has a girlfriend and seemingly, has a bright future ahead. This changes when he chooses to cast everything away and turn to heroin. Welsh's 'neo-liberal' argument does not really stand up when it comes to Renton. In fact, it could be argued that self-destruction is far more appealing to him than political resistance or a consciousness of an unfair society. This is shown when he analyses the direction of his relationship with Fiona: 'She'd talked about us getting a flat next year. Then graduation, nine-to-five jobs and another flat wi a mortgage. Then marriage… Then the four Ds: disenchantment, divorce, disease, and death' (Welsh, 2012, 171). Mark rejects the normality of life. He is scared by it and ultimately resists its ordinariness by opting out completely and choosing heroin. This alternative embraced by Mark is explained by Del Valle as: 'a gesture of refusal proclaiming the irreducibility and autonomy of life, but of a life inevitably modified by the contextual conditions of a supressed or subsumed sociality' (Del Valle, 2016, 120). The overarching fear of becoming regulated by the norms of society haunts Mark. The only way to resist is through heroin, this becomes his last bastion of refuge. The positives and negatives of his thoughts and aspirations become intermingled and cojoined. He feels that he must destroy everything, good and bad, to placate his addiction. This is illustrated when he abruptly finished with Fiona, reasoning that: 'Somehow ah sense that it's the very last unselfish thing I'll ever be able to do' (Welsh, 2012,183). This was even though she was: 'The best girlfriend I've ever had; the prettiest lassie ah've ever known' (Welsh, 2012, 181). Through his inward thoughts, Mark reveals his heroin addiction as: *My escape to oblivion, where they cannot get at me* (Welsh, 2012,191). Mark's actions form a resistance to the normality in society. He is challenging the hegemony of mainstream society by opting out of it.

Ian Haywood states that in the 1980s: 'the working- class youth response to the prospect of life on the 'broo' was self- abandonment and an immersion in a hedonistic, self-destructive underclass existence, cut off from all conventional moral discourses' (Haywood, 1997,158). This is certainly true of the main characters in *SkagBoys,* described by Welsh in *Trainspotting* as a sub-culture of working class Edinburgh junkies (Irvine Welsh Website, 2012, np). Welsh explains this rejection of social conformity as:

> Choose life. Choose mortgage payments; choose washing machines; choose cars; choose sitting oan a couch watching mind-numbing and spirit crushing game shows, stuffing junk food intae yir mooth. Choose rotting away, pishing and shiteing yersel in a home, a total fuckin embarrassment tae the selfish, fucked up brats ye've produced. Choose life.
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> Well, ah choose no tae choose life. If the cunts cannae handle that, its their fuckin problem. (Welsh,1996, 186-187).

This quote clearly rejects the widely held societal aspirations of modern day society. This form of transgression questions modern day Capitalism and materialist culture, while also carrying strong undertones of protest against the machinations of society itself. For Welsh, the economics of modern day Capitalism has created the environment for materialism to flourish: 'as a society we seem to be more socially proscribed and monolithic than ever, our freedom is increasingly co-terminus with our purchasing power' (Irvine Welsh Website,

2012, np). The 'choose life' critique of society also creates a perception that ordinariness and conformity create people who are non- entities. For Welsh's characters, the ability to be able to switch off from society is a form of resistance against this mass uniformity. Instead of conforming to the homogeneity of society, the group instead reject it. The group can therefore be likened to what Karl Marx termed 'the lumpenproletariat': 'the class of outcast, degenerated and submerged elements that make up a section of the population of cities and industrial centres' (Marxist Internet Encyclopaedia, 2017, np) or: 'individuals located persistently outside the dominant forms of economic production and exchange' (Giddens, 2008, 455). Furthermore, the Capitalist world, according to Del Valle, does not know how to identify with or control the group because of their passive rejection of mainstream society: 'The group of addicts enact the undoing of individuality through their co-belonging in need, through a 'force'- that composes a world for which the system of instrumental identification can find no use of viable representation… Therefore, the junkie manages to resist and eventually break free from the systematic machinery of control' (Del Valle, 2016, 126).

For Del Valle, the subcultural group created by Welsh has the ability to become a highly resistant force against the hegemony of mainstream society because it is outside its reach, and therefore its sphere of influence. Del Valle also believes that because of this the group ultimately has within its power the means to break free from societal control. This can be seen in the novel when the group visit Gorgie, where Mark senses their detachment from society: '*Who are these people, these aliens, that we move among in such sadness?'* (Welsh, 2012, 523). This detachment and alienation from society resonates with Emile Durkheim's sociological theory of 'Anomie': 'Anomie is a situation characterized by indeterminate goals and unlimited aspirations… It is loss in the infinity of desires' (Besnard, 1984, 93). The gradual descent into heroin addiction sees Welsh's group of junkies losing both the motivation and the capability to function as part of the mainstream of modern society. They are just existing for one sole reason- their next fix. The limitless nature of choice in modern advanced Capitalist society, with its rich tapestry of options, has been replaced by the limitation of addiction. This is the ultimate protest because it not only challenges the Capitalist hegemony of modern society, it also, as De Valle states, manages to break free from its grip. The protest novel, in this instance, has moved from the linearity of Wright and Steinbeck's classic Marxist revolutionary stance, and instead into an inverted passiveness which shatters the fabric of society by refusing not only to conform, but also not to recognise it at all. The characters' passivity is the antithesis of revolutionary thought. They do not want to change society, instead they somehow manage to *find a way out of society.*

Ian Haywood states that: 'The validity of Welsh's writing comes from the rawness of the vernacular language and the debunking of western enlightenment tradition' (Haywood,1997, 158). This rawness and the use of phonetic Edinburgh dialect certainly breaks with modern literary convention, yet it is not a new phenomenon. Other writers, such as Roddy Doyle and James Kelman have also used this method. By writing in phonetic dialect, the reader is, at times, forced to say aloud the words of the character to decipher their meaning. Begbie, for example, says: 'So ah says tae this cunt, "So yir in here fir a traffic offence, aye" N he looks up n goes, "What? What d'ye want?" (Welsh, 2012, 511). The thick Scots dialect in this instance is inflexible and rigid on the tongue. It forces the reader to slow down and sound out the words to decipher their meaning. This slow expression of speech obliges the reader to get closer to the inner thoughts of the character. They *become* the character for an instant. This form of first person, dialect driven, dialogue is missing in the work of Wright and Steinbeck. However, taken as a literary device it has similarities to how, in the early twentieth century, black American writer James Weldon Johnson encouraged negro writers to break from white, American, literary convention and: 'Do what Synge did for the Irish… to find a form that is freer and larger than dialect… A form that expresses the

imagery, idioms, peculiar terms of thought and the distinctive pathos of the negro' (Johnson, 2004, 902).

Johnson believed that to challenge the authenticity of the racist and oppressive white society, black writers needed to turn away from mimicking and copying the style of white writers and instead create their own style which would help them to: 'break free from the limitations in negro dialect imposed by the fixing effects of long convention' (Johnson, 2004, 902). Welsh's use of phonetic dialogue, it could be argued, also falls under this form of literary resistance because it defies the norms and structure of the written word. The use of phonetic dialect breaks from the normal dialogue of the English language, an example of this the dialogue of Spud: 'But ah'm outside, n ah sees ma jaykit lyin in the wet, oanthe pavement by the taxi rank, n thaires ma jumper in the gtter likesay' (Welsh, 2012,503). Welsh, himself claims that: '*Trainspotting* was rejected for the 1993 Booker Prize shortlist after offending the sensibilities of two female judges' (Welsh, 2012, np). If this is true, then the unorthodox style and mannerisms of Welsh's dialogue certainly challenged the literary canon.

Yet, as always with Welsh, there are paradoxes, even within even his literary style. Sick Boy and Mark Renton, for instance, are both able to think and speak in both the Edinburgh dialect and 'standard' English. For these characters, language/dialect is interchangeable. For instance, Sick Boy moves effortlessly from: 'Don't jump to conclusions babes, let's get a wee test done… whatever happens, we'll get through this little *contretemps* together' to 'Ah whisper intae her ear as ah work my hands round her back tae skilfully unhook her white bra.' (Welsh, 2012, 493/494). Mark's goes even further in his journal entries from the rehabilitation centre and reveals he can interchange not only in his thoughts and speech, but also in his writing: 'I felt masel turn tae stone as he ~~started to cry started~~ tae greet' (Welsh, 2012, 424). And, 'Its ~~cold,~~ cauld but after a while ~~you don't~~ dinnae notice (Welsh, 2012, 428). Mark's scribbled out words reveal a hypocrisy which is representative of postmodern literature because it reveals a fracture in the narrative function. By giving Sick Boy and Mark the capability to break the rigidity of dialect, Welsh infuses them with an introspective intellect which none of the other two central characters, Begbie and Spud, possess. The interchangeability of dialect is illustrative of Mark's, and to a lesser degree Sick Boy's wasted intellect. Both have the ability to think and act differently, yet instead they choose to 'hide' behind their outward facades. This also makes them unreliable to the reader because there is a contradiction regarding the voice of authenticity.

For Weldon-Johnson the use of dialect for black people was a spiritual, soulful device which could help to: 'express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than by symbols from without such as the mere mutilation of English spelling and pronunciation' (Johnson, 2004, 903). Therefore using dialect in writing was a method to help black writers to maintain a link with their past, while also creating literature which was on a par with that of white writers. Black writing could become deeper than language itself because of its spiritual meaning. Welsh's use of dialect fails to create a valid form of protest in the manner suggested by Johnson. Instead it is a device used to expose the inner thoughts of the characters which inevitably reveals little other than the depths of their addiction. There is no heroic spiritualism beneath the surface, and the use of dialect has no hidden meaning of class conflict. It does come across as working-class, although outside of the opening chapter there is no real attack on the state apart from a few passive conversational comments such as: 'cast oan the scrapheap by Thatcherism likesay' (Welsh, 2012, 499). Therefore, *SkagBoys* does not even remotely meet the rationale for Weldon-Johnson's use of dialect. There is no real deeper meaning, and it is not really used as a device to protest against the state. It could perhaps be deemed as a challenge to literary convention. This is because of its unorthodox postmodern style challenges and resists the norms of mainstream literature.

In conclusion, the aim of this dissertation was to ascertain whether Irvine Welsh's novel *SkagBoys* could be defined as a protest novel. Three different strands of the novel have been analysed. Firstly, the obvious points of protest contained in the opening chapter about Orgreave and the Miners' Strike and the interchapters have been analysed. Welsh's critique that 'heroin replaced work' which is centred around blaming Thatcherism and neo-liberalism with the increase of heroin addiction is, at best, clumsy. It is similar in structure, however, to protest novels such as Wright's *Black Boy* (the attack on perceived state oppression) and Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (the use of interchapters to convey a macro- level critique on society). In this respect, it can be defined as a protest novel, albeit in a flawed and weak manner.

The second strand involved the actions of the characters in the book. It is here where the strength of *SkagBoys* as a protest novel really emerges. The attitude conveyed by Mark Renton towards the normalities of life reveal a fatalistic destructiveness which rejects many of the ideals of modern capitalist society. By rejecting the narrative of 'Choose Life' (Welsh, 1996,186-187), the characters find a way to break free from the pressures of modern Capitalist society. This corresponds with Del Valle's critique that: 'Therefore the junkie manages to resist and eventually break free from the systematic machinery of control' (Del Valle, 2016, 126). This passive stance is, ironically, highly resistant to state control. The only real control present is heroin and the next fix. Welsh's characters therefore unconsciously form a highly vigorous protest group against modern Capitalist society. Their stance comes from a classic postmodern direction because of their rejection or even ignorance of the metanarrative of resistance. This contradiction helps make *SkagBoys* a protest novel because, as Moses points out, when defining the genre: 'It cultivates in everyday life a critique and analysis that disrupts and even deconstructs cultural productions that were designed to promote and reinforce domination' (Moses, 2014, 217).

The final strand of protest involves language. The phonetic dialect used by Welsh in *SkagBoys* forces the reader to slow down and read in an unorthodox fashion. This style can be construed as a form of resistance against literary convention because it defies the norms and structures of the written word. Welsh also allows his characters to switch between unaccented prose and dialectical dialogue. Mark can think speak and write while flitting between dialect and standard English. This poststructuralist style is a break from convention and, it could be argued, is resistant to the cultural norms of mainstream literature. This clearly makes *SkagBoys* a novel that protests literary convention.

Overall, I would argue that this novel can be defined as a protest novel on three fronts. The classic, revolutionary style of class difference and agitation is present echoing Wright and Steinbeck, alongside an unorthodox literary style that challenges convention. Both can be termed as anti-hegemonic and therefore resistant to different forms of control, both state and literary. The main reason why *SkagBoys* can be defined as a protest novel, however, is the fact that the main characters challenge society itself by their passive inaction. They create a break in the system, through heroin addiction, which defies modern Capitalist society and thought, and in the process, questions the scope of its hegemonical limits. Welsh seems to have intended to write a protest novel, but like the postmodern characters created by Flann O'Brien in his short story 'Scenes in a Novel' (1932) Welsh's characters refuse, challenge and attempt to obstruct him. Whether he intended it or not his novel *SkagBoys* is a paradox of contradictions.

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