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ORIGINAL STUDY

Dark Laughter in Uniform: Humor and Militarism in Gregory Burke's *Black Watch*

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ABSTRACT

Gregory Burke's *Black Watch*, which premiered at the 2006 Edinburgh International Festival, focuses on the experiences of Scottish soldiers deployed to Iraq in 2003. The play makes extensive use of dark humor by juxtaposing laughter and pain, valor and absurdity, military and civilian life, in order to reveal the contradictions of contemporary militarism. Rather than celebrating patriotism or sacrifice, Burke undermines the romanticized narratives of heroism through profanity, abrupt shifts in tone, and mock-heroic scenes. Dark humor, thus, functions as both a coping strategy for soldiers' trauma and a satirical device that subverts political rhetoric about the war. By situating Scotland's Black Watch regiment through humor within this framework, Burke reconfigures war not as a story of noble call but as a site of absurd exploitation of soldiers. The main aim of this paper is to demonstrate how *Black Watch* employs dark humor as a literary tool that destabilizes political rhetoric, heroic myths, and nationalist sentiment.

Keywords: Dark humor, Absurdity, The Iraq War, Militarism, Gregory Burke

Introduction

Dark humor is a prominent literary device, enacted in a wide range of genres, especially in drama. Despite varying in text and context, many British plays utilize humor to confront the darker aspects of life due to its engagement with society and human psychology. Even though some studies are propounding its social and psychological functions, defining dark humor, as Bloom (2010) postulates, is "virtually impossible because its manifestation in great literature necessarily involves irony, the trope in which you say one thing and mean another, sometimes the opposite of what is said" (2010, p.xv). He contends that dark humor reveals the double layers of meaning in literature. It leaves the reader/audience with a profound irony and provokes ambivalent emotions. Therefore, the humor derived from negative situations in fiction does more than provide entertainment; it addresses social or

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psychological issues that can be too overwhelming to present directly on stage. Dark humor seeks to reveal the contradictions within social norms, institutions, and human behavior. In this regard, it must be acknowledged as fundamentally political even if it is entangled with emotive and psychological dimensions.

Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (2006) is one of the most prominent productions of the National Theatre of Scotland vis-à-vis the use of black humor in contemporary British or Scottish drama. It was initially created as a part of its "HOME" project that aimed to foster and revitalize Scotland's cultural, social, and political distinctiveness from a London-based culture after the devolution of 1999 (Carner, 2016, p.9). The play displays the battlefield experiences of a group of soldiers during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 from an anti-war stance. It deals with the themes of national pride, patriotism, war, and masculine identity; however, rather than being galvanized by the playwright, they are instead ridiculed, questioned, and, at some point, repulsed by the characters.

Throughout the play, Burke employs humorous dialogue and crude jokes, then unmasks the contradictions inherent in some military concepts, including national pride and the notion of courageous soldiers who are set in one purpose—to defend a nation's interests. Humor often arises from the incongruity of situations within the play's military context and mock-heroic portrayal of the soldiers. These characters represent working-class individuals whom the English government recruits with some promises, such as national fame and money. However, in a stark contrast to general assumptions, they are characterized as unsophisticated and undertrained, almost caricaturized. Neither their personalities nor their ways of speaking fit into the gravity of their circumstances. This paradox forms the key aspect of dark humor in the play. Also, the soldiers' ongoing profane conversations evoke wry smiles from the audience. These brief comic scenes both relieve the intense tension in the atrocity of the battlefield and highlight the absurdity of the soldiers' experiences.

As for absurdity, the play conveys meaninglessness through its representation of Scottish soldiers at war and the concept of militarism. By locating Scotland's national military regiment, Black Watch, at the center of the play's cultural discourse, Burke problematizes the regiment's role (if any) in the Iraq War. In this regard, the deployment of Scottish soldiers for the Iraq invasion is the main political concern that Burke dismantles through dark humor. Of particular significance is that this dark humor emerges from the characters' uncertainty about why they have been sent to Iraq, what they are doing there, and who they are meant to be protecting from whom. It highlights both the futility of the conflict itself and the lack of any connection between Scotland and the invasion. The soldiers' skepticism and quest for meaning reinforce the play's absurdity and leads to dark laughter among the reader/audience. Humor in the play thus becomes a vehicle to question the un/reliability of the propagandist narratives that are very economical with the truth and fail to depict the lived realities of Scottish soldiers.

Having grown up in Fife, a major recruitment region of the Black Watch regiment in Scotland, Burke witnessed the enlistment of men into the British army, particularly during his youth in the late 20th century (Kaličanin, 2016, p. 308). His observations of military life and soldiers' personal experiences have enabled Burke a platform to discuss the contradictions between actual experiences and the false idealization of warfare. In this regard, theatre becomes an ideal space for him to address this discrepancy and reframe the context of the Iraq War from his own perspective as a Scottish citizen. To ground the play in the reality of the 2000s, Burke presents it in a docudrama format, which provides the account of the real interviews he conducted with Iraqi war veterans. Nonetheless, he blends those soldiers' personal memories with fiction and the conventions of in-yer-face theatre

with verbatim theatre. By so doing, he politicizes the theatre and makes a prominent effort to make soldiers' experiences visible and audible.

Burke's play has attracted considerable scholarly attention due to its verbatim techniques (Kaličanin, 2016), its satirical critique of Western imperialism, which reveals how the rhetoric of democracy conceals mutual destruction (Yelmiş, 2016), its engagement with post-truth discourse and epistemic instability in the military sphere (Çağan, 2024), and its position within post-devolution Scottish theatre (Carner, 2016). However, the function of dark humor in the play remains under-explored. This paper seeks to advance scholarship by explicitly addressing the emotional responses elicited by the play. By framing dark humor as a literary form of political and psychological resistance, this study highlights how it humanizes soldiers by offering them a temporary escape from the constraints of military life. This perspective also challenges earlier analyses by integrating psychological dimensions into the understanding of Burke's political theatre. This paper, therefore, offers a new reading of the play in its emphasis on the role of laughter as a coping strategy for both characters and spectators, which also promotes the interplay between humor and political satire.

In terms of methodology, this paper combines textual analysis with a close attention to the play's staging, tone, and audience reception. Dark humor, marked by irony and emotional reactions, is the core tool of this analysis to explore how the play negotiates the affective and ideological tensions in representations of war. This approach interprets the moments of humor as intersections of coping mechanism and political commentary. Ultimately, the present study aims to demonstrate how dark humor in *Black Watch* functions as both a literary trope that complicates audience empathy and exposes contradictions within nationalist and militarist narratives.

Black humor: Manifestation of helplessness

Laughter has held a remarkable significance in humankind's social life and cognition for centuries. The study of humor has produced various theoretical approaches to give a meaning to smiles and what makes people laugh. The theorists have attempted to categorize the functions of laughter by focusing on philosophical and psychological aspects. Among these, dark humor—also known as gallows humor—embodies a paradoxical response by transforming pain into play, despair into defiance, and suffering into acknowledgment and survival. In this study, dark humor is explored as a means through which laughter mediates trauma, absurdity, and moral collapse in wartime performance.

As outlined by Simon Critchley, the most influential explanations have been set forth by the classical theories of "superiority", "incongruity", and "relief" in humor studies[1] (2002, pp.1–2). In addition to those functional divisions, Critchley (2002), indeed, tends to affiliate humor with satire due to its social and philosophical dimensions. According to him, humor offers both relief and subversive insight into the human condition. Thus, he acknowledges it as a way to both foster communal bonds through shared recognition and reveal the flaws within cultural and institutional structures. As Critchley argues, the subversive potential of humor is observable in its capacity to resist and undermine the rigid norms of society. Though Critchley does not delineate dark humor as a distinct category, his theorization is particularly relevant in addressing its binary opposition between

[1] The superiority theory links the sense of laughter with a perceived dominance over others, while the incongruity theory locates humor in the dissonance between expectation and outcome. The relief theory, in contrast, frames laughter as a release of psychological tension, particularly in moments of heightened stress or repression (Critchley, 2002, pp.1–2).

laughter and crying. He argues that laughter, employed in works, echoes "the sublimity and suffering of the human situation" (2002, p. 111). To clarify further:

> *Jokes tear holes in our usual predictions about the empirical world. We might say that humour is produced by a disjunction between the way things are and the way they are represented in the joke, between expectation and actuality. (2002, p.1)*

Within this approach, making jokes in the face of death or pain is not a form of denial but rather an act of acknowledgment of mortality that carries a profound meaning. This emotional ambivalence highlights a notable dichotomy between what is seen/shown and what is experienced, between hopeful expectation and sober reality that leads to existential or situational absurdity.

While the origins of dark humor can be traced back to prehistoric times, it has gained increasing popularity in the aftermath of the Second World War, as Chaya Ostrower (2015) argues. Adopting a psychoanalytic criticism in her explanation of humor among Holocaust survivors, Ostrower uses dark humor and "gallows humor" as interchangeable terms because both refer to a defensive humor which has more profound than the human subconscious (2015, p.191). She emphasizes the psychological aspect of dark humor in alleviating the anxiety associated with the awareness of death. As she points out, "[h]umans are capable of joking about death because we celebrate the fact that we are alive. By joking about death, we tell ourselves that we are unlike the dead" (Ostrower, 2015, p. 191). Her suggestion thus reconfigures humor within a psychoanalytical framework and portrays it as an essential cognitive process of humankind that is activated when one confronts mortality.

As a matter of fact, it is not so surprising that the increasing trend in the use of dark humor coincides with the post-World War II period in Britain. Despite the circulating political discourse on military victory over the opponent parties of the war, physical devastation, economic plight, and the possible threat of nuclear destruction led to an intense sense of guilt, uncertainty, and mental breakdown among those who witnessed the war. The tension between the sense of pride in survival and fear of annihilation resulted in nihilistic tendencies in thought and an absurdity in daily life. Within this context, for the individuals who were stuck in the contradictions between outward prosperity and inner despair, dark humor turns out to be a coping strategy.

Even though it has great potential to convey inner complexity, dark humor often avoids portraying a tragic end in a work. Instead of giving a desperate conclusion, the fictional works, employing dark humor, refuse to collapse into the despair they portray through its rueful smile. To exemplify, in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the bleakness of waiting endlessly without any purpose seems disturbing at first glance as it shows the meaninglessness of life in a nihilistic manner. However, it also brings a sense of humor that turns despair into absurd laughter. The refusal to be overwhelmed by hopelessness and absurdity of the situation calls our attention to the resilience and resistance inherent in dark humor. This contrast is clearly illustrated in the Theatre of the Absurd because, as noted by Esslin (1960):

> *[The Theatre of the Absurd] may be riotously funny, wildly exaggerated and oversimplified, vulgar and garish, but it will always confront the spectator with a genuine intellectual problem, a philosophical paradox, which he will have to try to solve even if he knows that it is most probably insoluble. (1960, p.14)*

Esslin's argument refers to absurdist drama making use of humor in an attempt to imbue it with existential concerns. It sets the stage for philosophizing about the contradictions

that human beings are born to. The given duality hence mirrors the audience's own struggles to make sense of a chaotic and often contradictory world.

From a literary and sociocultural perspective, Lisa Coletta (2003) associates dark humor with modernism through its satirical commitment to society. According to Coletta, dark humor defies any established systems. It evokes laughter "on the chaos and oppression represented in the text and refuses to endorse an all-encompassing ideological or philosophical view of the World" (2003, p.2). Dark humor, as she points out, has significant power to challenge authority and gives people resilience by refusing obedience or dogma. It therefore confronts humanity's greatest fears, incapability, painful search for meaning, and transforms them into sources of pleasure.

In light of these humor explanations, this study's theoretical framework is built on a tripartite structure encompassing the philosophical, psychoanalytic, and political dimensions of dark humor. At its foundation lies the theory of incongruity, defined by (Critchley, 2002) as a paradoxical but meaningful social practice characterizing the conflict between reality and expectation. This inconsistency constitutes the core of the dark humor in *Black Watch* that renders laughter as a means of confronting death, societal conventions, and existential contradictions. The second level, drawing on the psychoanalytic approach of Ostrower (2015), interprets dark humor as a defense mechanism that facilitates coping with trauma, loss, and mortality. The third level, informed by Coletta's modernist perspective (2009), redefines humor as a political and ideological tool that functions subversively to expose hypocrisy, challenge authority, and resist institutional narratives, namely the militarist concepts. Yet, it is significant to note that these three dimensions of humor do not function in isolation but continually intersect and overlap throughout the play.

Dark laughter in uniform

Although the main reasons for the Iraq invasion were varied, the war was officially justified under the pretext of promoting democracy and eliminating terrorism in the Middle Eastern region. However, it was a brutal display of economic and geopolitical ambition of powerful countries with the pursuit of control over Iraq's oil reserves. The consequences were devastating because thousands of Iraqi civilians lost their lives during the war. Burke's play presents the experiences of Scottish soldiers deployed to Iraq as both a physical and psychological impasse by challenging the myths of heroism traditionally linked to military service. The play alternates between two key settings, such as the familiar space of a pub in Fife and the battleground of Fallujah. These contrasting worlds are brought together through the soldiers' fragmented memories. Burke also includes a journalist character who interviews the main soldiers of the play to record their stories of trauma, disillusionment, and loss. These traumatic recollections focus on the death of three Black Watch soldiers and their translator in the 2005 bombing. By shifting between present-day Scotland and the soldiers' time in Iraq, the play clearly evinces how the psychological wounds of war persist even long after they return home.

This rupture in linearity reverberates Burke's political commitment to expose the contested ideologies that arise from a stark opposition between the idealized patriotic rhetoric and the real encounters of the soldiers. As a protest against the established hypocrisy, Burke presents soldiering as a part of an exploitative system or existential trap, instead of a proud duty of male citizens in Britain. To exemplify, he starts his play by challenging the values of war, which are constructed by power holders to appeal to soldiers' emotions and encourage them to achieve victory in the war. The opening scene presents a broad view of the military system. The ceremonial music of the Royal Military Tattoo and bagpipes

establish the militaristic mood. This dramatic effect initially gives a sense of pride and collective national identity. As Ian Brown (2016) encapsulates, the play "evok[es] the emotional impact and power of a pipe band's stirring of the spirits and overwhelming of properly doubtful reservations about war's value" (p. 59). According to his claim, the pipe band recurrently used in the play as a symbol of the nation becomes an ironic trope, as it both stirs national pride and masks the trauma and futility of war.

In line with Brown's argument, the honor-bound military portrayal is interrupted by the presence of Cammy, who is the narrator of the play and a member of the Black Watch soldier. He directly addresses the audience to share his personal experiences:

Cammy: At first, I didnay want tay day this.
Beat
I didnay want tay have tay explain myself tay people ay.
Beat.
See, I think people's minds are usually made up about you if you were in the army.
Beat.
They are though, ay? They poor fucking boys. They cannay day anything else. They cannay get a job. They get exploited by the army.
Beat.
Well I want you to fucking know. I wanted to be in the army. I could have done other stuff. I'm not a fucking knuckle-dragger.
Pause.
And people's minds are made up about the war that's on the now ay?
Beat.
They are. It's no right. It's illegal. We're just big bullies.
Beat.
Well, we'll need to get fucking used tay it. Bullying's the fucking job. That's what you have a fucking army for. (Burke, p. 3–4)

At first glance, Cammy's speech proves his hesitation to explain himself, but he then feels an urge to shatter misconceptions about soldiers' military service, which overlook individual experiences. Through intermittent beats and pauses, he delivers an influential performance designed to resist these stereotypical images. Those constructed images perpetuate views of soldiers as incompetent and portray wartime actions as legalized/justified killing. By alluding to the false assumptions about soldiering, he portrays the stark disconnect between public assumptions and the soldiers' realities.

The monologue scene quickly shifts to an ordinary, casual pub in Fife, where the soldiers participate in interviews to share their war experiences. Nevertheless, this familiar setting is disrupted by the surreal intrusion of screen projections. Some of them show a football match, whereas others live report the military CCTV, which are "hung from each of the towers" as noted in the stage directions (Burke, 2008, p. 3). When considering the functions of these props it is reasonable to consider them as visual markers of the duality between leisure life and military surveillance, since they blur the line between civilian life and military trauma. This overlapping technique also helps Burke dramatize the soldiers' fractured memories, where the looming presence of violence and loss shatters their mental stability.

The psychological instability of the regiment gradually veers into absurdity, which generates humor in the play. This sense of absurdism becomes most apparent in the episodes where characters feel trapped between the discursive manipulation of mainstream media in the public sphere and their precarious existence in the private realm. The soldiers' dilemma is intensified through the inclusion of a voiceover from BBC Radio 4's

Today program, which reports an overview of the regiment's mission in Iraq. In "Pub 1", a flash-forward scene is acted through a dialogue between fictionalized versions of broadcaster John Humphrys, Scottish National Party leader Alex Salmond, and Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon. The following excerpt in the broadcast conveys this vast difference between what politicians promote and what soldiers experience:

Alex Salmond: I think it will give way to a wave of anger as Scotland and the Black Watch families compare and contrast the bravery of our Scottish soldiers with the duplicity and - chicanery of the politicians who sent them into this deployment.

John Humphrys: Is that anger justified, Mr Hoon? (Burke, 2008, p.8)

The discussion revolves around the political climate in Britain in the aftermath of a suicide bombing that has killed three Black Watch soldiers during the Iraq invasion. Instead of engaging in sincere reflection, the broadcasters highlight how politicians devote themselves to justifying their decision to send soldiers into the conflict. For those who lose their sons or husbands, anger is not excused. However, this suffering is quickly exploited for political gains by those in power. This clever tactic used by the politicians is highlighted by a rhetorical question from Geoff Hoon in the play: "I cannot understand why someone should seek to take political advantage of the tragic deaths of three brave men. . ." (Burke, 2008, p. 8). The tension between the valor of soldiers and the hypocrisy of politicians is uncovered.

While politicians represent deception and manipulation, soldiers are expected to embody military conduct, including bravery, loyalty, obedience, and sacrifice. The required capabilities prioritizing the nation's interest over the soldier's life lay bare the political chicanery. The contrast between bravery and betrayal not only intensifies public outrage but also challenges simplistic depictions of national pride and duty. At this point, the question of whether that anger can be justified or not turns out to be the essential question on which the audience of the play is invited to ponder.

After giving the main framework of war discussions in the mainstream media, the voice-over scene moves to another setting in "Central Iraqi desert, October 2004" (p. 9). The scene portrays the soldiers in a perplexed situation amidst the battle chaos. They question their purpose in Iraq because there is no reliable information provided for them. Besides, they are not trained professional soldiers or too naive to be on a battleground. To be more precise, the soldiers do not fit the stereotypical image of soldiers as fearless, disciplined, patriotic, and self-sacrificing men devoted to family and nation. Contrary to such expectations, their conversations reveal a sense of disillusionment and vulnerability in the face of war. For example, in one scene, they describe their circumstances and refer to the futility of their mission:

Kenzie: D'you think it's got Sky?
Fraz: I hope so. We'll be able to watch the news and find out why the fuck we're here.
Kenzie: This is fucking pish.
Fraz: This isnay in the adverts, ay?
Kenzie: Have we actually got tay live here?
Fraz: Dinnay worry, it's just till some cunt kills you.
Kenzie: What the fuck are we gonnay day here? (Burke, 2008, p.9)

As clearly indicated, Burke captures a humorous reaction through soldiers' dialogue. He employs dark humor to criticize the current military and political system. Those characters make a joke about needing a news channel, "Sky", to be able to find out why they are even in Iraq. They risk their lives, and yet they are uninformed about the political reasons behind

their deployment. Likewise, Fraz utters a carefree reassurance that it will last until someone kills you. These remarks are quite humorous, which invokes laughter among the audience. Laughter becomes an act of resistance against dehumanizing narratives since it uncovers the function of humor as a coping mechanism for soldiers facing the constant threat of sudden death. Moreover, these humorous exchanges challenge the notion of the soldier as vigorous and heroic. Instead, the soldiers appear weary, skeptical, and disenchanted. From this vantage point, political rhetoric tends to show soldiers as emblems of valor and national pride for their own sake.

Another inconsistency is observed in the difference between the soldiers' raw and vernacular Scottish language and the standard English used by the officials. The seriousness of the situation that politicians attempt to define is broken and challenged by soldiers' rough language and jokes. Therefore, each joke acts as a subversive emotional tool for the constructed and masked national issues. On one level, this linguistic duality reflects social hierarchies. Accordingly, standard English stands for prestige, authority, and reliability, whilst regional dialects are often associated with marginalization and lack of power. The soldiers' use of a strong Scottish vernacular language involving sex jokes, meals, novels, movies, and witty puns reinforces their status as working-class men situated at the social and cultural periphery. This positions them far removed from the elite decision-makers whose speeches are polished and sanitized. On another level, the humor embedded in their dialect can be considered a form of subversion. It causes a collapse in the gravity of official discourses of honor and sacrifice by exposing how meaningless those ideals feel in the real war. In this sense, Burke uses humor not to trivialize conflict but to highlight the humanity of soldiers whose voices and laughter are often absent from official histories. This reinforces the argument of David Archibald (2008), who identifies the plays as an intersection between personal memory and historical narrative: "History is to society what memory is to the individual. In *Black Watch*, the two are fused as the soldiers' stories are collected, ordered, and placed within a broader historical narrative" (p. 8).

The scene, "The Gallant Forty Twa", advances the play's satire of war by using dark humor's subversive role. Earlier scenes have already exposed the contradictions of war through the hypocrisy of media propagandists, officials, and the stark difference between public discourse and personal experience. Humor has been captured in the incongruity of the soldiers themselves, whose crude, everyday conversations do not align with the supposed seriousness of their situation. The given scene, however, is more radically subversive since it dismantles the solemnity of war altogether and turns its contradictions into mockery. The comic tone is established immediately in the staging of Fraz and Cammy. Fraz leans carelessly in the doorway of the wagon while Cammy is sitting below with his trousers rolled around his boots and absorbed in a battered book. They start to talk about a famous novel, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom, A Triumph* (1926). At this point, Burke evolves their conversation about the novel into a tool for offering his cynical outlook towards Western ideology. The novel gives a biographical account of the British agent T. E. Lawrence, who played a significant role in the Middle East during the First World War. Lawrence encouraged the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire, but this was not truly for the benefit of the Arab people. His efforts were meant to secure the interests of Britain. By revisiting this story, Burke points to Britain's imperial ventures and the instability they created in the region. Making analogies between Lawrence's exploitation of Arab resources Britain's efforts to secure control in the region during the Arab Revolt, Anderson (2014) in "The True Story of Lawrence of Arabia" indicates that Britain's cause was framed as "full independence for virtually the entire Arab World" (2014, para.33). This historical context is comparable to the contemporary involvement of Western powers, including the UK military and the Scottish Black Watch regiment, in the Iraq War that ostensibly aimed

at bringing namely democracy. Cammy and Fraz's following humorous discussion points to the continuity of neocolonial endeavors across time and space and underpins how similar motivations and actions persist from the early 20th century to the early 21st century as a recurring pattern of Western intervention in the Middle East:

> *Cammy: I ken it's The Seven Pillars of Wisdom, but it is hard tay tell what it's about when there's only half ay it ay.*
> *Fraz: It's the Three and a Half Pillars ay Wisdom?*
> *Fraz: Do you think they'll make a film about this war?*
> *Cammy:They fucking better. I didnay fucking join the army for it no tay get immortalized on the big fucking screen.*
> *Fraz: You dinnay think it'll be too fucking boring?*
> *Cammy: Maybe. (Pause.) I'll do it my fucking self. Film it on fucking Kinghorn beach. Who'll fucking know? Sweating Wayout Moving. (Burke, 2008, pp. 14–15)*

As clear in the excerpt, the dialogue between Cammy and Fraz first sounds like a part of slapstick comedy. However, approaching the given scene from a political stance adds profound, meaningful layers to the surface-level reading. Cammy's response to Fraz's question about the possibility of a film being made about the war they are involved in demonstrates both the soldiers' desire for recognition and their disillusionment with military service. It highlights the irony of soldiers risking their lives for a cause they may not fully believe in, but only to desire fame and recognition for their efforts. Fraz's gibe about "The Three and a Half Pillars of Wisdom" reflects the soldiers' ability to find humor even in serious matters since, as Coletta explains, "[p]sychological protection and pleasurable experience are equally important in dark humor" (2003, p.7). Cammy's response to the idea of making a film on the war accentuates this resilience even further. Despite admitting that sort of film might turn out to be a very boring one, he insists on the importance of recording their own adventures. Besides, Cammy's subsequent declaration that he would film it himself on a local beach, using crude language to describe the process, adds an absurd element to the conversation. This absurdity also highlights the soldiers' feelings of powerlessness and their way of coping with harsh circumstances through dark humor, which makes them more relatable to the audience.

Another humorous but subversive element of the play is the employment of anti-heroes who are trapped in contradictions. Those characters are shown as names devoid of any real personalities; hence, they do not have full names. Instead, Burke presents them as caricatures struggling to survive. As the play proceeds, they face the harsh realities of war and become aware of the hypocritical impetus of the Majesty's government. Their realization forces them to notice they are only performing the roles imposed on them. They are not soldiers but pawns or cannon fodder of the Majesty. This inexorable truth shatters any illusions of glory and honor they might have had. The soldiers eventually understand that their deployment is not driven by noble causes or the defense of freedom but rather by the strategic and political interests of the UK government. The rhetoric of patriotism and duty is shown as a veil masking the true nature of their mission. The Sergeant reveals this manipulation in his following statement:

> *You're here because Her Majesty's Government has decided that there's no way we can sit down in Basra topping up our tans when our allies are getting ten types ay shite knocked out ay them by the mujahidin. [. . .] It's our turn tay be in the shite. (Burke, 2008, p. 17)*

Here, the sergeant evinces how those soldiers are caricaturized by the English government. Those ordinary men are not trained for combat but enlist for personal reasons. Most

of them are driven more by necessity, cultural expectation, and limited opportunity than by any ideological commitment to military or nationalistic motivation.

Further issue mocked by Burke in the play is the idealized heroism rooted in the dominant ideologies of powerful nations to encourage bravery and loyalty among warriors. Burke subverts the heroic deeds of sagas in the play through a phantasmagoric revival of Lord Elgin. By bringing Lord Elgin onto the twentieth-century stage, Burke creates a key moment that allows the audience to reconsider how history and national identity are shaped. At first, Lord Elgin suddenly appears to the soldiers as a symbol of Scottish heroism, linked to the legacy of Robert the Bruce and the legends of Bannockburn and the struggle for independence. However, it is through Burke's theatrical twist that he turns out to be the emblem of the corruption and greediness of human nature. This transition is evident in the portrayal of soldiers whose inquiry into financial compensation as soon as they encounter Lord Elgin's resurrected form is as follows:

Granty: How much?
Lord Elgin: What?
Granty: How much?
Cammy: Aye.
Lord Elgin: How much?
Rossco: Aye.
Lord Elgin: This is Robert the Bruce's sword.
Rosco: Well, get Robert the fucking Bruce tay go way you then.
Cammy: Aye.
Lord Elgin:Bannockburn.
Beat.
Freedom.
Beat.
Robert the Bruce and that?
Granty: We are still wanting fucking paid. (Burke, 2008, pp. 25–26)

In the excerpt, Lord Elgin gets confused when he is asked about personal gain from the war. This confusion sparks a moment of comedy stemming from a misunderstanding, or rather from a verbal and situational irony. The striking irony here lies in his attempt to motivate the soldiers by invoking the Battle of Bannockburn and calling on Scottish pride. Nevertheless, the soldiers care only about their pay. He waves his symbolic sword with the hope of igniting patriotism, but it does not work for them. Their concerns are practical and immediate, which are shaped by survival in the twenty-first century instead of medieval chivalric ideals. The contrast highlights the absurdity of trying to motivate modern soldiers with heroic myths. This scene, as Imren Yelmiş points out, reveals that the government is not really offering a better future but rather "glory is sold to the soldiers" (2016, p. 496). This kind of ideology puts a twist on general assumptions about war. It demonstrates the extent to which war is commodified since it reveals that it is based merely on personal and material benefits. Having said that, Bannockburn is portrayed not as an honorable site but as a setting where the manipulation is clear and intense. Thus, the play does not glamorize or idealize any certain kind of war, neither in the present nor in the Scottish past.

Although the roles of the Black Watch soldiers initially do not appear to be influenced by the USA's neo-colonial and capitalist endeavors, as Milena Kaličanin reveals, the play is "in the service of demystifying the prevalent Western imperialist and nationalist tendencies" (2018, p.8). It becomes evident that they are also confronting and deconstructing their own Scottish policies. In a characteristic of dark humor, the play does not propose a (moral) message to the audience, unlike traditional satire, which often aims to correct

societal flaws. As affirmed by Crawford (2014) in *Bannockburns*, "*Black Watch*, however, is not by means of straightforward propaganda" (2014, p.52). The avoidance of making any promotion is obvious in the following quotation that reveals the characters' sincere motivations:

Cammy: No for our government
Macca: No for Britain
Nabsy:No even for Scotland
Cammy: I fought for my regiment
Rossco:I fought for my company
Granty: I fought for my platoon
Nabsy: I fought for my section (Burke, 2008, p.72)

Considering their remarks, it is clear that the reasons for enlisting differ greatly and don't match the common stereotypes shown in mainstream media. The final protest of the soldiers echoes a defiant strike against false assumptions and generalizations about military life and national pride, and replaces those with solidarity, camaraderie, and brotherhood, which are the real sources of their motivation. The soldiers' accounts of motivation and their final act of solidarity extend beyond mere camaraderie; they illustrate dark humor's function as a collective coping mechanism. Their laughter in the face of loss and futility, echoing Ostrower's notion of "defensive humor," becomes an act of psychological preservation. As Critchley argues, humor often emerges at the threshold between laughter and tears — a paradoxical acknowledgment of suffering that refuses despair. The final solidarity speech thus reads not as sentimental closure but as an embodiment of the absurd heroism dark humor enables: to affirm life through laughter precisely when meaning collapses.

Conclusion

This study has centered on Burke's employment of dark humor as a literary trope with both absurdist and existential purposes. At the core of this article lies the argument that the use of dark humor enables Burke first to encompass and then subvert the pervasive dualities in the military or political sphere of Britain during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The dualities, observed in laughter and pain, valor and absurdity, high class and lower class, and the civilian and military spheres, disrupt the audience's expectations and arouse an emotional twist among the reader/audience. The binaries of the play are also constructed by a fragmented narrative structure, which gives an interplay between the battleground and a pub, and the past and present. The multiple experimental theatrical techniques in the play mirror the disjointed psychological state of the soldiers. Hence, duality and disorientation are drawn as the fundamental characteristics of the play.

Staging the harsh experiences of those soldiers facing the brutality of a war, Burke evidently condemns the war-maker regimes that reduce those soldiers into mere pawns of governments. Burke's *Black Watch* thus plays a vital role in satirizing the manipulation of information in media propaganda and the exploitation of the soldiers who are situated in an unprivileged position in British society. Many Highlanders, as ostensibly suggested in the play, have enlisted in the army for economic reasons and been motivated by the promises of glory and a national cause, and yet those soldiers later encountered the brutal side of war instead of the romanticized version of it. This also reinforces the discrepancy between political rhetoric and what the soldiers experience.

Furthermore, the soldiers' dark humorous behaviors and responses, which range from profane banter to mock-heroic reenactments, uncover their coping mechanisms. These

moments provoke and question the brutal realities of their existence. Jokes about death and surreal hallucinations, and the revival of heroic characters such as Lord Elgin, blur the boundaries between the real and the fantasy, so they also contribute to the projection of the psychological fragmentation that war inflicts on individuals. Through such grotesque scenes of comedy, Burke cultivates a grim tension between what is visible and what is endured. This incongruity within humor thus projects the soldiers' helplessness as well as their attempts to navigate an incoherent and hostile reality.

Moreover, Burke frames dark humor not only as a coping mechanism but also as an act of resilience and subversion. The soldiers' laughter amidst atrocity is a form of rebellion against the systems in political, social, and military spheres. The captured laughter seeks to redefine their identities, which are opposed to the oversimplified generalizations. By ridiculing the absurdity of their circumstances, they briefly dismantle the official narratives that romanticize war and portray heroism in simplistic or valorized terms. This resistance through humor allows the soldiers a sense of unity by highlighting how satire and mockery can also be apparatuses of survival and empowerment in the face of overwhelming stress and anxiety.

Burke's use of dark humor destabilizes traditional representations of war on stage. Rather than glorifying sacrifice or perpetuating sentimental heroic tales, *Black Watch* presents a more uncomfortable portrait of war where laughter and despair coexist. By so doing, the play invites audiences to rethink their assumptions about patriotism, duty, and the true cost of military engagement. It denies the possibility of any clear moral teaching. Instead, it presents the war as an experience defined by ambiguity, contradiction, and disillusionment. It fosters a skeptical stance where emotional vulnerability and political satire can intersect, which allows both the characters and the audience to confront the uncomfortable truths. Through these layered meanings emerging from the functions of dark humor, Burke not only humanizes the soldiers but also provides a broader perception of the ways societies remember, interpret, and mythologize the national conflict.

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