

“The Shame of Being a Man”?: Masculinity and Shamefulness in Peter Ho Davies’s *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself* (2021)

¿“La vergüenza de ser hombre”?: Masculinidad y vergüenza en *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself* (2021), de Peter Ho Davies

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Abstract: Often drawing on a misogynistic psychoanalytical tradition that perpetuates gender stereotypes, guilt has generally been considered a “masculinised” affect, while shame has often been “feminised,” apparently causing men and women to write shame differently. Scholars have often concluded that while women tend to write themselves out of shame, men have frequently written shame in abstract philosophical terms, displaced it onto female bodies or tried to coin glory from it. These alleged differences between men’s and women’s writing in/about shame have been taken as an indicator that shame organises women’s personal sense of self but is never the baseline condition of being a man. However, this article proposes that Peter Ho Davies’s *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself* (2021), a narrative about the aftermath of an abortion, can be read as an exploration of the shame of *being* a man in contemporary postfeminist society. The text investigates the legitimacy of the shame experienced by privileged subjects and demonstrates that the pro-feminist stance of its author/protagonist goes beyond mere imposture. In his exploration of male shamefulness, Davies’s writing aligns itself with the criticised female (or feminised) tradition of “oversharing” and vindicates the feminist adage that “the personal is political.”

Keywords: shame; masculinity; pro-feminism; autofiction; contemporary writing.

Summary: Introduction. On the Gendered Construction of Shame. Writing Male Shame. (Shame Is) *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself*. Conclusions.

Resumen: Partiendo con frecuencia de una tradición psicoanalítica misógina que perpetúa estereotipos de género, por lo general se ha considerado que la culpa es un afecto “masculinizado,” mientras que a la vergüenza se la ha “feminizado,” haciendo que parezca que hombres y mujeres escriben la vergüenza de forma diferente. Algunos académicos han llegado a la conclusión de que, si bien las mujeres han tratado de exorcizar la vergüenza por medio de la escritura, con frecuencia los hombres han escrito la vergüenza en términos filosóficos abstractos, la han desplazado a cuerpos femeninos o han tratado de vanagloriarse a través de ella. Estas supuestas diferencias entre la escritura que hombres y mujeres hacen con o sobre la vergüenza se ha tomado como un indicador de que la vergüenza ejerce un rol fundamental en la construcción de la identidad de las mujeres, pero nunca es la condición básica de ser un hombre. Sin embargo, este artículo propone que *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself* (2021), de Peter Ho Davies, una narración sobre las secuelas de un aborto, puede entenderse como una exploración de la vergüenza de *ser* hombre en la sociedad posfeminista contemporánea. El texto investiga la legitimidad de la vergüenza experimentada por sujetos privilegiados y demuestra que la postura pro-feminista de su autor/protagonista es más que simple impostura. En su exploración de la vergüenza masculina, la escritura de Davies se alinea con la criticada tradición femenina (o feminizada) del “oversharing” y reivindica el adagio feminista de que “lo personal es político.”

Palabras clave: vergüenza; masculinidad; pro-feminismo; autoficción; narrativa contemporánea.
Sumario: Introducción. Sobre la construcción de la vergüenza desde el punto de vista del género. La escritura de la vergüenza masculina. (La vergüenza es) *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself*. Conclusiones.

INTRODUCTION

Peter Ho Davies’s *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself* (2021) (hereafter *Lie*) chronicles the predicament of a couple making the decision to terminate a pregnancy, after finding out that the baby could have chromosome abnormalities, as well as the subsequent birth of a son diagnosed as twice exceptional. In a third-person narrative from the father’s point of view, the text investigates how the unnamed male protagonist’s desire to be involved as a father and have a successful heterosexual marriage is thwarted as he fails to live up to contemporary ideals of masculinity and fatherhood, while also trying to overcome trauma and shame.

Davies’s decision to make shame the central theme of the narrative should not be overlooked given the historical gendering of this affect. This article investigates how shame has traditionally and stereotypically been constructed as a feminine or feminised affect, primarily through psychoanalysis, and how scholars have most often distinguished between a tradition of male and female writing in/about shame. While guilt has long been considered a “masculinised” affect, shame has been “feminised” to such an extent that it is often regarded as a fundamental part of women’s

identity construction. Women’s shame is seemingly part of their *being*, whereas shame does not organise (normative) men’s personal sense of self. The aim of this article, however, is to explore how Davies’s text, while at times reproducing this discourse, appears to explore the shame of *being a man* in the current postfeminist context. Davies’s *Lie*, this article further suggests, aligns itself with a female tradition of shame (and abortion) writing and with the much-criticised practice of oversharing—of which many women writers are, rather stereotypically accused.

Before embarking on a brief review of the literature on the gendered construction of shame and the differences between men’s and women’s shame(ful) writing discussed by various scholars, several considerations must be made. The traditional distinction between shame and guilt, especially in psychoanalysis, undoubtedly perpetuates misogyny, gender stereotypes and cisheteronormativity. Rather than reproducing the rhetoric of traditional psychoanalysis and the sharp distinction that is sometimes drawn between female and male writing, through an analysis of Davies’s work this article is intended to question the extent to which it is possible, necessary and desirable to differentiate between male and female shame writing. The terms “male” and “female,” as well as “feminine” and “masculine” are, of course, contested categories and one should be wary of making any bold statements with regard to what constitutes or characterises the writing of particular subjectivities, as it is all too easy to slip, even unwittingly, into essentialism. The differences discussed in this article between men’s and women’s experiences of shame are not aimed at perpetuating stereotypical views of femininity and masculinity based on traditional gender binarisms and roles, nor at obviating the experiences (of shame in this case) of queer subjects. On the contrary, this article seeks to discredit or at least challenge precisely the arguments on which these distinctions are based, bearing in mind the gap between the potential oppression suffered by privileged subjects and the actual oppression suffered by their so-called Others. This does not mean, however, equating the shame that more or less normative men may feel as a corollary of their gender with that systematically suffered by women or queer subjects.

1. ON THE GENDERED CONSTRUCTION OF SHAME

Shame has frequently been conceptualised as being structurally different from guilt. Psychoanalyst Helen Block Lewis argues that the primary difference between shame and guilt hinges on whether the focuses on the

transgressor or on the act of transgression (*Shame*). Put differently, guilt emanates from a wrongdoing while shame impinges on the very essence of the self. This distinction between guilt and shame seems to stem precisely from the differential structure of both affects. Shame covers a family of negative feelings such as humiliation, mortification, shyness, painful self-consciousness, chagrin, or embarrassment, all of which focus on the “*helpless self*” (Lewis, “The Role” 98). While shame concerns flawed, objectified selfhood, guilt has been frequently theorised as more agential and other-focused. Shame seemingly relates to a position of passivity, inactivity and paralysis while guilt allows for reparation and retribution; it has an “activity-based cause and resolve structuring” (Biddle 230–31). Considering the characteristics attributed to shame and taking into account the markedly misogynistic character of traditional psychoanalysis, it is not at all surprising that shame has most often been feminised and guilt masculinised. The feminisation of shame can be traced back to Freud’s identification of this affect as “a feminine characteristic *par excellence*,” derisively resulting from a “concealment of genital deficiency” (qtd. in Mitchell 18). As Manion contends drawing on Lewis, although the association of womanhood with shame in psychoanalysis does not have such strong misogynistic overtones and is no longer informed by penis envy, the unfounded assumption of a greater propensity for interdependence still makes women be perceived as more shame-prone than men.

This proneness to shame seems to derive at least partly from the historical and socio-cultural association between femininity and emotionality. As Sally R. Munt explains in *Queer Attachments: The Cultural Politics of Shame*, “[w]ithin Western traditions of psychology and psychoanalysis a healthy person is one that knows how to manage and contain ‘their’ emotions within the individual self” (13). Women and femininity have traditionally been associated with emotional expression and (normative) men and masculinity with emotional restraint (see, for example, Bird; Bordo; Jansz; Morgan). Ullaliina Lehtinen argues that “women feel an inner shame and that men feel it as outer,” meaning that “men may feel shame in a less penetrating way” (qtd. in Probyn 83). However, if experiences of shame are shaped by a gendered cultural politics of emotion and men are socialised to suppress certain emotions, perhaps it is not that men feel shame in a less penetrating way but that they are less likely to acknowledge and express shamefulness. What is certain is that shame has historically been weaponised to repress women. As “the

negative side of narcissism” or “the preoccupation with the self as rejected by judging others,” write Joseph Adamson and Hilary Clark, shame has inexorably shaped the experience of women under patriarchy (22). In *Femininity and Domination*, Sandra Lee Bartky argues that women’s shame “has a different meaning in relation to their total psychic situation and general social location than has a similar emotion when experienced by men” (84). Women’s shame is felt as a “pervasive sense of personal inadequacy” that reveals their “generalized condition of dishonor” (85). In contrast to men, Manion argues, women “tend to organize their personal sense of self around feelings of shame, that is, around a sense of disappointment in failing to meet some proposed ideal, especially in the eyes of others” (24). However, one could wonder whether patriarchy does not also deploy the dynamics of shame to induce masculine selves to recalibrate according to the unattainable ideal of hegemonic masculinity.

In *Honour and Shame and the Unity of the Mediterranean* (1987), anthropologist David Gilmore identifies honour as the antithesis of shame and as a masculine ideal. In such a cultural terrain, women’s sexual conduct often becomes the currency for securing men’s honour, which is part of the reason why women’s bodies and female sexuality are subjected to relentless surveillance under patriarchy. However, female “shamefulness” is not the only factor that can potentially bring shame upon men. As Gershen Kaufman notes,

men traditionally have been shamed for expressing distress affect (crying), fear affect, and shame affect. Men also have been shamed for expressing their need for affirmation, for touching/holding, and for identification, to feel merged with another. In contrast, women in this culture traditionally have been shamed for expressing anger affect and excitement affect, for asserting power, and for expressing their need to differentiate from significant others—to define themselves as distinctly different and separate while placing their own desires ahead of others’ desires. (93)

Men and women have typically been shamed for engaging in behaviour traditionally associated with the opposite sex/gender. Men fear the humiliation of falling short of the ideal of hegemonic masculinity (Kimmel 31) and ashamed of feeling shame affect (due to its disclosure of vulnerability). Arguably, then, it is not only women, as Manion contends, who experience the anxiety of not conforming to some gender ideal. Nonetheless, it is tempting to conclude that, as Bartky avers, men’s shame

can only be intelligible by presupposing male power, while women's shame represents a token of their powerlessness (84–85).

In *Writing Shame: Gender, Contemporary Literature and Negative Affect*, Kaye Mitchell observes that if “men and women stand in different relations to shame, then it is perhaps predictable that they might write it differently” (202). Before moving on to the analysis of Davies's text, in the next section, I shall turn my attention to how male shame manifests itself in literature in order to explore the relationship between masculinity, shame and writing. Given that shame is apparently not intrinsic to being a man, can men write successfully (whatever that means) about it? What characterises men's writing in/about shame? And are the intentions of men who write about male shame inevitably dubious?

2. WRITING MALE SHAME

In “The Shame of Being a Man,” Steve Connor investigates the triangular relationship between masculinity, shame and writing. He deems masculinity “a crashed category, the very name of ruin” and provides a long list of the “attributes and occasions” of his own gendered shame:

I am ashamed, for example, of the advantage of having been a man, and of its arrogant privilege and prospects. I am ashamed of the will-to-manhood involved in being a man. I am ashamed of the stupidity and selfishness and certitude and pettiness of being a man. I am ashamed of men's shoving voices and the sound of my own, of which I hear a lot. I am ashamed of the things men carry on agreeing to want and ashamed as well of what men have done, and what I believe being a man continues to entail doing, to women and to other men, and not just accidentally but systematically, as part of the long, and now almost comprehensively rumbled, plot of patriarchy. I am ashamed of all that is male in my sexuality, which is all there is of it, that pittance, all the way down, not far, to the bottom, and sorry for bringing it up. I am ashamed most of all of the violence that is inseparable from being a man.

Connor distinguishes between a male and a female tradition of writing shame. Women writers have attempted to “[write] themselves out of shame rather than into it,” while male writers have tried “to write the weakness of shame” (227). Mitchell seems to agree with Connor when she claims that writers such as Franz Kafka or Samuel Beckett engage with a “more abstract, structural and generalised form of shame,” delving more into a

philosophical or moral terrain rather than “the narrowly personal” (202). For Connor, shame in men’s writing is not only most often depersonalised but transmuted into guilt, “entering into measure and apportioning and reversibility and atonement.” The representation of masculinity as masochistic or clownish in many cultural manifestations, Connor avers, demonstrates precisely an attempt to morph shame into guilt and make it expiable, as well as being a mechanism for maintaining male dominance. In his own words: “[r]idiculing the phallus . . . is perfectly compatible with securing its power.”

Both Connor and Mitchell point out that men hardly “write in shame without attempting to coin glory from it” (Connor). This is the case, Mitchell argues, of writers such as Ian McEwan, Martin Amis or Philip Roth, who more often turn male shame into “a form of heroism, a badge of pride” and whose displays of vulnerability are “mitigated by the ultimate displacement of that shame upon female bodies” (207). The same could be said of Karl Ove Knausgård, whose autobiographical series *My Struggle* generally casts male shame as emasculating, reinforcing an intrinsic link between femininity and shamefulness (235). Converting male shame into heroism is, however, as problematic as masking it as “numbness or assumed insensibility” (Connor). For Connor, the “sulkily noncombatant masculinity” advanced by writers such as Will Self represents “a confection of rather than any defection from masculinity” and an attempt at “smug defiance,” thus further complicating the positive reception of men’s shameful writing.

The central question that arises from my reading of Connor and Mitchell is ultimately whether it is ever possible for men to write male shame (or, to write *in* shame) without winding up displacing it onto female bodies, turning it into expiatory guilt or a heroic or self-gratifying act, or committing an egregious act of mere imposture. This question resonates with Jonathan McAloon’s in his article for *The Guardian*, “Can Male Writers Avoid Misogyny?” (2017). Using Roth and Amis as examples, McAloon discusses how male authors often “reproduce what they sought to expose,” namely male chauvinism. McAloon also points to the case of David Foster Wallace, who branded male authors such as John Updike or Norman Mailer the “Great Male Narcissists,” only to end up becoming another such male narcissist himself. McAloon wonders in all seriousness whether no matter how “nuanced and sensitive [the] literary presentation of misogyny,” male writers always end up irredeemably perpetrating it. One might want to detect a nonchalant complicity in men’s questioning or

seeming unawareness of what does and does not constitute misogyny, or in deploring the ineluctability of incurring it (and thus the ultimate futility of attempting to avoid it). However, a relevant question arises: how can pro-feminist male writers, where they are willing to do so, position themselves as such in their writing? Quoting Gilles Deleuze, Connor avers: “The shame of being a man—is there any better reason to write? But how could one envisage a men’s writing aimed not at ‘free[ing] [men] from the shame of being a man’ but rather conceived as ‘a way of meeting with shame, a coming into male shamefulness’.” In the following, I shall investigate how Davies navigates the dilemmas of writing male/masculine shame under postfeminism in his most recent work, *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself* (2021), to propose that it effectively represents such inscription of men in shame.

3. (SHAME IS) *A LIE SOMEONE TOLD YOU ABOUT YOURSELF*

The shame that afflicts Davies’s protagonist is primarily caused by his and his wife’s shared decision to opt for an abortion after receiving inconclusive results that “[t]here was a chance the baby was normal. There was a chance the baby was not” (1). Post-abortion tests are conclusive, but the couple cannot agree whether they should receive the results: “‘I can’t bear it,’ she said, ‘The not knowing. How can you bear it?’” (9). His desire not to know is “[n]ot because if the baby was normal, it would make things worse (though it would)” but because “[h]e didn’t want to be relieved of this shame, when it was all he could feel, all he was allowed to. All he had left to remember her by” (11)—his shame verging on masochism. Still immersed in the trauma of their loss, the couple decides to try again for a child. The birth of their son, however, fails to alleviate their shame. The narrator describes feeling continually exposed to the other’s gaze, “as if his very skin is seen-through. As if he’s been flayed” (18). For his wife “the cries [of the newborn] feel like blame. A phrase recurs to her—one of her mother’s old-fashioned, but somehow ringingly apt: *a crying shame*. A shame that weeps and shrieks and wails and sobs for all to hear” (27).

The shame inflicted on the father by the abortion is experienced in stereotypically masculine gendered terms as described by Connor or Mitchell, that is, masked as guilt: “‘I sometimes think every other parent is better at this than us,’ she says. That can’t be true, he knows. But what he suspects is true is that none of them ever killed a child. That’s how they’re better” (54). In an attempt to transmute shame into action-oriented

culpability and thus achieve expiation, he decides to volunteer as an escort in an abortion clinic: “I want to help. . . . I just want to help: itself a plea” (88), “he’s not been at the clinic to do good . . . so much as to find absolution” (115). When he is given an umbrella to shelter women clients from protesters’ spittle, the protagonist likens it to a “lance or a spear” and, although he tries “not to feel like a doorman,” he cannot help but find his actions “courtly, chivalrous” (96). Nonetheless, this masculine desire to reinstate honor and coin glory from shame through protection does not go entirely undetected:

Typically male, he understands. This desire to fix something, to protect someone. He knows his chivalric instinct is as rusty, as clanking and ungainly, as a knight’s armor. But aren’t other men just as backward, as atavistic? And aren’t many of those men on the other side of this fight? To speak to them, to combat them, maybe his instincts—retrograde as they are—might be some use. He hopes so. (88)

His heroic zeal is nipped in the bud by his female co-worker, Barb, who praises the courage of the women who come to the clinic: “some are afraid to tell their partners . . . but some just want to spare them the guilt, to protect them. Remember that next time you’re feeling all manly heroic” (101). When the protagonist’s eagerness to “shield” women persists, Barb intervenes once more to point men (or rather patriarchy) as the real danger from which women have to protect themselves:

“I know you want to protect women. Fine. But who do you think you’re protecting them from? Who do you picture? What if men *are* the problem? What if abortion at root is an undoing of the power of men? Can a man help with that?” He opens his mouth, closes it. (116)

The protagonist reflects on how shame is mobilised or weaponised politically to control women and minorities and shows awareness of how certain bodies are more shame-prone than others. The pro-life bumper stickers he sees everywhere read: “93% of women regret their abortion. If Mary was Pro-Choice there’d be no Christmas. What part of Thou Shalt Not Kill DON’T you understand?” (6). These messages strike his wife as personally addressed to her, to the point that, despite the fact that “[a]bortion’s been legal my whole life,” she cannot but “feel like a criminal” (7). Barb reminds the father that their abortion was, in fact, “a

virtuous abortion” (89). Although he finds it unsettling to hear his shame described as virtuous, and hence belittled, he acknowledges his position of privilege:

He knows what Barb means, of course. They weren't some teenagers who'd forgotten to use a condom. They weren't underage, or high, or poor, or Black. Or even unmarried. They didn't fit any of the usual categories of blame or bigotry. No, they were white and middle class and married and trying to have a baby. They had an abortion within the bond of holy marriage. (89)

While his presence at the clinic goes relatively unnoticed, Barb must endure the intimidation of the “antis,” shouting “Nazi, butcher, baby killer” (98). These vicious insults directed at a woman seem to indicate that women are in fact constructed as more shameful than men and highlight the role this affect has in controlling their bodies. As Connor notes, “[f]emale shame has mostly been regulatory and disciplinary. In the shame attaching to menstruation and pregnancy and illegitimate birth and excessive or unfeminine behaviour (drunkenness, ribaldry, lewdness, loose talk), shaming has worked to keep females in bounds, docile, infant, obedient.” The father reproduces the gendered discourse of “biology as destiny” in relation to women when he mentions that a girl he dated as a young man “considered pregnancy, babies *gross*” and did not want to have children, something that at the time made him see her as “immature” (37). His words point to the instrumentalisation of shame as a mechanism to “secure the form of the family by assigning to those who have failed its form the origin of bad feeling” (Ahmed 107), suggesting that a “mature” woman’s greatest aspiration should be to procreate and demonstrating how women unable or unwilling to literally incorporate the gendered expectations placed on their bodies inevitably end up shamed. That shame is quintessential to womanhood and femininity is what his wife tries to explain to him by escalating the shame attached to female corporeality and sexuality:

“All teenage girls think babies are gross,” she explains. “It’s not immature, or it’s only an immature way of saying they’re terrified of getting pregnant.” She sighs. “Abortion is shameful, because pregnancy is shameful, because sex is shameful, because periods are shameful. It almost makes me relieved we had a boy.” (37)

Part of the shame felt by Davies’s protagonist is the result of perceived emasculation. Despite his pro-feminist leanings, his words disclose that equality does not come quite naturally to him. For example, he feels that he ought to be congratulated simply for sharing domestic chores:

She always had a horror of being a housewife, a disdain for stereotypical domestic expectations—cooking, cleaning, laundry.

The father gets it, does his bit. It’s only fair, they agree.

But secretly he feels she should be grateful. As if he’s doing her a favor. As if taking out the trash is an act of love.

And secretly she disdains his efforts. His cooking isn’t cooking—his sauces come from a jar. His cleaning isn’t cleaning—just tidying. (47)

Marriage, fatherhood and care combine into a crisis of male sexual identity. The father feels his wife deploys him for the sole purpose of having a child: “she wants [sex], more than anything, more than ever before; only what she wants, he thinks, isn’t him. She wants someone else. She wants a baby more than him” (15). He conceives of marriage as a contract in which sex is traded in exchange for fidelity: “He’s considered an affair. He has grounds: fourteen years of faithful marriage . . . And in return? The only occasional toleration of his desire” (79). Furthermore, he is presented as shamed by feminism and as a victim of his wife’s refusal to let him commodify her body in order to pander to his male gaze: “He buys her lingerie; she wears it as if it’s a fancy dress. What he finds sexy; she finds eye-rolling ironic” (79). He takes to masturbation to get “more action,” going so far as to prefer it for being “quicker, more efficient, less cumbersome than intercourse” (79–80). However, masturbation and sexual frustration are not without shame, as “he fears he’s addicted, not to the porn, not even to the act itself, but to the shame it provokes. As if it’s shame he’s coaxing from himself, from his body” (80). His shame turns to anger and reactive humiliation when he blames his wife for his need to consider an affair and masturbate “[t]hree, four, five times a week, like a horny high schooler” (80). The displacement of his shame onto his wife’s body is far more explicit in the following scene:

Just once, home alone, mother and baby at story time some-where, he glimpses a pair of lace panties in her drawer, wraps his fist in the watery silk. He remembers this pair, kissing her through them, drawing them off with his

teeth. Even remembers the hot flush of embarrassment choosing them in the store, as if he were choosing them for himself, which in a sense he was.

Now they're a relic. Imagining her in them as ridiculous as slipping them on himself. Which he does. The fit snug, lightening as he grows hard until they clasp him like her hand. He's suddenly furious at her, ashamed and hoping to shame her, but his orgasm, when it comes, feels dismally. (81)

The protagonist is self-aware of the direct relationship between his manhood and his ability to arouse sexual desire in women: "What he doubts is in manhood, not in bed, but on the playground, at playdates, at pickup, when he's often the only man and the women, the mothers, eye him warily and then, once he's established as a dad, ignore him. 'Invisible Manhood,' he calls it" (82). Fatherhood is explicitly portrayed as something that prevents him from being the object of female desire, as an attribute that erodes men's sex appeal. This transpires also in a scene where he meditates on the absence of male superheroes who are parents. At a school event where fathers are required to wear comic-book t-shirts, the protagonist decides to wear Mister Fantastic of the Fantastic Four. This character, he avers, is not "*Something-Man*, but *Mister*. Just like a dad" and his superpower, far from being related to anger or strength, is to be "stretchy, bendy, elastic. . . . All arms to reach and hands to catch. Able to pack a healthy lunch *while* emptying a loaded dishwasher!" (83). In stressing that Mister Fantastic is not something-*man*, his superpower is feminised and rendered somehow shameful in a man.

The protagonist's shame also stems from a fear of inheriting certain traits associated with traditional masculinity and fatherhood; a shame that, if not intrinsic to being a (normative) man, is portrayed as inescapable from masculinity. These traits refer to authoritarian and violent behaviours inculcated in him by his father. This is especially evident in a scene in which he shames his son for failing at a game, feeling in turn the shame caused by emulating his own father:

. . . they play catch in the yard, until the boy jams his finger, gets a ball in the face. *It's called catch*, the father snaps. *Not drop!* The sarcasm like a slap.

He thinks of his own father, teaching him stuff—math, riding a bike—the shadow of disappointment that would cross his father's face, when he got something wrong, when he fell or cried. Those hot moments of shame. And now he's inflicting them. Passing them on like genes. And yet, they're so

bound up in the love he feels; how to feel one, without inflicting the other?
(41)

Davies’s encapsulation of male shame recalls Connor’s and Mitchell’s descriptions of the mechanisms that transform shame into guilt, present it in wholly abstract terms or displace it onto female bodies. However, to group Davies with authors of an older generation, such as Roth or Amis, who expiate male guilt by shaming women and who end up perpetuating misogyny by trying to expose it, would be seriously fallacious. While the protagonist often appears to feel compromised and shamed by feminism, the narrative is geared towards interrogating, rather than promoting, the legitimacy of such feelings. Although at times his shame seems to be a direct corollary of perceived emasculation, it also stems from his understanding of the violence that structures traditional masculinity. Davies refrains from creating a male character that is a standard-bearer for feminism but neither does he create a male protagonist whose shame turns into numbness or mere imposture. Davies’s protagonist is a man beset by dilemmas and frequently aware (and even ashamed) of his privilege. While exposing the oppressive impact of shame, Davies’s narrative also conjures its ethical and transformative potential (particularly for more or less normative men), as shame serves as a catalyst for the male protagonist to meditate on how gendered subjectivity tends to be structured for the benefit of men—despite claims of crisis. Moreover, Davies is careful to ensure that the male protagonist’s perspective is not the only one provided. His voice does not impose itself, but is inflected and mitigated by the voices of female characters such as the mother or Barb. These other points of view, together with the father’s own critical self-reflection, offer a fitting picture of the hectic turbulences currently unsettling contemporary gender relations and of how notions of masculinity, fatherhood and care are subject to a process of transformation and evolution. *Lie* can thus be seen to exemplify what Connor describes as the writing of male shamefulness. The narrative invokes the shame of being a normative man as a gendered identity constructed through shaming less privileged others and purports to mobilise shame to interrogate and challenge traditional masculinity.

The relationship between the pro-feminist politics of the author and the main character, or of the text as a whole, is especially noteworthy considering that *Lie* is a work of autofiction. The main character, like the author, is a well-educated, middle-class man who studied physics and is

now a writer and lecturer of creative writing, has a son and is married to a woman editor. Davies's decision to blur the line between fact and fiction in an attempt to write shame, especially male shame, seems particularly relevant. As Kaufman suggests, referring mostly to psychoanalytic theory but to an extent equally applicable to literature, the neglect of shame has been partly to do with the lack of a language to "adequately perceive, describe and so bring into meaningful relationship this most elusive of human affects" (4). Like Connor, Timothy Bewes raises the question of the extent to which shame can or cannot be written, wondering how it might be possible to write about shame in a work of literature, especially if written by a man. Is it possible to speak of a shame that precedes the work, a shame that the work takes for its object, a shame that the writer seems to be attempting to process? Is shame utterable? Taking into account that the expression of certain emotions has too long been disavowed by the imperative ideal of hegemonic masculinity and that men are often too ashamed to express shame, autofiction can be seen as a stylistic resource that enables men to speak about "weak" emotions from the "safety" of the fictional encapsulation of the work. As the protagonist says:

He takes her advice of so long ago, writes about their loss. A story. Or is it? He's not quite sure himself. One of the gifts of fiction, he tells students, is the cover it provides. A story can be 1% true and 99% made up, or 99% true and 1% made up, and the reader won't know the difference, the writer doesn't have to declare. It means he can tell the truth and take the Fifth simultaneously. (48)

Davies's work is concerned with finding ways to say the unsayable, "to speak the unspeakable—the unutterable made utterable by virtue of being written, whispered on a page" (168), as his protagonist claims. The unsayable in this context refers to trying to communicate traumatic experiences in writing but also to investigate men's enfeebling emotions. The protagonist is "stricken with grief, stricken with embarrassment at his own grief," while questioning his "right" to suffer because "[h]ow do you mourn something you killed?" (153). Furthermore, his shame seems ultimately misplaced and unjustified if abortion is ultimately an alien experience for cisgender men:

We had an abortion, he thinks he might say.

But can *we* have an abortion? he wonders. Or is the male use of the first-person plural in this context as suspect as saying, “*We’re* pregnant”? Something his wife always scorned. Yet if the phrase “we have a child” is fine, couldn’t “we had an abortion” also be viable?

Of course, he knows the unease with that use of “we” is more complicated. If it’s a woman’s right to choose, after all, what role does that leave for the man? Agree or disagree, it’s her choice. (Though wasn’t she his choice? he thinks. And he hers?). (88)

And also:

“. . . you act like it happened to you! You were just there. It happened to me!”

It happened to us, he wants to say. It happened to you, yes, of course, but also happened to me, because I love you. Wants to say, but can’t because for a moment it isn’t true. (104)

The protagonist is thus “[a]shamed, and ashamed of his own shame” (8), following Kaufman’s argument that men are ashamed of feeling (and expressing) shame affect. He feels like a “grief thief” or a “shame thief,” as if his feelings implied an element of appropriation. *Lie* problematises the shame or feelings of inadequacy that a cisgender man may experience when he feels he is appropriating experiences to which he has no direct access, such as abortion. It thus complicates the relationship between men’s right to suffer and the potential victimisation it can generate by shifting the focus from oppressed subjects such as women to men, a move that is not made uncritically. Likewise, it raises questions about the ethical implications and responsibilities of writing from a perspective that is not one’s own. The protagonist reflects on the ethical implications that autobiographical writing may have, considering that its purpose is somehow to lay bare the uncomfortable, the private, the secret, and more often than not tends to involve structural differences:

All fiction is appropriation. Only the narrowest, most solipsistic memoir of life on a desert island, say—doesn’t appropriate from others. Still some appropriations, he knows, are more charged than others. It’s a challenge for a woman to write a male character, but it’s a different challenge for a man to write a female character (and yes, for a man to write about abortion). For a Black writer to write a white character is one thing; for a white writer to

write a Black character something else again. Something shaped by society, and history, by power and the abuse of power. . . .

Yet isn't the ultimate power imbalance between parents and children? For a child to write about a parent is one thing; for a parent to write about a child something else. And he still wants to be a good parent. (166)

This is also evinced in his conversations with his wife:

“Do you mind,” he asks softly. “My writing about it.”

He's trying again.

“About us, you mean.”

He nods.

“It's your version,” she says. “Your side. I didn't take it as the whole story. I assumed that was why it was written like at. That that was what all the breaks were for.” (81)

As regards the appropriation of women's experiences (although people who are not women may experience abortions) or the possibility of coming across as an impostor, the author identifies *Lie* as an actively pro-feminist work and as an exercise in trying to speak “to the possibility that there must be some space for men to be allies of a woman's right to choose, and how do we speak into that space” (Davies and Holland). This is why Davies's choice of Italo Calvino's words for one of his epigraphs seems particularly pertinent: “In abortion, the person who is massacred, physically and morally, is the woman. For any man with a conscience every abortion is a moral ordeal that leaves a mark, but . . . every male should bite his tongue three times before speaking about such things.” As Davies explains, “Calvino speaks to my own anxieties, but also represents an example of a man speaking up in support of woman's right to abortion.” Davies seems thus concerned, like McAloon, with how pro-feminist male authors can write to advance pro-feminist politics.

As a highly autofictional and metafictional text, the various approaches to shame investigated in *Lie* play a key role in Davies's and his protagonist's understanding of the tradition they are working in. The title, *A Lie Someone Told You about Yourself*, is taken from a quotation by Anaïs Nin's “Shame is the lie someone told you about yourself.” As such, *Lie* seems to literally wear its intentions on its sleeve from the beginning by referring to Nin, who in several of her texts (e.g. “The Birth” from *Under a Glass Bell*, or her diaries) discusses her experience with abortion and

miscarriage. Davies’s proxy criticises a male tradition of writing shame, in particular, of course, on abortion. Specifically, he singles out the short story “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, an “abortion story that never mentions the word abortion” (60) and whose “subtlety” causes its very subject to disappear. The protagonist calls the story’s discretion “perversely coy” and wonders “Why shouldn’t it use the word? (Why, for that matter, should the most famous fiction about abortion be written by a man?)” (61). He ponders whether he should stop teaching the story and instead introduce “Alice Walker’s ‘The Abortion’ or Anne Sexton’s ‘The Abortion,’ or something, anything, by Grace Paley, said to have started writing stories while recuperating from—you guessed it—her abortion” (61–62).

Alongside the female authors mentioned above, *Lie* also displays an intertextual affinity with another tradition of women writers whose autofictional texts have been considered by critics as exercises in “oversharing.” Rachel Sykes problematises the concept of oversharing as a literary practice characterised by “the revelation of ‘too much’ personal information” in works that blur fact and fiction, and how the label of oversharer is an ideologically charged accusation, largely associated with women (151). Sykes condemns the double standards of reviewers who consider the works of Lena Dunham, Emily Gould, Sheila Heti, or Chris Kraus to be almost pathologically explicit in their self-disclosures, while praising male writers such as Ben Lerner, Karl Ove Knausgård, or Tao Lin for producing very similar autofictional texts, riddled with sexual and other embodied confessions. Indeed, this could also apply to *Lie*, said to be “told with fearless honesty” and “thoughtful frankness” (Smart). Despite their remarkable differences, it is tempting to compare Davies’s “fearless honesty” also to the much-criticised unveiling of taboo truths in Rachel Cusk’s memoir on motherhood *A Life’s Work* (2001). It is hard not to agree with Sykes that women writers invariably find themselves at the receiving end of their reviewers’ gendered bias, a fate that male writers indisputably escape. A similar point is made by Mitchell as she analyses various critiques of Knausgård’s work. According to Mitchell, if one is to assume that “‘writing about feelings’ is both feminine and shameful” by presenting it as a fearless enterprise when executed by male writers “something that might be considered banal or trivial in a novel or autobiography by a female writer becomes ‘fascinating’” (225). When women writers engage with supposedly shameful topics, even if they do so in ambivalent ways, they are apt to receive censure. Mitchell poses a series of very interesting

questions: does the corresponding lack of censure, or even praise, make it easier for men writers to “meet with” shame, or does it only give them licence to write about “shameful” topics? And most importantly, does an admission and frank display of shame bear the potential to transform conventional masculinity? (206).

By explicitly deploring the fact that arguably the most popular text on abortion was written by Hemingway, a man, Davies demonstrates a certain sense of shame in writing about the same subject himself, at the same time as he anticipates the potential glory he may glean from it. Similarly, by referring to autofiction as at once enabling him to tell the truth and taking the Fifth, his text must appear as an almost cowardly act, far from risky or bold. Furthermore, Davies’s text demonstrates that the ways in which men writers’ “self”-disclosure works to disrupt traditional gender roles is, almost as a rule, diametrically opposed to that of women writers. The gender-subversive potential of women’s life writings, such as those mentioned by Sykes, lies precisely in their reclamation of female sexuality, their use of humour and coarse language and their bluntness and excess; traits that do not seem at all unusual in narratives written by men. As the criticism of Cusk’s work, in particular, demonstrates, the idea of a woman opening up about the terrors and anxieties of maternity, or showing shameless greed, irresponsibility, pretentiousness, or selfishness¹ horrifies, despite these very characteristics having long been central to the literary representation of fatherhood. What seems radical about Davies’s autofiction is precisely what would make a motherhood narrative fairly “conventional” or “gender-appropriate” by traditional standards: that is, a parent’s desire to be involved in childcare and nurturing practices, to be present, to be exposed and to be vulnerable to the pressure of certain ideals of parenthood.²

¹ See “I Was Only Being Honest,” an article for *The Guardian* where Rachel Cusk herself addresses the criticism of *A Life’s Work* (2001).

² By this I am far from condemning female writers who depict tenderness or discuss the joy of motherhood and care, or male writers who expose paternal neglect or investigate issues such as sex or abuse. However, I believe that in the present moment it is more “urgent” to explore representations of femininity and masculinity or motherhood and fatherhood that escape traditional gender norms or expectations. As the criticism indicates, it is still difficult to read today that a woman refuses to be a mother or that she does not enjoy motherhood, just as it is still rare to find representations of, say, vulnerable and committed fathers or stay-at-home dads.

CONCLUSIONS

Without ignoring the crucial fact that the label of “oversharer” is, almost as a rule, reserved exclusively for women, this article attempts to make a case that Davies’s patrifocal writing constitutes “a mode of dissent in contemporary culture” that can vehemently transgress patriarchal norms” (Sykes 151). By exploring a negative affect such as shame and its relation to traumatic experience, the text unsettles a series of signifiers traditionally associated with masculinity such as strength, power, control or emotional impassiveness. *Lie* advances an ontology based on radical vulnerability and exposure, thus destabilising the hegemonic ideal of masculinity as based on stoicism and the rejection of interdependence. The protagonist’s ongoing sense of being subjected to a judgmental gaze places him on a similar plane with women and marginalised minorities. This entails an exercise in empathy that does not, however, imply overlooking, but rather acknowledging and critically examining his privileged status. Davies’s text is reflective of the current postfeminist context, positioning itself within a tradition of women writers as well as pro-feminist politics and ethics. *Lie*’s autofictional nature meaningfully illuminates the ambivalent nature of shame as oscillating between the public and the private, as “an exposure of the intimacies of selves in public” (Probyn 72). In this sense, it can be read as aligning itself with the confessional mode and the feminist adage of “the personal is political.” The text offers two perspectives on shame: its potentially denigrating and stigmatising effect on historically oppressed collectives and a salutary or reintegrative one, capable of generating self-evaluation and transformation in privileged subjects. Although, as noted by Lauren Berlant, “shifts in the affective atmosphere are not equal to a changing world” (qtd. in Pedwell and Whitehead 122), it is interesting to consider the potential political and ethical effects of investigating what shame *does*. As Probyn claims, “the deeply embodied experience of shame compels a different approach to envisioning social life: it highlights the connections and proximities of individuals to one another as the basis on which political action ultimately rests” (77). Davies explores a certain shame apparently intrinsic to being a man as representative of standard masculinity in today’s postfeminist society, particularly on realising that men’s inherited privilege categorically exempts them from the violence that women, queer subjects and minorities experience on a daily basis. In doing so, he demonstrates how emotional experiences can be drivers of social and historical change, capable of

de/reconstructing identities and triggering radical change towards a more just and equitable society.

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