

# Disillusionment and Hope in James Kelman's "talking about my wife"

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## *Abstract*

*In The Sane Society (2002), Fromm argues that man "with his desires and woes, loses his central place in the system...this place is occupied by business and production...[he] ceases to be "the measure of all things" in the economic sphere." (2002: 83) This claim implies that in modern Western society, basic human necessities, such as connection and comradeship, are denied for the purpose of better maintenance of the economy: man "becomes the means for the economic interests of another man, or himself, or of an impersonal giant, the economic machine." (2002: 91) Fromm's perception of modern individual as a mere cog that fits into the grand economic machinery is applied in the critical interpretation of Kelman's 'talking about my wife' (2009). Through the portrayal of a husband/wife relationship, contemporary disillusionment with politics and harsh realities of economic stagnation in Scotland (and the world at large) are potently criticized. The only way to restore personal dignity can hopefully be found in the domestic sphere relying on a meaningful human interaction, long forgotten in the unjust system operating on the free market economy rules. Apart from Fromm's views, the paper also relies on the theoretical insights of Bond, Rich, Marcuse and Freud.*

*Key words: disillusionment, hope, Fromm, Kelman, Marcuse, Freud.*

## **Introduction: (Dis)Illusions of Modern Living**

In his memorable study, *The Fear of Freedom* (1942), Fromm claims that modern world is regretfully ruled by advertising and profit, while man represents a mere "cog in the vast economic machine" (Fromm 1942: 96). Before Fromm made his insightful observations on the unjust and unnatural pace of modern living, it was Freud who prophetically expressed the idea that human beings are basically denied happiness in civilization. In *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1929, 2005), Freud insists on the claim that the civilized social order opposes the fulfillment of basic human needs, i.e. the gratification of all desires. In order to find security in civilization, man has to sacrifice the gratification of certain desires, since various external obstacles stand in the way of personal wish fulfillment.

Life as we find it is too hard for us; it entails too much pain, too many disappointments, impossible tasks. We cannot do without palliative remedies [...] There are perhaps three of these means: powerful diversions of interest, which lead us to care little about our misery; substitutive gratification, which lessen it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it.

(Freud 2005: 7)

The gloomy reality that hampers wish fulfillment is rather difficult to bear; hence, there are various forms of distraction, mostly channeled through the means of mass media and modern variations of entertainment. These powerful channels provide modern man with a false sense of purpose thus directly maintaining the economic equilibrium. Being too busy and overwhelmed to despair over his personal misery, with the goal of life which generally

boils down to consuming as much as possible, modern man's genuine desires are purposefully thwarted and "the individual is blocked in realizing his sensuous, emotional and intellectual potentialities" (Fromm 1942: 156), which creates an overbearing feeling of "unaliveness" (Fromm 2002: 196).<sup>ii</sup>

This contributes to the creation of what Simmel defines as "the metropolitan type of man" who "develops an organ protecting him against the threatening currents and discrepancies of his external environment which would uproot him. He reacts with his head instead of his heart." (Simmel 1950: 410, 411) Instead of cherishing intuitive emotional responses towards other people and oneself, modern man is required to be punctual and calculating:

Punctuality, calculability, exactness are forced upon life by the complexity and extension of metropolitan existence and are not only most intimately connected with its money economy and intellectualistic character. These traits must also color the contents of life and favor the exclusion of those irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses which aim at determining the mode of life from within, instead of receiving the general and precisely schematized form of life from without.

(Simmel 1950: 413)

The presumed necessity to lead mechanized lives requires relying on numbers and logic, which molds a social character<sup>iii</sup> that is calculating and predominantly intellectual. This type of character is capable of superficial emotions that would not interfere with the "proper" functioning of society. The inability of "irrational, instinctive, sovereign traits and impulses" to act out is in other words smothering of affect in favor of intellect. In a mechanized environment these character traits are not stimulated and therefore remain underdeveloped. As Fromm remarks, this kind of life organization creates a "monocerebral man", whose main characteristic is the split between thought and affect. The monocerebral man is able to perceive the world intellectually but not affectively, he approaches the world "as a conglomerate of things to be understood in order to be used effectively [...] One might say feelings have withered" (Fromm 1973: 352).

In order to preserve the last traces of humanity, in *The Sane Society* (2002), Fromm writes about possible ways to transcend the entrapment of the consumerist system. One of the solutions he proposes relies on forming new ties to others in the form of symbiosis or through loving connection by retaining individual integrity. The symbiotic union is usually formed at the expense of individual's integrity and implies domination over another human being. Therefore, the identity an individual forms in regard to others can be that of reciprocity, based on love, or that of subjugation, based on a symbiotic relationship. The system obviously reinforces the latter with the help of the type of character (rather similar to Simmel's metropolitan type of man) that turns every human interaction into a business relationship devoid of emotion. Fromm refers to this type as the marketing character.

The marketing character neither loves nor hates. These "old-fashioned" emotions do not fit into a character structure that functions almost entirely on the cerebral level and avoids feelings [...] Since the marketing characters have no deep attachment to themselves or to others, they do not care, in any deep sense of the world, not because they are so selfish but because their relations to others and to themselves are so thin.

(Fromm 2008: 121)

The marketing character structure is built to further the accumulation of profit. The most effective course of action to succeed in this task is the one that excludes intense emotion, this obviously being the reason why the marketing character type is molded to feel moderately. The system ideology represents the sole motive for the marketing character's unemotional responses and indifferent relations to others, as well as to oneself. "In our society emotions in general are discouraged [...] it has become an ideal to think and to live without emotions. To be emotional has become synonymous with being unsound or unbalanced" (Fromm 1942: 211). The system proscribes moderate emotional response, ideally the exclusion of emotion altogether, as Fromm explains.<sup>iv</sup> To be overly emotional means to be mentally unstable. Ultimately, the system manages to represent an ideal individual as a smooth functioning emotionless robot that always strives to complete his tasks with a fake smile. An ideal type of personality would be the one that shows a minimum of (superficial!) emotion that does not defy the system. Should a person experience discontent regarding the prescribed role and thereby express this dissatisfaction through an outpour of emotions, that individual must be submitted to an appropriate therapy treatment.

Thus, it goes without saying that nurturing the capacity for compassion and empathy does not aid the accumulation of profit and does not help to maintain the system; on the contrary, it may have a subversive effect. For this reason, the industrial society nurtures the having orientation in life, thus encouraging mass consumption that relies on human greed and selfishness. In *To Have or To Be* (2008), Fromm points out that Western civilization nurtures the belief that identity is built on possession i.e. people are what they own. "The having orientation is characteristic of Western industrial society, in which greed for money, fame, and power has become the dominant theme of life" (Fromm 2008: 17). Furthermore, Fromm also asserts:

The growing person is forced to give up most of his or her autonomous, genuine desires and interests, and his or her own will, and to adopt a will and desires and feelings that are not autonomous but superimposed by the social patterns of thought and feeling [...] by a complicated process of indoctrination, rewards, punishments, and fitting ideology, it solves this task by and large so well that most people believe they are following their own will and are unaware that their will itself is conditioned and manipulated.

(Fromm 2008: 64)

Through an elaborate process of education and pedagogy the aim of which is to properly instill the appropriate ideology, Fromm rightfully claims that modern individual is deprived of his or her ability to think and feel freely. All choices are ready-made, and the individual is left with an illusion of choice, having the free market and liberty to choose any desirable product. The only decisions people get to make are in fact trivial. Making trivial decisions and having the illusion of choice is what Herbert Marcuse calls fulfilling false needs.

The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual [...] Free choice among a wide variety of goods and services does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear – that is, if they sustain alienation. And the spontaneous reproduction of superimposed needs by the individual does not establish autonomy; it only testifies to the efficacy of the controls.

(Marcuse 2002: 10)

As Marcuse declares, modern man in actuality has no freedom. Choosing products to buy is not real freedom if one is trapped in the system, being forced to maintain it.

One of the ways of maintaining the current system of values relies on the stimulation and manipulation of human desires, advertising being most common of all. Advertisements promise the fulfillment of any desire in exchange for buying the advertised product linked to the desire in question. Since human desires are limitless and are relentlessly stimulated, modern man becomes greedy and insatiable. The unlimited consumption, sadly, becomes a paradigm of happiness.

Cultures that foster the greed for possession, and thus the having mode of existence, are rooted in one human potential; cultures that foster being and sharing are rooted in the other potential. We must decide which of these two potentials we want to cultivate, realizing, however, that our decision is largely determined by the socioeconomic structure of our given society that inclines us toward one or the other solution.

(Fromm 2008: 86)

What Erich Fromm so eloquently expresses in the previous quote is the fact that the consumer capitalism of modern Western civilization fosters the having mode of existence, which is required for its self-preservation. The potentials for greed and selfishness are as inherent in human beings as potentials for altruism and compassion, they develop in great part according to the stimulation. However, the fact is that without human greed and selfishness, the consumerist system would be untenable. Therefore, those are the qualities that are stimulated. For the system to be able to maintain the equilibrium the qualities it required of human beings “egotism, selfishness, and greed” were proclaimed to be “innate in human nature; hence, not only the system but human nature itself fostered them” (Fromm 2008: 6). Gradually the fact that the system generates and stimulates these human qualities for its own purpose was dismissed, and all that was left was the proclamation of selfish human nature. Hence, people living in a consumerist society believe that this system is the only one that functions to fulfill basic human needs.

As already stated, the powerful capitalist ideology operates in close connection to the ideology of consumerism. Both ideologies rely on human selfishness and greed as the driving force. Capitalism puts emphasis on profit accumulation transforming it into the main motive of human activity. The existence of free market, private property and apparent individual freedom create the illusion that capitalist system is the ideal system designed to fulfill human needs in a most democratic manner. Given that human selfishness and greed are artificially stimulated and encouraged as desirable qualities, the statement that the capitalist system fulfills genuine human needs becomes invalid, to say the least. The need of every average consumer to acquire as many things as possible is also artificially generated. The two systems merge into one vast economic machine that operates on its own will.

Unfortunately, the economic machine controls the society and therefore all aspects of life. In *The Sane Society* (2002) Fromm argues that profit has ceased to be a means to an end and became an end in itself. At the dawn of the capitalist age, the accumulation of profit served as a means to provide for human requirements. As the development of capitalism progressed, the role of man within the system changed. “The living human being, with his desires and woes, loses more and more his central place in the system, and this place is occupied by business and production. Man ceases to be “the measure of all things” in the economic sphere” (Fromm 2002: 83). This means that the economy no longer serves the purpose of attending to human needs. On the contrary, basic human necessities, such as

connection and comradeship, are denied for the purpose of better maintenance of the economy. As Fromm concludes, in contemporary Western society it is the law of the market that has its own life and rules over man: “[...] a living human being, ceases to be an end in himself, and becomes the means for the economic interests of another man, or himself, or of an impersonal giant, the economic machine” (Fromm 2002: 91). Therefore, not only does the economy lose its purpose of attending to human needs, but it also transforms man into a means for achieving economic interests, that is into an object, a mere cog that fits into the grand economic machinery. Fromm states that in the capitalist hierarchy of values, capital is valued more than human labor and amassed things bear more importance than life.

One of the methods for keeping the economic machine operational is creating distance among people. Isolated and detached individuals are better consumers because the only source of happiness for such individuals is material possession. The system dictates and controls desires; it artificially implants desirable thoughts and feelings, as already discussed. The relatively good quality of life “makes for a happy consciousness” (Marcuse 2002: 79) which prevents people from having a judgmental attitude towards the socially proscribed norms, values and needs. As a consequence, people accept those norms, values and needs as their own and thus subject themselves to the unconscious mind control.

However, since man has a natural need to connect with other people,<sup>v</sup> the process of failing to create a bond with others leads to what Fromm terms “a sickness of the mind”. In this situation, isolation becomes unbearable: “Man has to relate himself to others; but if he does it in a symbiotic or alienated way, he loses his independence and integrity; he is weak, suffers, becomes hostile, or apathetic” (Fromm 2002: 66). As Fromm elaborates in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* (1973), if man experiences himself as entirely passive, a mere object, he will likely compensate for this feeling with the act of violence. The violent act becomes a source of the excitement due to the realization that he is able to affect the outward world, even though through destruction. “It is much easier to get excited by anger, rage, cruelty, or the passion to destroy than by love” because that kind of “excitation does not require the individual to make an effort.” The energy invested in a loving act requires patience, while the act of violence offers instantaneous excitement (Fromm 1973: 242).

Apart from violence and aggression, profound boredom also characterizes the mental state of modern man and all of these states could be equated with depression. In *The Sane Society* (2002), Fromm defines depression in contrast to happiness. Whereas happiness is the result of productive living and satisfaction arising from love as the genuine human emotion, depression is essentially the inability to feel. The state of depression can be avoided either fundamentally, by being productive and thus experiencing happiness, or superficially by pursuing various forms of entertainment and mistaking them for happiness. Average modern man frequently chooses the latter, the superficial solution that is easily obtainable in the consumer culture but is also short-lived. This pursuit of pleasure consists of satisfying all desires immediately in an incessant flow. The goal is to remain constantly entertained - from incessant shopping, watching television, to consuming alcohol, narcotics and seeking sexual satisfaction. This effort to keep oneself entertained is so eagerly invested because if the chain of amusement is broken, the sense depression manifests itself acutely.

## **Kelman's Disillusionment: Is Hope an Option?**

It is not a coincidence that the theoretical framework of this research mostly relies on Fromm's valuable insights. Openly proclaiming himself a socialist humanist, Fromm with his political views and activism is rather close to Kelman's fervent support for traditional left-wing causes, particularly in the domain of social justice. Though not a member of a political fraction, Kelman declares himself as an initially libertarian socialist anarchist (1992). Mostly preoccupied with the life of the Glaswegian working class in his writing, Kelman bears the title of one of the most controversial Scottish authors. He still remains the sole Scottish author who was awarded the Booker Prize (in 1994, with *How Late It Was, How Late*).

The whole Booker event was rather contentious. One of the judges, Rabbi Julia Neuberger, denounced the decision to the media and declared that the book was "frankly [...] crap". The columnist Simon Jenkins, writing for *The Times* of London, called him "an illiterate savage". Among other literary fallacies, the profanity of Kelman's style has represented a conspicuous objection to his creative writing. However, according to Kelman, these objections were mostly related to the use of Lowland Scots and Glaswegian dialect in his novel, and in his own defense, he pleaded that verbal elitism of those who prefer "received pronunciation" or "educated speech" basically equaled actual racism. As a writer, Kelman believes that his duty is to stand up to any kind of oppression: "My culture and my language have the right to exist, and no one has the authority to dismiss that [...] A fine line can exist between elitism and racism. On matters concerning language and culture, the distance can sometimes cease to exist altogether" (Wood 2014).

It is precisely the habit of giving voice to the dispossessed members of the Glaswegian working class that Kelman reinforces in one of his latest short story collections, *If It Is Your Life* (2010). In the story, "talking about my wife", all the burning issues of language, class, politics, gender, age that came in the spotlight during the 1994 Booker episode, are vividly portrayed.

Kelman's common method of the first-person narration is employed in this short story which enables the readers to deeply grasp the author's intentional mingling of the private and global political/economic domain. The story depicts a habitual walk home from work of a night shift worker whose area of expertise is purposefully not stated anywhere in the text. Kelman wisely suggests that the situation in which this night shift worker finds himself is unfortunately quite frequent in modern Scottish society; also, the usage of the first person narration allows for the interpretation that this member of the Glaswegian working class is the author himself thus boldly erasing the borderline between the intellectual elite and uneducated poor.

As the story unveils, the readers are obscurely informed that the main character was fired by his boss the night before. Apart from the worker's personal wounded dignity, this news is rather difficult to convey to his wife since his monthly salary is inevitably counted on for domestic expenses that provide his four-member family (with two teenage daughters), more or less, with a decent living. Instead of portraying the unscrupulous act of the middle-aged worker getting fired, Kelman describes the whole event by depicting the worker's private sphere. Thus, his wife's reaction to the new situation is eagerly expected, and, simultaneously, deeply dreaded. However, Cath does not utter a single word. Her silence potently speaks a history: "I could only shrug and tell her the truth, an approximation to the truth. I had a fall out with the gaffer, there was a bit of bother. Other women might have accepted that. Cath was not other women and her silence continued" (Kelman in Kelly 2009:

186). What bothers the main character of the story is obviously not the fact that he was sacked, but how to convey bad news to his family. The wife's silence is rather intuitive; in other words, she has a hunch that something has changed in her husband's behaviour and is rather curious to detect the reasons of this visible change. Drifting in optimistic thoughts is definitely not a proper way of dealing with the situation for the main character – popular optimistic sayings about tomorrow that offers new opportunities cannot ultimately change his state of mind: “Tomorrow is a brand new day. Except literally it was not. It was the exact same day as here and now” (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 186).

Even the word “sacked” sounds strange to him and he openly claims that there is something anti-human about that term (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 190). When his wife finally speaks, she verbalizes the words that he is intuitively anxious about: “So what happens now? Do you mean you have got the sack?” (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 186). As a naughty boy caught in the act, he denies being fired, immediately sensing that he is being scanned all the way to his fingertips.

Her continued silence indicates that she wants further information on the matter. However, it is rather difficult to convey the truth to Cath, as the main character informs us. Her life has been totally detached from the unjust or better to say, inhuman way of the system's dealing with common replaceable work force and, in that sense, Cath, like all other women, represents a true representative of the middle class. She could not properly grasp the borderline between power and powerlessness:

The truth is she was innocent. There are a lot of women like Cath. They know nothing. Cath knew nothing. She had never experienced the actuality of work. Genuine work. Jobs where things like “angry gaffer” and “sack” crop up regularly. In her whole life she had never worked in an ordinary hourly paid job. Office stuff was all she did. That was a thing about women, they were all middle class. She knew nothing about real life, the kind of job where if ye told a gaffer to eff off you collect yer cards at the end of the week. That was power and that was powerlessness.

(Kelman in Kelly 2009: 190)

Thus, it is up to the husband to open the eyes of his wife on the matter of gloomy reality. The bare truth is totally different from her expectations – an ordinary worker is constantly denied power. Being in such a powerless position, it is crucial for him to please his superiors so that he would keep his post as long as he could. It is precisely this fact that the night shift worker can no longer endure: after the enormous effort to please everyone at work, he has to behave in the same way at home. Kelman's astounding movement from the global political/economic to personal domain here is rather intentional in depicting modern man's genuine impotence:

Here is the reality: I was an ordinary worker. Power there is none. It did not matter I was a would-be author on matters cultural, political and historical, to wit my life. None of that mattered. I existed in the world of “angry gaffers”, data such as “sack” and other matters of fact. Man, I was fucking sick of it. And having to please everybody. That was part of it. That was an essential part of it. Then coming home here and having to do the same in one's domestic life.

(Kelman in Kelly 2009: 191)

Being initially disappointed with his wife for blaming him without even knowing the circumstances (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 192) of the quarrel with the gaffer and then for her

naïve way of thinking that he can find another job since this one is rotten as he used to say frequently (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 192), he sarcastically comments: “Sure. Jobs don’t grow on bushes” (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 193). The last straw that he holds for is the possibility to apologize to the boss, because it was him who attacked him in front of other people. Then, the very next moment he talks about inducing physical damage to the gaffer, violence and aggression being instinctive responses to the unfairness and immorality of the situation.

The rotating effect of depression and urge for violence of Kelman’s worker definitely corresponds to Fromm’s description of modern man’s frequent reactions to the predominantly having orientation of Western culture that basically cherishes material possession as the ultimate standard of living (Fromm 2002, 1973: 242). This culture intentionally breeds greed and selfishness whereas altruism and compassion are completely non-existent in the global political/economic sphere. The mere truth of the whole matter boils down to the main character’s frank confession:

The truth is [...] I don’t think I can handle working these days. It is all just cowards and bullies. One is surrounded by them. Ye cannay even talk in case it gets reported. Times have changed. I cannot talk to these blokes, I cannay actually talk to them. Except about football maybe.

(Kelman in Kelly 2009: 194)

What Kelman’s night shift worker passionately explains to his wife is the conspicuous fallacy of the capitalist system which offers a form of invisible authority that provides an illusion of certainty. Fromm claims that man has an innate need for a frame of orientation.

The fact that man has reason and imagination leads not only to the necessity for having a sense of his own identity, but also for orienting himself in the world intellectually [...] But even if man’s frame of orientation is utterly illusory, it satisfies his need for some picture which is meaningful to him.

(Fromm 2002: 62)

Capitalism is proclaimed to be the ideal system that perfectly responds to human needs. It provides a purpose in life – the maintenance of the economic machine, it provides a motivation for human action – the accumulation of profit. Even though all action is stimulated within the boundaries of the system requirements, an illusion of purpose and meaning exists.<sup>vi</sup>

This artificially created illusion of purpose and meaning makes for the system to easily maintain itself. However, there are people who can see through this fake apparatus, Kelman’s night shift worker, being one of them. At the age of forty-two, he describes that all his youthful dreams and hopes have utterly vanished. The only thing that he and his co-workers genuinely desire now is to become old-age pensioners (“I wish I was a pensioner already. I want to go to a green field and just lie down” (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 198)). Happy pills would be the second solution to immense hardships of everyday life in Scotland that has lately become “a complete waste of space” and Great Britain that has lately become “the existential nightmare”, as he prophetically proclaims:

I don’t actually care. I’m forty-two years of age. Do ye know what we talk about during a typical tea-break in one’s typical factory workhouse? How effing glad we shall be to reach one’s seniority; in other words, our chief desire is to become old-age pensioners. What happened to all our hopes and dreams! That is what happened to them. This is



what I am talking about, give me the happy pills. Great Britain today, the existential nightmare that would have driven my poor old father off his fucking nut if he had had the good sense to die at the advanced age of sixty-one and three quarters. So-called Scotland, be it known, a complete waste of space: I refer here to one's existence.

(Kelman in Kelly 2009:198)

What the gaffer really has against Kelman's worker is the fact that he is a "throwback" type (204), that is, a kind of person who constantly looks back into the past and pines for bygone times. Apart from this, he also represents a potential threat because the young people listen to him rather than to the voice of authority. The boss in the story unfortunately represents a universal modern paradigm of authority - a proper emanation of Simmel's metropolitan type of man (Simmel 1950: 413) or Fromm's marketing character (Fromm 2008: 121): a person void of genuine emotions, punctual, calculating, interested more in profit and realization of business plans than in the personal domain of his co-workers. It is no wonder then that the night shift worker is perceived by his boss as a mentally unstable character; namely, he shows genuine interest in his colleagues' problems and not in further accumulation of profit. The mere fact that he is a would-be author, as he calls himself, is perilous for his boss's business expectations and, generally, potentially subversive for the proper maintenance of the system ideology.

What the gaffer in Kelman's story demands of his workers is a proper illustration of Fromm's symbiotic union (2002) among individuals in modern society: complete obedience, subjugation to his wishes, paying attention to his monologues, whereas the existence of dialogues among colleagues is very much frowned upon. As Martin Buber elaborates in *I and Thou*, an individual actualizes his existence through a dialogue based on reciprocity with another human being. This way he is able to acknowledge the other human being as an equal. An individual who is not able to perform a dialogue and thus actualize himself performs monologues. This individual fails to perceive the existence of others as equals and thus experiences them as objects. Buber calls this relation I-It, which is characteristic of the modern age, its dehumanization and isolation. In the I-It relationship an individual treats others, people and things alike, as objects to be used. The reduction of a human being to an object is insufferable and as an inevitable consequence aggression appears.

Man cannot live as nothing but an object, as dice thrown out of a cup; he suffers severely when he is reduced to the level of a feeding or propagating machine, even if he has all the securities he wants. Man seeks for drama and excitement; when he cannot get satisfaction on a higher level, he creates for himself the drama of destruction.

(Fromm 1973: 8)

The artificial order within a hierarchical society imposes the feeling of powerlessness on man. Being a part of the system is literally like being dice thrown out of a cup, people have little or no control over their lives and they are hardly free to live as they please. Instead, they are a part of the vast economic machine, and those who become aware of that fact are inevitably enraged, while the rest remain apathetic.

It is not a coincidence then that one of the last images in the story is the painting of Brueghel, the worker describes the village scene with all the people, horses and dogs. His wife reminds him that in fact this painting is entitled "The Slaughter of the Innocents" (207), which unequivocally confirms Kelman's version of the story of power and powerlessness in the capitalist system.

One of the solutions that Cath offers is to get away, at least for a period, but not to Ireland or Hebrides as her husband suggests. The need is to go away to a place where the society is completely different: “There are choices to make and we’ve got to make the right yin” (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 207). Both of them are ultimately aware of the fact that modern culture purposefully creates what Fromm termed “illusion of choices” (Fromm 2008: 64). The getaway journey would have the goal of inducing a radical change in their lives by creating a rebelling attitude towards the consumerist culture’s sets of values. Its primary aim is definitely not to advertise a good quality of life and thus “make for a happy consciousness” (Marcuse 2002: 79). In this case, the whole getaway episode would be merely illusory, because it would basically trivialize their decisions and ultimately fulfil false needs, as Marcuse rightfully declared (2002: 10).

However, both the husband and wife in Kelman’s story are instinctively aware of the fact that the getaway has today become impossible, simply because all places are more or less similar and a possible elopement would not entirely solve the problem. It seems that the only thing that one can rely on is basic human interaction. Cath and her husband perform all the usual activities families do: they make tea, eat toast and marmalade, listen to their favourite tunes, smoke, in other words, communicate with each other. Cath keeps telling her husband to relax. The readers get the impression that if you are lucky enough, the meaningful human interaction is nowadays reserved solely for the private sphere:

Cath smiled. She left her cigarette smouldering in the ashtray and came towards me. I made space for her to see out the window, put my arm around her shoulder. Far below a woman was passing along the pavement and entering very close. It made us both smile. I found that very positive.

(Kelman in Kelly 2009: 209)

Finding a reason to smile is the last ray of hope that Kelman’s main character clings to. Positive attitude is definitely untypical of Kelman’s writing, but this story testifies to his more optimistic tendencies. Thus, the end of the story is rather affirmative about life in general. To Cath’s final question “What’s up?” (209), her husband replies: “Nothing” (Kelman in Kelly 2009: 209). Kelman’s “nothing” is, as in Shakespeare, pregnant with meaning. One of the possible interpretations is definitely that the sole way to preserve sanity and personal integrity in modern world is to rely on the microcosm you yourself create, which again gives evidence to the significance of preserving human interaction among the predominantly alienated emotional robots of consumer culture, as Fromm wisely suggested (2002).

### **Conclusion: Hopefulness Regained**

As Lionel Trilling recounts in his essay *Freud: Within and Beyond Culture* (2004), there is an inner part of man inaccessible to culture.

Freud’s emphasis of biology in human fate might be a liberating idea. It proposes to us that culture is not all-powerful. It suggests that there is a residue of human quality beyond the reach of cultural control, and that this residue of human quality, elemental as it may be, serves to bring culture itself under criticism and keeps it from being absolute.

(Trilling 2004: 268)

Trilling has an optimistic belief in human nature, the very essence of man that remains untouched by culture and enables man to criticize it, perhaps change it and prevent it from becoming all-powerful. In accordance with Trilling's belief, Tzvetan Todorov writes:

In the eyes of the humanists, man is a potentiality rather than an essence: he can become this or that, act one way or another; he does not do it out of necessity. But in addition, and this is essential, even in the presence of the clearest determinations, human beings always have the possibility of opposition, therefore of standing aside from themselves; without that, they are no longer, or not yet, fully human.

(Todorov 2002: 34)

Modern man is taught to believe that his predicament is unavoidable, however, according to the humanist belief there is always a possibility of opposition. The task at hand remains finding the opposition in a productive way. Kelman is just one among modern thinkers and artists who embrace Fromm's idea of transcending the entrapment of consumerist system by forming new ties to others in the form of loving connection by retaining individual integrity (2002). Once individual integrity is hopefully preserved, an individual is able to develop a critical mind towards modern culture, which represents yet another form of nay-saying to the dominant set of values that Kelman passionately opts for in the short story analysed here.

Namely, the best way of developing a critical mind, suggested by Adrienne Rich, is reading "as if your life depended on it" (Rich 2003: 21). To read with a keen sense of understanding, instead of just acquiring information, means to develop a critical mind. An individual with a developed critical mind is self-assured and able to tell right from wrong without relying on any authority for guidance. It is of paramount importance that people learn to think independently to be able to understand the messages that art is to convey.

Thus, it is not a coincidence that Kelman's main character in "talking about my wife" (2009) is both a powerless worker and a potentially powerful would-be author. The power of art is great, and every artist has a responsibility, states Edward Bond in the Author's Preface to *Lear* (1983), to write about the problems that present themselves before the writer. In his writings about violence Bond points out that human beings respond aggressively when they are deprived of physical and emotional needs, this unnatural behaviour causes alienation from the self and bears both physical and emotional consequences. It is important that the artist shares his insights with the rest of the society, providing the hope that human situation can and must be changed.

According to Fromm, Marcuse, Rich, Trilling, Todorov and finally Kelman, the primary purpose of art then is to help people reconnect and that way communicate meaningfully so that the shared human experience can be properly understood. Through the nurturing power of imagination man can transcend the self and see the world through another's eyes, thus making the necessary identification with another human being and reestablishment of the I-Thou connection possible.

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<sup>ii</sup> "boredom is nothing but the experience of a paralysis of our productive powers and the sense of unaliveness" (Fromm 2002: 196)

<sup>iii</sup> It is the function of the social character to shape the energies of the members of society in such a way that their behavior is not a matter of conscious decision as to whether or not to follow the social

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pattern, but one of wanting to act as they have to act and at the same time finding gratification in acting according to the requirements of the culture (Fromm 2002: 77).

<sup>iv</sup> Fromm rightfully claims that indifference is in general a social sickness of the contemporary world. “We cease to be excited, our emotions and our critical judgment become hampered, and eventually our attitude to what is going on in the world assumes a quality of flatness and indifference” (Fromm 1942: 216).

<sup>v</sup> Modern society consists of “atoms” (if we use the Greek equivalent of “individual”), little particles estranged from each other but held together by selfish interests and by the necessity to make use of each other. Yet man is a social being with a deep need to share, to help, to feel as a member of a group (Fromm 2002: 135).

<sup>vi</sup> The need for a frame of orientation exists on two levels; the first and the more fundamental need is to have some frame of orientation, regardless of whether it is true or false. Unless man has a subjectively satisfactory frame of orientation he cannot live sanely. On the second level the need is to be in touch with reality by reason, to grasp the world objectively. But the necessity to develop reason is not as immediate as that to develop some frame of orientation, since what is at stake for man in the latter case is his happiness and serenity, and not his sanity (Fromm 2002: 62).

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