MA in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities

# "I am my own revolution": A Mythocritique on Thomas Shelby's Hegemonic Masculinity in Steven Knight's *Peaky Blinders*

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5 IGUALTAT DE GÈNERE

*Past the square, past the bridge*
*Past the mills, past the stacks*
*On a gathering storm comes*
*A tall handsome man*
*In a dusty black coat with*
*A red right hand*

- “Red Right Hand”
(Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds)
Theme song to *Peaky Blinders*

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## Abstract

This dissertation aims to examine masculine manifestations in Steven Knight's acclaimed TV series *Peaky Blinders*. It is particularly interested in Thomas Shelby, the gang's leader and main character, and how his masculine identity is constructed through the influence and manipulation of male myths to achieve a hegemonic masculinity. This last term, coined by R.W. Connell, will present a naturalised form of masculinity desired by Thomas and the Blinders. His agenda to establish a respectable legitimate business discloses Tommy's anxiety to attain social mobility and occupy a male respected position in contrast to the subordinated working-class masculinity he is forced to perform. Furthermore, the study of his identity will be complemented by an approach to homosociality to highlight the relevance of male interactions to both enhance and contest other masculinities.

Thomas' goal to become a respectable member of privileged communities will be analysed through a cultural mythography of masculinities. This is conformed by male ideals or myths that preserve male interests and power. The cultural myths chosen have been the myth of the Soldier, the Self-Made Man, and the Gangster. All presents different aspects that oppress Thomas' identity as a subordinated man to the patriarchal discourse: the trauma of war, his working-class background, and the restrictions of public order. Each will be assessed to argue how Thomas exploits conventional ideals about masculinity to improve his and his family's social conditions. Furthermore, it will be discussed how he profits from different forms of communities and male bonds—the army, the business, and the gang—to aid his personal project. Ultimately, the project intends to conduct a mythocritique to scrutinise the damaging consequences the aspiration to a hegemonic masculinity has on identitarian masculine processes. Therefore, my thesis uses Thomas Shelby's case to demonstrate masculinity to be an identity performance produced by patriarchal capitalist conceptions that require from underprivileged men to construct themselves around an aspiration that promises them power and gives them nothing.

**Key words:** hegemonic masculinity, Thomas Shelby, *Peaky Blinders*, homosociality, cultural myths

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## 0. Introduction

From 2013 to 2022, *Peaky Blinders*,[1] created and written by Steven Knight, became one of the most recognised TV series of the decade, turning into a product of the current mass culture. The series is a British crime drama television series set in post-World War I Birmingham, England. It revolves around Thomas Shelby, the gang's leader, who seeks to expand the family's influence and power through their own (illegal) business. The gang navigates the complexities of the criminal underworld, political corruption, and family loyalty, also exploring themes of power, ambition, and the effects of war on society. The rise of the Shelby family provided audiences with a masculine character, Thomas Shelby, ambitious enough to climb the social ladder until achieving a position that can keep privileged powers from harming him and his family; especially his brothers, Arthur and John; his aunt, Polly; and his sister, Ada. As the business grows, so does the family, and the dangers of losing everything.

The series' legacy has been that Thomas, a man with sharp intelligence and deadly cunningness, has become a role model for men, who aspire to be as ruthless and as charismatic as him. This is the main reason why I chose to write this project. A masculine character such as Shelby, emotionally detached and, sometimes, unnecessarily cruel, has had an impact on men's own perception of their masculine identity. Masculine mannerisms that have been deliberately magnified in the series have been revered by fanatics. By contrast, other viewers have criticised it for an excessive use violence and hypermasculine[2] features. *Peaky Blinders* provides a landscape of multiple masculine manifestations that range from normative to complicit to dissident. These presentations

[1] If 'Peaky Blinders' appears in *italics*, the text is referring to the series. But if it does not, it is referring to the gang. This distinction is important because the forms are not interchangeable.

[2] Hypermasculinity is canonically understood as "the exaggerated expression of traditional masculine attitudes and behaviours, such as willingness to fight, enjoyment of risk and danger, and the aggressive and dominating pursuit of sexual intercourse with women" (Mora and Christianakis 445). Such attributes are characteristic of the Peaky Blinders.

are adequate for a study on masculinities revolving around relations exclusively between men. Thomas, for instance, is a man who believes that keeping everything locked up is "what men do" (S1E3, 36:05). This widely held belief about men, which is questioned by the series, is the premise of patriarchal discourses on gendered expectations from maleness. This also has a major influence on women's life, which men tend to disregard.

Masculinity is a gendered project shaped by dominant institutions and social apparatuses (Connell, 1995). *Peaky Blinders* explores how men from non-privileged backgrounds navigate their masculinity and its repercussions on their families, mental health, and life achievements. Cillian Murphy, who portrays Thomas, noted in an interview that, although most of Thomas' decisions are morally questionable, audiences "see in him a magnified version of what all humans are like" ("Cillian Murphy", 00:03:25-28). The character, more significantly, embodies the struggle and pursuit for a hegemonic masculinity,[3] an aspiration most men unconsciously identify with. Thomas confronts the obstacles—war trauma, class, and violence—that hinder his quest for respectability by adhering to masculine ideals upheld by patriarchy and capitalism. Normative discourses of masculinity envision improved living conditions for Thomas, who must sacrifice his identity for a social safety that is never truly granted.

Australian sociologist R.W. Connell asserts that "masculinities do not exist prior to social interaction, but come into existence as people act. Masculinities are actively produced, using the resources available in a given milieu" (*The Men and the Boys,* 218). For Tommy to construct his identity and reach respectability, he must resort to those ideals available in a 1920s postwar England milieu. The male myths available at the time (which

[3] In her book *Masculinities* (1995), R.W. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity "as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or it taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). She maintains that it acts in opposition to and with the compliance of subordinate masculinities. This concept will be further developed in the theoretical framework.

could be argued to still exist in the 21st century) are the strength of war, the ambitions of capitalism, and the ruthlessness of crime. When constructing the character, Cillian Murphy explains the milestone the war represents for him as an actor embodying Thomas. In his opinion, after the war, Tommy "lost all faith. […A]uthority was just a joke. You know, the establishment was a joke. […H]e seems to turn that trauma into this kind of relentless ambition, because he could have died at any point there […]. So, every day is just, like, for free – so why not?" ("Cillian Murphy", 00:56-01:39). His disillusionment with societal life is channelled through his ambitions and adoption of male ideals. These I have decided to categorise in a cultural mythography[4] of masculinity: the myth of the Soldier, the myth of the Self-Made Man, and the myth of the Gangster. Each will present male archetypes that Tommy can resort to accomplish his success.[5]

It must be noted that I do not intend to condone or justify Thomas and his actions, but instead understand him and the circumstances that gave rise to his masculine identity. In other words, I am engaging with patriarchal and capitalist conditions that allow (Western) men to behave hegemonically masculine by taking Thomas as my case study. In an interview, Steven Knight explained that his reason for writing the series, beyond his family history, was to question whether "everything is predestined, are lives already mapped out? Do you have free will or not?" ("Steven Knight Interview"). It is not my goal to make a moral judgement on the character for trying to defy an imposed masculinity because "bodies are arenas for the making of gender patterns" (*The Men and the Boys* 12). Tommy is another body who is being patterned by these myths and, partially,

[4] The term 'mythography' is understood in this project as the compilation or anthology of myths (Losada, 2022) that "assembles such cultural bits and pieces into meaningful wholes according to structures deeply embedded within the cultural framework of meaning available at a particular period" (Doty 276).
[5] Although this dissertation limits itself to these myths, there are other archetypes I do not mention. For example, the myth of the Angry Man, the Outlaw, or the Warrior, all partially related to the myths proposed.

his own free will, which does not only influence Thomas but the homosocial bonds[6] he has weakly forged. As the leader of the Peaky Blinders, Thomas "is the Sun. The rest just orbit around him" ("Gold", 23:45). The myths will have irreparable consequences on his relationships, potential vulnerability, and fragile sanity.

A cultural mythography on masculinities in *Peaky Blinders* offers a collection of masculine ideals or myths that perpetuate and preserve unrealistic and unachievable hegemonic masculine behaviours. Correspondingly, this thesis argues that Steven Knight's *Peaky Blinders* portrays Thomas Shelby's internalisation and manipulation of these masculine myths and their homosocial ramifications to transcend his working-class condition. Through this exercise, the project will conduct a mythocritique[7] to showcase the manifestations of hegemonic masculinity and male homosociality in the series, highlighting the struggle and requirements of working-class men to achieve social mobility and privileges in a patriarchal and capitalist environment.

To conduct an analysis on the cultural structures that allow dominant masculinities, this project aims to collect myths of a primarily cultural and not religious essence into a cultural mythography. In the field of Cultural Studies, a possible definition of religious myth could be that "myths represent a way to speculate about the possible contours of the social order, a way to show up the shortcoming and tensions of reality or the limitations of any other mode of social existence" (Doty 280). A traditional pre-modern grasping of myth relies on the classical mythology of antiquity. They evolved as

[6] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduced the term *male homosocial desire* in 1985 to conceptualise "the *structure* of men's relations with other men" (2) in a non-sexual context. Similarly, Rita Segato (2018) coins the term 'mandato de masculinidad' to argue that this mandate "exige al hombre probarse hombre todo el tiempo; porque la masculinidad […] es un estatus, una jerarquía de prestigio, se adquiere como un título y se debe renovar y comprobar su vigencia como tal" (42). This concept will be further developed in the theoretical framework.

[7] I take the concept 'mythocritique' from Spanish Professor José Manuel Losada and his text *Mitocrítica Cultural: Una Definición de Mito* (2022). This term focuses on literary and cultural analyses to study the presence and use of cultural myths in artistic, literary and cultural objects.

characteristics were added and removed orally from the narrative throughout modern age. As a result, their historical credibility could not be guaranteed beyond their merging with history, literature, or religion (Losada, 2022). In the postmodern era, "myth becomes the representative of political ideology" (Doty 297) and cultural behaviour. They mirror social behaviour crossed by modern and postmodern political and cultural phenomena (Losada, 2022). Cultural myths are "inscribed everywhere in the foundational metaphors of Western philosophy, to which we whites are nevertheless so blind that these tropes might as well be written in invisible ink" (Von Hendy 10). For this reason, cultural myths are far more challenging to detect since they are not fundamentally narratives but ideological and behavioural transmissions. Here, myths will refer to assumed cultural male behaviours that "have served as storehouses of cultural information, educating men for centuries about societal function and masculine identity" (Blazina 286). Using *Peaky Blinders* and Thomas will give body and from to the myths.

To accomplish this task, the methodology of this study will include qualitative research that analyses the presentation of masculinity in *Peaky Blinders.* The field of Masculinity Studies will provide the essential theoretical framework, following renowned authors such as R.W. Connell.[8] From the positioning of Cultural Studies, I will conduct a textual analysis on Western constructions of the male gender through a close reading of the series. It must be noted that the interests of this project do not lie in technical cinematographic elements, although they do affect the presentation and reception of the male characters. The project strives to read this entertainment piece at a discursive level by considering character dialogue, character interactions, and thematic elements related to masculinity, class and war.

[8] Although it may seem I lean too much on Connell's arguments, I believe myself to be a novice on the field and my research departs from Connell's primary contribution. Nonetheless, I expect to develop my work in the future.

Finally, the dissertation will be structured as follows. First, the state of the art regarding masculinity in *Peaky Blinders* will be summarised to account for previous arguments. Second, a chapter will be dedicated to introducing the theoretical framework on Masculinity Studies, followed by a historical contextualisation of the cultural myths. Third, a section will analyse each myth that Shelby adheres to and that configure his masculinity and its homosocial propagation. Lastly, a set of conclusions and consequences will be presented to complete this project’s study on masculinities in *Peaky Blinders*.

## 1. Scholarly Perspectives on Masculinities in *Peaky Blinders*

Since its first series' release in 2013, *Peaky Blinders* has not been under great scholarly scrutiny. Although it has been popularly acclaimed internationally, academics have been reticent to fully assess this British period drama series (Smith, 2016; Hanna, 2017) since its sixth and final season aired in 2022. Nonetheless, those who have published academic research regarding the series have displayed various tendencies when approaching the story of the Peaky Blinders. It is imperative to collect these tendencies in order to account for previous arguments when proposing a thesis for this project. In this section, the most relevant literature regarding *Peaky Blinders*, especially the state of art concerned with masculinities, war, and class, will be addressed and examined to consider which contribution this project can make to the discussion.

One of the tendencies detected is that some critics condemn an excessive and gratuitous display of toxic masculinity[9] and violence in the series. As a result, they deliver a moral judgement on the characters when denouncing "its celebratory presentation of masculine identities" (Larke-Walsh 40). Their purpose lies on criticising this period drama for "the hegemonic masculinity behaviors [that] contribute to the legitimation of a patriarchal society" (Nuraila 25), instead of tracing how these characters can come to be. Furthermore, they claim that the social conditions and traumatic experiences the characters endure, especially Thomas, are excuses for the series to endorse male violence and a "narrative that champions them as self-serving individuals. The series […] stresses

[9] The term 'toxic masculinity' is considered "a factor motivating men's sexual, domestic, physical and political violence against others (especially women) as well as a catalyst for ill physical and mental health in men" (McGlashan and Mercer 2). In an interview with Lisa Wade, expert Michael Kimmel warns that toxic masculinity should not be reduced to a dichotomy of toxic versus healthy because men do not identify with or respond to it. Labelling their male behaviour as unhealthy makes them believe "we're telling them they're doing it wrong, that they're bad, and they have to change and give up their ideas of masculinity, the toxic ones, and embrace the new […]. And men won't go for it. They're too afraid to let go of things because *you* think they're unhealthy" ("Ask a Feminist" 237). As a result, a reactionary discourse is created which counteracts the whole purpose of highlighting the issue in the first place. Kimmel advises "to address the asymmetry between the social and the individual" (ibid.), and not to solely focus on individual personal experiences. This project seeks to follow Kimmel's advice.

the normalcy of male violence and the celebration of those who are strong enough to fight their way to supremacy” (Larke-Walsh 53). Similarly, the portrayal of severe trauma after the Great War is contemplated “as a justification and a celebration of toxic masculinity, for it not only argues why it exists but it also validates it as a necessary set of skills to succeed” (ibid.). Moreover, violence for the sake of violence is one of the strongest arguments for these critics since it champions “a cliché of violence as the solution, a necessity for anyone who rose out of the poor industrialized class into power, riches and wealth” (Mueller 40). This project partially agrees with these arguments.

Even though the social and economic struggles of the characters are analysed through a set of valid feminist approaches (Larke-Walsh, 2019; Mueller, 2022; Nurlaila, 2022), they undermine the construction of complex masculine characters that originate from naturalised social codes, present in the 1920s and manifesting still in 21st-century entertainment and male characters. Furthermore, these analyses argue that the female characters are mere paws in men’s schemes (Nuraila, 2022). Blinded by other issues, they neglect female agency in the false belief that women can only be pure and kind-hearted individuals that surrender to men’s violent behaviour (Mueller, 2022). Larke-Walsh notes that “while it can be argued that these strong women are fully rounded characters […], in essence, they are mainly used by the narrative to celebrate toxic masculinity by reducing male destructive actions to the level of ‘boys will be boys’ playful humour” (53). Although argued in the name of feminism, these critics fall victim of a romanticised sanctification of women. In their criticism on the use of masculine stereotypes, they do not allow the series to portray a non-traditional imaginary of female behaviour, complicit to patriarchy. Even though this series might relish “the sadism of its character, and the, often, gratuitous, pure brutality of their actions” (Pagello 582), the macrostructures that make these masculine characters possible are dismissed; patriarchal women being one of

them. The academics' interests lie in "shed[ing] light on the potential effects of such representation on the maintenance of gender stereotypes and the reinforcement of dominant patriarchal structures" (Nurlaila 26). A project on the causes and not the effects and implications of such display of masculinities would expose the system that originated the issue and not those individuals who already perpetuate it.

Other researchers have tended to an opposite approach and have proposed the possibility of Thomas and his criminal gang to be anti-heroes.[10] Attributing this archetype to the Peaky Blinders emerges from the idea that "finding heroes among the Shelby brothers, who with their gang of 'Peaky Blinders' rule the dirty violent streets of postwar Birmingham, proves equally problematic" (Taddeo 178). Instead of a full-on rejection, the academics show tolerance towards them because "the moral ambiguity of the characters serves to challenge the dichotomous perspective of 'good' and 'bad' characters" (A. Long 47). This project attempts to take a similar approach to the characters, without intentionally labelling them antiheroes. This moral ambiguity can be detected, as the critics (Taddeo, 2018; Larke-Walsh, 2019; Long, 2019) suggest, in audience reception and their adoption of Tommy as a venerated figure. His social position as a working-class citizen of Irish-Romani descent and war veteran

> [lo] forja como antihéroe realizando hazañas contra policías corruptos y asesinos, otras defendiendo a inocentes y otras acabando con el crimen organizado, pero siempre lo hace desde la brutalidad, segando la vida de quienes amenazan a sus seres queridos y aplicando su propio sentido de la justicia" (Freire Sánchez 99).[11]

As a result, Steven Knight's work is argued to avoid falling into binary narratives of good and evil deeds and leaves the audience to judge the characters' actions. Most importantly,

[10] Jesse Matz characterises the anti-heroes as characters "rarely singled out for their superior traits, and they rarely achieve much. If anything they are worse than normal [...] weak, disaffected, and passive, undone by circumstance, and lucky to make it through at all [...] remarkable not for his positive traits and accomplishments but for his negative ones" (45-6).

[11] "shapes him as antihero by conducting deeds against corrupt policemen and murderers, others defending innocents and other ending with organised crime, but he always does it brutally, cutting short the life of those who threaten his loved ones and applying his own sense of justice". (Own translation)

"it is the ability to force the audience to question their moral assumptions that makes the contemporary anti-hero a useful postmodern tool for social critique" (A. Long 52). Audiences defend these characters' display of masculinity because they encounter "'brutalised veterans' who we may have some sympathy for and we watch them on their rise (and fall) as tragic anti-heroes […], only to succumb to [the] violent world they inhabited" (Smith 289). The audience' support of the Peaky Blinders shows a shift in entertainment interests and how masculinities might be perceived by the masses. Thus, morally grey characters (i.e. complex and ambiguous), Thomas Shelby being a quintessential example, contest conventional roles in fiction for reflecting human complexity and ambition. Freire Sánchez advocates for these portrayals by stating that "aunque seamos animales sociales […] nos sometemos a conflictos interiores en pro de mejorar, de superarnos o simplemente por perdonarnos y aceptarnos; luchamos internamente contra todos esos demonios que nos gobiernan desde nuestro yo: miedo, prejuicios, adicciones, vicios, manías, traumas" (23). *Peaky Blinders* proposes a wide variety of antiheroes who do not conform to binary constructions of characters between good and evil; they are morally and ethically complex. The series imagines antiheroic men with whom audiences might relate despite how morally corrupt they first appear.

Chiefly, this series belongs to a long list of British period dramas which are conjointly analysed in Media and Television Studies (Hanna, 2017; Taddeo, 2018). In the series analysed, the portrayal of the Great War denotes a decisive factor in most of the male characters' behaviour, influencing their emotional and psychological journey throughout and after the war. *Peaky Blinders* is mostly associated with the aftermath for being set in the interwar period. In her chapter in *Conflicting Masculinities: Men in Television Period Drama*, Julie Anne Taddeo states that these TV programmes "complement recent historians' efforts at a more nuanced examination of the 'effects of

war on masculine ideals', imagining the multiple ways in which British men – soldiers *and* non-combatants – struggled with masculine identity and coped with trauma (physical and emotional), often long after the war ended" (167). Therefore, this group of academics strongly relates the characters' (toxic) masculinity to their war experience, the former potentially being a byproduct of the latter. In the case of *Peaky Blinders*, the depiction of war trauma, and not warfare, showcases "Tommy's reactionary attitude to peacetime living […] as the heart of the narrative and is the most toxic display of masculine ideals. Tommy continually works to keep the war alive, for it is an arena that has taught him how to win" (Larke-Walsh 53-4). One of the most recurrent arguments is that Tommy has transferred his experience in France to Birmingham, transforming the city into his own battlefield in his search for social validation (Larke-Walsh, 2019; Schuhmaier, 2019, Mueller, 2022).

The psychological and traumatic consequences of warfare, what was at the time diagnosed as shell shock,[12] were widely misunderstood at the time-period the series is based on (Loughran, 2012). Hence, the series has a creative freedom to channel war trauma in many directions. In Thomas' case, it involves the ambition for social recognition, even if it is through illegal channels after enduring a life-changing experience. As pointed out by Paul Long,

> this individualistic ambition is in Tommy's case a struggle for agency in a world as coldhearted as he is. His *sang froid* in the face of a number of life-threatening situations suggests that the experience of war has taught him the truth of the world, that the fate of men like him – whether on a battlefield or in a factory – is not his to decide (175).

[12] Simply put, shell shock is a historical term from "which wartime understandings […] are foregrounded, and the term itself is viewed primarily as a diagnostic label used to describe a variety of reactions to the First World War. 'Shell shock' would therefore be defined as the totality of its wartime meanings" (Loughran 104). It should be noted that there is an ongoing debate regarding the historical, cultural, and psychological implications of defining shell shock, since it has become part of literary practices which intend to represent the struggles of First World War veterans. Because it encapsulates earlier conceptions of trauma, *Peaky Blinders* might have taken certain artistic freedom when depicting shell-shocked soldiers. This thesis will not focus on the validity of such representations.

Consequently, the presence of trauma and the coping mechanisms used by the characters can explain some of the implications behind Thomas and the Blinders’ masculinities. There is an adoption of the “warrior culture and identity learned and taught through the hierarchy of military service. There is high adherence to traditional masculine norms; punishment comes to those who deviate. […] As military men, weakness is antithetical to the male definition of sexual dominance and power” (Mueller 38). As a result, overperforming military conducts stages new possibilities for hierarchal structures and definitions of manliness. Warrior culture is heavily present amongst the members of the gang. However, extremely little is discussed regarding the male bond between the male characters and their gang organisation.

Sina Schuhmaier does discuss, or more precisely, questions, the existence of community in the series. One of her arguments is that military dynamics have trespassed into the Shelby’s domestic space. The family does not practice conventional Edwardian conceptions of family relations, instead they imitate military hierarchy with Thomas as Sergent Major, who pulls rank with the rest. Consequently, “Thomas conceives of his family in terms of war comrades, whose strength rests in their absolute loyalty, that is, the cohesion of their community” (39). The family’s resilience lies in acting as a form of standardised community that fairly mimics traditional social structures. These will allow masculine and capitalist practices to persevere through the family’s patriarchal cohesion and authoritative dynamics. Therefore, the oppression faced “as well as the limited capabilities and vision of those around him mean that in order to realize his ambitions Tommy must look beyond the limits of family” (P. Long 175).

The imagery of the family as an army is one of the two communities with which the family is compared to. The second one is the company, an example of a capitalist structure. Schuhmaier argues that “Thomas ‘runs’ his family according to the parameters

of business, understood—and practiced—as warfare. Tradition, employed by Thomas where beneficial, thus enters the equation through the backdoor of capitalism" (39). Capitalism does, in fact, problematise the concept of community because it infiltrates the family and the dynamics between male characters. Additionally, there are critics who sustain that other than wartime, Thomas and his gang practice hegemonic masculinity by defying their social class. In his text "Modern Company, Postmodern Crisis", Alex Long maintains that "by destabilizing the traditional values of meritocracy and respectability, *Peaky Blinders* effectively represents the contemporary postmodern crisis of attempting to succeed under capitalism through the ascension and trials of the Shelby Company Limited" (47). Long considers that Tommy employs the tactics of the capitalist system already present in the 1920s to the extent of becoming a neoliberalist. Long insists that "Tommy Shelby is violent, corrupt, and morally shaky at best, but he is also ambitious, industrious, and highly intelligent. […H]e knows how to harness these traits to manipulate his surroundings and make his way up the social ladder" (53). Moreover, Long recognises the ambiguity of producing a period drama set in modern times but written with a postmodern mindset. He emphasises that "because the major thrust of the series is to portray the experiences and perspectives of a lower-class demographic […], it necessarily requires [Steven Knight] to offer a postmodern critique of the environment out of which his series arises, in both a historically and contemporarily grounded context" (50). This would lead the research to consider that *Peaky Blinders* is not simply another period drama, whose purpose is to be historically accurate but could be labelled as a postmodern commentary on the current globalised Western economy (P. Long, 2017).

These crucial connections (gender-war and gender-class) detected by the critics indicate their certain lack of intersectionality.[13] Articles do acknowledge factors that oppress and condition the characters because "not only does the Great War in *Peaky Blinders* issue a warning against present-day belligerence, it more broadly symbolises the mechanisation and alienation definitive of the rise of industrial labour and capitalist production in the modern age" (Schuhmaier 27-8). However, either class or war is considered the sole trigger for Thomas and company to strive for social mobility. It seems that even though they should be considered complementary, these social experiences are established in a hierarchy by these experts. Hence, most critics overlook that "the recognition that working-class men are emotionally marked by war is a means of affording such characters a rare and complex interiority" (P. Long 174). For this reason, most academics do not provide an intersectional exercise on the presentation of Shelby's hegemonic masculinity. As Connell explains, "it is impossible to understand the shaping of working-class masculinities without giving full weight to their class as well as their gender politics" (*Masculinities* 75). Thus, the statement that "in the end, Thomas, head of the Shelby family, is not driven by patriarchal structures, but by capitalist ones" (Schuhmaier 37) denotes a partial reading of a complex male character, whose oppressions should not be regarded as hierarchical but horizontal.

The same can be remarked about his ethnicity as a Romani descendant, which is observed but rarely examined. Few critics discuss the role ethnicity has in the series, despite being a central element in the *Peaky Blinders'* narrative. Discriminatorily referred to as 'gypsies' or 'tinkers', the Shelby family struggles with their ethnic origins in an

[13] Kimberlé Crenshaw first coined the term 'intersectionality' in her essays to denounce the use of categories such as gender and race as single-axis systems of oppression that act in isolation. She proposed the term to indicate that certain social and political identities, especially Black female identities, are discriminated against by an overlap of cultural oppressions that are complementary and context-dependant. This concept has been expanded by other renowned female Black scholars such as Audre Lorde or bell hooks.

ostracised population of Irish-Romani. The legitimacy of the portrayal of Irish-Romani people in the series has been questioned as being, once again, a "distraction from the militant essentialism that pervades the narrative" (Larke-Walsh 40). In addition, it is maintained that this heritage has been idealised by the writers to romanticise Tommy as an outcast or outlaw. According to these arguments, Shelby wins over the audience and prevents admonishment due to ethnic oppression. Hence, his desire for social mobility could be justified.

Other critics appear to be more lenient than Larke-Walsh. Paul Long, for instance, appoints this ethnic dimension of the character as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he concurs with Larke-Walsh that it might produce racial stereotypes, which is certainly problematic. On the other hand, such a multiethnic identity "serves to articulate the heterogeneous nature of this working-class milieu and to mark the liminal status of the Shelby clan" (173). Therefore, Long, unlike Larke-Walsh, accounts for the cultural mosaic created by working-classes. It should not be disregarded that the working-class is the base of the social pyramid. Ergo, thicker and more abundant than other social classes, able to encompass a wider variety of cultural and political identities. They also face backlash due to their Irish heritage. Even if partially white, they approach a certain white privileged social status, but never fully achieve it. They are 'white others', a concept proposed by Emily Webb. 'White others' can pass but still face racist policies. Yet, because of space limitations, ethnicity cannot be approached in the analysis of *Peaky Blinders,* but its presence in the series is dully noted and backgrounds the arguments presented throughout this thesis.

Overall, the literature presented here has been able to fill in certain gaps within what might be called the *Peaky Blinders* cultural world, especially concerning masculinity, war, and class. Nonetheless, some aspects are yet to be approached. First,

most of these authors have published their research before the finalisation of the series in 2022, and hence, provide a partial reading of the series. The final sixth season is not present in most studies. Then, the events and storyline that complete Thomas’ journey are not accounted for. This dissertation, however, will deem the whole series as necessary for completely capturing the masculine identities of Thomas and his gang. Second, male-bonding is barely accounted for and basically irrelevant in the existing literature. One of the fundamental characteristics of the prevalence of masculinities is the validation given to a male individual by a male collective. It is the male bond which allows the existence of a network of male hegemonic behaviours (Bird, 1996). Thus, homosociality amongst men in the Peaky Blinders gang as a motor for toxicity is seldom mentioned in the texts. Third, and already mentioned, the literature is generally interested in the implications of having these characters on the screen, and what it means for the audience to sympathise and defend them. Consequently, the white, patriarchal, and capitalist structures that allow writers to create these characters, who become subjects of privilege, such as the enigmatic Thomas Shelby, are assumed and overlooked.

Because of gaps in previous literature, this dissertation seeks to trace literary and cultural elements in *Peaky Blinders* which have permitted the writing of masculine characters, specifically Thomas Shelby. They adhere themselves to masculine hegemonic archetypes, mimetic of patriarchal structures to overcome systemic oppressions. The fact that this project is dealing with a period crime drama (Taddeo, 2018; Hanna, 2017, 2020) is not ignored. Even if the series is set in the early 20$^{th}$ century, the writing is conducted with a postmodern and contemporary approach (Long, 2019). Although the thesis might appear anachronistic at certain points, the literary influences Steven Knight might have had in a post-World War Two Birmingham context are pertinent to understanding how he

imagined the masculine identities of his characters.[14] Elements that may seem inaccurate to the historical setting imply that "the blurring of temporal boundaries in the series through the imposition of contemporary music [for instance] on an early-20th century setting immediately established the retro-pastiche common to postmodern texts" (A. Long 47). Therefore, the transgressions of time and history could reflect the writing's awareness of managing historical details but taking artistic liberties. It could be argued, in fact, that because of these transgressions, the series' goal is not to be historically accurate. Instead, it might pursue a period piece, liberally dramatized, that can encapsulate both modern and postmodern codes of narrating in an interdisciplinary field such as TV entertainment. It does not only present historical events, but it participates in a social commentary which can resonate in the present. Such entertainment, this project sustains, is filled with cultural evidence of patriarchal, class-conscious, and trauma-related issues that are only possible due to a pre-existing sexist and capitalist system that writers have been able to mould for contemporary fictional purposes. The next section will present these systems and their interweave with hegemonic masculinity, the main concept applied to analyse Thomas.

[14] This project is not disregarding the fact that the series is loosely based on a real criminal Birmingham gang. Nonetheless, the project grounds itself on the series as a cultural and mostly fictional text. The similitudes and differences between the real gang and Knight's fictional one will not be accounted for in this text. If interested in the real Birmingham gang, please check: Chinn, Carl. *Peaky Blinders: The Real Story of Birmingham's Most Notorious Gangs.* Kings Road Publishing, 2019.

## 2. (Hegemonic) Masculinity and Its Myths. A Theoretical Approach

The criticised hypermasculine atmosphere in *Peaky Blinders* relates to many of the discussions addressed by Masculinity Studies,[15] and its counterpart Critical Studies on Men.[16] The field first appeared in the English-speaking academy—Australia, the United States, and Britain—with the work of scholars such as Harry Brod, Joseph H. Pleck, and David Morgan in the late 1970s and early 80s. They leveraged the momentum created by second-wave feminism on issues of gender, inequality, and discrimination. There was a growing interest to demonstrate that men were just as gender-marked as women (Connell, 1995). This concern "produced a much more detailed, specific and differentiated view of men in gender relations, and so allowed a decisive move beyond the abstract 'sex role' framework that had been dominant earlier" (Connell, *Masculinities* xiv). Anthropologists, sociologists, cultural theorists, and other academics considered pertinent to explore male identities and problematise the epistemology of masculinities as natural biological phenomena in the Western hemisphere (Connell et al., 2004). The work of these academics complemented the progress of feminist scholars in the field of Gender Studies.

In the late 80s, and with full force in the 90s, academics on studies of masculinities (e.g., R. W. Connell, Michael S. Kimmel, Lynne Segal, and John Tosh) carried out extensive research on male gender relations, male violence, class and race inequality

[15] Although there are other areas of study complementing Masculinity Studies, such as Men or Male Studies, I have chosen to use the field of Masculinity Studies because of the problematic implications and limitations of the other terms. As Jeff Hearn explains, these are "not in women's interests. To speak of 'Men's Studies' is at the best ambiguous: is it studies on men or studies by men? It implies a false parallel with Women's Studies. At worst, it is anti-feminist" (49-50). This project intends to provide a critical feminist reading of the male characters in *Peaky Blinders.* Arguments that do not correlate to this feminist approach shall not be taken into account.

[16] Critical Studies on Men, abbreviated as CSM, "refers to that range of studies that critically address men in the context of gendered power relations" (Hearn 50). It is usually conducted by queer and feminist scholarship that fear the exclusion of women and queer individuals from the discussion. The field emerges from feminist critiques to previous research on masculinities, especially queer academics, who are proponent of motivating queer scholarship in the examination of masculinity and male sexuality (Hearn, 2004). I have decided not to incorporate research on Critical Studies on Men beyond Hearn -a pioneer on Masculinity Studies-, not due to any disagreement with its principles, but because it focuses on topics, such as sexuality, that are secondary to the core objectives of my thesis.

among men, the diversification of male sexual identities, the relation between men and social power, and patriarchy and sexist practices against women, among others. For scholars in this field, it was imperative to point out this self-evident social masculine marker because it identified, at the same time, the structures that empowered it (Tosh, 2004; Reeser, 2015). Men were not being considered as gendered individuals, remaining invisible behind naturalised gendered convictions (Morris and Oeur, 2018). For that reason, "masculinity had to be made visible, to be brought out as an object of study, and to not be considered an unmarked category […]. Masculinity's traditional invisibility […] was one way in which it maintained its power: by denying implicitly or explicitly that men were gendered" (Reeser 16). This field of study has been updated to encompass the social and political conditions that govern men's life. Thus, to synthesise the whole of the doctrine for this thesis proves quite arduous. In light of this, only the theory pertinent to this topic will be included to complement the research on *Peaky Blinders*, which largely focuses on the implications of aspiring to a hegemonic masculinity to attain social power and economic privilege in a working-class British context.

### 2.1. (Hegemonic) Masculinities and Normative Male Subjectivities

First and foremost, it is imperative to attempt to define the concept of masculinity, specifically in male bodies. Both masculinity and femininity are gendered terms that reject fixed definitions because "gender is always relational, and patterns of masculinity are socially defined in contradistinction from some model" (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). However, a loose definition of the concept, always open to modification, could be provided. Historically, masculinity has been considered a behavioural extension of the male biological sex (Segal, 1990; Connell, 1995; Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Judith Butler claimed in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990) that gender should not be regarded as a

biologically induced behaviour confined to one's sex.[17] Primarily concerned with the female condition, Butler argues that reading gender as a cultural manifestation of sex—an assumed physical manifestation of gender—establishes new binary boundaries, which limit understandings of gender as a social practice. For this reason, Butler proposed the concept of 'performativity', reasoning that gender expressions—both male and female—are influenced by cultural filters inscribed in traditional convictions of biological sex (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). Butler maintains that "gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence […] that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (33). Connell exemplifies this idea in her book *Masculinities* (1995) by dismantling previous standardised definitions of masculinity such as: "masculinity is what men ought to be" (70). Masculinity, just as femininity, is performed by subjects according to conventional beliefs on gender, which are appointed identitarian practices to either the male or female sex (Segal, 1990; Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1996).

Connell overtly rejects a traditional sociobiological epistemology because,

> According to these theorists, men's bodies are the bearers of a natural masculinity produced by the evolutionary pressures that have borne down upon the human stock. We inherit with our masculine genes tendencies to aggression, family life, competitiveness, political power, hierarchy, territoriality, promiscuity and forming men's clubs (*Masculinities* 46).

Connell is supportive of gender as a social construct (Kimmel, 1996; Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Morris and Oeur, 2018) as antithesis to sociobiology. Connell does not disregard the importance of male bodies as objects of gender markers. For her, "the body is a canvas

[17] The concept of 'sex' has also been problematised by feminist academics and critics. The philosopher's seminal work theorises that sex, just like gender, is socially constructed, blurring the distinction between gender and sex as cultural and biological phenomena, respectively. Consequently, "it would make no sense, then, to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (Butler 111). Biologist and philosopher Anne Fausto-Sterling participates in this problematisation in her discussion of sexual difference. According to Fausto-Sterling, "what bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender" (4). Although sex is not the central topic of my dissertation, Butler and Fausto-Sterling's contributions background my understandings of sex as a cultural apparatus.

to be painted, a surface to be imprinted, a landscape to be marked out" (*Masculinities* 50). Even more, she explains that the construction of masculinity is, in fact, only possible when compared or contrasted to femininity. Thus, all individuals are essentially defined by or in opposition to one of them—never in-between—through socialisation. Consequently, Connell broadly defines 'masculinity' as "a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (71). Yet only one of them became the privileged landmark for the institutionalisation of patriarchy as an oppressive system of social and cultural practices.

Connell adds that "because gender is a way of structuring social practice in general, not a special type of practice, it is unavoidably involved with other social structures. It is now common to say that gender 'intersects' – better, interacts – with race and class" (75). Masculinity cannot, therefore, be reduced to one single privileged normative subject—white, upper-class, cis, heterosexual, middle-aged—. Accordingly, feminist academic Lynne Segal suggests considering a plurality of masculinities, dependent on the individual's subject position. Segal sustains that "nor are we simply dealing with a multiplicity of masculine styles, for these are always cut across by, and enmeshed within, other differing relations of power – class, age, skill, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on" (xxxv). As valid as Segal's point was in the 90s, there is a risk of excusing men's oppressive behaviour because of their social context. That is, recognising a diverse reality of masculinities, whose subjects can be victims of social oppressions even if being male, can have "the effect of detaching men from their actions" (Schrock and Schwalbe 281). There should be a clear distinction between performing a certain male subjectivity, contingent on cultural, political, and economic factors, and performing 'manhood acts'. This last term is proposed by Schrock and Schwalbe, who consider that

such acts are "aimed at claiming privilege, eliciting deference, and resisting exploitation" (ibid.). For instance, the gang of Peaky Blinders performs manhood acts to signify their masculine selves in hegemonic circles, even though they do not signify a hegemonic masculinity, but a working-class masculinity. Consequently, manhood has implemented a hierarchy that determines exactly which manly actions are worthy of recognition.

When these arguments were put forward, the concern for many academics was not just to point out the hierarchy but also to dismantle it. One of the strongest arguments had been to advocate for men, or a population of certain men, who were changing and being liberated from conservative notions of masculinity (Segal, 1990; Morris and Oeur, 2018). Privileged men were transcending from male-coded behaviours to embrace feminist advice on masculine deconstruction.[18] In light of these arguments, highlighting the complexities of masculine relations proves as necessary as examining the effect of these relations on non-male bodies—female and non-gender conforming—. Therefore, "the logic of a dominant code of masculinity may be to uphold class power […] and in these cases power over men may be more significant" (Tosh 53). To approach these issues, the hierarchy of men must be disassembled. The first to be addressed are those that perform as male normative subjects, receivers of political privileges.

Connell introduced in 1987 the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to refer to conventional patriarchal subjectivities. It offers a form of masculine being who is privileged in gendered, social, and cultural spheres (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). This gendered hegemony is assumed as the norm which defines the male normative subject (Connell, 1995). Nonetheless, it is a gendered pattern which is aspired to but never actually achieved. Hegemonic masculinity is, therefore, an aspirational practice. In his

[18] This dissertation takes 'deconstruction' to mean the collective male effort to resort to healthy feminist discourses of masculinity.

chapter "Deconstructing Hegemonic Masculinity", Richard Howson describes hegemonic masculinity as an empty signifier, as an open space for cultural coding. It has the potential "to mediate the heterogeneity of the people and the particularity of their interests into homogeneity as stability and order around the hegemonic principles" (143). Hegemonic masculinity, in the end, functions as a supplier of masculine ideals to filter men in patriarchal, capitalist, and imperialist codes. Howson adds that,

> the hegemonic takes the form of an empty signifier whose content is drawn from the particularity of masculinity and whose task is to mediate heterogeneity to produce normative gender regimes and ultimately, gender orders. It is used by the traditional intellectuals as a mechanism for demanding complicity to the hegemonic principles that express the nature of the dominative hegemony of men (ibid.).

Therefore, it does not correspond to any actual mode of male life (Connell, 1995). In fact, because there is no true and single masculinity but a plurality of them, "they are all subject to change because they come into existence in specific settings and under particular situations" (Messerschmidt and Messner 38). Consequently, in the heterogeneity of masculinities, some "are more socially central, or more associated with authority and social power, than others. The concept of hegemonic masculinity presumes the subordination of nonhegemonic masculinities" (Connell and Messerschmidt 846). Hegemonic masculinity, as naturalised as it appears, is constantly being contested by other masculinities because its principles are mutable (Connell, 1995; Hearn, 2004).

It has been the intention of these academics to decentralise hegemonic masculinity to highlight other masculinities. Connell and Messerschmidt emphasise that hegemonic masculinity does not hold by sheer presence but by repetition and referentiality. It "works in part through the production of examples of masculinity […], symbols that have authority despite the fact that most men and boys do not fully live up to them" (846). Carefully deliberated, hegemonic masculinity might coincide with a small but not insignificant proportion of male population. Hence, it is an aspirational term that barely

represents the male heterogenous collective. To aspire to it solely produces "a desire towards an ultimately unachievable ideal" (Howson 143). There are no guidelines to achieve a hegemonic masculinity, but discursive practices have mythologised the dominant cultural practice of masculine behaviour. The desire to achieve hegemonic masculinity is motivated by the ambition for power, be it social, political, or economic. The Peaky Blinders' ambition, especially Thomas', is to achieve an authority, powerful enough, that can provide them with social and economic privileges unfeasible for working-class masculinities. In effect, they aspire to perform a hegemonic masculinity and benefit from its promoted male ideals and myths. To accomplish so, Thomas struggles, more decidedly so as the series progresses, to portray and embody conventional male norms, aspiring to resemble that small proportion of patriarchal individuals. Simultaneously, he will strive to discard his working-class masculinity, limiting and constraining, to gain power.

Power, a rather loose term, is the force that moves every individual in their search for cultural significance and social positioning (Morris and Oeur, 2018). Power, in its most basic sense, is the capacity to act, of being able to act, not the action itself. The concept has been socially transformed into and institutionalised as the "capacity, the ability to dominate or influence others through reward or punishment" (Hearn 52). Male dominance and power have been established in Western economic and political systems at the expense of female and ethnic subordination (Kimmel, 1996). Patriarchy enforces gender inequality so men can be the sole recipients of power. Yet not all men can be its beneficiaries and must accommodate to lesser powerful masculine codes (Tosh, 2004). The threat of losing power for men implies that when they "feel the least powerful and the least manly, they are the most likely to hurt themselves and others in attempts to reclaim power and manhood" (Morris and Oeur xii). *Peaky Blinders* presents this

situation through Thomas, whose ambitions are not only harmful to those closer to him but to himself too.

The gendered power seized by hegemonic masculinity is only possible if there are other masculinities which are subordinated to it (Connell, 1995). Kimmel states that "within the dominant culture, the masculinity that defines white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men is the masculinity that sets the standards for other men, against which other men are measured and more often than not, found wanting" ("Masculinity as Homophobia" 124-5). As a result, other male identitarian categories—queer, racialised, poor—subordinate to gender (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). All masculinities are dependent on homogenous hegemonic practices, which require a well-defined heterogenous periphery. Hearn denominates this homogeneity as the hegemony of men, a term that addresses "the formation of the social category of men, and its taken-for-grantedness, as well as men's taken-for-granted dominated and control through consent [of subordinated masculinities]" (59). Hearn's hegemony of men serves to determine the normative male subject, who appears at the expense of peripheric non-hegemonic masculinities. It is pertinent, thus, to delineate this neglected periphery and the interweavements between periphery and centre.

### 2.2. Non-Hegemonic Masculine Peripheries

These power relations between and amongst men have produced, according to Connell, four categorical non-hegemonic masculinities that Messerschmidt and Messner summarise as:

> First, *complicit masculinities* [which] do not actually embody hegemonic masculinity yet through practice realize some of the benefits of patriarchal relations; second, *subordinate* masculinities are constructed as lesser than or aberrant from and deviant to hegemonic masculinity; third, *marginalized* masculinities are trivialized or discriminated against, or both, because of unequal relations, such as class, race, ethnicity, and age; and finally, *protest* masculinities are constructed as compensatory hypermasculinities that are formed in reaction to social positions lacking economic and political power (38).

The Peaky Blinders are primarily concerned with marginalised and protest masculinities. They are examples of men who find themselves ostracised due to class. Their hypermasculinities are a reaction to certain political and economic limitations which intensify their manhood acts in protest of being excluded from and profited by the hegemony of men. The intention is to trace how they occupy these non-hegemonic spaces to, in fact, become part of the hegemony; and if that is plausible. To accomplish such a goal, non-hegemonic masculinities, principally working-class masculinity, should be explained in more detail. In addition, the question of male violence will be approached in the following paragraphs.[19]

In 2004, bell hooks published *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love,* presenting her views on masculinity and violence, denouncing the 'emotional numbness' that permeates male lives.[20] As she argues, "there is only one emotion that patriarchy values when expressed by men: that emotion is anger" (21). Even more, anger is often translated into violence since men have not been taught or encouraged to learn emotional intelligence, or a 'love ethic' as hooks proposes. She theorises that "the will to use violence is really not linked to biology but to a set of expectations about the nature of power in a dominator culture" (59) brimming within masculinised institutions. Violence is often contemplated as a male tribute, stamping their manliness in each male (Segal, 1990). Kimmel maintains that "violence is often the single most evident marker of manhood" ("Masculinity as Homophobia" 215). Likewise, Connell reminds us that,

[19] Even if ethnicity and sexuality are commented on merely in passing in this study, this thesis is aware of their relevance in Masculinity Studies. It was decided, because of limitations of space, that the dissertation would fully concentrate on working-class masculinities, war, and violence. The issue of Romani ethnicity and sexuality are crucial in the series, and research on this topic should be conducted. These and other topics not discussed in this dissertation can be found in the section 'Further Research Avenues'.

[20] My interest in violence lies particularly in violence amongst men. Violence against women is recognised in this dissertation; its exclusion is, thus, deliberate and not neglectful. Although it is not explicitly discussed, the series portrays violent scenes against women, lesser in number, however, than those between men. Generalising, brutality against women in the series is usually of a sexual nature, while amongst men reflects the systematisation and militarisation of masculinity.

through the multiplicity of violences—institutionalised, military, domestic—men aspire to the infamous hegemonic masculinity. Even if perpetually unachievable and completely aspirational, "the hegemony of masculinities [emphasizes] violence, confrontation and domination" (*The Men and the Boys* 224). Amongst masculinities, violence is the channel through which male assertion is sought by overperforming violently against subordinated masculinities in pursuit of authority and submission from fellow men. By contrast, protest masculinities, assigned to the Peaky Blinders, respond with violence to the class violence already received (Connell, 2000). Therefore, violence is a mechanism of subordination to hegemonic masculinity, but it also serves as a mechanism of resistance by marginalised masculinities.

Connell and hooks attempt to decode male violence, assumed inherent in male practices. In arguing that violence is both a requirement from and a response to hegemonic maleness highlights naturalised apparatuses of social and gender control (hooks, 2004). They demonstrate that patriarchal violence has an effective control on other social male environments (Connell, 2002); for instance, the working-classes. hooks affirms that:

> working-class male children and grown men often embody the worst strains of patriarchal masculinity, acting out violently because it is the easiest, cheapest way to declare one's 'manhood'. If you cannot prove that you are 'much of a man' by becoming president, or becoming rich, or becoming a public leader, or becoming a boss, then violence is your ticket in to the patriarchal manhood contest, your ability to do violence levels the playing field. On that field, the field of violence, any man can win (72).

Thomas Shelby and his criminal corporation evince the use of violence as an option for evening the social board. As a working-class organisation, violence provides outlets to infiltrate into hegemonic action. Furthermore, the Peaky Blinders do not only engage in violent acts, but on lad culture, or 'laddism', which complements their hypermasculine working-class behaviour. Traditionally, laddism "is the form of white working-class

men's rebellious behaviours" (Jordan et al. 701).[21] The hypermasculinity encountered in laddish performances indicates "the process whereby some masculinity performances by some men in some contexts are constructed as excessive, providing a counterpoint through which to legitimate the 'just right' cultural ideal of hegemonic masculinity" (703). In the hypermasculinisation of their social patterns, underprivileged men aspire to a shifting hegemonic masculinity, biased in the upper and middle-classes' favour.

Working-class masculinities, rejected from the playing field, are crossed by an axis of privilege. Not only so, but the class system discloses other identitarian categories subjected to gender, attesting to "an ideal of working-class manliness and self-respect [being] constructed in response to class deprivation and paternalist strategies of management" (Connell, *Masculinities* 75). As a subgroup, working-class men are conditioned by dominant and economic-privileged male groups, who have more access to social recognition and political power, as well as social validation and respect. Social stratification has, consequently, limited professional opportunities and prospects for working-class men in the capitalist wheel of profit-for-power dynamic. Working-class men are socially encouraged to perform and construct their masculinity in the shadow of affluent men. Subordinated to the rich man, working-class men's "experience of English society can be read in terms of the building of a defensive culture of masculine survival against social marginalisation. It is within this culture that they construct and live out images of what it means to be a man" (Mac an Ghaill 187). Consequently, the construction

[21] This dissertation is aware of the problematic implications of the definition provided. It stigmatises working-class men and their social environment as brutish and unmannered. It should be clarified that laddism can and is usually performed by middle and upper-class men, who believe they adopt such behaviour from the working classes (Jordan et al., 2022). Furthermore, although the term lad culture denominates a masculine subculture of the late 1990s and early 2000s, I consider that it can be ascribed to the Peaky Blinders because it reflects the reactionary responses to economic and social oppression by other masculinities. It also depicts the pack mentality of the gang and how they draw "on cultural norms around masculinity, gender-based violence and the connections between them" (702).

of masculinities is concerned with socioeconomic backgrounds, educating men on imaginaries of normative, class-specific male identities.

Nonetheless, educational and institutional organisations prevent underprivileged men from pursuing hegemonic recognition. Segal explains that "competitiveness, personal ambition, social responsibility and emotional restraint were described as the main ways whereby masculinity is pattered in middle-class families […] The working-class boy, in contrast, is directed towards physical toughness, endurance and male bonding" (94). The reasons behind this divergence in male behaviour reside in the preference for middle-classes as power holders instead of the working-classes. Formally put, "the stereotypical picture that emerges is that whereas middle class men can wield institutional power, their working classes counterparts employ physical power through fighting, […] drinking, machismo and displays of sexual prowess" (Beynon 20). Hegemonic masculinity extracts from peripheric masculinities, such as the working-class, imaginaries and stereotypes that classify and manage men in hierarchies of power. Collectively, men perform their gender in contrast to other men, who might occupy similar, superior, or inferior masculinities (Segal, 1990; Connell, 1995; Hearn, 2004). As a result, male interaction plays a decisive role in the configuration of masculinities and the formation of the hegemony of men.

### 2.3. Male Homosociality

Connell's proposal of masculinities and Hearn's hegemony of men might lead to the matter of male relationships, also labelled as homosociality. In her book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick introduced the concept 'homosocial desire' to differentiate it from 'homosexual desire'; the former does not involve sexual attraction—although both complement each other in a *continuum*—. Male homosociality is referred to in academic discussion as 'male

bonding', regarded by Sedgwick as "characterised by intense homophobia, fear, and hatred of homosexuality" (1).[22] Male bonding is a social practice applicable to the Peaky Blinders, a gang which relies absolutely on the sociability between their male participants. Connell mentions that "protest masculinity […] builds on a working-class masculine ethic of solidarity" (*Masculinities* 117). Laddism might play a relevant role in the homosocial relations between the Peaky Blinders as potential hegemonic men as well. Although male bonding works within a specific masculinity, it may also operate across other masculinities, especially when directed towards hegemonic masculinity (Arxer, 2011; Hammarén and Johansson, 2014).[23] Thomas shares spaces with hegemonic men, in which male bonding influences their professional and political relations in a contest for power.

As previously argued, masculinities are repeatedly being contested by other masculinities in the development of male bonds—the aforementioned 'patriarchal manhood contest' by hooks demonstrates the contestability of maleness—. Male kinship works as a social organisation (Connell, 2005), established in the state and in institutions which represent the social structuring of cultural practices. Rita Segato denominates this organisation as a corporation that constantly questions the manliness of their participants. This contestation is conducted by following a mandate of masculinity, which demands from the male subject "exhibir su capacidad, su título, su posición masculina ante los ojos de los demás. […O]tras presencias se hacen sentir junto a él. Es lo que he llamado

[22] Sedgwick's theory is actively involved with the dichotomy between male social and sexual desire (homosociality – homosexuality). However, I have decided to not include the relationship between masculinity and sexuality in order to dedicate a large portion of this section to other issues. Nonetheless, this dissertation recognises that homosexuality, homophobia, and heterosexism imply a substantial contribution to the field of Masculinity Studies.

[23] Hammarén and Johansson contribute the difference between hierarchical homosociality and horizontal homosociality. The former holds onto the structures of power across men, that is, "a means of strengthening power and of creating close homosocial bonds to maintain and defend hegemony" (5), while the latter implies a power equality between men, which includes "relations that are based on emotional closeness, intimacy, and a nonprofitable form of friendship" (ibid.). It could be argued that Shelby engages in both homosociliaties throughout the series; the difference being the men with whom he socialises: the Peaky Blinders or political enemies.

'interlocutores en la sombra'. Esa compañía que le exige, que lo prueba, que lo insta. La prueba de que es hombre" (Segato 43).[24] Even though Segato contextualises her thesis in situations of extreme sexual violence in Brazil, her arguments are pertinent for this project when factoring in Sedgwick's homosocial desire in *Peaky Blinders*. Segato's theory provides a boarder overview of the issues and clearer insights into the parameters of homosociality and male bonding. Both are responsible for maintaining the male hegemonic *status quo* by having male subjects desperately seeking entrance into hegemonic circles. Emotional detachment, competitiveness, and sexual objectification of women (Bird, 1996) are some of the many expectations men follow according to this masculine dictum and homosocial desire. Therefore, the brotherhood decrees certain ritualistic trials that men should participate in. Chiefly, breaching all or any of the conditions is not understood as an act of resistance. In fact,

> The contradictions that non-hegemonic masculinity meanings (e.g., expression of intimate emotions, cooperation, and identification with women) potentially pose to dominant masculinity patterns are suppressed in male homosocial heterosexual interactions, inhibiting change. When individual departures from dominant masculinity are experienced as private dissatisfactions rather than as reason for contesting the social construction of masculinity, hegemonic patterns persist (Bird 22).

For this very reason, any attempt by male members of the Peaky Blinders to perform a non-hegemonic masculinity, and the meanings it carries with it, is discouraged by fellow Peaky Blinders, principally Thomas. Arthur Shelby, the oldest Shelby brother, acts as an example of a traumatised man who, throughout the series, seeks for other masculine manifestations through religion, sobriety, or celibacy, but that are abandoned for being unmanly or not correlating with Thomas' polices or business plans. Arthur's trauma is a product of a specific historic event: the First World War. To contextualise Arthur and

[24] "the exhibition of his capacity, his title, his masculine position in front of the rest. […O]ther presences are felt alongside him. This is what I have termed 'interlocutor in the shadow'. This group that makes demands on him, tests him, urges him. The test to show that he is a man". (Own translation)

Thomas' trauma and male behaviours, the masculine discourse of the interwar period should be briefly presented.

### 2.4. Masculinities in the Interwar Period

The preceding theoretical sections have introduced a general panorama on masculinities and their dynamics in male bonding. It is essential, however, to contextualise this theory historically. Although *Peaky Blinders* is an internationally recognised series, it is based on a precise historical period and location and has specific masculine discourses: the interwar period in Great Britian. Gender is, in itself, a temporal phenomenon and its manifestations are both products and producers of history (Connell, 1995). Therefore, a general presentation of British masculinities in the 1920s is necessary since "representations of sexual difference are as historically specific as the political contexts to which they give meaning" (Sluga 240). By contextualising *Peaky Blinders,* I aim to precisely highlight the cultural myths that Thomas performs for social recognition.

#### 2.4.1. The Cultural Myth of the Soldier

In the 1920s, Britain's politics were overwhelmed by the First World War; the country underwent political, social, and economic transformations that had conditioned the whole of the population and its gender politics. It has been widely argued that masculinity was in crisis in the interwar period because warfare problematised its definition (Lawrence, 2003; Levsen, 2008; Koureas, 2017).[25] John Horne explains that "war and politics have formed a classic locus for the self-definition of male actors who have seen themselves as bearing power, wielding force, and incarnating authority, whether actual or potential" (22). Early twentieth-century manifestations of masculinity suffered a great many

[25] Academics are now reticent to declare that masculinity is in crisis because it "seems superfluous: masculinity appears always and everywhere to have been uneasy and uncertain" (Griffin 158). Claiming that masculinity is in crisis implies that masculinity has remained perpetually the same throughout history when, masculinity, just as femininity, has undergone countless periods of transformation historically (Connell, 1995). Therefore, hegemonic masculinity has manifested itself differently in historical periods.

changes because of the war. Men, regardless of their social standing, bought into war propaganda and its militaristic myths (Sluga, 2004). However, such myths prevalent in the 1910s—courage, heroism, sacrifice, glory—did not survive the carnage of the war. Jon Lawrence explains that "even in the British case, war fostered militarist as well as antimilitarist myths, and in 1918 it remained unclear which would triumph in the battle for the public mind" (558). The government's determination to postulate the myth of British peacefulness after the war implied that the masculine training and personae gained in the trenches had no place in British society (Lawrence, 2003; Horne, 2004). Soldiers were effectively rejected from the new domestic British framework (Kent, 2019). The home they returned to did not want them any longer.

In pre-war Britain, "the soldier was idealised through a variety of cultural mediums […]. In Edwardian Britain the army stood for a hegemonic masculinity that valorised the trained and powerful body and invoked high ideals of courage and sacrifice" (Tosh 49). War propaganda promoted soldiers as saviours of state and nation, of democracy. It implemented a masculine ideal—a dominant masculinity—that all aspired to but that none could achieve. Nonetheless, soldiers had already been inscribed with masculine standards and duties. Their conceptual imaginary of national masculinity had been mythologised within the figure of the soldier. Such a figure "is grounded in a heroic narrative of combat, an imagination of martial violence that is privileged, powerful and strongly normative. The heroic soldier myth may change […], but it remains persistent" (Millar and Tidy 150). The Peaky Blinders persist in their personal imaginary of the soldier in post-war Britain; combating against their enemies implies embodying the soldier mythology to success in business and endure war trauma.

Back from the front, working-class soldiers had to refamiliarize themselves with working life after years of warfare. Ideals of masculinity were redefined by their sacrifice

in the trenches. Effective immediately, "the cult of the 'great man' was replaced by that of the 'unknown soldier'" (Horne 32). The Peaky Blinders represent a group of unknown soldiers who are not glorified by those on the home front. The myth of the Soldier did not correlate to traumatised soldiers, who "were reduced to the ignominy of the trenches, a kind of warfare that in practice denied them their warrior masculinity more than it virilised them" (Sluga 245). This study will therefore analyse how Thomas clings to the vanishing myth of the Soldier to consolidate and shore up his business.

### 2.4.2. The Cultural Myth of the Self-Made Man[26]

Britain's economy suffered greatly in the post-war period. A surge of unemployment complicated the inclusion of returned soldiers into the workforce (Kent, 2000; Levsen, 2008; Pope, 2014). This economic crisis led to consequences on masculinities, particularly, working-class masculinities. As Ben Griffin clarifies,

> men experienced unemployment as emasculating. That is because regular work and the role of breadwinner were considered essential for men if they were to access the most prestigious forms of masculinity in working-class communities. An economic crisis was also experienced, in part, as a crisis gender identity. […] The inequitable distribution of resources means that the usual condition of the lower middle and working classes has been precarious access to the means that would enable them to perform masculinities that they considered desirable (167).

The establishment of the welfare state in Britain (Pope, 2014) had provided the imaginary that economic and social elites were accessible for every British citizen. Nonetheless, the war proved that social hierarchies were more dominant than ever due to military hierarchy (Millar and Tidy, 2017). As a result, in post-war Britain, the working classes participated in the capitalist upper and middle classes consumerism of the Roaring Twenties in a simulation of social equity. The distinctions between old and new money became clearer

[26] Although the concept of 'the self-made man' is generally associated with North America and its political figures, the origins of this myth can be traced back to Victorian England. Tom Pendergast locates the prototype in "the ideal Victorian man [as] a property-owning man of character who believed in honesty, integrity, self-restraint, and duty to God, country, and family; as such he upheld the social and economic order in which he was an integral part" (10). As a result, I argue that, since the myth of the Self-Made Man has its roots in British culture, it is clearly pertinent for my study on Thomas Shelby.

as the 'self-made man' reached higher social standings. This participation is denominated as the "'embourgeoisement' of the working classes" (Brooke 105). Therefore, myths of capitalism, such as meritocracy or the self-made man, had infiltrated the working classes.

The myth of self-making is a clear component in the making of the masculine self and in the making of masculinity itself (Catano, 2001). It comprises masculinities, agency, economic prosperity, and social construction. Moreover, non-hegemonic men discovered "the appeal to self-making as freedom from determining physical origins—an escape from family, class, or race" (Catano 9). This myth gained force within working-class circles in the aftermath of the war because "the commemoration of the war promoted hegemonic notions of masculinity which sought to subsume and control working-class ex-servicemen" (Koureas 49). The myth of self-making instigated in working-class men the ideal that social mobility was conceivable through the performance of hegemonic masculine ideals. The influence of capitalism in industrial and entrepreneurial self-development created the cultural myth of meritocracy through productivity, and economic profit. Thomas exhibits the myth of the Self-Made Man in building up a profitable legitimate business—the Shelby Limited Company. Shelby covets the hegemonic masculinity promised by the Self-Made Man; he trusts the conviction that through diligent effort and the establishment of a prosperous enterprise he can transcend his oppressions and avoid subjugation to hegemonic figures.

### 2.4.3. The Cultural Myth of the Gangster

Thomas Shelby not only epitomises new money, but dirty money as well. The capital he earns is gained through illegal businesses—race-fixing, alcohol exportation during Prohibition, and others—. The criminal organisation of the Peaky Blinders reflects the volatile atmosphere that surrounded Britain in the 1920s. The aftermath of the war altered civilian's perceptions about violence; the British public and government questioned the

myth of Britain as a 'warrior nation' because of a fear of 'brutalisation' and a desire for 'civilisation' (Lawrence, 2003). Veterans, in contrast, struggled to abandon the violence of the war (Kent, 2019) because "for men who had sworn to 'win or die', the residual prestige of military masculinity offered small comfort in peacetime" (Nye 430-1). Crime and masculinities are intimately connected. Men, especially non-hegemonic men, can extract from the former resources to achieve a hegemonic masculinity (Messerschmidt, 2004). War and crime, in the 1920s, provided subordinated masculinities with new ideals of manhood that did not correlate with post-war Britain.

Crime and violence "remained embedded in many facets of British popular culture—particularly youth culture, where it could be […] acted out in the exploits of urban street gangs" (Lawrence 561). Heather Shore explains that these would profit from earlier forms of crime and innovate in post-World War I crime organizations. She adds that "whilst the racketeering, protectionism and gambling that were bread and butter to the interwar gangs were not an innovation of this period, the combinations of the traditional street fighting gangs with organised forms of these activities arguably were" (168). The Gangster can renegotiate his marginalised masculinity with aggressiveness, physical toughness, violent intimidation, and hypermasculinity—characteristics associated with working-class masculinities—. As Luyt and Foster propose, "gang activity may be seen as an integral facet in the lives of many disempowered males, enabling them to collectively display manly attributes not otherwise available, and thereby reinforcing their status as 'true' men in agreement with hegemonic notions of masculinity" (3).

The myth of the Gangster, as this dissertation terms it, allows the study of how non-hegemonic men assume that—by resorting to crime, violence, hypermasculinity and male bonding—they can thereby assert their masculine self as potentially hegemonic.

Exploring the Gangster, the Soldier and the Self-Made Man in *Peaky Blinders* through Thomas Shelby provides an insight into the cultural myths of masculinity at the turn of the 20th century; each one of these figures will be analysed in the following chapters to trace Thomas’ ideals of masculinity throughout the series. The next chapter is dedicated to the analysis of Thomas Shelby through the myths of masculinity presented beforehand in this project—the Soldier, the Self-Made Man, and the Gangster—to explore the influence it has on the character and his own manipulations of masculine hegemonic narratives.

## 3. The Myths of Thomas Shelby

This chapter centres on and examines Thomas Shelby's masculine hegemonic ideals in the TV series *Peaky Blinders* through the analysis of the myths of the Soldier, the Self-Made Man, and the Gangster—essentially, a mythocritique. These myths will motivate him, as this section attempts to demonstrate, to seek social recognition and masculine validation from upper-class men and fellow Peaky Blinders. This section will also question whether this is plausible, and if Thomas can transcend his class or is, instead, perpetually conditioned by it.

Thomas first appears on scene riding a midnight stallion. The screen indicates "Birmingham 1919". At that time, the city had been struggling to adapt itself to war veterans, Shelby included, who had returned from the front. Since, Thomas is the head of a notorious gang, the Peaky Blinders, a criminal organization in the business of race-fixing, planning on obtaining a legal betting license. Horse-racing will be the first vocation to become a profitable enterprise. Bootlegging, smuggling, political conspiracies, corruption, and drugs will complement Thomas' business deals as the years pass. As Aunt Polly, the family matriarch, tells him, Tommy is "a bookmaker, a robber, a fighting man, you are not a fool" (S1E1, 21:03). Despite not being the eldest son, Tommy eclipses Arthur as leader; his duplicity and cunningness assert him as a patriarchal figure, as "the law around here" (S1E1, 14:07). Here being Small Heath, the inner-city area in Birmingham where the Shelbys grew up. And "nobody in Small Heath craps in a pot without the decree of Tommy Almighty" (S1E5, 03:57). The area represents for Thomas and the Peaky Blinders the space from which to build their business, but also the hole they must crawl out of in order to "enter the palaces of power, only to show that they are as corrupt as the lowest, criminal levels of society, to which they are linked by their shared economic interests" (Pagello 580).

The journey Thomas embarks on—one of social mobility through illegality and manhood acts—displays not only the construction of his masculine identity but also the political and social corruption of power factions. The influence and manipulation of the myths emerge from this dichotomy since "on the one side he is depicted as the main character who comes from a lower class and has ambitions to rule in the area and on the other hand, he must fight the cruel and powerful upper class" (Marzona and Telaumbanua 150). The series seems to be promoting that it is "Thomas Shelby against the whole bloody world" (S1E2, 20:46). Therefore, the study of Thomas Shelby's masculinity is deeply imbedded in his working-class condition and personal ambitions. His experience in the war, his economic aspirations, and criminal schemes give rise to this masculine character with a myriad of layers, which complicate any full understanding of him. He appears as a character capable "de conseguir cualquier objetivo, siempre mostrando una moralidad ambigua y despreciando el yugo o la sublevación a los estamentos e ideologías que […] le pudieran privar su autonomía y libertad" (Freire Sánchez 37).[27]

The socioeconomic freedom and autonomy that Tommy longs for can only be achieved through the engineering of the same social oppressions that have determined him. First, the trauma and masculine military imaginary gave rise to a returned soldier who had "volunteered for war based on socially constructed ideals of masculinity and stories of heroism from previous wars. Their return […] resulted in behaviour that was destructive both to themselves and others" (Larke-Walsh 41). The myth of the Soldier showcases the trauma endured and the masculine repercussions of their choice of going "through hell for our king, [and walking] through the flames of war" (S1E2, 14:14). Second, his working-class upbringing has constrained his social landscape as he "was

[27] "…of achieving any goal, always showing an ambiguous morality and despising the yoke or subjugation to the institutions and ideologies that, according to his own perspective, could deprive him of his autonomy and freedom". My translation.

raised in a family that endured living conditions that would test the morality of even the most virtuous" ("Black Shirt", 52:42). The myth of the Self-Made Man provides Thomas with the entrepreneurial vision to explode onto the commercial scene as a businessman, whose masculine self is invigorated through economic benefits. This meritocratic masculine myth portrays how "disillusioned after the war and finding himself in an environment void of normative authority, Tommy does not believe in ethics, but in capitalism" (Schuhmaier 35). Third and last, ethics have considerable importance in the myth of the Gangster. Crime narratives and masculinities are closely associated in working-class atmospheres (Messerschmidt, 2004). With the imaginary of the Soldier and the Self-Made Man, the Gangster seeks to infiltrate power circles to attain social mobility because "the gangster considers himself above society and its constraining norms of right and wrong" (Schuhmaier 38). The Gangster turns the Self-Made Man's business into the Soldier's war, and vice versa. In the process, Thomas Shelby will become "just a man trying to make an honest living in a very dark world" ("Black Shirt", 17:08).

The analysis of the character and his homosocial relations will demonstrate that his masculinity is one intertwined with hegemonic ideals and competing masculinities. In *The Men and the Boys* (2000), Connell considers masculinity to be conceived as an asset in social structure and not only as the product of personal character. She argues that "meshed with consumer capitalism, hegemonic masculinity appropriates [a man's] body and gives it social definition" (85). *Peaky Blinders* imagines a man who is socially configured to perform a non-hegemonic masculinity in a toxic capitalist environment but who will, in his words, "continue 'till I find a man I can't defeat" ("Mr Jones", 37:43).

### 3.1. Thomas Shelby as the Soldier

The Tommy first encountered by the audience is one who has been profoundly transformed by the war. All that is known about him before that conflict is that "he

laughed, a lot. He wanted to work with horses" (S1E6, 28:22). Moreover, he had been romantically involved with an Italian girl who died from consumption, and "after she died, [Thomas] went to war. […T]he sweet boy who left never came back" ("Blackbird", 38:30). The audience never familiarises itself with this Thomas, rather they meet a traumatised veteran who has interiorised a military discourse into his life. This myth is, perhaps, the most impactful on Tommy's identity because he adopts it reluctantly, even if he is aware that "we fucking volunteered" (S1E3, 33:14). The carnage in the trenches was not the glory and heroism promised by military leaders and war propaganda. Possibly because of his social class, Thomas was given the hardest job as a tunneller.[28] As he explains to Danny Whizz-Bang, a Peaky Blinder and war comrade suffering from severe shellshock, Tommy suffers from insomnia and nightmares due to his violent experiences in the tunnels.[29] He hears shovels in the wall when sleeping. He explains,

> "I lie here and I listen to the shells […]. And I pray the sun will come up at the curtains before they break through. No, I don't pray. I hope. And sometimes it happens. The sun beats them. But mostly, the shovels beat the sun" (S1E3, 33:35-34:15).

This is one of the few instances Thomas openly talks about the consequences of the war on his own person. Tommy reveals himself to be a man who is "already broken" (S1E2, 47:35). On the one hand, there is reluctance to rekindle the trauma "because they haven't invented the fucking words" ("Black Cats", 49:55) to properly narrate it.[30] On the other hand, although the trauma "is shared and often acknowledged, this is nonetheless a cause of embarrassment. This is a milieu in which nobody is willing or able to deal emotionally

[28] Tunnellers in WW1 trench warfare dug underground tunnels to plant explosives beneath enemy lines, aiming to destroy fortifications and create breaches. The work was extremely dangerous, involving the risk of collapse, toxic gas, and enemy counter-mining. For further information, see Barton, Peter, et al. *Beneath Flanders Fields: The Tunnellers' War 1914-18.* McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004.

[29] The tunnel works as a leitmotif, recurrently appearing as Thomas' rhetoric to communicate his emotional toils. Thomas' mental health is buried underground, unable to breath fresh air since he is at war with himself.

[30] This aspect of silence and trauma in *Peaky Blinders* cannot be fully analysed in this MA dissertation. However, it is worth mentioning that Arthur and Thomas display the complex relationship between trauma and silence as a coping mechanism. See Caruth, Cathy. "Parting Words: Trauma, Silence and Survival." *Journal for Cultural Research* 5.1 (2001): 7-29, for a fuller comment and analysis on trauma and silence.

with this legacy" (P. Long 174). The masculine implications of narrating trauma and expressing vulnerability are incompatible with the stoicism and emotional detachment expected from military culture and male performativity. As Higate and Hopton explain, military culture presents "models of masculinity [which] extend beyond the military and tend to shape hegemonic ideologies of what it is to be a man" (443). As a result, Thomas earns "a reputation for not being scared of anything" (S2E1, 12:01); not even of death itself. Furthermore, his reputation as a soldier has also earned him the respect of recognised figures of state such as a (fictionalised) Winston Churchill.

In Season 2, Inspector Campbell meets with Churchill to discuss Shelby's role in their political plans against the Irish Republican Army (IRA). An antagonist to Thomas already in Season 1, Campbell expresses that "Shelby is a murdering, cutthroat mongrel gangster". Churchill's response is, "And yet, the tunnels were dug beneath out feet to silence the guns pointed at our heads" (S2E2, 30:18-35). Campbell is regarded with disdain by war veterans because of his cowardice in not serving in the war. In this respect, Thomas presents more hegemonically than Campbell who "is not a veteran and is therefore suspect in terms of loyalty, bravery and masculine identity. […H]is violent behaviour is a desperate assertion of masculinity" (Larke-Walsh 45). Through a soldier's discourse, Thomas earns the respect of higher-ranking men that even the Chief Inspector of the British police cannot achieve. The myth of the Soldier does not only characterise the male individual, but it also creates homosocial bonds. It should be noticed that Thomas threw his gallantry medals into the Cut, the canal running through Small Heath. This could imply that Thomas does not fully trust war narratives and heroic sacrifice.

Nonetheless, war comradeship infiltrates the Peaky Blinders. In establishing male-bonds in military ritualism, "the Shelbys maintain a brotherhood of mates born in the trenches, protecting each other long after the war has ended" (Taddeo 183). In the Season

1 finale, Tommy and the Blinders are about to confront Billy Kimber, an English gangster who controls the racing tracks the Blinders are interested in. Before the confrontation, Thomas makes a speech to a few comrades, expressing how Kimber’s men “are gonna try and break us up for good. […] That pub there is called the Garrison. Well, now it really is one. And it belongs to us. […W]hen a Shelby man dies here today, you bury us side by side” (S1E6, 30:35-31:27). The masculine bonds established in the trenches find room in Small Heath to incorporate Thomas’ gangster plans to protect the community from the villain. As Helen B. McCartney states, “for many soldiers the protection of home and family remained a powerful motivating force […], helping to justify sacrifice rather than encouraging interpretation of deaths as tragic waste” (302-3). The male community is reinforced through the existence of a common enemy, a threatening form of a more dominant masculinity. Hence, they define themselves as a community when in contrast with an opposing male pack. If a Peaky Blinder dies, it will be to protect another Blinder.

Yet, comradeship has its limitations in the series. Larke-Walsh stresses that Thomas “clings to the comradeship and regularities of military life in order to maintain his position as the leader of men. Tommy is stuck in nostalgia for imperial masculinity, and it is his actions that continue the trauma for everyone else” (54). This is the case with Arthur, who suffers from Flanders Blues, another term for PTSD. Unlike Thomas, who “can fucking be scared and carry on. And it’s not pleasant to look at and no joy to be around” (S3E1, 11:58), Arthur relies on drugs, illegal fighting, and sex to cope with trauma. Thomas benefits from Arthur’s instability to cope by exploiting his violence. Polly, for instance, accuses him of not allowing Arthur to heal in the selfish pretext that “every boss has to have a mad dog at this side. Somebody who can’t be predicted, mad in the head. But Thomas Shelby uses his own brother” (S2E1, 53:26). Moreover, while Thomas channels his trauma in his business ambitions, Arthur’s “head’s like a fucking

boat, Tommy. […] It's like my fucking head's just like this big fucking barge. And it just fucking drifts in and out, in and out…" (S2E2, 36:19-37:06). Unable to show emotional intelligence at his brother's suicide attempt, Thomas responds with,

> I have fucking had enough. Just fuck off! Supposed to treat you like a fucking kid again, eh? […] You think I haven't got enough going on? The war is done. Shut the door on it. Shut the door on it like I did! (S2E2, 37:41-38:12).

This short but revealing interaction points to the lack of emotional responsibility in male relations. Simply put, men have not been taught to care for one another healthily (Connell, 1995; Kimmel, 1996). In this scene, Arthur is displaying unmanly qualities, incompatible with the 'pure' masculinity Thomas aspires to. Segal, from whom I take the term 'pure masculinity', maintains that this masculinity, essentially seen as hegemonic, exists

> in relation to what is defined as its opposite. […] No one can be 'that male' without constantly doing violence to many of the most basic human attributes: the capacity for sensitivity to oneself and others, for tenderness and empathy, the reality of fear and weakness […]. So while the 'feminine' may be dispatched in the insouciant bravado of masculine endeavour, it will always return to haunt the conquering hero (114).

While Thomas supposedly "does what he does for [his family]" (S1E6, 04:02), he has turned his own brother into an obliging soldier, further straining their relationship in which neither men can completely heal. Something similar happens with John, the third brother. After the death of Grace, Thomas' wife in Season 3, Tommy gives orders to John and Arthur on the procedures to avenge her death. John complains about the lack of information regarding the plans: "You don't tell us shit. We're a couple of fucking toy soldiers" (S3E3, 07:16). Arthur supports John's complain, commenting that "in the old days, […] family meetings used to be all of us together. Now, me and John, we're just fucking bin men whose duty it is to obey" (ibid., 09:29-49). Consequently, Thomas' establishes in his own army hierarchical bonds that simulate the subordination of masculinities to the hegemonic. This is what can be expected from '*protest* masculinities' that compensate their lack of power by performing as hypermasculine and overpreforming hegemonic patterns (Messerschmidt and Messner, 2018; Tomsen and

Messerschmidt, 2024). Thomas, therefore, brings the soldier and the army to the homeland. Apparently, and as his family wonders, “Is it another war you’re looking for, Tommy?” (S1E1, 46:39).

As I have proposed, Thomas has learnt to incorporate the myth into his entrepreneurial and gangster strategies, to the extent of even bringing war to his doorstep. Early in Season 1, Thomas explains that in the war, “I learnt some things, such as, you strike when your enemy is weak” (S1E2, 28:06). This perspective perseveres in Season 3. In a family meeting, the Shelbys discuss how to approach a confrontation with an enemy gang. Arthur and Polly want to compromise, while John and Thomas want a war. According to Thomas’ arguments,

> The only way to guarantee peace is by making the prospect of war seem hopeless. If you apologise once, you do it again and again and again. Like taking bricks out of the wall of your fucking house. […] If you’re soft on rebellion, it’ll grow. […] Now, we go on the offensive. […] Because we fucking can and if we can, we do. And if we lift our heel off their necks now, they’ll just come at us. You’re getting soft, Brother. Soft and weak” (S3E2, 28:53-29:50).

This line of thought, hypermasculine and warmongering, will get his wife killed by the end of the episode, and his brother John killed by the beginning of the next season. Resorting to war discourses and strategies highlight the fact that Tommy “continue[s] to perform as trained. As circumstances shift and the environment changes the relentless soldier marches on, devising ways to defeat his opponent. The traumatic stress encountered becomes an asset” (Mueller 44). Shelby discovers in the Soldier a provider of homosocial bonds, of coping mechanisms, and above all, a masculine referent that aligns with social climbing in male spheres. Defeating the enemy instead of compromising reflects the anxiety of protest masculinities to consolidate a more dominant form of action and behaviour.

Thomas Mueller observes that "the cold stoicism and alienation from emotion indicate a greater level of PTSD and hypermasculine behaviors" (Mueller 41). A hypermasculine environment permeates the fourth season of the series more than the rest, especially because of the physical and warlike confrontation between the Blinders and Luca Changretta, an Italian American gangster who returns to avenge his father's death at the hands of the Blinders. The gang war that ensues is a struggle for who is stronger, Shelby or Changretta.[31] Whoever wins will demonstrate their leadership capabilities, masculine toughness, and abilities as a war strategist. As Connell notes, "military prowess in many parts of the world is part of the definition of hegemonic masculinity" (*The Men and the Boys* 62). Generalising, Thomas' struggles as a warrior and soldier are to constantly overcome the men who could be closer than him to a hegemonic masculinity, if not, "loosing occasionally makes [him] worse" ("Dangerous", 42:41). The reward, nonetheless, will be being "haunted by the sheer impossibility of actualising the myth in a manner free from deception and pretence" (Segal 114). May Carleton, Thomas' lover for a brief period, points out his emotional detachment and unwavering masculinity, "You've lost your wife… And now your brother, too. I thought it would make you different. But it doesn't seem to change you. Nothing seems to change you" ("Dangerous", 23:15-30). The myth buries itself in Shelby because the man we are "waiting for doesn't exist" ("Dangerous", 33:41). A healthy version of Thomas seems unlikely because he does not have the disposition to choose a positive engaging masculinity. He incessantly opts for one which conceals the pain and rejects vulnerability.

[31] Thomas has a different enemy in every season who challenges a distinct characteristic of his masculinity. Season 1 has Billy Kimber, who challenges his potential as a businessman and gangster. Inspector Campbell in Seasons 1 and 2 considers him *persona non grata* for his delinquency. Father Hughes in Season 3 questions his morality and intelligence. Luca Changretta poses an obstacle as a gangster and solider in Season 4. In Seasons 5 and 6, Oswald Mosley challenges his political abilities. These two last seasons also see Michael Gray challenging Thomas' leadership abilities in the Peaky Blinders. In this way, every season sees Thomas deposing male enemies who represent his limitations.

In Season 5, the Soldier is vastly less present than in the previous seasons as the Self-Made Man leads Thomas. However, the events in Season 6 demonstrate the effects of the Soldier in Thomas. After the death of his daughter, Ruby, Thomas realises the interiorisation of the Soldier's narrative and its far-reaching implications in his male behaviour as a leader, businessman, and father. To Arthur, he expresses, "I thought I could just march and march. I just kept up that fucking left-right, left-right, left-right fucking rhythm. I'd never have to stop. Then Ruby went… and I stumbled and crashed. Now here I am, sat on my arse, on the ground, like a fucking tunneller" ("Sapphire", 22:12-50). Masculine expressions of loss and grief are few and far in *Peaky Blinders,* particularly from Thomas. These expressions, regarded as canonically feminine (Segal, 1990; hooks, 2004; Connell, 2005), disrupt his masculine strength and soldier-like presence within the Blinders. As Arxer states, "Emotionality is understood to represent a loss of self-control and a sign of weakness. In this way, emotional detachment is a strategy for constructing masculinity through displays of strength" (404). As much as Thomas clings to the Soldier, it cannot keep him emotionally detached after such a great loss. Moreover, his military masculinity does not give him the ability to deal with loss healthily. In fact, he has "said very few true words since" ("The Duel", 48:33). Being back in the tunnel, the origin of his deepest traumas makes it "evident that Tommy's war is buried inside him and he displays the fewest 'weaknesses' in daily life" (Larke-Walsh 48).

For Thomas, masculine expressions of weaknesses are limitations, obstacles that impede his acquisition of an aspirational hegemonic masculinity. In his limitation, the Soldier offers him stereotypical patriarchal tools necessary in the male world of the 1920s to fulfil the "masculine pretense […] that real men feel no pain" (hooks 20). Notwithstanding this, Shelby unintentionally demonstrates that "there would always be some men left behind, unable to 'shut the door' on their physical and emotional traumas

and return to work and their families with ease" (Taddeo, 177). Nevertheless, Tommy does return to work, as determined, as successful, and as unlimited as the myth of the Self-Made Man will allow him to.

### 3.2. Thomas Shelby as the Self-Made Man

The journey undergone both in *Peaky Blinders* and by Thomas is about overcoming limitations: not being limited by war, by class, or by public order. In most of the series, Shelby overcomes limitations through the purchasing power granted by the myth of the Self-Made Man, especially since "the war has made him even more aware of his class" (Taddeo 180). The theme of class frames Shelby's narrative. I would argue that the driving force in Tommy's life is the quest to transcend it. The series unfolds because of Tommy's ambitions to be economically self-sufficient, socially respected, and politically protected. The premise of the series, consequently, concerns Tommy's decision "to move up in the world. [To b]ecome a legitimate businessman" (S1E3, 45:42). Embracing the myth of the Self-Made Man will not only expose corrupt political factions, dominant in Britain, but will also reveal the class essentialism[32] that Tommy wants to challenge through his masculine self, even if "to be respectable you have to be limited" (S1E4, 42:48).

In *Peaky Blinders,* the basic capitalist act of buying and selling assets and goods is eclipsed by the selling of the Self both to capitalist and patriarchal markets. A remarkable quotation from the series, spoken by Thomas to Grace in Season 1, is "Everyone's a whore, Grace, we just sell different parts of ourselves" (S1E3, 49:20). Admittedly, Shelby semiconsciously auctions his identity and future to power structures while he selfishly demands from Grace to prostitute herself for his business agenda. The

[32] Class essentialism, or social determinism, mimics biological essentialism. There is a process of hierarchical categorisation that bounds individuals to class, measuring the relation as unescapable and biologically induced. It determines that someone's class can be scientifically proven and justified by searching commonalities, specificities, and patterns between members of a class. (Tomsen and Messerschmidt, 2024).

implications are definitely not the same and this project recognises this contestation. However, I consider essential to examine the vision Tommy has of the pre-neoliberal world he inhabits. Evidently, "regardless of his self-justification, Shelby internalized the logic of capitalism so well that every action he takes is carefully calculated and always leads to a profitable bottom line" (A. Long 57). Selling himself to the narrative should culminate with his full integration into the normative culture.

hooks proposes that a "male worker struggles to provide economically for himself. And if he is providing for self and family, his struggle is all the more rigorous and the fear of failure all the more intense" (90). Fear of failure pushes Thomas, just as the Soldier does, to work relentlessly to acquire an institutionally accepted hegemonic masculine status; that is, to parallel and even best the men he confronts season after season who are more recognised in the *status quo*. Failing does not align with hegemonic expectations of masculinity because it is regarded as feminine and queer (Catano, 2001). Furthermore, individualization, characteristic of capitalist self-making, is key in the aspiration for a hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995). Additionally, Connell and hooks align with Catano's contribution that an individual development indicates a successful and independent male identity. Failing in masculine endeavours limits the aspiration, which is something that Thomas cannot afford.

For instance, in Season 2, Tommy is being targeted by Campbell and the IRA. At a complicated moment for him, he decides to clear his mind by cleaning the stables. Curly, the stable hand, asks him why he is dirtying his hands. Thomas responds that the task is "to remind myself of what I'd be if I wasn't who I am. […] It's honest work […], but I don't want to get used to it" (S2E5, 29:48-30:40). The image of the businessman is associated with ruling understandings of masculinity, not with manual labour. Individualising himself from the rest of the Blinders indicates Thomas "believes in the

authority of the individual through freedom of choice in all matters" (Larke-Walsh 48). Consequently, Shelby establishes his own hegemony of men within the Blinders in a smaller scale. Intellectual work befits Thomas because "that's the way of the world" (S1E1, 46:07). In his male self-making, Shelby turns gang and family into homosocial accessories, becoming "part and extension of hegemony, thus serving to always reconstruct and safeguard male interests and power" (Hammarén and Johansson 7).

Connell maintains that "for many working-class people 'the family' is the core of what they most value in life" (*The Men and the Boys* 107). By contrast, hooks highlights the assumption in Western patriarchal cultures that professional success does not correspond with the formation of emotional connections, meaningful enough to endure. In Season 3, Tommy experiences both. The government tasks him to act as the link with exiled aristocratic Russians, the first time the Shelbys interact with the upper classes. From the beginning, Tommy does not trust the Russians because "for them, family is a weakness, and they go after them. For me, family is my strength. And there's business to be done" (S3E1, 23:42). Thomas does not (or is unable to) distinguish between family and business and "exploits a culturally conservative idealised conception of the community of the family, which thereby becomes a farce" (Schuhmaier 40). Family gives way to business because the meritocratic myth makes business prosper, not family. Consequently, it is a challenge to determine whether Tommy is consciously defending his economic or his family interests when his focus is on manipulating male ideals, although he is also conditioned by them. Both situations exist in and around him.

The capitalist market invests in the production of masculinities that continually struggle to qualify for the rhetoric of male hegemony and meritocracy (Catano, 2001). As a result, Thomas' ambitions strain his relationship with the Shelbys and Grace, who knows that "there is business on your mind. And I know there always will be" (S3E1,

10:55). After her death, Thomas channels his grief into his business; once again demonstrating his lack of emotional intelligence and healthy coping strategies. The family becomes victim of a man who, on the one hand, supposedly seeks to protect them, and on the other, who falls "back upon those same traditional notions of manhood—physical strength, self-control, power—[…], as if the solution to [his] problem were simply 'more' masculinity" (Kimmel, *Manhood in America* 218). For this reason, by the end of Season 3, the family, as expected, breaks down. Thomas has overworked them in his self-making. The Self-Made Man has individualised him to such a degree that the family cannot attain collectively. The final scene of the season depicts this idea in Thomas' office in his recently bought mansion, with him at his desk and the rest expecting further instructions. The only remuneration Thomas can give them for their loyalty is economic; he simply cannot offer affection. Such is the product of neoliberal self-making: a masculine stoic unable to emotionally connect with others, perpetually and selfishly focused on business and financial profit. Nonetheless, Thomas angrily realises the lengths he has gone to in order to comply with hegemonic narratives. In his final speech, he says to the family,

> This is who I am! And [money] is all I can give you for what you give me. Your heart, and your souls. […] And I know you all want me to say that I'll change. That this fucking business will change. But I've learnt something in the last few days. Those bastards […] are worse than us. […] And they will never admit us to their palaces no matter how legitimate we become. […] Because of who we fucking are, because of where we're fucking from. […] You have to get what you want your own way. […Y]ou took the king's fucking shilling. When you take the king's shilling, the king expects you to kill (S3E6, 48:48-50:35).

This speech presents clear evidence to Shelby's self-making.[33] First, it showcases the unwanted limits Thomas faces. He "gradually realize[s] throughout [his] rise in society that many preconceived notions about class transcendence and social mobility were incorrect, and, therefore, many of their efforts are futile" (A. Long 61). The myths of

[33] This could be also analysed in reference to the myth of the Soldier. The king's shilling is, of course, an expression referring to men enlisting for war. Thomas' use of war rhetoric testifies to the influence of the Soldier on his identity. However, in this instance, I am focusing primarily on the Self-Made Man.

social mobility and self-making do not assure him a place in the hegemony, because it is purely aspirational, and those closer to it will not share their privileges willingly.

Second, it indicates the position in which Tommy stands in respect to his relatives. That is, Shelby is king of the Peaky Blinders, and “as [he] approaches a king-like status, he distances himself from his community” (A. Long 58). Homosocial bonds stretch and tauten, and the masculine homosocial hierarchy is reinforced with Tommy as a figure of absolute power. It is admitted later in the series that “without him they’ll take us all” (“Heathens”, 24:38). It is Thomas who binds the Shelbys and Blinders together. For this reason, he demands allegiance and loyalty from his family, business partners, and soldiers. He enforces his aspirations on those at his command.

Third and last, it touches on the issue of social determinism. Thomas seems to be acknowledging they are condemned by their class. His efforts will not award him a respectable position, figuratively speaking, since his “desire to be both ‘respectable’ and ‘legitimate’ is a fantasy, not only because the family is ‘other’ due to their lower-class origins but also because ‘respectability’ and ‘legitimacy’ are fallacies to begin with” (A. Long 47). These fallacies, I argue, deceive working-class individuals, particularly men, into accepting that only those who sacrifice their integrity and identity for the myth of self-making are allowed and worthy of higher-class positions, scorning the working classes. As typical of a protest masculinity, Thomas “embodies the claim to power typical of regional hegemonic masculinities in Western countries, but which lacks the economic resources and institutional authority that underpins the regional and global patterns” (Connell and Messerschmidt 848). This topic is recurrently debated in Season 4. Established now as a proud businessman, Thomas has become the undisputed leader of Birmingham. His situation is, as a result, considerably different from the earlier seasons.

Nonetheless, he is questioned by Jesse Eden, a union leader at one of Thomas' factories.[34] In their meetings, Eden accuses him of deliberately enforcing on his workers the same hardships he had faced. Eden demands higher wages for working mothers to buy shoes for their children. Tommy's response underlines his belief in the value of hardship:

> TS: Never had shoes meself.
> JE: So now you deny others?
> TS: And barefoot I grew up mean ("The Noose", 22:06-12).

Thomas is acutely aware of others' considerations of his social climbing, the persona he has built for his public. Yet, "he is still the anti-hero pulling himself up by his bootstraps […] from the shipping yards and gambling houses" (A. Long 64). His past is necessary for the creation of the Self-Made Man, preparing the ground from which to emerge. His humble background can and does define his masculinity. As the myth takes root, Shelby defies his past, turning his "corporate body into an individualistic masculinity rooted in power and dominance" (Catano 131). Most importantly, self-making implies that, as Thomas reflects, "I'm not a traitor to my class. […] I'm just an extreme example of what a working man can achieve" ("Dangerous", 35:28-55). Society is a ladder that cannot actually be climbed. The class system deludes individuals into trusting the ladder is real. As Alfie Solomons reminds him, "your class […] you cannot wash it out, because it come out of your mother's tits" (ibid., 50:43). It is a constant struggle for Thomas, then, to surpass the limits and realities of his class. They are not only limits, but anchors pulling him backwards, making him a marionette for the state and enemies.

Shelby is incrusted into his subordinate protest hegemony, as he has learnt that "no amount of money allows [him] to pass through the steel sheets that separate class from class" ("The Duel", 49:19). Consequently, exploiting capitalist ideals shapes his

[34] Thomas' relationship with women is a theme unexplored in this project. He does not abuse any women in the series, and he has respect and love for them. It does not imply, yet, that he considers them equal, but instead regards them as inferior and subordinate to him. This is stereotypical of hegemonic masculinity.

masculinity as potentially hegemonic but the only true outcome is "a response to powerlessness, a claim to the gendered position of power, a pressured exaggeration […] of masculine conventions" (Connell, *Masculinities* 111). Thomas expresses his powerlessness through the adoption of unrealistic gendered practices. His masculine identity will never be enough to fill Howson's empty signifier. He will always be lacking.

But nothing deters Thomas Shelby. And by Season 5 Thomas's ambitions are no longer just entrepreneurial but also political. In fact, the myth of the Self-Made Man intensifies when it reaches governmental spheres, where, as a Member of Parliament, he will "have a stage to stand on, millions of people will listen to you, and you will run the country like you run this family" ("Mr Jones", 39:32). The 1929 Wall Street Crash, however, harms his business deals and the rise of fascism infiltrates political activity. In this new conflict, Thomas must enforce his self-induced masculinity over those who wait for his downfall. Schuhmaier maintains that his "endeavours are doomed to fail because the system that simultaneously refuses and attracts him lacks the normative authority it invokes […]. His quest for success is therefore predestined to remain incessant, the very idea of success becoming a quimera" (Schuhmaier 38). The last two seasons show Thomas haunted by the idea of losing all that he has attained but nonetheless ambitious for more, because he is "not God. Not yet" ("Black Tuesday", 53:30-35). The struggle to become absolute turns into the struggle to withstand. His pseudo-hegemonic masculinity will be contested by other men. He predicts as much, for "when I sleep, I dream. And in my dream, someone wants my crown" ("Black Cats", 16:02).

Hegemonies are not fixed structures. They evolve depending on the necessities of the dominant ruling class, which determines the cultural norms of a determined period (Connell, 1995). Thomas is not immune to this succession of hegemonies and must update his masculine identity accordingly. Oswald Mosley, a fascist politician and Thomas' most

implacable enemy, represents the epitome of hegemonic masculinity, embodying the "most honored way of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 832). 'Honoured' should not be confused with 'noble'. The word means "ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion" (ibid.). When Thomas and Mosley meet, it becomes evident that Thomas appears to be in an inferior position. In one of their earliest scenes, Thomas questions Mosley in his new political inclinations,

> TS: My sister advised against meeting you because it appears you are moving away from the party… in a different direction [fascism].
>
> OM: "We are the people and we have had enough." I thought [Thomas' speech] was excellent. In which direction are you heading, Mr Shelby?
>
> TS: I am my own revolution ("Black Cats", 00:25:56-00:26:23).

There is a power game being played in this scene. There is recognition between the two. Mosley acknowledges the new male order that Thomas is plotting, while Shelby examines and tests the male authority he is attempting to defeat. Shelby is, in fact, seeking to restructure male power to benefit his working-class self-making. Interestingly, he perceives danger in Mosley's fascist interests. Correspondingly, defeating the evil embodied by Mosley will become Shelby's moral goal because "somebody should stop him. […] You're doing it because you think is the right thing to do. All this time, you just did things that feel nice because you can afford it" ("The Shock", 17:15-30). As a result, Thomas' Self-Made Man involves moral tangents, complicating the agenda he had previously planned. Thomas, therefore, slightly displays "more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man" (Connell and Messerschmidt 833) than Mosley. Regrettably, his plans of assassinating Mosley get members of the Blinders killed. These deaths, as a leader in the IRA who prevented Mosley's murder reminds him, are his "responsibility, because you constantly fail to understand your own limitations" ("Black Day", 05:25).

Unwilling to accept these limitations, Thomas must confront the consequences of his ambitions. First, homosocial implications of the myth can be traced to Michael, who

can be argued to be “a Tommy-in-training” (A. Long 62). Michael, Polly’s son, inherits Tommy’s business persona, or at least aspires to approach it. Hegemonic masculinity becomes a production line of men who are inspired by and follow men who are more hegemonic than them and test their subordinate masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). In a turn of events, the threat to Thomas’ crown comes from inside the family. It is Michael who plots to replace Thomas as head of the Shelby family in the final seasons. He can contribute a fresh and younger perspective to the business because new industries “don’t want to deal with an old-fashioned backstreet razor gang. Those days are over” (“Mr Jones”, 14:48). Tommy’s days do indeed seem to be over; this is simply “a natural succession that someday must happen” (ibid., 15:55). Their confrontation implies a contestation of masculinities, especially after Polly is murdered. Furious at Thomas’ role in her murder, Michael seeks retribution, because “when my mother died, at the hand of [Tommy’s] ambitions, you didn’t learn your limitations” (“Black Day”, 53:08). Thomas has unintentionally fostered a contesting masculinity in Michael, who can use Thomas’ weaknesses against him. Hence, both shall use the aggressive competitiveness of the Self-Made Man for a promotion in the masculine hierarchy.

Masculine contestations occur in homosocial spaces, where their male self-conceptualisation can be proven (Bird, 1996). By contrast, collaboration between men suggests an unmanly effeminate approach to gender hegemonic practices (Catano, 2001). Therefore, it is conventionally expected from Michael and Thomas to compete against each other instead of practicing solidary male behaviours (Catano, 2001). Their conflict demonstrates the separation and alienation of male agencies in neoliberal systems. Catano explains in his work that “the rhetoric of solidarity and mutuality threatens to unveil anxieties in masculinity that are written up as a set of naturally opposing pairs—[…] solidarity and mutuality or dependency and intimacy—and a lurking feminization that

lies at the heart of all these oppositions” (91). This argument leads to the second consequence of Thomas’ actions, his extreme independence but unquenchable loneliness.

In Season 6, Thomas is given a false diagnosis to make him believe he is dying. Orchestrated by Mosley, Shelby must face the ultimate limitation, death. Even if he has “defeated many enemies […]. Now you have a new one. Inside you. You cannot defeat it” (“Sapphire”, 54:30). Added to Michael’s betrayal, Ruby’s unexpected death reveals to Tommy his emotional void and lack of affability. His hegemonic male desire, focused on economic gains, disclose to him that money, as he asserts, “will be my legacy. Instead of me, there will be money. Because for most of the people who are close to me, that is what I am! Fucking money. That is my agency” (“Lock and Key”, 12:43-58). The Self-Made Man is a solitary and emotionally detached endeavour. Homosocial and heterosocial encounters in *Peaky Blinders* are exploited by Thomas instead of harvested. As a result, his sense of self and identity are entirely consumed by the myth of self-making, which ultimately fails to foster meaningful connections or emotional fulfilment.

Consequently, he is “never to understand the limits that other people will accept. Never to be allowed in where everybody else is. A curse never to be lifted” (“Lock and Key”, 04:00-18). His search for a self-made subjectivity has influenced him to sell his identity to patriarchal capitalist discourses. These have damaged his ties with his family despite having apparently ascended a treacherous social ladder. In a final meeting with Churchill, Shelby is congratulated for being a man who has lived in “a tent, then a boat, then a house, now a mansion. That’s something, isn’t it?” (“Mr Jones”, 04:53). Shelby has demonstrated to the highest figure of power in the series that he has the aptitude to perform more hegemonically than those already privileged. To threaten Thomas, “a man needs to prove he is better than me rather than show me his birth certificate” (ibid., 01:10). He does not require a title since he has the passion and dedication for a masculine

transformation. For Churchill, Shelby is a depiction of a successful industrious individual. Nonetheless, men "'who get the job done' under extreme circumstances are contemporary re-workings of traditional myths of male heroism" (Larke-Walsh 46). This is clearly not Thomas' case because neither heroism nor self-making will fill the mansion that is now emptier than ever. Heroism does not, in any case, correspond with the myth of the Gangster, who resorts to unethical and immoral acts to exceed the limitations Tommy so despises. The Gangster will smash the Self-Made Man's mansion into pieces.

### 3.3. Thomas Shelby as the Gangster

Crime and violence are at the core of *Peaky Blinders.* Thomas Shelby is a crime lord, to whom illegal means and violent behaviour are tools by which to achieve social mobility. The Self-Made Man and the Soldier are not status enough to accomplish a normative masculinity; their means are too licit. With the Gangster, crime and violence are not only key, but they also imply a lack of moral and ethical code that rejects dominant social expectations. Thomas, for instance, is a man who has "no sympathies of any description" (S1E3, 05:17); his interests lie in his own success and protection. In addition, whereas the Self-Made Man works endlessly to become hegemonic, the Gangster's goal is to get close to the upper classes and infiltrate their ranks as one of them. Thomas "sees crime as the path to social mobility and in the end, legitimacy" (Smith 285). Nonetheless, he acknowledges his legitimacy is a product of corruption and illegal scheming and not one of honest legal work. Tommy admits to Michael, who wants to join the Peaky Blinders in Season 2, that Michael is too "young, so you think what we do is all right. It's not all right. People get hurt" (S2E4, 13:26).

James W. Messerschmidt, a leading specialist on masculinities and crime, argues that "crime itself is a means or social resource/practice to construct masculinity" (Tomsen and Messerschmidt 59). The application of violence reasserts to the rest of the population

the subject's masculine properties, especially in a protest masculine setting. Crime allows Thomas to reassure himself of his dominant maleness in a subordinate masculinity. Correspondingly, if he "can't be Number One, [he has] decided to be Number Two—with a bullet" (Kimmel, *Manhood in America* 218). Thomas constructs his masculine identity by imposing his gangster persona on others. The performance as a Self-Made Man is possible because Thomas has the character and appearance to present himself as such. In fact, Thomas does not "pay for the suits. [His] suits are on the house or the house burns down" (S1E3, 01:13). The threat of violence and danger prompts respect and obedience from other subjects. On this topic, Schrock and Schwalbe argue that "a masculine self can be signified, and deference elicited, by evoking fear in others" (283). In the most drastic of occasions, Tommy believes that killing is "the only way to make people listen" ("Mr Jones", 39:18), and the only way to assure his social ascension. The threat to his own masculinity must be extinguished through force, domination, and the elimination of other contestants. Therefore, fear is essential in the construction of hegemonic masculinities. In other words, it is the fear of losing it that makes men refuse non-patriarchal discourses. hooks notes that this "refusal is rooted in the fear that their weakness will be exposed. They fear acknowledging the depths of their pain. As their pain intensifies, so does their need to do violence, to coercively dominate and abuse others" (128). As a result, Tommy is as vulnerable to violence and fear as those whom he threatens.

In addition, the fear he inflicts in other simulates the fear a male individual feels at having his masculinity and power contested (Connell, 1995). This fear is notably related with emasculation and feminisation; of being considered less of a man than others due to his social station. This anxiety constitutes many of the decisions Thomas makes, because "the flight from femininity […] is relentless; [and] manhood becomes a lifelong quest to demonstrate its achievement, as if to prove the unprovable to others, because

[men] feel so unsure of it" (Kimmel, "Masculinity as Homophobia" 127). Hence, violence as a reaction to this fear can be inflicted on him or, as it often occurs in the series, on others. In Season 3, Tommy violently confronts Alfie, who Thomas considered to be an ally, for his participation in the abduction of his son, Charles. Alfie's answer highlights the ambivalence of fear and violence in fragile masculine egos:

> I want him to acknowledge that his anger is un-fucking-justified! I want him to acknowledge that he who fights by the sword, he fucking dies by it […]. How many fathers, right, how many sons, yeah, have you cut, killed, murdered, fucking butchered, innocent and guilty, to send straight to fucking hell, ain't ya? Just like me! You fucking stand there, you judging me, stand there and talk to me about crossing some fucking line. If you pull that trigger, right, you pull that trigger for a fucking honourable reason. Like an honourable man, not like some fucking civilian that does not understand the wicked way of our world (S3E6, 22:19-23:21).

Violence is not natural behaviour, but is a conduct inherited from and encouraged by masculinised patriarchal institutions, such as the military (Connell, 2000). Thomas and the Blinders behave violently because it is expected from them as soldiers, not as civilians. These institutions do not appreciate illegality and criminality as a product of the lower-classes and ethnic minorities.

By contrast, the Gangster in Tommy embraces the crime for its social advantages. Those who enforce delinquency deem illegality as consistent with their (class) identity and as potentially rewarding (Thomas and O'Neill, 2024). Thomas accepts the corrupt and criminal path that the upper classes and politicians resort to, but wish to keep undisclosed to the public. Those who achieve power through lawful means should not be regarded with reverence because "'lawful' means might be as unjustifiable in the shark tank that is modern capitalism" (Schuhmaier 38). In his opinion, if he were to do good, he would be "laying off a thousand men, which I do like a good businessman. […] And people go hungry. And the bad, the bad is fucking winning the horse and a gun and some fucking self-respect" ("Dangerous", 39:25). As a gangster, Thomas is fiercely anti-establishment, pushing the boundaries of respectability and honour in normative

masculine narratives. Polly, Thomas’ right hand, reminds the family that “it is Tommy that has brought strength and power to this family. ‘Cause he knows. You have to be as bad as them above in order to survive” (S1E6, 14:42). While the Self-Made Man’s individualisation drives the family apart, it is paradoxically the Gangster’s malevolence that draws them closer together.

The gang promotes the station of all its members, not only Thomas’. This form of community is “considered as a social grouping that promotes hegemonic masculinity traits” (Nurlaila 27). Despite inflicting fear on the rest of the community, the Blinders offer a resemblance of protection and security in front of the police. Just before the confrontation with Billy Kimber in Season 1, the bartender in the Garrison expresses to Tommy that “Everybody round here… They want you to win this battle. I think what it is, you’re bad men but you’re our bad men” (S1E6, 33:10). The bond formed between members of the same class, as these words indicate, acknowledges that homosociality not only supports toxic masculine traits that “result in emotional repression or the internal exclusion of men[, but also] emotionality reinforces group solidarity and becomes a constitutive feature of hegemonic masculinity” (Arxer 406). It could be argued that homosociality does not simply promote toxic ideals but provides new traits to a standard masculinity. Heroism and egoism are briefly erased from the Peaky Blinders’ narrative.

The Self-Made Man requires a clinical and logic behaviour that can assimilate to social and gender rules (Catano, 2001). The Gangster, nevertheless, is slightly freer to navigate normative narratives of heroism and male bonding. Yet, this is very dangerous for Thomas Shelby, who does not accept limitations or expectations. For instance, he explains to Father Hughes, his main rival in Season 3, that “those I can’t charm, I can kill with my own hands. You learn it when you have a dog on a boat. They go fucking mad in tunnels. I feel like I’m in a tunnel now. You know that feeling, where you have to kill or

be killed?” (S3E2, 43:14-36) When the Self-Made Man or the Soldier are not enough, Thomas resorts to the Gangster to surmount obstacles and other masculinities. The Gangster is not as dominantly masculine as the other two myths, but it can suddenly appear to push Thomas forward. Most of his rivals (Campbell, Kimber, Father Hughes, Changretta, and Michael) die at the hands of the Gangster and his thugs. Tatiana, one of Thomas’ lovers, points to the unpredictability of the Gangster. She reveals to him that,

> There are no rules for you, hm? […] You have power. Everyone does what you tell them to do. Your brothers, your soldiers, no one can stop you. […] If you don’t like something, you say stop, and it stops. But you’re afraid of it. You break the law, but you obey the rules. Why? Did you know that madness sets you free? Otherwise, we’re just peasants obeying the law. There is madness inside your head, too (S3E4, 21:52-22:40).

Thomas’ masculine identity is unreliable because he bends social cues to his will. He breaks most public laws but obeys most of the social and cultural rules. For this reason, “Shelby maintains many gangster tropes but is not simply a ‘bad guy’” (A. Long 59). He does not kill viciously, even if most of his actions lead to violent deaths. Thomas’ infiltration in Mosley’s fascist party demonstrates that, despite his criminal wrongdoings, he is not simply nurturing a toxic maniac masculinity. In fact, his masculinity remains “unresolved in everything! [He has] to move between left and right, light and shade, and maintain the trust of both” (“Black Shirt”, 38:12). This division inside Thomas, who is aware of his use of violence not for the sake of violence but for a social purpose—despite critics thinking otherwise (Larke-Walsh, 2019, Nurlaila, 2022)—is depicted by the end of Season 5. Thomas is distressed because of his failure to assassinate Mosley and of getting Blinders killed. When he returns home, he flees to a field, where he collapses in the mud after pulling the trigger of an unloaded gun. After he gets up, we encounter a Thomas Shelby with half of his face caked in mud, while the other remains clean and white (“Mr Jones”, 1:02:30-1:03:26 - “Black Day” 00:00-03:10). The struggle within Thomas is no longer social, but identitarian. His narcissistic disposition has brought death and irrevocable pain to his family, although these are always willing to forgive him. His crisis

leads him to even consider suicide. The madness is not only against others, but mostly against himself. Thus, the scene simulates the consequences of an "increasingly, full-blooded masculinity [which] assume[s] the form of full-blown paranoia, and fear of, yet longing for, death" (Segal, 112). The violence of the Gangster is brought onto himself and his identity.

While it has been maintained that "the level of violence and callous self-destructive behaviour involved can be argued as a representation of toxic masculinity" (Larke-Walsh 40), the presence of excessive violence and self-sabotage aligns with the myth presented here. It is not gratuitous to the narrative. Instead, it aligns with Thomas channelling his rage and anger as a working-class man within the myth of the Gangster. If violence were gratuitous in the series, there would be no repercussions to his crimes. It is in Season 6 when Thomas must confront the pain he has caused to others. Ruby's illness and her certain death make Tommy face his criminal life, one that has caused many deaths. In his desperate search for a cure, Tommy convinces himself that Ruby "will be well! And I will undo the many wrongs that I have done. Now that I'm without whiskey, I can hear the spirits clearly. They are saying Ruby will be well if I make amends" ("Gold", 51:34-46). As much as he tries to make amends, a cure for consumption is not something he can buy or threaten someone to give him. Thomas will not save Ruby, and he will not be by her side when she dies.

Her death will trigger the final events of the series. Thomas has, as he insists, "this work to do 'cause now I know that I will change. That I have to change. And change for good […]. Not just yet" ("Sapphire", 43:12). The Peaky Blinders avenge Polly's death and Tommy kills Michael with a shot through the eye, eradicating another external threat. Having decided to have a lonely death, Tommy blows up his empty mansion, a symbol of his journey of self-making because, as he expresses it, "I don't want anyone… Anyone

who may or may not love me… To see me crawl and grow insane and helpless. That would be a cruelty to me and to them” (“Lock and Key”, 11:22-41). This small display of care towards others, rare in Thomas, proves he is not a despicably cruel man, just one truly flawed by the patriarchal system he has been instructed to aspire to. Thomas has learnt something that none of his enemies have ever understood. He observes that he is “discovering kindness. I’m learning it from my children” (“Gold”, 48:33). This prevents his fall into full patriarchal hegemony, not only because his “ghettoised origins simultaneously deny and promise him the rise to the top[,] which is the quintessence of the capitalist myth of success” (Schuhmaier 37), but because his success comes at a terrible cost—at least symbolically—namely, the death of his daughter and the disappearance of his self, one he has never truly controlled. His act of kindness, as trivial as it may appear, is a positive engagement with a non-toxic and therefore healthy form of masculinity. He might finally understand that “if someone touches [him], [he] won’t shatter” (“Sapphire”, 28:31). Evidently, his refusal to accept care from others is problematic and disempowering for him. But it is a glimpse to a potential ‘democratic manhood’. Kimmel defines such as a manhood that should not “be based on obsessive self-control, defensive exclusion, or frightened escape. We need a new definition […] that is more about the character of men’s hearts and the depths of their souls than about the size of their biceps, wallets, or penises” (*Manhood in America* 254). There is potential in Shelby’s masculinity. The three myths have provided him with countless masculine benefits, but they have also stripped him of emotional responsibility and healthy bonds. It is in the finale of the series when Shelby will be tested by the myths and will finally decide what kind of man he wants to be.

### 3.4. Thomas' (Mythical) Milestone

After blowing up his own home and having returned to where he began, alone "with horses and caravans… vagabonds and thieves" ("Lock and Key", 1:04:15), Thomas discovers that he has been misled in his terminal diagnosis. At first, the inevitability of death proved to Thomas that he is "not a devil. Just an ordinary, mortal man" ("Sapphire", 56:35). Even more, the possibility of Thomas dying an unmanly death, not in a battlefield as a hero, but in a lonely deathbed with pain as his legacy, reveals, in his words, that "for all I try to hide it, I'm just one of you. Could there be a sadder ending, eh?" ("The Road to Hell", 56:08). In fact, the ending of the series, and even the series overall, is not about whether Tommy has accomplished a 'proper' hegemonic masculinity, but about the psychological and emotional implications of having tried to attain one. He has lost his family—wife and children included—his home has been destroyed at his own command, and death is apparently looming over him. It seems it has been all for nothing because his patriarchal ambitions have made him "un ser que nunca hallará la paz [por] su alma sedienta. Se trata de un motor que le lleva al más extremo inconformismo, a ansiar escalar más alto que sus propuestos y objetivos, sea poder, riqueza o el respeto de los demás" (Freire Sánchez, 100-1).[35] He has been profoundly affected by all the loss in his life, but men "pretend. They act as though they have power and privilege when they feel powerless. Inability to acknowledge the depths of male pain makes it difficult for males to challenge and change patriarchal masculinity" (hooks 128). Feeling utterly powerless after the loss of Ruby and his eminent death, Thomas waits for his demise.

In a drunken haze, Thomas dreams of Ruby. Her apparition reveals to him that Dr Holford, hired by Mosley, has falsely diagnosed that he has a tuberculoma. Seeking

[35] "A being that will never find peace [because of] his thirsty soul. It is a driving force that pushes him to the most extreme dissatisfaction, always yearning to climb higher than his own goals and objectives, whether it is power, wealth, or the respect of others". My translation.

revenge, Thomas confronts the doctor. In this scene, the mythical machinery is set into motion. Thomas experiences for the last time the soldier's minute, which "in a battle that's all you get. One minute of everything at once. And anything before, it's nothing. Everything after, nothing. Nothing in comparison to that one minute" (S1E6, 33:57-34:23). In that minute, Tommy expresses that they believed "the only person who could ever kill Thomas Shelby is Thomas Shelby himself. You let me believe death was coming. Let my nature do the rest" ("Lock and Key", 1:16:11). With a gun pointed at his face, the doctor summarises Thomas' journey by explaining he has become a man

> sick with guilt. Sick of death at your own hand. Sick of who you were. You are no longer the kind of man who would kill another man in cold blood. Tommy, you have been on a journey. From the back streets to the corridors of power. You can't go back. You're a different man. The gun no longer belongs in your hand ("Lock and Key", 1:16:40-17:25).

Thomas is no more the soldier who kills his enemy on command; neither is he a working-class citizen struggling to climb to the top, nor is he a brutal and unscrupulous man who must resort to violence to build his path. The Soldier, the Self-Made Man and the Gangster hold possession of Thomas, combating for dominance. However, he does not seem to need them any longer because, just before pulling the trigger, Thomas says, "Oh, but I am back. Back from under the ground" (1:17:28). A bell chimes. Thomas realises the time is "The eleventh hour. Armistice" (1:18:07). The chime seems to end the war inside him. Finally, he is at "peace at last. Peace at last" (ibid.). Thomas does not pull the trigger.

The decision to not kill the doctor is not an act of benevolence, but of self-transformation. He can neither undo the journey he was set out on, nor can he let the myths resume controlling his life. All of them have led him to paranoia of losing his power and dissolved all the bonds he had weakly secured, especially the Self-Made Man, the one he fiercely clung to. As a result, Thomas must question his identity and masculine subject position. This cannot be immediate because it requires a complete reconsideration of his cultural masculine participation in power structures. Nonetheless, "looking out at

Tommy's achieved destitution, we are left inside the burning vestiges of his former self, soon to be destroyed" (P. Long 10). We cannot demand from Thomas a degendered reintroduction to society because of historical limitations but we can hope for him an alternative form of masculinity that does not require for him to destroy his self and others for a hegemonic masculinity that does not even exist or can be fully grasped.

Who will Thomas become when the screen fades to black is unknown to the audience. They are only left with Thomas Shelby, now destituted, riding off on a white stallion. The horse is not a sign of a newfound pureness in Thomas because he refrained from killing, but instead should be seen as a clean slate. His recent destitution offers the opportunity to discover another lifepath and dissident masculinity. I am not suggesting that Thomas is a deconstructed man, but I am proposing that his journey in *Peaky Blinders* recognises the danger of his story and its need for alternative masculine practices. This is a new journey he cannot make on his own again because identities are collective ongoing processes. Additionally, although there has been a shift of awareness, Thomas cannot completely decide which masculine identity he will perform because he is not above social projections. Therefore, there will constantly be limitations and obstacles that Thomas cannot surpass because identities are not wholly conscious cognitive projects. His masculine role evinces the malleability of social constructs; how they can be manipulated to one's benefit and how they, in turn, influence one's social performance and behaviour. Thomas, by himself, cannot revolutionise an entire gender structure, because he is another cog in the machine of modern capitalism and patriarchy, as much as he tries to deny it. Men like him—driven, ambitious, but injured by social and gender conventions—have a certain degree of choice to use the transformative potential of gender—as far as they are aware of it—to either preserve its ideals or aspire to more than repressive connotations that oppress and harm everyone at its vicinity.

## 4. Conclusions and Consequences

This project started with the premise that Thomas Shelby from *Peaky Blinders* aspired to a hegemonic masculinity through the influence and engineering of three myths of masculinity: the Soldier, the Self-Made Man, and the Gangster. I believe that I have not only established this, but that my objectives have been exceeded by also highlighting the devastating identitarian and homosocial consequences these have had on Thomas and the rest of Peaky Blinders. In effect, Shelby has had to learn that "ambition for respectability doesn't make you a saint" (S3E2, 07:34). On the contrary, he has resorted to unhealthy mechanisms of masculinity to transcend his working-class situation and reach legitimacy and respectability. The hunt for a hegemonic masculinity is the story of Thomas in *Peaky Blinders*. Each myth analysed has brought to the surface evidence that 'hegemonic masculinity', a term proposed by R.W. Connell, is a destructive aspiration in male lives. In other words, the myths prove "hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily translate into a satisfying experience of life" (Connell and Messerschmidt 852).

The cultural mythography I have proposed highlights how gender does not precede social codification; rather, it is social discourses that produce gender codes. These discourses can influence people's identities, or people can adopt them willingly. Thomas' case is possible because he can appeal to common widespread beliefs on men and maleness. Although Thomas must be held accountable for his actions, it is the archaic and corrupt systems of patriarchy and capitalism that majorly enable and support his behaviour. Free will evidently plays a role in the construction of his identity; Shelby chose his path, but only one that was canonically and culturally supported. Dominant forms of masculinity destroy men's self-esteem by exploiting their insecurities and fears. Thomas seeks to contest the hegemonic masculinity he aspires to with his understanding of masculinity, which, paradoxically, is influenced by the patriarchal patterns he so abhors.

Masculinity is a crossroads at which many identitarian myths create assumptions of a supposedly accepted masculine form. Thomas reflects a subordinated protest masculinity, whose oppressions—class, trauma, and civil order—prompt him to improve his and his family’s life conditions. His success is a product of enforcing assumed masculine privileges, further demonstrating that gender, as a social construct, promotes certain men while relegating others. His social class is one of many limits impeding him from achieving a ruling masculinity. Thomas’ objective is not to destabilise normative maleness, but to establish parameters applicable to his own self that can secure him social safety and political protection. Nonetheless, Shelby portrays the dangerous path men walk when aspiring to the unachievable. The myths are his downfall and not his salvation.

The mythocritique conducted in these pages exhibits the settlement of dominant gendered narratives in the postwar England of the 1920s. First, the myth of the Soldier showcases Thomas’ exploitation of military narratives to push his efforts forward despite his disillusionment towards life after the trauma endured. In his own words, “everything after [the war] was extra” (“Heathens”, 15:05). Frustration at his society’s ignorance coaxes Tommy to use his military training for his benefit. The project has revealed that the archetype of the Soldier advertises stoicism and emotional embarrassment to men, who unhealthily cope with trauma, especially around other soldiers. War demands that soldiers prove themselves to be heroic and strong in front of other men. In other words, to present as unfeminine and as non-queer as possible. Masculinity, therefore, is arranged by all the negative associations with femininity and queerness. Thomas avoids being further emasculated and feminised by dominant men at all costs.

Second, the Self-Made Man similarly requires male individuals to be professionally driven, exclusively and selfishly, to impress capitalist authorities. In the hands of capitalism, male bodies are transformed into corporate machines; Tommy has

been proven to be such. Profit being his only goal, he neglects most of his family responsibilities, showing little care, affect, or engaging concern. Individualisation from anything related with working-class labour leads Thomas to a masculine Self cohesive with capitalist speeches but adrift from heterosocial core bonds. His greatest internal conflict, beyond his longing for death, is disputing social determinism—also referred to as class essentialism—beating the allegations that only the upper classes deserve commodities. Meritocracy corrupts masculinity into producing incessantly. For Thomas, "There is no rest […] in this world. Perhaps in the next" ("The Company", 47:41). This meritocratic myth requires an unwavering commitment to business agendas although it will not generate any true social benefit. Sacrifices from working-class men to deserve the title of self-making maintain the myth alive. Yet Thomas will not receive any masculine compensation for such sacrifice. In the eyes of the ruling class, Thomas will remain symbolically low-born, and his masculinity tied to the constraints of being so.

Third, the Gangster, an archetype less normative than the others, provides Thomas with the violence and immorality necessary to make his business persona succeed. This myth aligns with negative preconceptions of the working classes, which Thomas exploits to instruct fear and loyalty from followers. Very few are immune to it. Differing from the other two myths, the Gangster does not pursue the approval of hegemonies. Instead, he forces his entry into the hegemony through the infliction of violence. The project has proposed violence offers a response to subordinated masculinities to withstand the possibility of having their masculinity contested. Thomas' masculine endeavours are secured because the Gangster employs male strength and physical authority. The discrimination suffered as a working-class man prompts Thomas to defy masculine expectations through violent manhood acts (i.e., beatings, killing, threats…). Resorting to this archetype highlights the fragilities of male egos. Masculine identities are, therefore,

extremely vulnerable entities and their need to feel valued relies on the anxiety of fellow masculinities. Thomas is a man suffering from an “irrational frenzy controlled by reason and self-reflection” (“The Loop”, 49:22). His violent acts are predominantly calculated, not gratuitous to the narrative because all point to Tommy’s male fragility. The urge to deny being weak, feminine, vulnerable or spineless in front of other men has irreparable consequences on his family. Hence, the maleness produced by the Gangster numbs Thomas to the emotional implications of his ambitions.

In relation to homosociality, this dissertation has forwarded the importance of male bonds in the construction of masculinities. The three myths have enabled Thomas to establish forms of masculine hierarchy within the Blinders. He forms different collectives with the same members: an army, a business, and a gang; all acting simultaneously. Thomas has worked to create his own hegemony of men which boosts his masculine efforts in every context. The community is structured and restructured to fit each narrative appropriately. Evidently, they are “not the Peaky fucking Blinders unless [they are] together” (“The Noose”, 56:25). Nonetheless, his incompetence to properly care for them, beyond financially protecting them, weakens their bonds. The project has pointed out the consequences of each myth in Thomas. He slowly realises he is disengaged from his family and emotional responsibilities. The Soldier has left him unable to cope with the death of his daughter and the pain of others, especially, his brother Arthur. The Self-Made Man turned him into a selfish individual who disregards the importance of community so as to stand out from the rest of Blinders. And the Gangster taught him that violence is the response to pain, frustration, and disillusion, as he closes down participation in his family turmoil. Tommy harnesses family bonds to turn them into accessories to his masculine aspiration. Masculinities are collective developments that essentially avail male power at the expense of other identities, both male and female.

All these myths have mainly occurred in homosocial spaces. Male bonding has strengthened Tommy's masculine position through cooperation with the Peaky Blinders, or through masculine contestations against his enemies. The former attests to Thomas spreading his ambitions to other potential masculinities. It is through homosocial interactions, principally, that other aspirational masculinities construct in reference to and in opposition to it—Michael being an example of Thomas' nurturing—. These circumstances preserve the production chain of male ideals. The construction of other possible male identities is prevented by the cooperation of subjugated men. The latter, by contrast, fosters competition between men. To dethrone masculine hegemonic manifestations becomes Thomas' motivation to reinforce masculine qualities—strength, entrepreneurship, authority, stoicism, a shark-like mentality, leadership—to channel his social frustrations. But dominant aspirations remain ungraspable, and Thomas approaches an extreme of not seeing "the point of carrying on with any of it" ("Mr Jones", 04:28).

The ending of the series demonstrates that masculinities are not entirely fixed identities. Thomas' new chapter, the blank slate after he rides off, predicts that some masculinities "are less likely to change than others—especially where a certain pattern of masculinity is strongly buttressed by the surrounding institutions and culture—but in principle no pattern of masculinity is entirely proof against change" (Connell, *The Men and the Boys,* 219). This study on *Peaky Blinders* and Thomas Shelby's masculinity has contended that however much a man performs hegemonically, there are obstacles that appear unconquerable. Even if Tommy were to become God, he would still be frowned upon for his proletarian background. In conclusion, (male) identity is imagined through patriarchal lenses to work for the interests of normative male individuals. Thomas' single-minded campaign to perform as such a man drains him of his true identity; whatever that might be—: a soldier, a self-made man, a gangster, a peaky blinder, all or none.

## 5. Further Research Avenues

The following topics are issues that are relevant to *Peaky Blinders* and are broadly in alignment with my approach. Ultimately, however, they were not sufficiently connected to my central argumentative concern and I therefore was unable to put them here. I present them as topics that might be given fuller critical attention elsewhere.

One of the first themes I had to exclude from the project was a religious and literary undertone in *Peaky Blinders* that sees Thomas as a reincarnation of the devil. A possible thesis could regard an analysis of Thomas’ masculinity as an heir to Satan’s construction of masculine evilness. A possible model of literary reference (both for its evilness and magnetic appeal) would be Milton’s Satan (*Paradise Lost*).

A second crucial aspect of *Peaky Blinders* is the relationship that Tommy establishes with the women of his family (Polly and Ada) as well as his possible love interests (Grace, Lizzie, Jesse, May, etc). An engaging study would be to examine Thomas’ behaviour towards women and what this reveals, from withing the framework of Masculinity Studies. This proposal relates to the third topic or myth I could not include in my dissertation, which I have decided to name the archetype of the Tortured Soul. A historiography of this archetype, perhaps particularly in popular culture, would illuminate the emergence of male characters both that fictional and real women are attracted to. This research might concern the construction of female desire towards toxic patriarchal men. The erotization of male narratives (which include traumatic childhoods, redemption arcs and idealised sexual prowess) has been exploited to ensnare female reader and viewership. Classic characters that could be analysed might include Heathcliff, Darcy, or Rochester, or more contemporary example such as Loki, Kylo Ren, Thomas Shelby, Jim Stark, Damon Targaryen, Damon Salvatore, and countless others.

A final topic I regrettably could not include was the intersection between masculinity and ethnicity. Romani ethnicity is fundamental for Thomas’ identity as a man. The research could centre around the ethnic oppression suffered by Tommy and the Shelbys (from the insistent use of derogatory terms such as ‘gypsies’ or ‘tinkers’, through to the more insidious social prejudice that operates against this ethnicity) and the impact that this subordination to *whiteness* has on their identities as a community. A key concern would be whether the Shelbys embrace or reject such an identity. It would hugely complement this intersectional study on masculinity and class.

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