**Feeling Northern: ‘Heroic Women’ in Sally Wainwright’s *Happy Valley***

**(BBC One, 2014—)**

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**Biographical Note**

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**Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank the reviewers of this article, Paul Blackledge and Alison Peirse for their useful comments.

**Abstract**

This article analyses a recent television drama written by Sally Wainwright in order to explore notions of Northernness, gender and class. I consider to what extent Wainwright is expanding and revising current perceptions of the North, and more specifically of Northern women, through an analysis of her recent television programme, *Happy Valley* (BBC One, 2014—). Wainwright’s work shares characteristics of the British social realist television drama from the late 50s, early 60s: they have themes of escape, they use location to say something about their characters and they take viewers on an emotional journey that is related to the social conditions they inhabit. And yet, she is also putting women, who were often on the periphery of social drama, in the centre. Wainwright takes her viewers on a journey that begins with the anger and injustice resonant to the male protagonists of social realism, but as women, this anger and injustice is worked through in terms of the family and eventually leads to a greater sense of commitment to community and the place she comes from, which, in Wainwright’s work, is the North. In so doing, she expands the genre and gives it a female voice. She offers us a sense of what ‘feeling’ Northern is to women, as well as men. Additionally, she is a screenwriter who is speaking from the position of the working class North; she is intimate to these communities, not a ‘detached observer’. And yet, despite these inroads, her work has only recently received praise from the British television Industry.

**Keywords**

Northernness, gender, social realism, Sally Wainwright, emotion

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Sally Wainwright’s television work follows in a strong tradition of British social realism from kitchen sink drama to *Coronation Street* (ITV, 1960). The use of emotion in this work is significant in describing a need for escape and a sense of injustice. This has often been figured through male anger, such as explored in ‘Yosser’s Story,’ in Alan Bleasdale’s *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC2, 1980-82). In contrast, one of the characteristics of Wainwright’s work is that she puts women centre stage as opposed to the periphery or as part of the reason for men wanting escape. Wainwright takes her viewers on a journey that begins with the anger and injustice resonant to the male protagonists of social realism, but as women, this anger and injustice is worked through in terms of the family and eventually leads to a greater sense of commitment to community and the place she comes from, which, in Wainwright’s work, is the North. In so doing, she expands the genre and gives it a female voice. She offers us a sense of what ‘feeling’ Northern is to women, as well as men. Despite these inroads, Wainwright has only recently received recognition as a screenwriter. Could this be because she is working class, Northern and female? And if so, does this create a paradox where, on the one hand, it can be argued that her position allows her to convey a distinct voice and yet on the other, this very position can be seen as the thing that has held her back from recognition within the British television Industry and television studies.

In a *Guardian* article titled ‘Sally Wainwright: ‘I like writing women, they’re heroic’—we are reminded that Wainwright won two Baftas in 2013—one for best writer and one for best drama. Wainwright’s reaction to this was to say: "It brings up a lot of emotions. And one of them for me was, 'Why haven't I won this before now?' To win it last year, after I wrote the *Braithwaites* 14 years ago … you do think: 'Why haven't I been noticed before now?'" When the interviewer tried to reassure Wainwright that her frustration makes sense given how long it is taken her to gain recognition and suggests that perhaps Wainwright is not being grand, she replies: "It's the opposite of confidence," she explains. "It's having a chip on your shoulder. I think it's very northern. And it is a class thing."’ (*Guardian*, 6.6.14)

One of the reasons for writing this article is to consider Wainwright’s position as a Northern, working class woman writing and directing British television drama. Has her gender, class and regional background kept her from the success witnessed by her male counterparts, such as Jimmy McGovern or Paul Abbott? Many of the UK’s most successful female writers, directors and producers, including Sally Wainwright, women such as Kay Mellor, Lynda La Plante, and Nicola Schindler come from the North and some have referred to their Northernness as the reason why they have survived and flourished in television, and yet also see it as a reason why they have not received the critical attention they deserve. In an article about Mellor’s new drama *The Syndicate* (BBC1, 2012—), for instance, the author writes that Mellor “suggests, without rancor, that being a working class, Northern woman, who doesn’t move in London’s elite art circles, might explain her glaring lack of Baftas’ (Lockyer, 17 May 2015).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Sally Wainwright recently won another Bafta for best television drama for her series *Happy Valley* (BBC One, 2014—). The series focuses on a small community in the North and constructs strong, Northern women as its central characters. This article considers to what extent Wainwright’s television programme contributes to perceptions of the North while locating her work within a tradition of social realism in British television drama. Does Wainwright offer something new in her use of location, her constructions of strong women characters, her ability to invite the viewer in with her use of an emotional journey? This article will consider Wainwright’s construction of an emotional journey, that is, a narrative arc that follows the affective development of its central character—in this case, Catherine Cawood in *Happy Valley.*

In her study of Salford as an Imagined Northern community, Susanne Schmidt argues that ‘any analysis of cultural representations of the North needs to consider the point of view of the writer, singer, painter, or producer. The North may be seen from without or within’ (2007, 349). I think Schmidt makes a strong point, and yet I think it is possible to be both within and with the North, particularly if it is where you come from. And perhaps some distance, the being ‘without’ allows some critical reflection. I want to focus on Sally Wainwright in part because of the recent success she has had with *Happy Valley* and *Last Tango in Halifax* and because she is someone from the North (Huddersfield), who has used the North in most, if not all, her television programmes and yet lives in the South (Oxford). So she is both without and within the North. She is not an outsider or a middle class woman pondering on the working class, and yet as she has achieved success, she has also moved out of that position (both literally and figuratively). And yet despite these successes, Wainwright retains her sense of class background; as Annette Kuhn reflects in *Family Secrets*, ‘Class is something beneath your clothes, under your skin, in your reflexes, in your psyche, at the very core of your being’ (2002, p.117).

In thinking about the ‘structure of feeling’ that accompanies white, working class women, Beverley Skeggs discusses her own experiences as a white, working class woman becoming aware of her class background as she entered University. It was not until entering University that she recognised her own class and, at the same time, a new feeling of insecurity and inadequacy. She argues that ‘the constant reading/viewing of working class women from the position of the knowledge of the middle-classes has produced inadequate theories and conceptualizations […]’ (1997, p.132). Far from an outsider, Wainwright is writing from her position of a Northern, working class woman and, as this article will argue, is bringing new conceptualisations of Northern, working class women to the screen.

**The North on Screen**

In order to consider Wainwright’s contribution to work on the North, it is important to consider how the term has been understood within film and television studies. In other words, what do we mean when we say ‘the north on screen’? The ‘North’ is often used within British cinema and television as both a reference point geographically and as an allusion to a particular style. Schmid suggests ‘the predominant image of the North includes the following elements: bleakness, coldness, industry, decay, social problems, working class, exploitation, lack of serious culture’ (2007, p. 349). The phrase ‘it’s grim up north’ may be a light-hearted expression, but it refers to something very real: the Industrial heritage of the North often evoked in film and television through low lighting, dense housing, pitheads and a specific Northern setting such as Liverpool, Leeds or Manchester.

In his work on the Northern Imaginary, Dave Russell suggests that between 1957 and the mid-1960s, ‘northern literature, film, television and popular music penetrated the national culture to an extent hitherto unknown’ (2004, 28). Although he does not identify it as such, this is also the moment of ‘kitchen sink drama’ and films such as Alan Sillitoe’s *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste Of Honey* portrayed ‘the gritty and grainy lives of the working class “up north”’ (Caughie, 2000, p. 66). These films, as well as visualising Northern male anger, also convey a sense of entrapment and a desire for escape. As Andrew Higson argues: ‘these films define individuality in terms of escape from the mass, the class, class consciousness, into an individual consciousness’ (1984, pp. 14-15). However, the ‘escape’ is often figured in terms of the inevitability of marriage and/or staying in the North. As Jimmy Porter, the lead protagonist in *Look Back in Anger* (1956) laments: ‘No, there’s nothing left for it, me boy, but to let yourself be butchered by the women’ (cited in Caughie, 2000, p. 67).

The male anger and implicit misogyny recognised within the kitchen sink films is also the subject of Phillip Dodd’s exploration of the North in literature. In considering writers such as Orwell, Hoggart and Storey, for instance, Dodd argues that the representations of “the North” have been dominated by the ‘masculine, working class and the physical’ (1990, p. 20). To counter the iconography that Dodd feels has dominated cultural imaginations of the North, he explores the representation of women in three fictional examples: Barry Hines’s *Unfinished Business* (1983), Helen Forrester’s *Two Pence Across the Mersey* (1974) and Pat Barker’s *Union Street* (1982). Although a novelist such as Barker brings women out of the periphery, as Dodd suggests ‘women are [no longer] elements in a landscape across which the male moves on his way to the metropolis’ (1990, p. 25), he is depressed by the way in which the ‘North’s’ past continues to haunt the present. For Dodd, this is figured in Barker’s focus on the physicality of her female characters, the mouth in particular, which renders Barker as a ‘detached observer’ (ibid, p. 26). This realisation, of the limits of the feminist intervention into depictions of the North, leads Dodd to feel disheartened at the way the ‘“North” of the present continues to be haunted by an earlier “North” which it cannot escape’ (ibid, pp. 26-27).

As I will go on to explore in *Happy Valley*, Wainwright’s work shares sympathies and characteristics of social realism and yet she positions women in the centre of this world. But perhaps more importantly, she uses emotion as both a way to engage her audience and as a means to demonstrate the way women, in particular, work through the anger resonant with the male protagonists of social realism. Their emotional labour, the affective working through of their feelings, leads them to find a sense of harmony with their lives, the land they come from and live in. Their resolve is not framed by a submission to inevitabilities (such as marriage, class background or staying in the North) but to the significant role they play within their family and community.

But what about these depictions of the North on the television screen? As Russell notes, ‘the ‘crucial “northern” event’ was the broadcast of Granada’s *Coronation Street* on the 9th December, 1960, which soon became the nation’s most popular programme (ibid., p. 189). Set in a northern, working class landscape, *Coronation Street* ‘tapped into the new mode of social realism, or ‘kitchen-sink’ drama, that had been popularised in theatre, and in literature, since the mid-50s’ (Cooke, 2003, pp. 33-34). As Cooke argues, *Coronation Street* perfectly adhered to the characteristics of social drama. Indeed, in discussing the first episode Cooke explains:

‘The title sequence establishes the world in which the drama is set with its opening shot of the roofs of terraced houses, accompanied by a melancholy signature tune, itself redolent with nostalgia, before taking us down into the world of *Coronation Street* and depositing us outside the local shop, where children are singing while playing a game with a skipping rope’ (ibid., p.34)

Here Cooke draws attention to the use of landscape, so familiar to kitchen-sink dramas and to the way the camera locates us in the drama through the formal devices of music, camera position and nostalgia. In considering the use of place in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, Higson writes: ‘it is not just that the character is *in* the landscape, but that the landscape becomes part of the character’ (ibid., p. 12). In *Happy Valley*, as I will go on to analyse, there is a clear sense the landscape is part of the characters and Wainwright uses shots of the Hebden Bridge, in West Yorkshire, to situate and root her protagonists to the land as well as to their emotional journey.

The use of Northern landscapes in television became more familiar as regional drama studios were established and series did more to explore regional diversity (see Cooke, 2007, p. 83). Lez Cooke argues that the television series *Second City Firsts* (BBC2, 1973-78), in particular, enabled more regional output and diversity on screen (2007, p. 92). Alan Bleasdale made his first television debut with an episode of *Second City Firsts* titled ‘Early to Bed’ (BBC 2, 20 March 1975) which begins ‘with a shot of a pithead, establishing the location as that of a Lancashire mining community, and the scenes filmed in the small town help to illustrate the limited opportunities there for Vinny, establishing his need to get away’ (ibid., p.90). Bleasdale went on to write one of the most iconic television portrayals of the North, *Boys from the Blackstuff* (BBC2, 1982)[[2]](#endnote-2), a powerful critique of Thatcher’s impact on the North and its people. As Cooke points out: ‘the series was character-based, rather than plot-driven, using the characters as a means to explore the condition of the working class […] in contemporary Britain’ (ibid, p. 132).

In Part 4, ‘Yosser’s Story,’ Bleasdale takes us on an emotional journey following the breakdown of Yosser Hughes, a Northern, working class, unemployed man in Thatcher’s England. The episode begins with a dream sequence in which Yosser walks with his children into a canal as middle class onlookers watch or row past. Slowly each of his children drown and he is left on his own and wakes to realise he was dreaming. The sequence reflects the way in which the middle class became observers, some passive, some horrified, but none acting against the degradation and inhumanity that was taking place. Yosser desperately searches for work and a way to keep his children. His ‘Gizza job’ [‘give us a job’] epitomised the anger and frustration at the unemployment levels and social inequity. The episode ends with Yosser trying, unsuccessfully, to drown himself, the final shot is of him screaming.

Bleasdale uses emotion and character to invite audiences to feel the struggle of the Northern, working class. This is a man who loses everything. It is worth pointing out, as raised elsewhere, that this is male anger and indeed, one of the most significant female characters in the episode, Maureen, Yosser’s ex-wife, is used to create more sympathy for Yosser. There is a sequence where she is framed by the camera in close up as she explains why she left Yosser and the children. The camera focuses in on her mouth as she smokes and angrily spits out flimsy reasons for abandoning her children. She is not framed as a victim, but rather as an instrumental woman who left when the going got tough. Her admission that she ‘just couldn’t cope’ is held against the heroic efforts Yosser endures to keep his children. This is not to say that all women are like Maureen in *Boys from the Blackstuff*, far from it. But they are on the periphery of the ‘boys’’ narratives. The reason to outline this in some detail is to recognise the importance of Wainwright’s work in terms of bringing women from that margin into the centre and, perhaps more importantly, to claim some of the anger and injustice that has previously been figured as a male emotion.

As successful as *Boys from the Blackstuff* was in raising audiences attention to the impact of Thatcher’s government on the North, Cooke notes a decline in social drama in the 1990s: ‘the pressures on progressive drama grew throughout the 1980s as the single play disappeared from the schedules and the opportunities for dealing with social issues in other genres became increasingly subject to political, institutional and economic constraints’ (ibid, p. 170). Indeed, Cooke uses the case of *Our Friends in the North* (BBC 2, 1996) as an example of how politics starts to recede and personal relationships take centre stage. As Cooke argues: ‘[*Our Friends in the North*] adopts a melodramatic approach and the characters are more foregrounded […] inviting the viewer to identify with their personal narratives and to experience the social and political history as they experience it’ (ibid, p. 170). While Cooke notes a shift in the 1990s, he also suggests a return to social issues and authored drama post 9/11. Established writers such as Alan Bleasdale and Peter Flannery had significant work commissioned in the 2000s along with new, emergent writers, one of whom Cooke identifies as Wainwright (ibid, p.229). Interestingly, Cooke links Wainwright and Mellor together, describing both by their Northern, working class backgrounds (2015, p. 234). As in journalist accounts of her work, Wainwright is clearly identified by her regional and class identity and as someone making ‘popular’ drama.

**Feeling Northern**

Before moving on to an analysis of *Happy Valley*, I want to further interrogate Cooke’s use of the term ‘melodramatic’ in describing *Our Friends of the North*, especially in light of more recent work on television and melodrama such as Linda Williams’ *On the Wire* (2014). There is a long tradition of valuing social realism over the melodramatic mode in terms of thinking about a fictional object’s ability to challenge, persuade or change perceptions. Wainwright’s work better fits within a new understanding of television melodrama, as Linda Williams’ proposes. Williams makes a case for the political and social importance of melodrama as it has often been seen as the opposite of realist drama and incapable of enabling critical reflection. As she argues: ‘There is such a thing as good, rich, complex, socially relevant, and politically efficacious melodrama, and the case of *The Wire* offers an opportunity to grasp what American genre-driven television culture can offer at its best (2014, p. 90). Although there is not scope to fully explore the critical argument Williams’ pursues in her re-understanding of television melodrama, suffice it to say that Wainwright’s work contains the complexity and social critique that Williams’ finds in *The Wire* and yet, as I will go on to argue, her work is more firmly located in a specific understanding of ‘the North’. That is to say that Wainwright’s work does take small, interpersonal stories and link them to broader social concerns (for example, drug trade in rural communities in *Happy Valley* and visibility of older people in *Last Tango*), but on a smaller scale to a series like *The Wire*, which approaches social inequity from a variety of institutional lenses. Nevertheless, Wainwright is able to raise the spectres of the past, quite literally in *Happy Valley*, in order to demonstrate her character’s ability to move forward.

Far from eschewing realism, Williams argues that melodrama ‘enlists forms of realism to generate outrage against realities that could and, according to its creators, should be changed (2014, 114). Wainwright’s use of emotion and affect, particularly in the more difficult physical scenes, as I will go on to analyse in the next section, provoke and even upset viewers. Emotion used in this way can be seen as establishing a ‘structure of feeling’ or ‘lived experience’ for audiences to engage with. Indeed, in her work on *Dallas*, Ien Ang understands the range of emotions a viewer can experience in a text as constructing what Raymond Williams terms a ‘structure of feeling’. She links the pleasure audiences take from watching serialised television with the ‘ever changing emotions’ they experience (Ang, 1985, p.46; see also Gorton, 2009, pp.83-84). As she writes: ‘in life emotions are always being stirred up, […] life is a question of falling down and getting up again’ (ibid., p.46, author’s italics). These ‘ever-changing emotions’ contribute to the success of the piece as well as its accessibility to audiences. As Raymond Williams argues:

‘To succeed in art is to convey an experience to others in such a form that experience is actively re-created—not “contemplated” not “examined” not passively received, but by response to the means, actually lived through, by those to whom it is offered’

(1961, p.51)

Wainwright’s work, particularly in *Happy Valley*, reflects her own experience of the North. She is not ‘contemplating’ or ‘examining’ in the sense that depresses Dodd, rather, she is conveying a sense of what it is like to be a woman in the North.

Finally, before moving on to an analysis of *Happy* Valley, I want to point out that not only is Wainwright bringing a female voice to British social realism, but in choosing to set her story within a crime genre, she is also making significant developments to what has historically been considered a male genre. She is also following in the footsteps of women such as Lynda La Plante who wrote *Widows* (Thames, 1983) and *Prime Suspect* (Granada/ ITV 1991-2006). And yet, as Julia Hallam notes in her work on Lynda La Plante: ‘women writers working in popular generic formats are left without a critical home, their work unacknowledged and absent from the teaching canon’ (2014, p. 222). Hallam argues that the critical neglect of significant women writers, such as La Plante, Mellor and Wainwright, is ‘primarily institutional, generated by facts within the broadcasting industry as well as in the critical echelons of academia that situate female writers on the margins of the “quality” drama tradition despite their considerable success in creating innovative interventions in popular series formats’ (ibid, p. 214). As I suggested above, despite the gains Wainwright has made for the genre, for depictions of the North, her work, like other female screenwriters, has not been afforded the praise it deserves.

**Happy Valley**

Wainwright’s previous television work includes *At Home with the Braithwaites* (ITV, 2000-2003), *Scott & Bailey* (ITV, 2011-2014) and *Unforgiven* (ITV, 2009). In these series we can see threads that will later be pulled and worked into *Happy Valley* particularly in terms of strong and yet struggling female characters, an interest in crime and an attention to the messiness of family life. Most of her series are set in the North and use the North to evoke a particular sense of place and character.

In many respects, Wainwright’s *Happy Valley*, set in West Yorkshire, is a tale of family secrets that are untangled and solved by the main character, police sergeant Catherine Cawood. What the series also reveals is the way the private and the public are intimately connected and that the act of solving family secrets or indeed crimes, takes a great deal of emotional labour. Early on in the series, we learn that Cawood’s daughter has committed suicide, shortly after giving birth to a child conceived out of rape. Cawood is still recovering from her daughter’s death and the strains of raising a young boy when she discovers that the man who raped her daughter, Tommy Lee Royce (James Norton) has returned to the village.

The establishing shot is of Sowerby Bridge, in the upper Calder valley, the camera pans down to the top of a police car as a woman runs out and asks a newsagent for a fire extinguisher. It is significant that the series begins with an aerial shot of the valley and locates Catherine’s place within the dramatic spectacle. In his work on ‘landscapes of television,’ Andrew Higson argues that: ‘within television, the aerial shot becomes a means of constructing a spectacular vision otherwise difficult to attain’ (1987, 9). The shot positions the viewer as masterful and yet distant from the drama that is unfolding. Additionally, the shot references the social drama that Wainwright’s work comes out of—as Cooke describes the opening of *Coronation Street*, this is the shot that delivers the viewer into the world of *Happy Valley*.

The next scene closes on Catherine’s face as she approaches a man on top of a child’s climbing frame who is threatening to set himself alight. Completely unmoved by the scene, Cawood tells him: ‘I’m Catherine by the way, I’m 47, I’m divorced, I live with me sister whose a recovering heroin addict, I have two grown up children: one dead, one who doesn’t speak to me, and a grandson’ (2014, S1:E1). Wainwright locates us not only by place, but also by accent. When Lancashire delivers this introduction to herself, it is clear that she is Northern and working class. As Valerie Hey suggests ‘it is common sense to presume a link between place, voice and class location,’ (1997, p.141) and Wainwright firmly roots her story in the hands of a white working class Northern woman.

The emotion is raw and honest, from the first moment. There is no slow reveal as in some American dramas, where we eventually learn that the lead character is suffering from the death of a child, such as in the recent *True Detective* (HBO, 2014—). In *Happy Valley,* we know from the first moment that Catherine Cawood has a dead child. Instead what is slowly revealed is the way she is going to confront and deal with that reality and how the emotions on the surface are quite different from those beneath. The Hebden Bridge setting, of a small valley town in the North of England, where people know each other, allows emotions to surface differently. While this is not distinct to a Northern town, the residue of the Industrial start is there and provides its own spectre.

The opening montage features the song ‘Trouble Town’ by Jake Bugg. The lyrics resonate with the central themes in the series: ‘Stuck in speed bump city where the only thing that’s pretty is thought of getting out’ […] ‘In this troubled town, troubles are found, In this trouble town, words do get ‘round’. The notion of ‘getting out’ and that ‘words do get ‘round’ is emphasized by the limited location shots and the way in which news travels across the town. The opening scene, for example, of a man trying to set himself on fire is repeated first by her ex-husband who is a journalist trying to find out more about the case and then by Catherine’s sister who tells her that she heard it from a woman ‘at the shops’. They each also tell Catherine that Tommy Lee Royce, the man who raped her daughter, has been let out of jail. Catherine tells her sister that she knows Tommy will show up, because, as Catherine explains: ‘It wouldn’t occur to him to go anywhere else […] he’s like a rat. Never be more than three feet away’. There is a sense of entrapment—Catherine is trapped in her grief, Kevin is trapped financially and there is no way out. This desire to escape is reminiscent of social realism and yet distinct in terms of locating it both within the real of the landscape, the North, and, as I will go on to explore, within their emotional well-being. In so doing, Wainwright continues to weave place with emotion creating a distinctively Northern ‘lived experience’ or ‘structure of feeling’.

Different to most contemporary American dramas, there is no therapeutic language or use of a therapist to draw out more intimate feelings. After Catherine returns from the hospital and is at her worst, we know this because she shouts, uses profanity, gets angry with her grandson and her sister. It could be argued that in using anger instead of sadness or melancholy Wainwright refuses to position Cawood as a victim. She is seen as almost physically working through the pain and loss she has suffered and finding a way out of her own emotional entrapment. On the other hand, the emotion is performed in a very physical way which becomes reminiscent of the Northern working class male reaction to a sense of entrapment and a desire for escape in social realism.

In episode 4, directed by Sally Wainwright, Cawood is brutally attacked by Tommy Royce, her daughter’s rapist and the man who holds Ann Gallagher against her will and rapes her. There is a lot of collateral damage towards women throughout the series, which is something Wainwright has talked about herself. She argues: ‘If your head is smacked against the wall, you bleed. It’s life…Drama is about the dark side. How bad things happen to good people. All the women in this are seen to suffer in some way’ (cited in Diski, 2014, 16). In *The London Review of Books*, Jenny Diski (2014) regrets that ‘so much writing and acting talent is being channeled into crude and overblown melodrama dubiously justified as ‘real life’ and what she really seems to take offense with is what she calls ‘the easy redemption of the victims’—‘the raped and battered woman simply announcing that she refused to become a victim—feels like tacked on justification, far weaker than the violence they received’ (ibid, p. 16). She sees Wainwright as creating victims of her characters and thereby increasing the misogyny she finds in so many cop/crime dramas, such as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*.

I find this criticism completely unjustified, but also, and interesting to this article—I think this is, in part, because Diski misunderstands the programme. Firstly, it is worth pointing out that Diski uses the term ‘overblown melodrama’ as a way of dismissing any critical value that one could attribute to the work. As discussed earlier, ‘melodrama’ is still not understood as capable of critical reflection but rather seen as exaggerated or overly dramatic.

Secondly, it is important to say something more about Wainwright’s role as director for this episode. Not only is there disproportionate number of female screenwriters to male in the British television Industry, but there are even fewer women writing *and* directing their work. This also underlines *Happy Valley* as more author-driven, which means that Wainwright has far more control over how the story is told and seen. And yet, it begs the question of whether *because* she is a woman, and a screenwriter associated primarily with the popular and melodramatic that this kind of physicality is so objected to.

Finally, Diski sees these women as victims, whereas I think Wainwright has created agents—and I think this comes from Wainwright’s characterization (and arguably real experience) of Northern women—that they are capable of overcoming and confronting the darkness with a resiliency that Diski misunderstands. Far from misogynistic, Wainwright’s attention to Catherine’s anger and sense of injustice constructs an empowering emotional journey. She presents us with a woman who is both hurt and damaged and yet possesses the strength and honesty to move forward.

If this was in question, we have only to look at the way in which Wainwright handles rape, both of Cawood’s daughter and of Ann Gallagher. Following the brutal death of her younger colleague, Kirsten, Cawood is seen as hallucinating the body of her hanging daughter at moments of high anxiety. The sequences are not flashbacks—we do not return to the moment Cawood finds her daughter’s body in her bedroom. Instead these are spectres, ghosts haunting Cawood’s psyche. They are also gruesome. The body is frightening; the sudden camera shift to a dead body jars the viewer and creates significant discomfort. I also felt concerned at first that Wainwright had made a mistake of judgment. Was it tacky to insert this ghoulish figure into the narrative? And yet, it functions to disrupt any ‘easy’ viewing, to punctuate Cawood’s emotional journey and to remind the viewer of the horrors of rape and suicide.

It is also significant that the bodies appear while Catherine is working as a police sergeant. In her collection of essays on memory and imagination, Annette Kuhn draws a comparison between memory work and detective work, arguing that ‘the past is like the scene of a crime’ (1995, p. 4). As she writes:

‘For the repressed will always return, and more often than not in some infinitely more ugly guise. Bringing the secrets and the shadows into the open allows the deeper meanings of the family drama’s mythic aspects to be reflected upon, confronted and understood at all levels. This in turn helps in coming to terms with the feelings of the present, and so in living more fully in the present’

(ibid, p. 7)

Wainwright literally brings ‘the secrets and the shadows’ from Catherine’s past ‘into the open’ through the visualisation of the dead body. Although we are initially presented with a woman who is calm and control of herself and those around her, we slowly realise the demons that haunt her and watch her work through these difficult and painful emotions. Her grief is not only part of the performance, but is located, by Wainwright, through choosing to show Catherine sitting by her daughter’s gravesite. Coming to terms with the grief of her daughter’s death is situated not just in her mind, but in the place she lives and works.

It is also worth pointing out that we never see Tommy rape Ann, this is only alluded to and then confirmed by Ann when she discusses the rape with Catherine. This is important because the rape(s) are framed as violent, not as sexually gratuitous as they often are in the programmes that Diski dislikes. The violence that is shown is to the body, further underlining rape as a violent physical act.

In the final episode, the two women share a smoke together outside the house as a party for Catherine’s birthday goes on inside. The following dialogue troubles Diski’s reading of Ann as a victim and reiterates the way Wainwright presents a powerful alternative to victimisation.

Catherine: How are you coping?

Ann: I’m coping. I have to for my mother’s sake. Which is good. What happened says more about him than it will ever say about me. I’m not pregnant, I haven’t got Aids, so…

Catherine: That’s a good attitude. Women so often blame themselves, God knows why. But they do, it’s ridiculous, in almost every circumstance. You’re very rare. (S01, E06)

Ann frames her emotional recovery through the need to be there for her mother who is dying of cancer. It is not to say that she does not feel anger or injustice over what happened to her, but that family enables her to move forward.

Wainwright represents the end of Catherine’s emotional journey with Cawood at the top of a big hill overlooking the ‘happy valley’ (Halifax). She is seen surveying the landscape intercut with scenes from the series: a moment of love and affection between her and her grandson, when Tommy Lee Royce brutally attacks her, and finally when she captures him and saves her grandson – scenes that serve to remind the viewer of the emotional journey Catherine has been on and survived. Blending the landscape with memory reminds us of the way in which her identity, her sense of self, is woven into her sense of place, of being Northern. In this way she is intimately linked to the happy valley she comes from and belongs to.

Taking her up the hill serves as a powerful metaphor to reflect the journey she has undertaken and the emotional and physical abuse she has survived. It also serves to root her to the place and class she comes from. There is a sense of escape in going up the hill, but not one ‘down south’ or out of the North; indeed, it is to look over the valley, as if she has accomplished the challenge set for her. Counterpointing the opening aerial shot which pans down to locate Cawood, here the aerial shot contains her in the frame, linking her to place and a feeling of hope. As Williams writes: ‘Melodramatic heroes suffer injustice; sometimes they overcome it by brave deeds, and sometimes they simply show their virtue by continuing to suffer’ (2014, 5). Catherine manages to do the former, which is important not just in terms of imbuing her with heroine status, but also to suggest that she has found happiness. In so doing, Wainwright constructs a Northern ‘structure of feeling’ with ‘ever-changing emotions.’

**Heroic Women**

Wainwright continues in the tradition of British social realism in evoking anger and injustice as significant emotions that motivate a character to go on a journey to discover and confront the past or present. However, in choosing a woman as her central protagonist, she is giving women a voice, she is placing their concerns centre stage, which is an important development. The women in *Happy Valley* are far from victims, rather they heroically resolve complex feelings and find a deeper connection to the communities they live in. Wainwright’s use of a Northern landscape is significant as it simultaneously references the Northern, male anger from social realism and yet develops it, both through her use of female protagonists and in ending the story with hope that is tied to the landscape not outside of it. Her narratives work to root and strengthen her characters place in the North rather than to suggest that leaving or escaping will offer them a better life.

In an article titled ‘Northern Accent; women writers reflect on writing about the North,’ Wainwright explains that the term Northern evokes certain connotations: ‘It is about class or being old fashioned as well as warm and friendly. I am proud to write northern drama and it is about people who don’t think that the be and end all is to go and live in London’ (cited in Hyland, 2014). Wainwright’s choice of the words ‘warm’ and ‘friendly’ is interesting when thinking about how she uses emotion in a series which is more often gruesome, bleak and, at times, violent. And yet, there is a feeling of warmth constructed amongst the characters: of sisters who live together despite their difference in lifestyles, of a man and woman who still love each other despite ending their marriage, and friendship that cuts across class boundaries. While the opening scene might lead viewers to think of Catherine as ‘hard Northener,’ by the end of the series her ability to care and the lengths she will go to protect her community and family are nothing short of heroic.

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1. In her article titled ‘Northern Accent; women writers reflect on writing about the North,’ Bernadette Hyland argues that ‘It was only in the 1990s that television and theatre saw a real growth in women writers, many of them from the north, including Kay Mellor, Debbie Horsfield and Sally Wainwright’ (May 2014), <https://www.contributoria.com/issue/2014-05/531cbfded63a707e780001c3>, accessed 1 July 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The series came from Bleasdale’s 1980 drama, *The Black Stuff* [↑](#endnote-ref-2)