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Waits“

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Emanuel Riedmann

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Introduction

In his 40-year-long career, Tom Waits has gained a fine reputation as a musician, songwriter, poet and actor. His music has been nominated for an Oscar, three Grammys, of which he has been awarded two so far, and he was finally inducted in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2012. Waits' trademarks are his raspy growl of a voice, unorthodox musical arrangements and a concern for America's outcasts. Moreover, as several sources concur, he is a prolific storyteller (cf. Kessel 3; Jacobs 17, among others). Since this is apparently the case, it is surprising that narratological approaches to his work are almost non-existent.

In its vast majority, literature on Tom Waits is still biographical. There are several biographies, for example, *Wild Years – The Myth and Music of Tom Waits* (2006) by Jacobs, Humphries' *Small Change – A life of Tom Waits* (1989), and Hoskyns' *Lowside of the road – A life of Tom Waits* (2009). To this we might add Montandon's collection of interviews, *Innocent when you dream – Tom Waits: The Collected Interviews* (2005), as well as Maher's *Tom Waits on Tom Waits: Interviews and Encounters* (2011).

A few journal articles are obtainable, too. However, these analyses are either restricted to a single album, for example, Pesses' *What's he building in there? The existential geography of Tom Waits* (2011), which examines the album *Mule Variations* (1999). Or they examine very specific aspects but do not provide analyses of narratological elements. Solis' interesting article *Workin' hard, hardly workin' / Hey man, you know me: Tom Waits, Sound and the theatre of masculinity* (2007) certainly deserves to be mentioned here. Therefore, Kessel's *The Words and Music of Tom Waits* (2009) is the only analytical work which approaches Waits from a narratological angle.

In Kessel's analysis, "[the author's] goal is to demonstrate how Tom Waits' [...] music and evocative lyrics chronicle the daily lives and unravel the tangled memories of the lowlifes, misfits, and outcasts of society" (Kessel XIIV). Her work is certainly ambitious and comprehensive, as she includes every album Waits has released in his forty-year career until the date of her publication in 2009. However, because of the wide range of material, much of the narratological part of her analysis remains rather superficial. Furthermore, one searches in vain

for narratological works in her bibliography. Since Waits is renowned as a storyteller, a more profound analysis in terms of narratology seems appropriate.

Moreover, literature on Waits seems to focus too readily on his lowlife and vagabond image, which ultimately stems from his work in the seventies. Santoro's (2004) description of Waits echoes the same image again, calling him "[a] sort of Romantic barbarian seer who [...] sympathizes with the pregnant women and Vietnam vets begging on the freeways, steps into the cool and still graveyard for a nap, and then hunkers down with an old stray dog in front of the furniture store window to catch a little TV" (239). The reference to the "cool and still graveyard" rephrases a line from "Cold Water" (*Mule Variations*), released in 1999. That is, Waits' old image is imposed on his more recent work, without giving sufficient credit to developments and novelties.

This highlights the profound interest in Waits' on-stage persona and his image, which is also reflected in the large number of Waits biographies. However, such ready-made categorizations hardly do justice to the versatility and depth of his work. The same themes and characters may still appear on his albums, but for about twenty years now, Tom Waits has been dealing with a variety of new ones. With *Bone Machine* (1992) he started to ask "bigger questions" about life, as Kessel correctly points out, but then fails to elaborate on in more detail.

My goal is to provide a narratological analysis of character and space, and to examine the underlying worldviews in Waits' oeuvre. I will analyze aspects of his work which have been widely neglected so far, and also offer new views on more typical elements.

Considering the vast amount of biographical work that is already available, information on Waits' life will be restricted to what is necessary in order to facilitate a better understanding of the following analysis. Moreover, my goal is not to provide an analysis of the entire Waits oeuvre. Instead, this paper will focus on the studio albums released after *Swordfishtrombones* (1983), which constitutes a milestone in Waits' career, since he started to produce his records together with his wife, Kathleen Brennan. After 1983, his work becomes more self-determined. Waits endeavoured to break out of his barfly image of his previous work on this record, which often still determines the way his work is summarized. Thus,

excluding his previous work from this analysis may in fact help to gain new insights. Therefore, if further below I refer to “Waits’ oeuvre,” I will be referring to the period after *Swordfishtrombones*, unless indicated otherwise.

As will be examined in the third chapter, imperfection and flux are crucial notions in Waits. They can already be observed on the discourse level, which helps further underline these aspects on the story level too. This also applies to the binary pair permanence and transience, which is fundamental. “Recording for me is like photographing ghosts” (Montandon 317), Waits has said. That is, he considers making music as capturing, and thus making permanent, something ephemeral and transient. This dichotomy is also evident on the story level, as will be discussed in the following analysis.

Waits’ treatment of space in particular helps to understand this aspect. Therefore, a separate chapter will be dedicated to this story element. The creation of space will later help understand the creation of character. Change of space and the semantics of space often imply the emotional state of Waits’ protagonists. These insights will, in turn, be useful in the analyses of themes and worldviews further below.

Kessel’s analysis of Waits’ voice and music is superb and her work offers several useful insights. However, as has been mentioned above, her analysis of characters lacks a theoretical framework and academic depth. Hence, her work also ignores the fact that Waits’ characters are fictional constructs, rather than real-life people. Therefore, in my chapter on Waits’ protagonists I will also examine how they are characterized and apply the narratological theory outlined in chapter one. I will not include every character who falls into the respective categories. Instead I will focus on the most relevant examples and examine them in more depth. This approach should allow for a more substantial analysis.

One central aspect that the chapter on themes should help to illustrate is Waits’ ambiguity. With very few exceptions, he is constantly moving in a grey zone and avoids clarity or simple answers. Therefore, the worldviews conveyed in his work are similarly ambiguous. For my paper, I have decided to examine the dichotomy of religion versus nihilism first. This subchapter leads to the question whether human actions matter or not, whether the course of the world towards decay is

already predetermined, as in fatalism, or whether man is himself responsible. These opposing concepts are reminiscent of existentialism. Therefore, certain elements of this philosophy in Waits' work will be examined in the last subchapter.

1. Outline of theoretical framework

In order to provide an accurate (albeit short) biography of Tom Waits and an introduction to his work, I have consulted several sources. First of all, I have read two biographies, Jay S. Jacobs's *Wild Years* (2006) and Hoskyns' *Lowside of the road* (2009), which complement each other rather well. Kessel's study of *The words and music of Tom Waits* (2009) provides further biographical information and, additionally, includes valuable analyses of Waits' oeuvre. Santoro's work on American music and songwriters, *Highway 61 revisited* (2004), and a volume of Waits' interviews by Montandon, *Innocent when you dream* (2006) will help deepen our understanding of various aspects, especially later on in the third chapter. These sources will be complemented by the collected interviews and biographical information in the "Tom Waits library."¹ With this material the introduction to Waits' life and work will be sufficiently comprehensive for our purposes.

Waits' approach to creating art results in the discourse level's conveying two major elements of his work, that is, lowlife aesthetics and flux. The third chapter of this paper will thus shed some light on how Waits achieves these effects. For this purpose, I will consult the same sources I have mentioned above and add to them Watkin's fascinating article on "Musical Ecologies of Place and Placelessness" (2011) and Pesses' article on "The existentialist geography of Tom Waits" (2011).

Waits typically turns into art what is commonly overlooked, for instance, he puts outcast characters in his songs, uses dissonant noises and rare instruments. As he often turns everyday objects into instruments, Waits has referred to his musical approach as "organized chaos." Besides, Waits argues that songs are constantly

¹<http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/interviews.htm>
1

moving and have to be “caught” in order to be recorded (which they are allegedly not very fond of). In two subchapters these concepts will be examined and analyzed while some examples from his songs will be given, too.

Before starting to analyze character we must outline a theoretical framework for this analysis, too. Mostly, I will follow Chatman’s approach, which allows fictional characters to be open constructs, as opposed to words on a page (cf. Hardison qtd. in Chatman 117). Concerning Tom Waits’ work, it is certainly true that characters are often remembered independently from plot (Chatman 118) and works such as Kessel’s (2009) or my own show that there is a wide interest in his characters. Therefore, for our purposes

[a] viable theory of character should preserve openness and treat characters as autonomous beings, not as mere plot functions. It should argue that character is reconstructed by the audience from evidence announced or implicit in an original construction and communicated by the discourse, through whatever medium. (Chatman 119)

This approach permits a broader variety of interpretations than Hardison’s, since it allows the audience’s “real or fictive experience” (Chatman 120; also cf. Rimmon-Kenan 36) to be added. While Chatman does not further define the “line that separates the worthwhile from the trivial” in the process of interpretation (120), this analysis is wary of the danger of over-interpretation as well as the fact that we are not dealing with real-life people, but rather with artistic constructs that are “partly modelled on the reader’s conception of people and [thus] they are person-like” (Rimmon-Kenan 33). I shall therefore try not to indulge in psychological or speculative interpretations. Instead, I shall, first and foremost, focus on the information we gain from the lyrics. Furthermore it will be of concern what kind of information about the character we are given, in what way this information is presented and how these two parameters add depth and help construct open characters.

Concerning the distinction between character traits and “more ephemeral psychological phenomena, like feelings, moods, thoughts, temporary motives, attitudes and the like” (Chatman 126), the fact that we are dealing with relatively short lyrics rather than long narratives, makes our task somewhat more challenging. The possibility that we might be dealing with more ephemeral phenomena than an actual trait will be taken into account. In fact, this will be

given some attention in the last chapter on existentialism, where I will discuss cases of authenticity and alienation.

Besides, I will also distinguish between traits and story events, which has not been done elsewhere². As Chatman relies on Guilford's definition of a trait as "any distinguishable, *relatively* [emphasis added] enduring way in which one individual differs from another" (Guilford qtd. in Chatman 121), so will we. This will enable us to make a clearer distinction between events and traits and it will also allow us to analyze traits in the limited spatial frame of song lyrics.

While I consider the equation of traits and story events wrong and, for our purposes, even dull, since it would turn the analysis of a character into a mere retelling of the story, I am aware that actions serve as a means of character presentation. In fact, Waits' characters are often presented via actions, most of which are one-time actions (as opposed to habitual ones), which "tend to evoke the dynamic aspect of the character" (Rimmon-Kenan 61) and add the element of transience, which is highly prominent in Waits' work.

Since they are one-time actions, one may feel inclined to doubt in how far they imply actual character traits. However, Waits' characters are often dealing with difficult situations. Therefore, as Rimmon-Kenan argues, "although a one-time action does not reflect constant qualities [...], its dramatic impact often suggests that the traits it reveals are qualitatively [...] crucial" (61). In this analysis we will furthermore distinguish between acts of commission, acts of omission and contemplated acts (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 61-2), all three of which will prove crucial.

Occasionally, it is implied that we are dealing with a habitual action. That is, the description of a nocturnal excess, for instance, may appear a one-time action at first, and thus evoke the notion of transience. However, at the same time, we may encounter indications which reveal that we are dealing with a habitual action. Hence, it can be assumed that the character has indulged in this sort of excesses before, or that he will do so in the future. Thus, the somewhat classic dilemma of Tom Waits' characters is implied. That is, openly indulging in excesses, eschewing commitment and responsibility, they take refuge in escapism.

² Kessel's (2009) analysis of characters is ambitious, however, on several occasions it does not go beyond rephrasing the story events.

However, by doing so, they ultimately get permanently stuck in a world that seeks to avoid permanence. This paradox constitutes the vicious circle most of Waits' characters find themselves in: for some reason or another, they end up renouncing permanence in the form of domesticity and a socially accepted lifestyle and, instead, they seek to encounter permanence in transience. This may be in the form of the aforementioned escapism, or in other ways such as taking on a vagabond lifestyle they hope will never have to end.

Moreover, on numerous occasions, Waits' characters illustrate that acts of commission (that is, what is actually done) are always acts of omission, too. Their actions frequently originate in some sort of escapism. The immanent lack of determination, the characters' weaknesses displayed in the face of life's challenges, which often appear in the form of inter-personal relationships, ultimately catalyse the characters' escape in superficial distractions, or in a journey in order to leave the problems they are too weak to confront behind. The acts of omission thus condition the acts of commission, and what the character does not do may, on some occasions, be more telling than his or her actions.

On a more general level, we will also distinguish between indirect presentations and direct definitions of characters. The latter certainly constitute a special case in Waits' work. One may almost establish the rule that if they abound in a song, either the character or the narrator cannot be trusted. For instance, in "What's he building?" (*Mule Variations*, 1999), we are provided with numerous direct descriptions of the narrator-character's neighbour. The eerie atmosphere and suspicion created by his listing one enigmatic rumour after another, is eventually turned around on the narrator-character himself, as the listener realizes that the most suspicious and alarming character is not the neighbour in question, but the very narrator-character uttering the description. Bearing in mind Waits' general elusiveness, it seems strangely coherent that direct definitions in his songs are hardly trustworthy. In fact, sometimes the direct definition of the character becomes invalid and turns into an indirect presentation of the narrator-character instead (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 64).

In my analysis of characters I shall not use the distinction between “flat” and “round” ones. Clearly, the limited spatial frame of song lyrics requires a more sensitive classification. Some of Waits’ characters may not develop throughout the song, however, their traits and actions imply complexity. On other occasions, we may learn much about a character’s thoughts and deepest feelings, however, there is little complexity, nor development in his character. Therefore, I will use Ewen’s model of a continuum along the three axes “complexity,” “development” and “penetration into inner life” (cf. Ewen, 1972, p.71; or 1980, pp.33-44; qtd. in Rimmon-Kenan 41), for a more appropriate character classification.

Another crucial distinction to be made is the one between actual characters and setting-elements³. In Waits, very often a supposed character is named or described, but this alone does not make him or her an actual character. These “characters” do not participate in the action, they do not reoccur, nor are they important to the plot. They are only briefly referred to, as if the camera were moving through the room and one could see, for an instance, some curious characters filling the scene. Therefore, they are rather “part of the ambience in which a character finds himself” (Chatman 139). Waits uses them to set the mood of the song, to create an environment for his characters. The environment they find themselves in, alongside other elements such as the characters’ external appearances, often help characterize his protagonists (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 65-6). Yet, although some of the aforementioned “setting-characters” might, for instance, reflect a character’s mental state in some cases, they are certainly not characters in their own right.

If further above I have made a comparison with cinematographic space, we must be aware that “space in fiction is different from space in the visual arts” (Stanzel, qtd. in Jahn N5.2.) because its incomplete representation requires the reader to “complete the ‘verbal picture’ by imagining the rest” (Jahn N6.1). Waits is rather fond of the creative process that the act of completing incomplete or distorted input constitutes. We will therefore examine how Waits creates space by describing elements of the setting, which is often achieved by the mention of supposed characters.

³ Kessel does not make this distinction, for instance, in her chapter “Human Oddities” (105-110), although it would be very appropriate.

Since many of Waits' characters are related to travel and travel can essentially be defined as movement through space, a separate chapter will be dedicated to the treatment of "space" in the sense of "the environment characters move or live in" (Jahn N6.2). First of all, via a close reading the main reasons for change of space will be defined and analyzed. The search for love and a home where one is understood, but also escapism or chasing someone are three major motives.

The second subchapter will be dedicated to the semantics of space. I will follow the methodology of gathering isotopies, which Jahn considers "the most promising approach" (N6.4) in this respect. The oppositional spaces "city-countryside" will be examined, paying special attention to Waits's treatment of rural settings. The main focus will be on the pair "transitional space – permanent space," which is essential to Waits' work. Marc Augé's concept of "non-places" will be of importance for this chapter. He defines a non-place as "a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (Augé 77-8), which particularly accounts for "rail and motorway routes, [...] trains and road vehicles, [...] railway stations, hotel chains" (Augé 79). These non-places account for a large share of Waits's literary spaces.

For the analysis of space, Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976) provides a useful theoretical framework, too. Especially, his concepts of *insideness* and *outsideness*.

If a person feels inside a place, he or she is here rather than there, safe rather than threatened, enclosed rather than exposed, at ease rather than stressed. Relph suggests that the more profoundly inside a place a person feels, the stronger will be his or her identity with that place. (Seamon and Sowers 45)

On the other hand, when someone feels "separate or alienated from place [the] mode of place experience is called *outsideness*" (Seamon and Sowers 45). Many of Waits' characters seem to struggle with feeling inside a place. Sometimes they experience this sensation while they are, in fact, in a non-place like the road, for instance. On other occasions, they fail to achieve feeling inside a place and realize that they only do so in a non-place, or transitional space, that is. Examples of this can be found throughout Waits' career. Interestingly, however, in his later career we find examples of characters who endeavour to combine domesticity (permanent space) with an itinerary lifestyle (transitional space).

In the fifth chapter of this paper, several themes in Waits' work will be analyzed. "A theme refers outward to the world of real-life experience" (Chatman *Reading Narrative Fiction* 273) and since it is experience-related, different people may identify different themes in the same work (cf. Chatman *Reading Narrative Fiction* 274). I am aware that my selection somewhat differs from the themes dealt with elsewhere. This is done on purpose, since the aim of chapter five is equally to analyze "old" themes from a new perspective and to shed some light on rather neglected ones. Following Chatman's theory, one song may bear several themes and may thus appear in several chapters, too.

The last chapter will focus on the worldviews one can deduce from Waits' work. As the world in Waits' songs is one in constant flux, there is not only one, but several worldviews that can be observed. The first two points will be treated as a continuum, rather than strictly defined notions. The chapter entitled "Between religion and nihilism" on the one hand examines Waits' religious gospel songs, for example. On the other hand, bleaker songs will be considered, ranging from questioning God's actions, to doubting his existence and to nihilist elements which imply the absence of a meaning to life.

"Between fatalism and responsibility" again examines a continuum between two radically opposed worldviews. By "fatalism" I understand the notion "that our human nature dooms individuals or human beings as a group to be stuck in our situations" (Panza and Gale 172). Thus, since changing our situation is beyond our power, the concept of responsibility is rendered futile. This notion is opposed by songs that express very strong feelings about responsibility. These may take form in a father worrying about the safety of his children, or of political criticism, as in anti-war songs.

Finally, I will provide an existentialist reading of Waits' oeuvre. Several existentialist notions will be examined, such as the absurdity of life, the feelings of alienation and forlornness, as well as the issue of authenticity. For this chapter I have consulted an anthology of existentialist writings (Marino 2004) as well as two concise introductory works by Cox, Panza and Gale, and I will mostly follow Sartre's nomenclature.

2. Tom Waits

2.1. A short biography of Thomas Alan Waits

I was born at a very young age in the backseat of a yellow cab in the Murphy Hospital parking lot in Whittier, California. It's not easy for a young boy growing up in Whittier. I had to make decisions very early. First thing I did was pay, like, a buck eighty-five on the meter. As soon as I got out of the cab I went out looking for a job. The only job I could land was as labor organizer at a maternity ward for a while. I got laid off, got a little disenchanted with labor. (Jacobs 19)

As this often quoted remark shows, the little information Tom Waits has given about his personal life lacks factual value.⁴ Hence, giving an accurate account of Tom Waits' life is a somewhat difficult enterprise. Too many myths and only rather few facts about his life turn it into a hard task. Hoskyns's difficulties with finding interview partners for his biography "Lowside of the Road – A life of Tom Waits" (2009) already speak volumes about Waits' control over his privacy (and myth) (Hoskyns 505-9). In his 2006 biography "Wild years – The myth and music of Tom Waits" Jacobs goes as far as assuming that "even the County of Los Angeles seems to be in on the conspiracy, accepting payment for a copy of Waits' birth certificate but failing to deliver it" (Jacobs 19).

Concerning Waits' birth, its announcement in the the *Pamona Progress-Bulletin* remains one of the few reliable sources biographers are left to work with. According to this document Waits was born on December 7th in 1949 at the Park Avenue Hospital (Hoskyns 6). The above story about being born in a taxi is, nonetheless, revealing in other respects, which will be discussed in chapter four.

Waits was the second of three children (and the only son) of Jesse Frank and Alma Waits. Frank had Scottish and Irish ancestors, and Alma's family was from Norway (Jacobs 20). They were very different in character. Alma was a rather conventional, domestic and church-going 'hausfrau.' Frank, who was named after the legendary gangster brothers Jesse and Frank James, was "a boozier [and] a roving romantic" (Hoskyns 7). With roving alcoholics on one side of his family and "evangelists" (Hoskyns 7) on the other, "[i]t's tempting to see the warring sides of Tom Waits' character in the unlikely pairing of his parents' marriage" (Hoskyns 7): transience on one side and domesticity on the other side.

⁴ Both Hoskyns (6) and Kessel (1) mention similar anecdotes told by Waits, which apparently date back to a concert in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1976.

Contrary to the lowlife characters he would make up later in his life, he grew up as a middle-class child in Whittier, California, his parents were both school teachers. They divorced when he was nine or ten. However, contrary to several allusions Waits himself has made about his father's leaving the family without giving them notice of his whereabouts⁵, Tom and Frank Waits remained in contact at least to some extent (cf. Jacobs 23; also cf. Hoskyns 232). After the divorce Alma Waits moved to Chula Vista, California, with her children. "There, Waits became indoctrinated into a whole new world. He started hanging out with adults: pool hustlers, vinyl-booted go-go dancers, traveling salesmen, and assorted gangsters" (Jacobs 23). He learned to play the piano and the guitar, enjoyed listening to old records and conversing with his neighbours' fathers (Gilbert 334). Apparently, "[f]rom an early (or at least pre-adolescent) age, Tom seems to have wanted to be older – *much* older – than he was" (Hoskyns 15; see also Gilbert 334).

As a teenager, he started devouring the Beats (Hoskyns 25), who "renounc[ed] middle-class shibboleths, assert[ed] brotherhood with the poor, the oppressed" (Hoskyns 36). He dropped out of high school and took on a series of jobs as what he referred to as "the jack-off of all trades" (Kessel 2), some of which he worked into the song "I can't wait to get off work" (*Small Change*). Thus, meeting peculiar characters and overhearing conversations, Waits found much of the material he would later write about in his songs (cf. Kessel 2). Also, he discovered alcohol very early (Hoskyns 35).

In his work as a doorman at the Heritage Club in San Diego he got in touch with a variety of musical styles and realized he wanted to "live or die on the strength of [his] own music" (Kessel 2). Performing at the Troubadour in Los Angeles in 1972, Waits met Frank Zappa manager Herb Cohen, who signed him for Asylum Records and secured Waits his first record deal (Kessel 2).

During the seventies he released several critically acclaimed albums, made himself a name as an outstanding songwriter and achieved a cult following. "His performance persona was truly that of a drunken bohemian singer-songwriter, a consummate bar entertainer, sitting behind the dusty piano or cracked guitar at the

⁵ Cf. Hoskyns, 3, 18.

back of the bar telling stories about real people with real lives and real struggles” (Kessel 3). The onstage alter-ego Waits had created turned out to be very bad for his health and suffocating in terms of creative freedom.

On the turn of that decade Waits was looking for a way to change his music dramatically. Working on the soundtrack for *One from the Heart* (released in 1982), Waits met Kathleen Brennan and the couple married shortly after. Brennan had a profound effect on Waits’ music⁶. The first album they produced together, 1983’s *Swordfishtrombones*, stands out as a milestone and radical change in Waits’ career. Musically, it was a major development and a rather self-conscious break with his earlier records⁷. On a different level, Waits learned that it was not necessary for him to live like a vagabond in order to convincingly sing about one. Waits started to use “an actor’s skill to give depth and complexity to the dysfunctional and emotionally bruised characters of his songs” (Kessel 5). He became quite heavily involved with the theatre, even staged a play himself at the Steppenwolf theatre in Chicago (1986), took on several roles in movies, most memorably one of the leading roles in Jim Jarmusch’s *Down by Law* (1986).

The eighties also bore several major changes in Waits’ private life. First, he married Kathleen Patricia Brennan in 1980⁸ and in 1983 and 1985, respectively, their first two children, Kellesimone and Casey Xavier, were born. After spending most of the past two decades in Los Angeles and New York, respectively, in 1992 Waits and his family finally moved to the country, that is, Petaluma County (Northern California)⁹.

While much of his work in the seventies was in some way or another related to the lifestyle he led at the infamous Tropicana Hotel, family life certainly had an effect on Waits. During the eighties he took on acting as a means to avoid “becoming” one of his characters in real life, which would not have combined well with family life at all. In the nineties he discovered new subject matters and techniques. Instead of bar conversations newspaper clippings became a source of inspiration.

⁶ Later Waits would argue that “[m]ost of the significant changes I went through musically and as a person began when [Kathleen and I] met” (see Kessel 6).

⁷ For instance, on the second track (Shore Leave) Waits uses a chair dragged over a concrete floor as an instrument.

⁸ <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/timeline1976-1980.html>

⁹ <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/timeline1991-1995.html>

To some extent, one might say that Waits widened his vision to tackle bigger themes, too. He started to use biblical references. Death, destruction (cf. Kessel 8) and obsession became more prominent. Not inconceivably, his collaborations with Robert Wilson informed some of these changes. Moreover, living in the country, he explored some of rural life's eerier sides.

In the 2000s Waits' popularity continued to grow. Certainly, his Grammys as well as his movie roles helped him become more widely known. Creatively, some argue that they were not Waits' best years and Hoskyns even claims that he seemed nothing less than "stuck" (Hoskyns 481). In 2011, however, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and released the critically acclaimed album *Bad as Me*. It has also been his fastest selling record to this date and earned him another Grammy nomination for Best Alternative Album¹⁰.

Despite his growing popularity, Waits has managed not to become a "mainstream" artist of the sorts of Bruce Springsteen, for instance, and retains an "underground" quality (cf. Pesses 55). Already in 1987, Robert Sabbag from *The Los Angeles Times* subtitled his Waits story "Rock's scavenger songwriter has become a legend in his own spare time" (Montandon 65-75). That is, while he shuns the limelight, Waits has had a constant cult following since the beginnings of his career. Since his songs are hardly aired, his music is often passed on directly from one person to another, and as Pesses jokingly concludes "you have serious hipster credibility if you have Tom Waits on your iPod" (Pesses 55).

2.2. A brief introduction to his work

Waits' musical career started in 1973 with the release of *Closing Time*. In his music he combined various genres such as blues, jazz and folk, always with his trademark growl of a voice. In the following ten years Waits created the legendary on-stage persona that many people keep associating with his name: an entertaining, mumbling drunk, a "skid-row night-lifer" (Jacobs blurb), singing about America's outcasts, old diners and broken hearts. In those years, Waits and the characters in his songs "[became] dangerously similar," since "he was still avidly cultivating his romanticized 'slumped in the gutter with a bottle of whiskey

¹⁰ http://www.tomwaits.com/news/article/193/Tom_Waits_Grammy_Nomination/

and a book of poetry' image for audiences, interviewers, and even himself" (Kessel 76).

The big transformation occurred ten years after *Closing Time*. In 1983 Tom Waits took full control over his music and produced his first album together with his wife Kathleen Brennan. On the one hand, this step may have been motivated by the fight Waits and his manager Herb Cohen had gotten into over the "sorry state of [Waits'] personal finances" (Jacobs 115). However, another, maybe more important reason, was the new musical direction he would take on *Swordfishtrombones* (cf. Jacobs 116-7).

This release divides Waits' career into two parts. Apparently owing to Brennan's influence, "Waits becomes less 'working man,' more 'circus freak' [...] and it should be noted that in addition to a new concern for absurd and surreal thematics, and the use of startlingly new textures and instrumental sounds, Waits began expanding the range of voice types on his recordings" (Solis 46). Brennan also introduced him to the music of Captain Beefheart, who informed much of his work¹¹.

During the 1980s Waits not only released three albums to high critical acclaim, but he also became more involved with acting. Apart from his own stage play *Frank's Wild Years* (1986), he also performed in the play *Demon Wine* (1989) (Kessel 140). Moreover, he took on several movie roles, thus working together with movie icons such as Francis Ford Coppola¹², Jim Jarmusch¹³, Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep¹⁴. These acting experiences certainly influenced Waits' career in music business (Kessel 5).

In the nineties, Waits achieved some of the biggest successes of his career. He won a Grammy in the category Best Alternative Music for his 1992 album *Bone Machine* and another one for his 1999 album *Mule Variations* for Best Contemporary Folk Music¹⁵. He also worked together with avant-garde theatre director Robert Wilson and Beat icon William S. Burroughs on a musical version

¹¹ Jacobs even considers *Swordfishtrombones* a sort of "tribute to Captain Beefheart" (116).

¹² *One from the Heart* (1982), *The Outsiders* (1983), *Rumblefish* (1983), *Cotton Club* (1984).

¹³ *Down by Law* (1986), *Mystery Train* (1989).

¹⁴ *Ironweed* (1987).

¹⁵ He was awarded this Grammy the year after the album's release.

of “Der Freischütz,” named *The Black Rider* (1990)¹⁶. Two years later, again with Wilson, he collaborated on the play *Alice* (1992), which “was based on the relationship between the Reverend Charles Dodgson and Alice Liddell, otherwise known as Lewis Carroll and Alice in Wonderland” (Kessel 9). The Waits family grew with Sullivan’s birth in 1993, and also expanded financially, with the album *Mule Variations* (1999) being Waits’ biggest commercial success so far, entering the American billboard charts on the 30th place (Kessel 10).

In 2000 Waits and Brennan once again teamed up with Wilson for a production of Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* (1837) in Copenhagen, Denmark. The play was restaged with much success in 2010¹⁷. His 2004 album *Real Gone* entered the Billboard charts at number 28 and thus beat the commercial success of 1999’s *Mule Variations* (Kessel 12). The song “Metropolitan Glide” earned Waits a nomination for the Grammy in the category Best Solo Rock Vocal Performance (Jacobs 213). Despite this nomination and the commercial success, critical reviews were “lukewarm” for the first time after *Nighthawks at the Diner* (1975) (Jacobs 215).

His next album, the three CD-box *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers and Bastards* (2006) was a collection of 56 songs, most of them old unreleased ones but also several new ones. It brought together almost all musical styles that Waits had purged for himself. As it often happens with such ambitious projects, some fillers tend to end up in the final work, too. According to Hoskyns, those “songs [on *Orphans* which were] recorded in the aftermath of *Real Gone* [...] confirmed what much of *Real Gone* itself had intimated, which was that Waits was stuck in a kind of self-parodying primitivism” (481).

Thus, it can be argued that *Orphans*, although monumental in its dimension, betrays some sort of creative stagnation, as apart from old and unreleased songs it contains the aforementioned “self-parodying” new tracks. As a consequence, Waits may at times seem lost in his own little niche, unable to break out of the role he has written for himself.

¹⁶ There were over thirty productions in seven different languages according to Kessel (9), and one more counting Victor Álvarez’s production in Catalan at Barcelona’s Almeria Teatre which I had the pleasure to see and interview Álvarez. See <http://www.almeriateatre.com/blackrider.htm>.

¹⁷ <http://www.abendblatt.de/kultur-live/article1354442/Purer-Existenzkampf-durchs-soziale-Netz-gefallen.html>.

Nevertheless, at the same time, his acting career moved on rather well with roles in Jim Jarmusch's *Coffee and Cigarettes* (2003), Roberto Begnini's *La Tigre e la Neve* (2005), Goran Dukic's independent movie *Wristcutters: A love story* (2006), and in Heath Ledger's last on-screen appearance, *The Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009) by Terry Gilliam.

In early 2011 Waits was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and, later that year, he released *Bad as Me*, his fastest selling album to this date, to raving reviews¹⁸. One may argue that the induction has finally turned Waits into one of pop cultures' 'sacred cows' once and for all. Musically, the album is outstanding. However, it lacks the spirit of invention of other Waits albums. As guitarist Marc Ribot said about the recordings it was less about creating something "without precedent" and more like "let's rock the house"¹⁹. The album is certainly more accessible and less dark than *Real Gone*²⁰. It is neither a creative milestone like *Swordfishtrombones*, nor does it show Waits breaking out of his usual pattern. Still, it is arguably Waits playing Waits at his best, managing to combine many of his styles on one short, accessible album.

2.3. Presentation of albums to be considered

This analysis will primarily focus on the studio albums between 1983 and 2011, leaving out live albums and soundtracks. Theatre collaborations will not be of primary concern, while references will be made to the extent that these albums introduce new concepts to Waits' oeuvre.

The three albums *Swordfishtrombones* (1983), *Rain Dogs* (1985) and *Frank's Wild Years* (1987) form a trilogy, as they are tied together by similar sound, themes and characters. First and foremost, *Swordfishtrombones* presents a sonic revolution within Waits' music. Most characters on the album are still sailors, soldiers or criminals. Waits works in some novelties, nevertheless. Most remarkably, the character of Frank, who recurs on the following two albums, here appears for the first time. He is certainly the character to whom most scholarly

¹⁸ <http://www.tomwaits.com/news/?page=3>

¹⁹ <http://www.tomwaits.com/news/?page=3>

²⁰ <http://www.tomwaits.com/news/?page=3>

attention has been given so far. Frank is Waits' most developed character since he is also the protagonist of Waits' and Brennan's theatre production *Frank's Wild Years* (1986). Moreover, *Swordfishtrombones* features what Waits would later refer to as "a preacher waving a gun around" ("Shake it", 2004), that is, a new character type: an evangelist. Also, he explores middle-class suburbia for the first time after a decade of working-class nostalgia.

On *Rain Dogs* (1985) we find the usual share of sailors, criminals and drunks again. Yet, for the first time "family" serves as a song topic. Death becomes more prominent a theme, too, this time. The album also features a merciless image of dog-eat-dog vagabonds, which is a far cry from Waits' typical idealizations of life on the road. Furthermore, family life shows its first effects on Waits, as he works nursery rhymes into several of his songs.

As has been mentioned above, *Frank's Wild Years* (1987) is the album of the eponymous 1986 theatre play, featuring the attempts of Frank O'Brien at becoming a successful entertainer. Since this character has already been given much attention in other works (Kessel 99-105), he will not be of too much concern to us. Waits conjures up another evangelist, and the themes temptation, frustration and escapism do not present big novelties either. However, both the "small-town dreamer" and the attempt at a career in entertainment business are two concepts Waits has worked into many different songs since *Frank's Wild Years*.

The Grammy-winning album *Bone Machine* (1992) shows Waits at his darkest, dealing with apocalypse²¹, death and suicide, nihilism and a general atmosphere of *homo homini lupus est*. It bears several surrealist lyrics, something Waits started to work with in the 80s. Some of these describe an eerie femme fatale, a character type Waits uses on later albums, too. There is, again, a dreamer planning to make it big in entertainment. A strange kind of believer is featured, too, in one of Waits' first religious parodies. For the first time Waits explores rural life, and he addresses the issue of runaway children. Transience thus receives negative connotations as soon as children are concerned, which is a concept Waits will develop further on later albums. Besides, Waits delivers an ode to "individuality

²¹ For an interesting discussion of this issue, see Angela Jones' article "Musical Apocalypse: Tom Waits' *Bone Machine*".

and the strength of the human essence” (Kessel 74). It is also important to notice that newspaper clippings have come to work as a new source of inspiration for the lyrics.

On *Mule Variations* (1999) Waits works with many similar concepts. Again, there is a parody on entertainment business and on religion, a femme fatale, and a runaway girl. It is noteworthy, however, that Waits not only focuses on rural life this time, but also that the concept of ‘home’ is more prominent. After Tom Waits, his characters, too, seem to “[find] identity, home, and permanence” (Kessel 119).

On the double-release of theatre collaborations, *Alice* and *Blood Money* (both 2002), Waits explores darker themes again. There is a lot of obsessive and unhealthy love, surrealism, freaks and even a song sung from the grave on *Alice*. *Blood Money* is still much bleaker, embracing nihilism and, especially, fatalism.

The album *Real Gone* (2004), again, deals with entertainment business and circus freaks. There is yet another song sung from the grave and Waits deals with the uncanny secrets hidden beneath the surface of rural life. The big novelty on this album are the anti-war songs that are featured and which, for the first time in Waits’ career, express the artist’s discontent with the country’s decision makers and the Bush administration in particular.

The three-CD collection *Orphans: Brawlers, Bawlers and Bastards* (2006) features many variations of known themes and kinds of characters. However, one may argue that there is nothing new on it in this respect. On Waits’ *Bad as Me* (2011), we find familiar subjects once again. Yet, the juxtaposition of transience - permanence regains importance with attempts at combining the two. While there is again some concern with death, there are also very positive and life-affirming pieces, and after years of obsessive and unhealthy love relationships and femmes fatales, Waits explores the “healing” power of “a good woman’s love”.

3. Discourse: selected elements

3.1. Organized chaos

“It’s like history. What you choose to ignore is part of the history as well.”

– Tom Waits (*Wilonski* 217)

Waits has called his own music “organized chaos,” an interesting paradox that deserves closer scrutiny. “Chaos” here may refer to any sort of noise we might hear. Through clever arrangements these noises are then incorporated into music. As Waits told *The New York Times* “everything is really music—words are music, every sound is music, it all depends on how it's organized” (Sipal 268).

This point already makes reference to an important peculiarity of Waits’ style. What is ignored, broken, thrown away or considered unworthy of attention in general, is the raw material of Waits’ creative process. His characters are usually outsiders, vagabonds or even criminals. Waits incorporates them into his art and he does the same with noises. That is, he turns found objects which are not commonly used in a musical context into instruments. There is a chair on “Shore Leave” (*Swordfishtrombones*), a chest of drawers on “Singapore” (Rain Dogs) and an old door on “Heigh-Ho” (Orphans), to name but a few examples. Waits puts it this way:

I use things we hear around all the time, built and found instruments – things that aren’t normally considered instruments: dragging a chair across the floor or hitting the side of a locker real hard with a two-by-four, a freedom bell, a brake drum with a major imperfection, a police bullhorn. [...] You know, I don’t like straight lines. The problem is that most instruments are square and music is always round. (Oney 150)

Thus, Waits opens his creative spectrum to what is usually ignored by most other artists and creates a rather unique sound. What seems to compel him about this approach is an important aspect of chaos. It is the absence of clear rules, comparable to the wild freedom of outcasts, being exempt from etiquette and rules of conduct. After all, everyone is familiar with the way a conventional instrument like the piano is supposed to sound like. But what about a chair? Clearly, this approach opens up an entirely new field and infinitely more creative ground to work on.

Waits seems to find a part of this freedom in states of transition or of becoming. For example, Waits has uttered his fascination for “things as they begin” (Oney 151), since there are no established rules or conventions yet. Hence, there is more creative freedom. “It’s what you don’t know that’s usually more interesting. Things you wonder about, things you have yet to make up your mind about” (Black 53). Although he is clearly a perfectionist, Waits embraces the uncontrollable, he enjoys getting lost and disoriented since one tends to discover new places one has not been to before, both literally and figuratively speaking.²²

In order to get lost on purpose, Waits relies on the creative potential of mistakes. Waits has said that “[m]ost things begin as a mistake. Most breakthroughs in music come out of a revolution of the form. Someone revolted, and was probably not well liked. But he ultimately started his own country” (Rowland 91). Not surprisingly, Waits is known for telling his musicians to make mistakes on purpose (Hoskyns 329).

The question then arises, why would a perfectionist like Tom Waits do this to his own music? Waits seems to believe that perfection is rather closed and sterile. That is, it cannot be varied, since to do so would mean to destroy it. Imperfection, on the contrary, is open to change and modification, in the fashion of an oral tradition, as in folk songs, for instance. If something is incomplete, there are gaps that can still be filled with personal experiences and feelings, for instance, thus changing the song’s meaning and keeping it alive and relevant at the same time.

Waits has repeatedly mentioned that “he’s fascinated by music he doesn’t quite hear properly,” when it comes from far away and is mixed with street noises and the like, “because so much of what he hears has to be imagined” (Pick 160). The listener thus becomes more of a participant. To Waits, perfection clearly does not offer this kind of involvement.

Furthermore, Waits’ approach of different noises and music mingling together is similar to the cut-up method established by William S. Burroughs with whom Waits worked together on Wilson’s *The Black Rider*. In Burroughs’ cut-up method “text and image fragments are intuitively pieced together.” He used this

²² For instance, he would drive the car while his wife would randomly tell him where to make a turn until they get lost (cf. Hoskyns 246).

technique to form open associative narrative structures in order to expand the boundaries of language and describe human consciousness.”²³ His record of audio cut-ups, *Dead City Radio*, was released on *Island Records* in 1990, when Waits’ still had a contract with this label himself. Waits must have been familiar with the beat icon’s work. His observations about the soundscape in New York show that his approach is very similar to Burroughs’.

The types of things you hear while you’re here . . . if you remember them and put them together it’s real international— if you’re listening. I usually enjoy things that I misinterpret. When you hear music through a wall. You’ve missed a couple of beats and the words aren’t what they are but you hear them and you think that’s what it is. That happens a lot in New York cause you’re hearing everything filtered through things.²⁴

This is essentially the same approach. However, Burroughs puts his cut-ups together himself, while by the very nature of his medium (sound), Waits’ cut-ups are more accidental, because one cannot control what one hears in the same way that text fragments can be picked up and rearranged. Furthermore, Waits emphasizes the element of error, or flaw. For example, the parts of a song that are misheard become the most interesting elements in Waits’ cut-ups. They constitute a creative process, since the listener’s brain fills in the missing parts itself, which is maybe the most important process of human perception. Or the listener must try to complete the information himself.

The bits that have to be imagined thus constitute a creative process triggered by wonder, which, according to Aristotle’s metaphysics, is the very beginning of philosophy. Waits believes that “nowadays there seems to be a deficit of wonder” (Lanham 392), and, apparently, he endeavours to bring back some of it in his own way. In the computer age of Google search everyone can find answers to almost anything within seconds. Waits is not so keen on the answer itself, instead he wants people “to wonder about it” (Lanham 392). Much wonder has always been created by the question of truth. It only seems coherent from this point of view, that Waits constantly moves between fact and fiction. He lists odd information about animals in “Army Ants” (*Orphans*), bizarre US-state laws on his *Glitter and Doom Tour 2008* (*Glitter and Doom live*), all of which appear too grotesque to be

²³ <http://www.kunsthallewien.at/cgi-bin/event/event.pl?id=4625&lang=en>

²⁴ Barney Hoskyns, “The Marlowe of the Ivories,” *New Musical Express* 25 May 1985: 28–31, qtd. in Jacobs 126.

real. His interview answers are only rarely to the point. Consequently, Adam Sweeting from the *Guardian* concludes, “It’s the bits Tom Waits leaves out of his conversation that are the most fascinating. His answers are like shapes drawn in the sand with a stick. You have to guess what’s in the middle” (Sweeting 162).

Neither perfection nor truth seem to be nearly as interesting as their counterparts, nor their counterparts as intriguing as the uncertainties that lie in between. “I believe in the mysteries of things, about myself and the things I see. I enjoy being puzzled and arriving at my own incorrect conclusions” (Rowland 118). The Romantic poet John Keats once wrote in a letter, “[...] at once it struck me, what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason” (Keats 77). According to Hoskyns, Keats’ words certainly apply to Waits (493).

In Waits’ organized-chaos approach a concept that he refers to as “the hair in the gate” serves as a crucial technique. The movie term he learned from through his collaborations with Keith Richards actually refers “to hairs or other objects getting in to the ‘gate’ of a film projector and thus appearing on screen” (Hoskyns 349). The effect that this may cause is that “[s]uddenly, that small imperfection holds more fascination than the film itself, but then, as quickly as it has come, the hair vanishes. And for a moment the audience misses it” (qtd. in Jacobs 168).

Hence, Waits endeavours to deliberately work imperfections into his music, since they may later become the centre part of a song, just like the hair that appears on screen may become the protagonist in the movie for a short time. While Waits admits that “sometimes it’s just distraction. [He claims that other] times it’s imperative” (Rowland 96). Examples, other than the aforementioned choice of unorthodox instruments, may include the percussion on the album *Bone Machine*, which music journalist Steve Pick calls “(to put it mildly) loose, though oddly compelling” (Pick 160), the piano that already tends to be slightly out of tune on his earlier records. In order to break with old patterns and structures, he likes to use instruments he does not understand (Rowland 110, Pick 160, Wilonsky 223). Waits explains this approach by drawing a parallel to painting, “I think it’s good to kind of surprise yourself sometimes. [...] I’ve got a friend who’s a painter who

wears glasses. He goes out in the woods, takes off his glasses, and draws, you know, ‘cause everything looks different” (Wilonsky 223).

Furthermore, Waits works with recording techniques where he “push[es] the track into the room through Auratone speakers and then mike[s] that” (Rowland 119) in order to add room sound, or he records in places that are not completely soundproofed, thus allowing environment sounds to enter the recording room (Jacobs 164). And of course there is his voice. It started out as a regular folk voice²⁵, but Waits has learned how to turn it into an incomparable “[croak] that could guide ships through dense fog” (O’Brien 75), according to Glenn O’Brien from SPIN magazine. All of these aspects create the impression of imperfection on purpose. Mistakes that are usually cut out from the final result, objects that are not commonly accepted as part of the world of music and are thus ignored, all find their way into art through Waits’ arrangements.

3.2. Catching songs

“Place nurtures music, and music nurtures place, but music just as easily flees the roost, consigning its place of origin to a distant memory. [...] [M]usic is forever moving in place” (Watkins 408).

If transience is a prominent theme in Tom Waits’ work on the story level, it also plays a major role in his approach to songwriting and music in general. For Waits, music is always related to movement in space. He explains part of this approach as follows, “when you think about how songs were written, how they were kept alive before the recording industry, that to me is fascinating” (Brown 436). That is, he is referring to a time when songs were part of an oral tradition, before music could actually occupy a physical place such as a record, for example. Songs were nowhere physical, yet they were there in people’s cultural memory. “From the earliest notated chants to wandering minstrels to mp3 files, music has been caught in a continuous cycle of displacement and re-placement for as long as its history can be reconstructed” (Watkins 408). Hence, a song is in itself another manifestation of permanent transience.

²⁵ Cf. the collection of early material on *Early Years Vol. I & II*.

In Waits' work, everything tends to be in flux. To Waits' music seems always related to movement and he develops this aspect on various levels. Almost all the characters in his songs lead an itinerant lifestyle. What is more, space and movement through space are a major concern on the story level. Furthermore, Waits often expresses movement through his musical arrangements, too. The effect of the loose percussion on *Bone Machine*, for instance, "is similar to listening to street recordings of parade music, where the sounds build slowly, come together and then pass by" (Pick 160). Moreover, on "Clang Boom Steam" (*Real Gone*) and "Gospel Train" (*The Black Rider*), "Waits attempts to recreate the actual sound of a locomotive" (Kessel 95).

It is also worth mentioning here that songs have the ability to let the listener travel, as they "[create] 'the sense of being within a particular time and space'" (Grimley qtd. in Watkins 405), and apparently Waits goes to great lengths endeavouring to develop and express this aspect in great detail.

What is more, to Waits even songs that have not been written are in constant movement, as if they had a life of their own. According to him, they have to be "caught" (cf. Sabbag 66, Oney 155, Lloyd 229) in order to be recorded, which they dislike (Gill 49). What may initially only appear a rather spiritual view on the world in general betrays an interesting concept of inspiration and creativity. That is, by maintaining that songs have to be "caught" and that they have a will of their own, Waits turns the process of inspiration into something external rather than internal, thus minimizing creative pressure and responsibility.

Success author Elisabeth Gilbert once interviewed Waits (see Montandon 333-354). In her TED-talk "Your elusive creative genius" on creativity and inspiration, she recounts an anecdote that changed Waits' approach to creativity and made him externalize part of the process. While driving, Waits suddenly has a melody in his head, an idea for a song, but he is unable to write it down or record it.

So he starts to feel all of that old anxiety start to rise in him like, "I'm going to lose this thing, and then I'm going to be haunted by this song forever. I'm not good enough, and I can't do it." And instead of panicking, he just stopped. He just stopped that whole mental process and he did something completely novel. He just looked up at the sky, and he said, "Excuse me, can you not see that I'm driving?" (Laughter) "Do I look like I can write down a song right now? If you really want to exist, come back

at a more opportune moment when I can take care of you. Otherwise, go bother somebody else today. Go bother Leonard Cohen.”²⁶

Hence, to Waits, inspiration is something external and he does not take the full responsibility for the creative process. Songs are constantly moving around and all he can do is try and catch some of those passing by. According to Waits, he turns himself into “an antenna [...], a lightning rod [...], so whatever is out there can come in” (Oney 155). The term “whatever” is rather telling. Waits tries to turn off his creative filter and endeavours to remain open to anything that may contribute to the creative process. Immediacy is crucial. That is why he admires children for their creativity. “I watch kids draw and go, Jesus, I wish I could do that. I wish I could get back there [...]. You become very self-conscious as you get older, and less spontaneous, and you feel very victimized by your creative world, your creative person” (Rowland 99). Since immediacy plays such an important role, Waits usually carries a tape recorder with him so he can record any noise, melody or idea for a song the moment it occurs (cf. Heschl 52).

Waits considers music an essential part of human life and culture. He once said, “you know, people only travel with their seeds and with their songs,” (Brown 436) thus underlining both the importance of music to human existence and its itinerant quality. “In Bosnia they interviewed a lot of refugees - they’d left with nothing and they asked them what they had, and they had seeds, in their pockets, from their gardens. And they had songs. That was it. Once you’re nourished in that most fundamental way, everything else will follow” (Brown 436).

As it will be argued further below, with Waits, transience and permanence often lie closer together than it might seem at first (see chapters four and five). Some of his characters merely choose an itinerant lifestyle in an act of escapism, while what they are really looking for is a home. Similarly, the prominence of transience may betray a longing for permanence in more general terms, too. Waits is fascinated by the way songs are passed on in the fashion of an oral tradition. They seem to exist without ever materializing (in the form of a record, for instance), but they are kept alive – or, are immortalized – by human culture.

The key to a song’s immortality hence lies in its being employed in culture in one way or another, “if you’re an old man going by a schoolyard and you hear

²⁶ See the transcript on http://www.ted.com/talks/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius.html.

children singing your songs, playing jump-rope, or on the swings. That's the ultimate. You're in the culture"²⁷. What Waits is implying here is the return to an oral tradition. Nursery rhymes may be considered representatives of the oral tradition, since (although they may be held in written form somewhere) they still tend to be passed on orally from one generation to another. Waits may be serious in this attempt in as far as he has used melodies from nursery rhymes for his songs on several occasions, for example on "Clap Hands" and "Jockey Full of Bourbon" on *Rain Dogs* (compare Hoskyns 259).

In Waits everything is in flux and transience clearly predominates. It may seem commonplace to assume that this expresses a profound desire for permanence, just like his foible for brokenness originates in the desire to bring to work again what others have already discarded or given up on. Considering Waits' childhood, however, this assumption gains in depth. His parents' divorce not only broke apart the family, but it also brought travel to the ten-year-old Waits' life, since he would move to different cities with his mother and sisters as a consequence. "[Because] I come from a broken home, I guess. I like things that have been ignored or need to be put back together" (Hoskyns 383), Waits has said. The same may account for his relationship with travel and transience in general. The question of how Waits works this subject matter into his songs will be treated in the following chapters.

4.Space

4.1. The creation of literary space

Generally speaking, Tom Waits has a strong interest in places, which can be observed in the fact that many of his song titles bear a place name²⁸. Therefore, it should be rewarding to examine how Waits creates literary space in his songs.

²⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2009/oct/08/tom-waits-gives-devil-due>.

²⁸ See, for instance, "Chicago" (*Bad as me*), "Kentucky Avenue", "Christmas card from a hooker in Minneapolis" (*Blue Valentine*), "Johnsburg, Illinois" (both *Swordfishtrombones*), "Telephone call from Istanbul", "I'll take New York" (*Frank's Wild Years*), "Downtown", "On the Nickel" (*Heartattack and Vine*), "Potter's Field" (*Foreign Affairs*), "Putnam County" (*Nighthawks at the Diner*), "Reeperbahn" (*Alice*), "San Diego Serenade" (*The Heart of Saturday Night*), "Virginia Avenue" (*Closing Time*), "Union Square", "Midtown", "Gun Street Girl", "Ninth and Hennepin" (*Rain Dogs*). "Burma Shave" and "Heartattack & Vine" refer to fictitious places.

First of all, he frequently uses actual toponyms, for instance, “Chicago,” or street names as in “Ninth and Hennepin.” The latter is one of Waits’ most famous accounts of the seedy aesthetics of American lowlife. It also serves as an example of how Waits puts together pieces from various places in order to synthesize them into a song²⁹. The eponymous street corner of “Ninth and Hennepin” is in Minneapolis, Minnesota, but “most of the imagery is from New York” (O’Brien 87). It has already been mentioned in chapter 3 that Waits combines noises and ‘found instruments’ with more conventional ones in his musical arrangements. He also admires the actors Jack Nicholson and Meryl Streep for how they create characters, which is very similar³⁰. In fact, Waits uses a very similar technique himself, both for characters and space.

In general, “Ninth and Hennepin” is a good example of how Waits creates literary space. He starts by mentioning a proper name and goes on to introduce very specific images (in this case) in order to draw a seedy and somewhat ominous image.

Well it's 9th and Hennepin
All the donuts have
Names that sound like prostitutes
And the moon's teeth marks are
On the sky like a tarp thrown over all this

The second and third line betray a very Waitsian technique. It is not a fact, but an observation that may lead to various questions, such as “What sort of names are they?”³¹, or “Why would anyone name his donuts after prostitutes?”. None of these questions are meant to be answered, of course. The very fact that one may ask them is already the effect Waits seems to be aiming for: what is left out is interesting, too.

In the fourth and fifth line, Waits describes how “the moon’s teeth marks are on the sky,” which is “like a tarp thrown over all this.” That is, the night is both somewhat threatening and isolated, as by implication, no-one outside can observe this scene. The following two similes add further tension. “And the broken

²⁹ Compare also Jacobs 167.

³⁰ Waits has explained that “they build a doll from Grandmother’s mouth and Aunt Betty’s walk and Ethel Merman’s posture, then they push their own truthful feelings through that exterior” (qtd. in Hoskyns 344).

³¹ Waits has told *Spin Magazine* that the names were “cherry twist, lime rickey” (Montandon 87).

umbrellas like / Dead birds / and the steam / Comes out of the grill like / The whole goddamned town is ready to blow.” Clearly, this adds up to a dangerous place³², although, in fact, no dangerous actions occur, Waits achieves this impression with imagery.

This place is the world of misfits and outsiders, where “everyone behaves like dogs” and no kindness is to be expected. Everybody is lost in one way or another, or left behind. “They all started out with bad directions / And the girl behind the counter has a tattooed tear / One for every year he's away she said.” Interestingly, neither the pronoun “they,” nor, arguably, the girl, refer to actual characters. Rather they are part of the setting. While the girl apparently speaks, she does not participate in the action and the phrase “she said” appears a way of rendering the description of the setting more lively. After all, there is no plot she could partake in. As it turns out at the end, the whole song is merely a description of what the narrator has seen “through the yellow windows / of the evening train,” probably, mingled with his own imagination.

When trying to distinguish characters from setting, we ought to bear in mind that Chatman considers character “a paradigm of traits” while he defines a trait as a “relatively stable or abiding personal quality” (Chatman 126). It should be mentioned that song lyrics provide little space to establish these requisites and, generally speaking, it may be rewarding to accept some constructs as characters despite the little information we are given. While this is certainly true we must also bear in mind that the focus of a song may vary. That is, some songs may focus on character, some on action and others on setting. Of course, these paradigms interact with each other. Setting, much like real-life places, may “provide the backdrop” for the characters’ actions, “yet is [also] complemented by and influences those activities” (Relph 46-7). A certain interdependence between space and character can be observed in Waits’ work. However, songs like “Ninth and Hennepin,” or “Circus” (*Real Gone*), clearly focus on setting and thus it seems plausible to consider said constructs as part of the setting rather than as

32 Waits has mentioned that “[he] was on 9th and Hennepin [...] in the middle of a pimp war” (Montandon 87) and the scenario he creates in his song is arguably a suitable background.

proper characters³³, analogous to Rimmon-Kenan's reflections about the distinction between action and character (35).

"Circus" (*Real Gone*) provides several examples of Waits' using supposed characters as part of the setting. In this song, several "characters" are mentioned, however, the information is too scarce to speak of actual characterhood. Waits raises the listener's interest with the minimum of narratological means, the most powerful being the proper name, which often seems to hide an entire story for itself. That is, the only thing we know about "Horse Face Ethel / [a]nd her Marvelous Pigs in satin" is that they are "[t]opping the bill" of the circus. The name "Horse Face Ethel" suggests a very bizarre physical appearance while the "Marvelous Pigs in satin" promise little less of the grotesque. Nevertheless, we do not gain any further information. As they are "topping the bill" of a circus, we may only assume that there is something extraordinary about them.

We do receive some more information about a "character" called Myra, however, the passage seems the description of a picture with her in it, rather than an actual scene with a character.

And one[-]eyed Myra, the queen of
 The galley who trained the
 Ostrich and the camels
 She looked at me squinty with her
 One good eye in a Roy Orbison
 t-shirt as she bottle fed
 an [o]rangutan named
 Tripod

This passage is very open, too. One inevitably feels as if only part of the information is given, much like overhearing parts of a conversation with crucial parts missing which one is left to fill in oneself. That is, we may stop to enquire, for example, as to the story that led her to looking "squinty" at the narrator, or ask how the orang-utan came to his name, Tripod? All these "characters" seem to hold intriguing stories about their lives, however, we are not to hear them. The literary space in these songs is created in a way which is not unlike a camera moving through a room full of bizarre people, each of whom might be the protagonist of an entire movie of its own, but the camera does not stop long enough for this to happen.

³³ See also the discussion of this issue in Chatman 139-140.

Waits invites speculation. What is missing is interesting, because it leaves so much to the imagination and he seems to endorse this creative process. After all, keeping songs on people's minds is a way of keeping those songs "alive." In his approach to creating space, Waits sometimes appears to prefer "characters" to objects, because they invite the listener to "[construct] for them a past and a future beyond what is specified in the text" (Rimmon-Kenan 32).

As has been mentioned further above, Waits' most effective tool is the use of proper names. These names may refer to real toponyms, setting-characters, or to fictitious place names. In the latter case, the effect is often similar to that of "setting-characters." For instance, in "What's he building?" (*Mule Variations*) the narrator mentions a town called "Mayors Income." Amid all the slanderous rumours about his neighbour that the narrator lists throughout the song³⁴, this place name immediately receives negative connotations, and may be associated with corruption and crime. Again, we find an open construct that invites speculation.

Of course, we must bear in mind that "space in fiction can never be presented *completely*" (Stanzel 1984, ch.5.2. qtd. in Jahn 6.1.), and that it is normal that "in the process of reading, readers will complete the 'verbal picture' by imagining the rest" (Jahn 6.1.). Thus, incomplete descriptions are not by definition extraordinary, but rather inevitable. What is nevertheless peculiar about Waits' approach is his insistence on incompleteness as a highly deliberate technique.

Finally, the creation of transitional space should be mentioned as a further important element. The song "Pony" (*Mule Variations*) serves as a good example. After a life full of travel, the protagonist is now "yearn[ing] for home" (Hoskyns 424). As in many other Waits songs, several place names and itinerant setting-characters are mentioned here (cf. Hoskyns 424). The relationships with these other "characters" are bound to be superficial and of passing nature and so is the relationship with place. That is, the fact that he is merely passing through these places "prevents [the protagonist] from perceiving [each] as a place, from being fully present in it" (Augé 84-5). The places listed in Waits' songs "create

³⁴ For example, "He has a router / and a table saw and you / won't believe what Mr. Sticha saw / There's poison / underneath the sink / of course But there's also / enough formaldehyde to choke / a horse".

non-place” because they “turn [places] into passages” (Certeau 156 qtd. in Augé 85). Thus, the concept of place is negated and non-place, or transitional space, is created in its stead.

4.2. Change of space

Kessel argues that “Waits’s characters are all linked to travel” (64). While it should be mentioned that there are, in fact, a few exceptions³⁵, it is true that this statement accounts for the vast majority of Waits’ protagonists. Since change of space is thus at the centre of Waits’ work, it deserves further examination.

Quoting from Baumann’s pilgrims, Kessel agrees that for Waits’ characters “the truth is elsewhere; the true place is always some distance, some time away. Wherever the pilgrim may be now, it is not where he ought to be, and not where he dreams of being” (Baumann 20). While this quote may seem perfectly suitable a description of Waits’ characters at first glance, it should be pointed out that Baumann is referring to pilgrims here, as becomes clearer in the next sentence, where he writes, “The distance between the true world and this world here and now is made of the mismatch between what is to be achieved and what has been” (Baumann 20). Concerning Waits’ characters, rather than of pilgrims, it certainly makes more sense to speak of vagabonds³⁶. Baumann differentiates, “unlike the pilgrim the vagabond has no set destination” (28), but is rather “pushed from behind by hopes frustrated and pulled forward by hopes untested” (28). Both share the longing for somewhere else. However, the major difference between the two definitions is that for the pilgrim the best lies still ahead, while for the vagabond this may not always be the case.

One may thus apply the following model of analysis to Waits’ songs to explain the motives for change of place of their characters. At the beginning, the character sets out in search of a dream, or a concept whose realization we may call “perfection” here. Looking for “perfection,” everything is still new, crude and

³⁵ For instance, “Cemetery Polka” (*Rain Dogs*) deals with a family gathering and gossip, while “In the Neighborhood” (*Swordfishtrombones*), “Jesus gonna be here” (*Bone Machine*) and “Chocolate Jesus” (*Mule Variations*), among others, all feature characters who stay put.

³⁶ Not all of them are vagabonds, of course, but arguably none of them could be called an actual pilgrim.

imperfect, the motivation for the character's change of space is the lack brought into being by the distance between his current situation and "perfection." There is longing for what might be found further ahead and hence there is movement. However, typically there is ignorance as to what it is that the character lacks, the only thing that is certain is that he cannot find it where he is now, so he hopes to find it elsewhere, some place ahead.

Probably due to this ignorance, the state of "perfection" is never actually achieved. It merely exists as a concept, and may take on the form of a passing moment or situation in the character's life. Frequently, it passes without noticing, or is even only created *a posteriori*. That is, it may be an unspecified hope of something or someplace better lying ahead. Or, looking back, the character may make himself believe that at a certain moment in his life he had everything he had been looking for, that a specific moment was "perfect," but it is only recognized as such in nostalgic retrospect³⁷.

With this element of nostalgia, there comes tragedy. Since one cannot move back in time, every step takes the character farther away from his desired state. There is deterioration, the hopeless effort to regain what has been lost, and surrender. If the character "moves on," he does so literally. There is no process of maturation, no confrontation or introspective, merely the character's walking away and the hope for a fresh start somewhere else. Since Waits is drawn to lowlife, gloom and rather bleak situations in general, with a few exceptions, his characters tend to be caught in this downward spiral in one way or another. Thus, the major motives for change of space are those of Baumann's vagabond, who is "pushed from behind by hopes frustrated and pulled forward by hopes untested" (28).

Waits' characters are hardly capable of developing in the sense of maturing, because they lack will power. They are somewhat similar to addicts who pity themselves for their addictions but cannot find the strength to change. Rather than facing problems, they leave them behind and hope for better luck somewhere

³⁷ Like the character in "Martha" (*Closing Time*), who calls up an ex-lover after 40 years after he realizes (or makes himself believe) that their time together was when he was happiest. Besides, this plot bears certain resemblance with Beckett's play *Krapp's Last Tape*, which was staged by Waits' frequent collaborator Robert Wilson at *Landestheater Niederösterreich* in St. Pölten in 2012. See <http://www.landestheater.net/spielzeit/11-12/krapps-last-tape>.

else³⁸. Hence, existential authenticity is a major issue³⁹. Quoting Wagner, Relph writes, “To be oneself one has to be somewhere definite, do certain things at appropriate times” (Wagner 49, qtd. in Relph 44). The key phrase here is “somewhere definite.” Waits’ characters rarely stay anywhere for long. Permanent space is scarce. As a rule, his characters live in transient space. Thus, Waits’ treatment of space signifies a constant struggle for and with identity. If we assume that “[t]o be oneself one has to be somewhere definite” (Relph 44), constant change of space implies the continual negation and re-negotiation of one’s identity. That is, on this level, too, both instability and a lack of determination can be observed, and it seems that Waits deliberately sacrifices identity for the sake of uncertainty.

“Whistle down the wind” (*Bone Machine*) is one of the rare examples of a character that has spent much, or all of his life in the same place. Since he is “somewhere definite,” does this mean that the above problems of space and identity are invalid in his case? Relph would answer in the negative. According to him there are different modes of being in a place. The one we find in “Whistle down the wind” is a perfect example of what Relph calls “existential outsidersness,” which “involves a self-conscious and reflective uninvolvedness, an alienation from people and places, homelessness, a sense of the unreality of the world, and of not belonging” (Relph 51). Consider the first lines of the song, “I’ve grow up here now / all of my life / But I dreamed / Someday I’d go.” The expression of alienation reaches its peak in the following lines

The bus at the corner
The clock's on the wall
Broken windmill
There's no wind at all
I've yelled and I've cursed
If I stay here I'll rust
I'm stuck like a shipwreck
Out here in the dust

Clearly, the character is only physically in a “definite place,” but not existentially. He does not feel part of the place, nor does he wish to. This would imply

³⁸ Hoskyns relates Waits’ own “city swap” between New York and Los Angeles to “a ‘geographical’”, [which is a term from rehabilitation] defined as the fantasy of removing oneself from Place A in the hope of feeling different in Place B” (Hoskyns 236).

³⁹ This concept will be discussed in more detail in chapter 7.3.

accepting a certain identity. Rather, he desires to leave, but not in order to find identity or authenticity elsewhere. He wants to go “Where blue eyed girls / And red guitars and / Naked rivers flow,” to “places where they never sleep / And the circus never ends.” This is escapism at its purest. What he is thus longing for is not “definite place,” but the negation of place. He wants transient space, where the basic questions of identity can be avoided, as implied by the last two lines quoted above.

Without existential insideness, “places cannot be significant centres of existence, but are at best backgrounds to activities that are without sense, mere chimeras, and at worst are voids” (Relph 51). In fact, existential outsideness is the prominent mode in “Frank’s Wild Years” (*Swordfishtrombone*), in “Swordfishtrombone” (*Swordfishtrombone*) and “Hold on” (*Mule Variations*). Change of space is thus motivated by the desire to escape middle-class mediocrity, the search for alternative forms of existence, and alternative identities. Sometimes, the characters want to leave something or somebody behind, as in “Walk Away” (*Orphans*), on other occasions, their profession forces them to travel, especially sailors and soldiers (cf. Kessel 90). Some are on the run, as the jailbreak in “Trouble’s Braids” (*Swordfishtrombones*). On a few occasions, characters follow or even chase somebody, as in “Lucinda,” “All the time,” or “Widow’s Grove” (all *Orphans*), all of which feature an unhealthy and obsessive love relationship (see chapter 5.2.).

4.3. The semantics of space

Waits’ career started out with a clear focus on urban landscapes. Still in the 80s the major part of literary spaces he created in his songs was urban spaces. To a large extent, Waits’ attraction to the city stems from its contrasts, the very different kinds of existences that are lead one next to another. People’s isolation and the resulting ignorance of what happens around them seem to inspire Waits. For instance, the song “Ninth and Hennepin” (*Rain Dogs*) is about “the guy going back to Philadelphia from Manhattan on the Metroliner with the New York Times, looking out the window in New York [...] imagining all the terrible things he doesn’t have to be part of” (O’Brien 87). It offers a glance at the seedy realities

of the city that are the only reality his lowlife characters know, and which everyone else would be glad not to be part of.

Violent contrasts and life in a big city go together for Waits. “You see things like the \$400 shoe followed by the \$500 ball gown stepping into the pool of blood from the bum that was killed the night before” (Hoskyns 311), Waits has said about New York, for instance. About the album *Blue Valentine* (1978), Waits stated, “There’s more blood in this record, probably more detective-type stories,” which he explained “just [came] from living in Los Angeles” (Hoskyns 207). Hence, the city is an unforgiving place, as well as one of solitude and isolation. The characters who inhabit these urban landscapes, especially on the album *Rain Dogs*, are “the urban dispossessed” (Hoskyns 304), the type of social outcasts most people would prefer not to deal with in real life. “I’m just trying to give some dignity to some of the things I see without being patronizing or maudlin about it” (Hoskyns 207), Waits has explained his choice of subject matter.

Moreover, the whirl of bizarre city nightlife is dealt with in songs like “Union Square” (*Rain Dogs*), for instance, with people hurrying “[t]o that drag bar down the block,” which, allegedly, has the “[b]est live show by far on the whole east coast.” Therefore, city nightlife and “the urban dispossessed” (Hoskyns 304) seem to go together with urban landscapes in Waits. Escapism on the one hand and the “terrible things” that happen close to you but that “[one] doesn’t have to be part of” (Hoskyns 311) on the other, form the subject matter that is most strongly related to urban space.

Rural settings are a different matter and did not become more prominent until the album *Mule Variations* (1999). References to small-town life sometimes signify that the character has to change space in order to avoid mediocrity, as for example in “Hold On” (*Mule Variations*), where this is expressed in the lines “They hung a sign up in our town / “if you live it up, you won’t live it down” / So, she left Monte Rio, son / just like a bullet leaves a gun.” On *Mule Variations*, Waits starts to explore country life on his own terms. However, the most telling phrase might already be found on “Murder in the Red Barn” (*Bone Machine*), which is about a murder that is covered up by a small-town community.

And noone's asking Cal
 About that scar upon his face
 'Cause there's nothin' strange
 About an axe with bloodstains in the barn
 There's always some killin'
 You got to do around the farm

That is, far from picturesque farm-life idyll, rural space often signifies hidden secrets. Here a murder is blamed on “a drifter,” in order to protect a community member from prosecution. “Don’t go into that barn” (*Real Gone*) is about a farm that was built on top of a slave barn⁴⁰ and now, “When the river is low / They find old bones and / When they plow they always / Dig up chains.” The song “What’s he building?” (*Mule Variations*) is about a character gossiping about his neighbour, making up all sorts of bizarre rumours and slander. That is, rural life is suspicious and tends to hide terrible secrets.

Apart from urban and rural spaces, the binary pair transitional space and permanent space requires some scrutiny, too⁴¹. At first glance it may seem that permanent space has bad connotations for Waits. There are many adventures one may experience on a journey, but permanent space is different. It may be argued, however, that this is where people’s minds start to wander. One may even suggest certain biographical parallels to Waits’ life, himself a city-dweller who moved to the country in the nineties (see chapter 3.3). With urban nocturnal excesses literally out of reach, Waits discovered permanent space on the countryside and started to deal with it creatively. Gossip is the theme in “Cemetery Polka” (*Rain Dogs*), “What’s he building?” (*Mule Variations*), “Buzz Fledderjohn” (*Orphans*), all of which evoke permanent space. Arguably, the lover that has been left behind with a broken heart is often found in permanent space, too. Permanent space at least tends to have negative connotations.

While “an excess of place can lead to a provincialism and callousness for outsiders [...] an excess of journey can lead to a loss of identity or an impartial relativity that allows for commitment to nothing” (Seamon & Sowers 49-50). This “callousness” is clearly observable in “What’s he building?” (*Mule Variations*) and “Murder in the red barn” (*Bone Machine*). The “loss of identity” has been

⁴⁰ This song is based on a “local news story” (cf. Jacobs 167). See <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/06/us/in-a-barn-a-piece-of-slavery-s-hidden-past.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

⁴¹ Some aspects of this binary pair will be examined in further detail in chapter 5.1.

treated to some extent further above, while the “commitment to nothing” is certainly an important aspect of transitional space in the work of Waits, especially, concerning the lack of commitment in love relationships.

However, permanent space does not guarantee existential insideness. The two concepts may relate to one another the way “house” relates to “home.” Permanent space may facilitate the creation of a home, yet it is no exact equation. “House where nobody lives” (*Mule Variations*) treats this issue, asking “what makes a house a home” (Kessel 120)? The poor condition of the abandoned estate makes the narrator realize that “houses are just made of wood” and only the human relationships in it can turn it into a home. Quoting Brett, Relph argues,

What the individual requires ... is not a plot of ground but a place – a context within which he can expand and become himself. A place in this sense cannot be bought; it must be shaped, usually over long periods of time, by the common affairs of men and women. It must be given scale and meaning by their love. And then it must be preserved. (Brett 140 qtd. in Relph 78)

In “House where nobody lives” all of the above seems to have gone wrong. It is interesting, moreover, that all of these criteria are manifest in the song.

So if you find someone
someone to have, someone to hold
Don't trade it for silver
Don't trade it for gold
I have all of life's treasures
and they are fine and they are good
They remind me that houses
Are just made of wood
What makes a house grand
Ain't the roof or the doors
If there's love in a house
It's a palace for sure
Without love
It ain't nothin but a house
A house where nobody lives

Frequently, permanent space is like a promise that cannot be kept or has been broken already. Transitional space seems the quick answer to this on many occasions. However, transitional space in Waits is often solitary and exclusively masculine. The good-humoured “Cold Water” (*Mule Variations*), an ode to the freedom of a vagabond lifestyle, features a character who believes this “freedom is priceless and is all that he needs to survive” (Kessel 71). “Bottom of the World”

(*Orphans*) is very similar in this respect, as the protagonist is content with his vagabond lifestyle. He need not commit to anything, neither to a certain place, nor to people, in order to be happy. “Face to the Highway” (*Bad as me*) is bleaker in tone, since the protagonist leaves his lover because life on the road lies in his nature. “Ocean wants a sailor / Gun wants a hand / money wants a spender / And the road wants a man.”

Permanent space is often deceptive, whereas transitional space is where hopes, dreams and opportunities lie. Every journey from A to B entails transitional space which is limited by departure on the one side and arrival on the other. One can only remain in it for the journey’s duration. Frequently, the hopes and dreams are hence doomed since theirs is a place that is highly transitory, not permanent.

Therefore, transitional space is not always presented as desirable. Every now and then, a character stops and realizes that he misses permanent space, usually in the form of a home and his lover. This is evident in songs like “Shore Leave” (*Swordfishtrombone*), where a sailor stops in the middle of his nocturnal excess to admit to his lover that “[he] can’t make it by [him]self.” The protagonist in “Pony” (*Mule Variations*) is a “road-wearied wanderer” who “is left with this disarming longing for his home, which ends with a dream for domesticity⁴²” (Kessel 73).

The later Waits starts to change the solitary and masculine nature of transitional space. He endeavours to combine it with domesticity, which is usually restricted to permanent space and irreconcilable with travel. In “Long Way Home” (*Orphans*) the protagonist is aware that he is unfit for an existence in permanent space. However, he asks his lover to go with him. “Chicago” (*Bad as me*) starts with the lines, “The seeds are planted here / But they won’t grow / We won’t have to say goodbye / If we all go.” Thus, this is clearly another attempt at combining the two opposites.

Part of what has been mentioned so far about Tom Waits’ approach to space brings to mind

⁴² It is tempting to see certain autobiographical elements in this. Waits’ ex-lover and musician Rickie Lee said “that in the long run what Tom really wanted was to lead a normal suburban existence with all the standard features — loving wife, kids, pets, Little League games, pta meetings” (Jacobs 93).

Henry Miller's harsh assessment (1947, p.xv) of America: "America is full of places. Empty places. And all these empty places are crowded. Just jammed with empty souls. All at loose ends, all seeking diversion. As though the chief objects of existence were to forget. Everyone seeking a nice cosy little joint to be with his fellow man and not with the problems which haunt him. Not ever finding such a place, but pretending that it does exist. If not here then elsewhere" (Miller xv, qtd. in Relph 51).

Besides the fact that this passage ends with Waits' most prominent motive for change of space (cf. Baumann 28), it also shows that Waits' spaces are quintessentially American. These are places where people do not seek solutions for their problems, but oblivion. Frequently, they "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (Augé 77-8), that is, they are non-places. Diners are a recurring literary space in Waits, for instance. In the seventies he even released an album with the title *Nighthawks at the Diner* (1975). The bars in Waits' songs may also count as non-places. They are usually interchangeable places of superficial encounters between strangers and thus suit Augé's definition.

In Relph's terms, the people in these non-places lack existential insideness without which "places cannot be significant centres of existence, but are at best backgrounds to activities that are without sense, mere chimeras, and at worst are voids" (Relph 51). The literary space in "Whistle down the wind" (*Bone Machine*) has become such a void, and "there is nothing left for [the protagonist]" in the place in "Time" (*Rain Dogs*) either. Nothing makes sense in "Everything you can think" (*Alice*), for example, where "the dish ran away with the spoon," a motive that recurs in "Jayne's blue wish" (*Orphans*). The "chimera" is most evident in "Please wake me up" (*Frank's Wild Years*), where the protagonist wants to be woken up "in [his] dreams" to escape reality. Thus it may be argued that the most prominent sense of place in Waits' work is by far that of existential outsidership.

For much of Waits' characters the dilemma consists in that the places they feel existentially inside are, as a matter of fact, non-places or transitional spaces, that is, in spaces where existential insideness is impossible, since they "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity" (Augé 77-8). As so often with Waits, we are dealing with a transitory concept. That is, for a while someone may feel inside a place, identify with it. However, this is only possible during little more than a passing moment. It is rather a feeling than a mode of existence.

“Existential insideness is part of knowing implicitly that *this* place is where you belong – in all other places we are existential outsiders” (Relph 55). As a matter of fact, most of Waits’ characters are outsiders, sometimes even homeless, and they have no permanent space where they may feel inside. If the protagonist in “Rain Dogs” (*Rain Dogs*) affirms in the middle of his nocturnal excesses “I am a Rain Dog, too,” he finds identity as one of the other outsiders that are with him⁴³. They are “aboard a shipwreck train,” that is, stuck in a transitional space. Moreover, they are “inside a broken clock,” that is, the laws of time do not seem to apply here. Usually, time cannot be changed, nor can transitional space be made permanent either. However, when someone whispers to the protagonist “you’ll never be going back home,” it may indicate that he will stay in this transitional space forever. The broken clock and the shipwreck train indicate that the natural laws in this literary space are different to the ones in the extra-fictional world. This character seems to be “part of [this] place and it is part of him” (Relph 55), while both are characterized by transience. Thus, in some songs, Waits seems to achieve making transience permanent (cf. chapter 5.1.).

Waits’ literary worlds are full of non-places, which are by definition “lacking intentional depth and providing possibilities only for commonplaces and mediocre experiences” (cf. Relph 79). However, for his characters, these shallow places signify the world. Especially “the urban dispossessed” among them, but also many of Waits’ other outcast characters, only have non-places to live in. Therefore, one interesting aspect that may be observed in Waits is a constant struggle to achieve meaning and to create space in a world where placelessness is becoming more and more prominent and where “it is [therefore] less and less possible to have a deeply felt sense of place” (Relph 80). That is, Waits’ approach to space also raises existential questions about *Dasein* (see chapter 7.3).

⁴³ For Waits’ explanation of the term “Rain Dog”, see page 64.

5. Themes

5.1. Permanent transience as both a goal and a curse

In Waits' songs, permanence is frequently sought to be avoided and therefore transience becomes the goal. Sometimes this happens even against better knowledge and despite warnings. Transience seems the only possible escape from permanence. However, the only way to also escape it in the long run, is to make it permanent again. The concept of permanent transience is not so much a spatial one, but rather refers to a state of consciousness. On a general level, it often implies non-commitment, or rather commitment to non-commitment.

The songs mentioned here are not the only examples, but the ones I consider the most suitable ones for the exemplification of the concepts at issue. "Rain Dogs"⁴⁴ from the eponymous 1985 studio album may be the most interesting starting point for the analysis of "permanent transience." It can certainly be considered as such, since it combines both elements in a rather peculiar manner. If we consult the *Oxford English Dictionary* for the adjective "transient," we obtain the following two definitions: "lasting only for a short time; impermanent" and "staying or working in a place for a short time only."⁴⁵ That is, the term refers to an impermanent state in both space and time. The importance of this will shortly become clear.

The song "Rain Dogs" (*Rain Dogs*) starts with the line "[i]nside a broken clock," while the second verse sets the goings-on "[a]board a shipwreck train." These lines indicate that the common laws of both time and space are invalid in the literary world of the song. With neither of the two, how can there be permanence? And how can there be transience? Waits creates a paradox which blurs the boundaries between these binary opposites. The "broken clock" implies that time does not pass here. The "shipwreck train" is an interesting metaphor. A train is almost synonymous with non-place⁴⁶, while the fact that it is "shipwreck" takes it a step further, with a non-place stuck in the middle of nowhere. Thus, Waits'

⁴⁴ Waits has explained the term "Rain Dog", which urban lowlife characters who live on the street, as follows, "dogs in the rain lose their way back home [...]. 'Cause after it rains every place they peed on has been washed out" (Montandon 88). Some event has thrown these characters off balance and they can't seem to be able to make sense of the world anymore.

⁴⁵ <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/transient> (last access: 8-6-11, 4.47 pm)

⁴⁶ Cf. also "The railway, which often passes behind the houses [...] catches provincials off guard in their daily lives, behind the façade" (Augé 99).

subject matter appears to be an ephemeral moment, a brief glimpse into the lives of a group of “Rain Dogs.”⁴⁷ This concept may be expressed best in Charles Bukowski’s poem “Nirvana,” which is featured on *Orphans* (2006). The main character wants to make a rather meaningless and everyday moment last forever. That is, a transient moment that would pass by most people without their noticing is tried to be captured and made permanent, a concept which has already been discussed in chapter three.

In “Rain Dogs,” permanent transience is presented as a more positive than negative condition. Although there is a somewhat foreboding “whisper” telling the protagonist that “[he]’ll never be going back home,” the situation suggests that identity, or even a home, is found in the song’s world, bare of permanent values. That is, here the paradox of permanent transience is achieved by committing to non-commitment in the form of a transient lifestyle.

Waits deals with the concept of permanent transience in various ways. As has been mentioned before, rather than to a place, permanence may also refer to commitment, often in the form of a love relationship. “Downtown train” (*Rain Dogs*) features the search for permanence in a transient space (see chapter 4.2.). The idea of looking for your true love on a train may be a rather questionable approach in real life for the same reason that it seems to suit perfectly well in the world of Waits’ songs. Permanence (in the form of love) is sought in transient space, that is, the downtown train. By implication, the song longs for the possibility of combining love and home on the one side, and transience and travel on the other. In other words, it hopes to combine commitment and freedom, permanence and transience.

“Long way home” (*Orphans*) features a similar attempt at combining the two opposites. It is called “Long way home” because the road is more appealing than the home here. Financial security and domestic life cannot compensate for life on the road as expressed by the lines “I put food on the table / and a roof over our head / but I’d trade it all tomorrow / for the highway instead.”

⁴⁷ Besides, the fact that Waits makes such a transient moment permanent by turning it into the subject matter of a song betrays the main concepts discussed in chapter 3.2.

Likewise, the lines “money’s just something you throw / off the back of a train” clearly situate experience and adventure over security and domesticity. The tone, however, is apologetic and a reconciliation of both lifestyles, of the two concepts permanence and transience, is desired, as the song closes with the lines “come with me – together; we can take the long way home.”

The longing for transience seems of an innate nature in many characters and the attempt to fight it would amount to self-negation. Although, love and a home are also desired. However, while some characters would just leave both behind for a life on the road, as in “Face to the Highway” (*Bad as me*), others try to combine both concepts, the freedom of vagabond lifestyle and domesticity.

On other occasions, transience is considered a rather painful absence of permanence. In such cases there are often similarities, or even allusions, to the myth of Cain, who was doomed to travel the earth without ever finding a home. Generally, this is the case if the character does not choose transience, but is forced into it by something external. He may be left by his lover or forced to travel by his profession, for instance⁴⁸.

Let us consider “Shore leave” (*Swordfishtrombones*) for an example. Here the protagonist tries to make the transient experience of a two days’ shore leave last, “pacing [him]self; trying to make it all last / squeezing all the life /out of a lousy two day pass.” The concept works on two levels. That is, while he is trying to make the transient experience a permanent state, or at least a memory, he also stops in the middle of it in order to write a letter home. All he has is transience, in both his shore leave and in his itinerant profession as a sailor. However, what he is looking for in the middle of all of this is a home, love, and thus permanence. That is, he does not choose transience. Instead, he is forced to it by his profession. What seems a search for permanent transience is therefore a mere act of escapism, while the object of his desire is actually real permanence. He does not want transience to stay, but in his search for permanence he has nowhere else to turn to, since his whole life consists of transience. Thus, he seems doomed to seek permanence in transience.

⁴⁸ Examples include “Hang down your head” (*Rain Dogs*), “Make it rain” (*Real Gone*) and “Shore leave” (*Swordfishtrombone*) among others.

Similar manifestations can be conceived in other songs where transience is not chosen deliberately but rather forced upon the characters. For instance, in “Make it rain” (*Real Gone*), a man who has been left by his lover, who took all of his money and his best friend with her, describes his situation as one of “another sad guest on this dark earth” and compares himself to Cain. Clearly, transience is a curse for him. An interesting facet of this song is that this curse of transience comes with, and in fact due to, the breakdown of the character’s belief system. With neither love, nor friendship as permanent values, he is thrown into a state of permanent transience not by choice, but due to the absence of permanent values, which until his lover’s leaving him, seem to have functioned as a sort of emotional haven, or anchor.

In general, permanent transience is an ambiguous concept in Waits’ work. Sometimes, it refers to the attempt at capturing a passing moment and making it last. On other occasions, it may imply escapism, taking refuge in transience in order to avoid the basic questions of *Dasein* (cf. Relph 51). However, it may also be a curse, as when a character’s belief system falls apart and he is left with nothing permanent to hold on, or when a character is forced to a itinerant lifestyle while what he really desires is domesticity. Only in his more recent work can one observe the attempt at reconciling permanence and transience. All in all, it is a theme that can be observed in a large variety of Waits songs. Some of them are “Bottom of the world” (*Orphans*), “Get lost” (*Bad as me*), “Singapore” (*Rain Dogs*), “Anywhere I lay my head” (*Rain Dogs*), “Cold Water,” “Pony,” “Take it with me” (all *Mule Variations*), “Walk Away” (*Orphans*), and “Train song” (*Frank’s Wild Years*).

5.2. A different kind of love

In many of Waits’ songs, love is not the somewhat schmaltzy emotion it comes to be in his more famous, earlier ballads. Waits biographer Jay S. Jacobs relates a conversation with Howe Bones, Waits’ producer on the 1976 album *Small Change*:

[Waits] went down and hung around on skid row in L.A. because he wanted to get stimulated for writing this material. He called me up and

said, “I went down to skid row . . . I bought a pint of rye. In a brown paper bag.” I said, “Oh really?” Waits replied to Howe, “Yeah — hunkered down, drank the pint of rye, went home, threw up, and wrote ‘Tom Traubert’s Blues.’” Howe was even more struck by what Waits said to him next: “Every guy down there . . . everyone I spoke to, a woman put him there” (Jacobs 69).

This may well have been the hour of birth of Waits’ peculiar approach to love. In fact, many of his songs feature either the character who has found himself in trouble because of a woman, or, on other occasions, his songs seem to examine the relationship leading to these unfortunate outcomes.

The relationship with the woman character in “Black market baby” (*Mule Variations*), for example, is one of these unhealthy and obsessive ones. “My eyes say their prayers to her [...] / [I]like a moth mistakes the light bulb / [f]or the moon and goes to hell.” Again, we encounter a perverted love relationship, obsessive in nature and fatal in outcome.

Quite literally, one cannot win with this relationship, as “[e]verytime you play the red; the black is coming up.” However, her appeal is stronger than reason and she seems to have an almost supernatural power to control and manipulate the male character. “There’s no prayer like desire; [t]here’s amnesia in her kiss” expresses rather strongly the obscure obsession he feels for her, and the oblivion he finds in her “love.”

As concerns the relationship in “Black market baby,” there are parallels to the song “Lowdown” (*Orphans*). This song, too, is an obscure ode to a femme fatale. The woman praised here is described as “a wild rose,” “a cheap motel with a burned out sign.” She has “a stolen check book” and, as the title suggests, she is “lowdown,” that is, “mean and unfair”. This character will be analysed in more detail in chapter 6.2 (see page 70). Suffice it to remark here, that the relationship described here, bears strong resemblance to the one in “Black market baby.”

The destructive potential of such obsessive love relationships is closed in upon in two songs in particular. In “Gun Street girl” (*Rain Dogs*) a character tells the story of a man called John, who “[f]ell in love with a Gun Street girl” and is now “dancing in the Birmingham jail.” As the narrator relates how John endeavoured

to escape prosecution, he reminds us that “[a] Gun Street girl was the cause of it all.” Their love relationship thus resulted in John’s imprisonment. In a similar vein, a character called William the Pleaser relates the story of his misfortunes only hours before his execution in “Lucinda” (*Orphans*). In the lines “I left Texas to follow Lucinda; [n]ow I’ll never see heaven or home,” it becomes apparent that his obsession with Lucinda has brought him to his perdition.

His problems started when “[he] left Texas to follow Lucinda,” and finally he has “fallen from grace for Lucinda” since “she wanted the bell in [his] soul.” That is, the intention to do everything for this woman has lead him to an unhealthy situation of self-abandonment and a highly self-destructive obsession. In fact, we learn that he has already tried to “[break] loose” of Lucinda on some occasions, but he did not succeed. Eventually, for his hanging he plans to “search every face for Lucinda’s; and then she’ll go off with [him] down to hell.” In other words, although in death he would be free from her, he wants to take her with him and prefers revenge to the ultimate separation from her. This reflects the ideas of a highly obsessive mind, of course.

The songs on *Alice* (2002) go back to the collaboration with Robert Wilson on the eponymous theatre play about the unhealthy love of Lewis Carroll for the young Alice Liddell. Waits explored this relationship in “Fish & Bird,” about which he has said “I’m trying to explore the nature of obsession, not just in [Carroll’s] frame of mind but also as it applies to any love affair” (Waits qtd. in Hoskyns 446).

A very powerful manifestation of such an obsession can be found in “Poor Edward” (*Alice*). This character is tortured by a bizarre deformity: on the back of his head he has the face of a woman, who speaks to him “of things heard only in hell” and drives him mad. As they cannot be separated, Edward eventually commits suicide. However, it is implied Edward was not thus “freed from her,” but that “she drove him to suicide / And took Poor Edward to Hell.” It “is a metaphor for the themes of obsession and uncontrollable compulsions in [the Wilson play] *Alice*, where Dodgson’s emotions of attachment are so powerful and so visceral that he fears that his separation from young Alice will result in the

destruction of both of them” (Kessel 109). It may, to this day, be Waits’ most extreme rendering of the love-obsession theme.

“Widow’s Grove” (*Orphans*) presents a somewhat special case. Here it is a woman who experiences obsessive love. She witnesses how the man “waltzed too slowly” with another girl and grows jealous. Her obsession with him leads her to homicide. In the song, she relates, “I hid in the elm and raised the bough / that hung even with your neck / I chased you and drowned you / there deep in the well.” That is, while the song is atypical in the sense that the obsessive character is a woman, it is, however, conventional in the sense that the male character experiences the consequences of it.

The fact that obsessive love can be observed in many of Waits’ songs underlines his ambiguity once more. Similar to how there is a beautiful side to dark subjects, there is also a very dark side to love. Only in the song “Raised Right Men” (*Bad as me*, 2011) does Waits also explicitly attribute positive powers to love. Although it is also implied that “that lonely man on the Turnpike in the / Toll takers booth” is there because his lover has left him, the song also indicates that he was “a complicated man” and that “[h]is head was just too thick.” Thus, interestingly, the man himself is to blame here instead of the woman. It is even stated that “good women can make a diamond out of a measly lump of coal.” The characters Gunplay Maxwell, Flat Nose George and Ice Pick Ed Newcomb are “[o]n a slab in the morgue,” however, “[w]ith a good woman’s love we could have saved all three.” The notion that a woman’s love can bring a man on the right track is a novelty in Waits’ work, although his real life may be a fine example. The destructive quality of obsessive love, on the other hand, has a long tradition in his oeuvre.

5.3. Hope

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the term “hope” as “a feeling of expectation and desire for a particular thing to happen” as well as “grounds for believing that something good may happen”⁴⁹. However, the question arises if the

⁴⁹ <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/hope> (date of last access: Nov. 4th 2012).

oeuvre of a singer songwriter who has written such fatalist titles as “Misery is the river of the world,” or “God’s away on business” (both *Blood Money*) is really the place to look for hope? Considering such fatalist lines as “if you live in hope you're dancing / to a terrible tune,”⁵⁰ most people’s answer would no doubt be in the negative, and so far scholars have not paid much attention to this possibility either. Therefore, it will be examined here.

In fact, in Waits, the concept of hope is often ambiguous. There are similarities with the myth of Pandora, which maintains that “it was Hope who enabled humankind to go on living despite all adversity” (Daly 110). The prospect of returning back home or of becoming famous is the source of hope in some cases. In “Hold On” (*Mule Variations*), a young couple leave behind their home and its small-town values in order to find an alternative lifestyle in California. The difficulties they have to face on their way, which are expressed in the verses, are contrasted in the chorus’, “You got to hold on / Take my hand, I'm standing right here / You got to hold on.” The fact that they have each other is what gives them hope, what makes them go on “despite all adversity.”

Of course, it is not always this straight forward. There is the story of Frank O’Brien featured on the album *Frank’s Wild Years* and the *Steppenwolf Theater* production (1986), for example, who leaves home full of hope in order to become a successful entertainer. The positive attitude at the beginning of his journey is apparent in “Straight to the top (Rhumba)”:

I can't let sorrow
try and pull ol' Frankie down
live for tomorrow I have found you
I'm going straight to the top
up where the air is fresh and clean
I know that I will never stop, oh no,
until I know I'm wild and free.

As the album goes on, however, the prospective turns bleaker. Hope is finally frustrated. Frank tries to take refuge in a dream world (see “Please Wake me up”) and utters his despair in “Train Song,” especially, in the lines “It was a train that took me away from here / but a train can’t bring me home.” In the end, what is left

⁵⁰ See “Starving in the belly of a whale” (*Blood Money*).

is regret for what he has done and despair because it cannot be undone. On this album, the hope that is featured in the first few songs, is finally annulled by the ones that follow, much bleaker in tone and atmosphere.

A close look at Waits' work also reveals that several songs clearly feature a more positive concept of hope. "Down there by the train" (*Orphans*) is a gospel song and, thus, comes with a lot of religious imagery and symbolism. In short, it conveys the hope for the redemption of sinners. What is crucial to understand here is that the narrator does not only offer hope on the basis of assumptions. In fact, the song starts with the line "[t]here's a place I *know* [my emphasis]." Hence, the place of redemption, which is the source of hope here, is presented as real, and the narrator knows where it is to be found. In this place "the sinners can be washed in the blood of the lamb," and as the narrator reassures, "there's room for the forsaken" and "you'll be washed of all your sins and all of your crimes." Besides, no matter what your vices and wrongs are, "all of the passengers will be treated the same."

Hope is especially conveyed by the lines "I know that your name will be on that list," as well as in the last verse

if you've lost all your hope
if you've lost all your faith
I know you will be cared for
I know you will be safe.

The narrator furthermore addresses virtually everyone who, like himself, has "taken the low road," including "all of the shameful and all of the whores / even the soldier who pierced the heart of the [L]ord." Hence, he gives comfort and hope to everyone without asking anything, like a firm religious belief, for instance, in return.

In a similar vein, the closing track on *Mule Variations* (1999), "'Come On Up to the House'[,]" is an open-armed call to all the downtrodden vagabonds [...] and lost souls that Tom Waits has immortalized in song" (Kessel, 121-2). At first glance, the lyrics of this song may draw a rather bleak view of the world, a place where nothing is as it should be. "[T]he moon is broken / [a]nd the sky is cracked" and "[t]he only things that you can see / [i]s all that you lack". Significantly,

however, it is maintained that self-pity is not the right answer, as "[a]ll your cryin' don't do no good". Moreover, even self-sacrifice and martyrdom for a greater cause are shown as somewhat nonsensical in the lines "[c]ome down of the cross / [w]e can use the wood". All in all, although it is never specified, the song seems to hold a promise for those who follow its call and "[c]ome on up to the house". As the song apparently addresses those who have a rather pessimistic attitude, who can only see "all that [they] lack", who are hopelessly lost and desperate in their dead-end situations, this "open-armed call" (Kessel 121) can certainly be classified as encouraging and hopeful.

Another form of hope can be conceived in "Day after tomorrow" (*Real Gone*). The narrator-character is a soldier who is questioning the reasons for the war he is fighting in. He finds no meaning in what he is doing, despite the propaganda the young soldiers are brainwashed with. The only thing that makes him abide and endure his situation is the prospect or the hope of returning home "the day after tomorrow". While he seems to know that this cannot be taken for granted, as he wonders "will God on his throne / bring me back home [?]", he does not lose his hope. He underlines "I still believe that there's gold / at the end of the world" and repeatedly affirms "my plane *will* [my italics] touch down; [o]n the day after tomorrow".

Moreover, the song's position as the last track on the album *Real Gone* (2004) is significant. While hopes that are expressed on early songs on an album may still be frustrated in its course, the closing track constitutes the last impression that the listener is given. In fact, unlike *Frank's Wild Years*, many of Waits' albums close on a positive tone. "Come on up to the house", which we have discussed above, closes *Mule Variations* (1999). The album *Rain Dogs* (1985) leaves the listener with the cheerful New Orleans jazz sounds at the end of "Anywhere I lay my head". *Bone Machine* (1992) closes with the song "That feel", which Kessel describes as "a powerful attestation of individuality and the strength of the human essence" (Kessel 74). Even the deeply pessimistic and fatalist *Blood Money* (2002) ends with the humorous "A good man is hard to find", while *Alice* (2002) closes with an instrumental piece called "Fawn," an image that certainly has rather positive connotations, too. The 2006 release *Orphans* closes with two hidden

tracks, both of which feature humorous stories told by Waits. Therefore, many of his albums go from bleak to more positive notions, implying that despite the hard times one might be going through, something good may still lie ahead.

In general, the notion of hope is never a purely positive one. It always signifies a certain anxiety to change and to improve one's situation. Waits draws numerous bleak and seemingly desperate situations and characters in his songs that often have very sound reasons to feel this kind of anxiety. However, similar to the final positive note on the closing tracks of many of his albums, the notion of hope eventually shines through on several occasions. While in some songs hope may even be described as "terrible", there is obviously a wide range of songs which feature a very positive concept of hope.

5.4. Humour

Tom Waits has repeatedly displayed his sense of humour in interviews, his famous live performances, and film roles. In his music, humour is often present in formal aspects of his songs. As Jacobs writes about the highly fatalist album *Blood Money* (2002),

It has a playful black sense of humor behind the apocalyptic yowls of anger. 'Misery is the River of the World' contradicts an enraged howl at the moon on the human conditions with a carnival oom-pah band backing. A subtle samba beat percolates underneath the resigned bitterness of "Everything Goes to Hell." (Jacobs 196)

Jacobs says about the material on *Small Change* (1976) that the "songs were very well written and reflected their composer's famous sense of humor" (Jacobs 68). This remark refers to Waits' pre-*Swordfishtrombones* years, when he still maintained the drunk barfly image which famously claim that "the piano has been drinking"⁵¹ and not him. However, so far, little has been said about humour in his post-*Swordfishtrombones* lyrics. In fact, although he is commonly known as a "joker" (Jacobs, blurb) owing to his often hilarious interview answers and the humorous banter at his live performances, the humour in his song lyrics has rarely been considered beyond the length of a footnote.

⁵¹ See "The piano has been drinking (not me)" (*Small Change*).

Considering the aim of the present paper, I will focus on Waits' parodies of religion and show business. "Jesus gonna be here" (*Bone Machine*), which Kessel defines as "a serendipitous sinner's testament that his savior [sic] will be here soon to keep his promises and to comfort his soul" (Kessel 118), may serve as a starting point. The comic effect arises from the overly confident way in which this sinner maintains his curious beliefs. This character is strongly convinced that he does not have to do anything "but wait here". He is certain that Jesus will eventually consider him worthy of redemption despite his drinking problems, since "[Jesus] knew that [he] would". According to him, Jesus will finally come over the horizon in "a brand new Ford" and he can already hear him "rolling on down the lane".

That is to say that, on the one hand, a satirical effect is achieved by implying that an omnipotent and omniscient God already knows about everyone's sins in advance, and thus, if He does not prevent them, He cannot blame anyone else either. On the other hand, the sharp contrast between religion, Jesus, and the symbol of industrialized America *per excellence*, a Ford, together with colloquialisms like "rolling on down the lane", constitutes a tension that adds comic effect.

In a similar vein, "Chocolate Jesus" (*Mule Variations*) features a believer who does not display any serious efforts to deserve his salvation. However, this does not prevent him from believing strongly in the same. Waits explained the story behind this song in an interview,

My father-in-law has been trying to get me involved in this other business. He's got these little lozenges that come in different flavours and they have a cross on one side and a Bible passage on the other. He calls them 'testamints.' The idea is that if you can't make the church service, you meditate on the testamint passage, then pop it in your mouth. We took the idea one step further with Chocolate Jesus.⁵²

This believer "[doesn]t go to church on Sunday", nor does he "fall down on [his] knees to pray." Rather he worships the Lord by eating these chocolate items. Far from connoting sweets with gluttony, as some might do, he is not only convinced

⁵² Tim Perlich. "Wily Tom Waits' Barnyard Breakthrough". *Now magazine*. April 22-28, 1999. In <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/interviews/99-apr22-nowmagazine.html>. Compare also Jacobs, p.182.

that Jesus loves him. He even considers the possibility that he does so "maybe just a little bit more". The comic exaggerations reach a peak during the bridge:

When the weather gets rough
and it's whiskey in the shade
it's best to wrap your savior
up in cellophane
He flows like the big muddy
but that's ok
Pour him over ice cream
for a nice parfait

The lyrics are, of course, highly absurd and it is this absurd quality that adds the element of parody to the song. After all, how can a simple mortal be so sure that he will be saved? While millions of people are making sacrifices in order to follow the rules and laws of the Bible and are still highly self-conscious despite all their efforts, this character substitutes sacrifice for a tasty sweet and is utterly convinced that this will suffice.

In "Altar Boy" (*Orphans*) Waits draws the picture of an old altar boy gone wrong. While altar boys may generally entail connotations such as nice, law-abiding or innocent, Waits, again, takes the concept *ad absurdum* by imagining an altar boy who has ended up in the gutter. Down on his luck and "bound up in leather and chains" he endeavours to comfort himself to some extent, stating that "[he] can order in Latin" and "make 'em au gratin". However, ultimately he still feels depressed, because "[he] never got the rest of the dream / just the ritual". From the term "ritual", which especially in this context connotes the church and the holy mass, Waits goes on to "now I'm a habitual", adding a grotesque contrast. These bizarre shifts embody Waits' way to achieve comic effect in "Altar Boy." With the lines "he's hoping he can meet a woman / dressed like a nun [...] drinking across from the church" Waits contrasts, or rather combines, the connotations of purity that the church, at least, traditionally has, with fetish, sex and debauchery.

Apart from the songs mentioned above, which poke fun on religion, Waits has especially written parodies on show business. The song "Eyeball kid" (*Mule Variations*) must be pointed out. A couple who wants to have "a show-biz child" eventually has a son who is, as the title suggests, merely an eyeball and thus

becomes a freak-show star. Soon a manager discovers and tries to exploit him. Due to his fame, people treat him differently to the point where they worship him because of, rather than despite, all his physical deformities. People take his defects as a sort of proof of a higher, even religious power and come to a ridiculous conclusion,

How does he dream
How does he think
when he can't even speak
and he can't even blink[?]

We are all lost in the
Wilderness we're as
blind as can be
He came down to teach us
how to really see
Hallelujah.

Waits once described the concept behind this song as "a metaphor for people that get into show business, because they usually have some kind of family disturbance or are damaged in some way or another" (Valania 307). Considering Waits's own family situation (see chapter 2.1.), this statement betrays a considerable amount of self-irony, as does the fact that both the "Eyeball Kid" and Waits are born on 7th December 1949. The Eyeball Kid's defects are idealized and people admire him to the point of religious worship for no logical reason, which is clearly a parody of the star cult in popular culture. Waits has said about this song that it "just [takes] the idea of show business to a ridiculous place."⁵³

Similarly, "Big in Japan" (*Mule Variations*) parodies the notion of success in entertainment business. The protagonist is someone who may, at best, have only half of what it takes to be "big" in this business, as every affirmation that is enlisted in the song, is followed by a negation. The first verse, for instance, goes

I got the style but not the grace
I got the clothes but not the face
I got the bread but not the butter
I got the [window] but not the shutter

⁵³ Michael Barclay. "Tom Waits, In Dreams". *Exclaim*. April/ May, 1999, qtd. in <http://www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-album.html>.

Despite this apparent lack of potential, comfort is taken in the chorus, which confirms somewhat proudly "but I'm big in Japan". Waits once explained,

There are people that are big in Japan, and are big nowhere else. [...] It's also kind of a junkyard for entertainment. You can go over there and find people you haven't heard of in 20 years, that have moved over there, and they're like gods. And then there are all those people that don't do any commercials, they have this classy image. And over there, they're hawking cigarettes, underwear, sushi, whiskey, sunglasses, used cars, beach blankets.⁵⁴

Again, lack is a very important element here. The supposed star lacks numerous abilities and properties. In show business, however, he may still get somewhere. Similar to the Eyeball Kid, this protagonist has several defects, which may deny him success in more traditional fields. However, in show business, these characters can nevertheless become successful to some extent. At least, as long as he does not mind succeeding nowhere except on "the junkyard for entertainment"⁵⁵.

"Goin' out west" (*Bone Machine*) "is about those guys who come to California from the Midwest with very specific ideas in mind"⁵⁶. The character in the song takes a chance and goes to California to become a star. Tony Franciosa, "an American TV-star in the 60s and 70s"⁵⁷, who allegedly "used to date [his] ma", is his only possible contact. As Waits has mentioned in an interview "There are people who come to California with less than that to go on"⁵⁸. Thus the song pokes fun at the naive expectations which the prospect of a career in entertainment business produces in many people. This bragging character is convinced that he is not an extra, but "a leading man". He backs up this assumption

I know karate, Voodoo too
I'm gonna make myself available to you
I don't need no make up

⁵⁴ Rip Rense. "A Q&A about Mule Variations". *MSO*. Early 1999, qtd. in <http://www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-album.htm>.

⁵⁵ Rip Rense. "A Q&A about Mule Variations". Early 1999, qtd. in <http://www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-album.htm>.

⁵⁶ Peter Orr. "Tom Waits at work in the fields of song". *Reflex*. Issue 28, October 6, 1992, available in <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/interviews/92-oct6-reflex.html>.

⁵⁷ See <http://www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-album.html>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

I got real scars
 I got hair on my chest
 I look good without a shirt

By announcing that he will "make [him]self available", he suggests that he is the perfect match for show business' requirements. Of course, having "real scars" does not help in so vain a business, and his alleged expertise in Voodoo, too, seems out of place in this context. While he is convinced that he has "a masculine face", we learn that "[his] friends think [he's] ugly". The reference to his parole officer, furthermore, betrays a criminal background. The boisterous tone and the extreme confidence of the character contrast with much of the actual information given, which is how the comic effect is achieved.

In general, what is interesting is that religion and show business are somewhat treated similarly. That is, in "Jesus gonna be here" (*Bone Machine*), the protagonist is convinced that Jesus will come to redemption much in the same way as the character in "Goin' out west" (*Bone Machine*) is sure to find stardom in California. Nevertheless, to some extent, there is always a tragic element involved. That is, all of the above characters are either deformed, or out of place, and doomed to fail in their endeavours. As Angela Carter says, "Comedy is tragedy that happens to other people."⁵⁹ To a considerable extent, this is also true for Waits.

5.5. Moral code

Usually, Waits is not explicit on moral matters. However, there are several songs in which a kind of moral code can be observed. They are, for example, cautionary tales emphasizing the dangers children might find when going out into the world, or political songs which criticize war and greed. Many of these songs were inspired by real-life events read in newspaper articles.

"The Fall of Troy" (*Orphans*), for example, deals with young children that are killed with guns and is based on "a news article about two kids that were involved

⁵⁹ <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/27/specials/carter-wise.html>

in a shooting [in New Orleans]"⁶⁰. To some extent, it can be considered a warning against the dangers in the world. The line "out the door and through the woods / there's a world where nothing grows" is a far cry from the positive portrayal of vagabond lifestyles in other Waits songs⁶¹. When it comes to children, Waits adopts quite a different tone and, in fact, seems to urge them to stay at home and be good, rather than to take risks and travel the world.

This concept can also be traced in "A little rain" (*Bone Machine*). While there may not be a specific news story behind it, the song, too, was inspired by small-town news articles. According to Waits, "they cover a lot of murders and a lot of car accidents [...]. There's something in the way they write about them... it's like a warning."⁶² No murder is mentioned explicitly, however, the last verse holds some of the clichés one would expect to find in the emotional and dramatic style of a tabloid article.

She was 15 years old
And [she'd] never seen the ocean
She climbed into a van
With a vagabond
And the last thing she said
Was "I love you mom"

The implications are that a murder may take place, yet Waits stops the song and leaves the listener intrigued about the end of the story. Asked about "A little rain", Waits once mentioned, "For some, [...] murder is the only door through which to enter life,"⁶³ which should be sufficient proof for this hypothesis. Much like the news articles he mentions, Waits' song is itself a warning, a cautionary tale directed at children, to stay at home and beware of the dangers lurking out there.

⁶⁰ *KCRW-FM: Morning Becomes Eclectic* (interviewed by Chris Douridas) on March 31, 1998, qtd. in <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics/orphans-bawlers/thefalloftroy.html>

⁶¹ Compare, for example, "my daddy told me looking back / the best friend you'll have is a railroad track" in "Bottom of the world" (*Orphans*).

⁶² Peter Orr. "Tom Waits at work in the fields of song". *Reflex* 28, October 6, 1992. In <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/interviews/92-oct6-reflex.html>

⁶³ Peter Orr. "Tom Waits at work in the fields of song". *Reflex* 28, October 6, 1992. In <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/interviews/92-oct6-reflex.html>.

"Georgia Lee" (*Mule Variations*) is based on the real kidnapping and murder of a 12-year-old girl. Georgia is portrayed as a school dropout and a runaway child with unstable family conditions⁶⁴. The third verse seems an instruction to the game hide-and-seek, with Georgia hiding while she emphasizes, "be sure to find me. I want you to find me." Waits remarks, "A lot of kids are raising their parents. You usually run away because you want someone to come and get you, but the water is full of sharks."⁶⁵ The chorus repeatedly enquires,

Why wasn't God watching?
 Why wasn't God listening?
 Why wasn't God there for
 Georgia Lee?

If God was not there for her, everyone must ask themselves why they were not there for her either. Again, the world outside is presented as dangerous and the song seems to urge parents and, in fact, also communities, to protect their children from those dangers and take responsibility.

"Road to peace" (*Orphans*) treats a wholly different topic, namely the Middle-East conflict. Nevertheless, certain similarities can be observed. That is, as in "Georgia Lee", God does not seem to act and man is made responsible for the tragic goings-on. Like a collage of newspaper articles, the song displays suicide bombings and the spiral of violence those assassinations entail, starting with the suicide bombing of 18-year-old Abdel Madi Shabneh. It mainly reiterates information from two articles from the New York Times⁶⁶ and moves on to accounting the US government for part of the conflict, enquiring "why are we arming the Israeli army / with guns and tanks and bullets[?]" Finally, God's omniscience is questioned in the last verse and Waits suggests that we should not rely blindly on the help of a supernatural power, but rather on ourselves.

⁶⁴ Compare the second verse, "Ida said she couldn't keep Georgia / from dropping out of school / I was doing the best that I could / but she kept runnin away from this world / these children are so hard to raise good."

⁶⁵ Rip Rense. "A Q&A about Mule Variations". *MSO*. Early 1999. In <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics/mulevariations/georgialeee.html>

⁶⁶ <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/12/world/suicide-blast-kills-16-in-jerusalem-israel-strikes-gaza.html?scp=3&sq=Abdel%20Madi%20Shabneh&st=cse> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/13/world/the-mideast-turmoil-suicide-bomber-a-sudden-violent-end-for-a-promising-youth.html?scp=1&sq=Abdel%20Madi%20Shabneh&st=cse>; last access: 04/06/11, 11.38am.

[I]f God is great and God is good
 why can't he change the hearts of men
 well maybe God himself
 is lost and needs help
 maybe God himself
 he needs all of our help

The pronoun “our” stresses human responsibility as opposed to the reliance on divine interference. “Road to peace” therefore urges the listener to take responsibility for what is happening in the world, rather than to wait for God to intervene (see chapter 7.3). Therefore, the song clearly makes a moral statement.

It would be out of place to call Waits a moralist. In fact, the spectrum of his songs is wide enough to reach from hope to despair and, likewise, from conveying a moral message to maintaining nihilism. Waits eschews easy categorization. Thus, lines like “Why be sweet, why be careful, why be kind? [...] Everything goes to hell, anyway” are as much part of his work, as the cautionary tales mentioned further above. However, what is highly interesting is that he does not allow for ambiguity in the songs discussed in chapter 5.5. That is, while hope may always imply “adversities” and humour include tragic elements, if there is a moral message in a song, Waits is unmistakably clear. This also applies to his anti-war songs, among which “Hell Broke Luce” (*Bad as me*) may be emphasized as the most straightforward and uncompromising one.

In fact, what the cautionary tales and anti-war songs have in common is the expression of a concern for children. The young soldier in “The day after tomorrow” is writing on his 21st birthday. “Road to Peace” features the lines “they fill our children full of hate / to fight an old man’s war,” while the suicide bomber “was only eighteen years old.” When asked about the Iraq war in 2004, Waits said, “The government looks at these 18-year-old kids as shell casings, you know, like we're getting low on ammo, send in some more. We're neck deep in the big muddy and the big chief is telling us to push on and offer up our children. I sure wouldn't want to let my boys go”⁶⁷. That is, Waits may allow for ambiguity and very dark tones in themes like love, he may joke that “there’s no Devil / there’s

⁶⁷ Richard Grant. “Bard Of The Bizarre”. *Telegraph Magazine* (UK). October 2, 2004. In <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/quotes-fatherhood.html>; cf. also Montandon 327.

just God when he's drunk"⁶⁸ and only rarely give straight answers in interviews. However, when it comes to children, he lowers his guard and is clear and straightforward.

6. Protagonists

6.1. Doomed wanderers

Waits' definition of the term "Rain Dog," stating that the rain washes away all the scent marks and the dogs thus lose their way back home, is significant. It shows that these characters are thrown off balance by a certain event and are consequently down on their luck and unable to find a home. In fact, this pattern applies to a large number of Waits' protagonists.

Waits' definition bears resemblance with the myth of Cain, who was cursed to wander and never find a home after slaying his brother Abel. In Waits' songs, the reasons may not be homicide, however, there are allusions to the myth of Cain nonetheless. In "Walk Away" (*Orphans*), the character "Dot King was whittled from the bone of Cain." As a matter of fact, her answer to any problem or confrontation is to "walk away and start all over again." Hence, this is a habitual action and, furthermore, as has been mentioned before the acts of commission are frequently determined by the acts of omission (see page 9). That is, the fact that she always walks away from her problems, implies that she is unable to confront them. Also, she is incapable of serious commitment. Both means she will never find a home, since her mind is set on transience and she is doomed to wander on.

The first line is a direct definition that underlines that Dot King is different, since unlike Eve, who was made from Adam's rib, she was "whittled from the bone of Cain." This opens a wide field of connotations like homicide and doomed wanderers, for instance. Then the characterization changes to indirect presentations, the character is speaking, in the first person, of regret and the inability to change the way she is. "[T]here are things I've done I can't erase / I wanna look in the mirror and see another face / I said never but I'm doin' it again / I wanna walk away and start over again." It may thus be argued, of course, that

⁶⁸ See "Heartattack And Vine" (*Heartattack And Vine*).

she is ultimately walking away from herself, since being in transient space implies a transient state of identity, too.

“The dramatic impact [of one-time actions often] suggests that the traits [they] reveal are qualitatively [...] crucial” (Rimmon-Kenan 61-2). This certainly applies here, as it is finally underlined once more, and through one-time actions, that there are no permanent values in Dot King’s life. She has “left [her] bible by the side of the road.” Furthermore, she will neither create, nor leave behind anything that will last. Since, rather than planting a tree that will keep growing even after her death, she only “carved [her] initials in an old *dead tree* [my emphasis],” that is, her initials (or even her identity) leave no marks in life but are already related to dead withering matter.

Another reference to Cain can be found in “Make it Rain” (*Real Gone*). Here, rather than the character himself, his situation is introduced first by his ex-lover’s actions, “She took all my money / And my best friend.” The following auto-characterization underlines the effect these actions have had on him and his personality, as he states “I have no pride / I have no shame.” The crisis which is thus presented exceeds mere heartbreak and becomes a crisis of values in general. Without values such as friendship, trust, loyalty, without emotions like love, pride or shame, this protagonist is hurled into despair as there are no longer any permanent values that could function as an anchor for him.

The second verse is addressed to his ex-lover. “Since *you* [my italics] gone / Deep inside it hurts / I’m just another sad / Guest on this dark earth”⁶⁹ and with “I want to believe in the mercy of the world again” the expression of forsakenness seems to reach its peak. He may still be alive, but he is also uprooted forever, as the line “I’m not Able, I’m just Cain” implies. Without values to rely on, and left behind with a shattered worldview, he does not mind if his reaction is self-destructive, as implied in “Without your kiss / Hell can’t burn me / More than this” and later “I’m close to heaven / close to the gate / they sharpen their knives / on my mistakes.” The element of self-destruction is also key to Waits’ doomed wanderers, since many of them indulge in an excessive lifestyle whose only possible results are dreadful.

⁶⁹ The last two lines are taken from Goethe’s *Selige Sehnsucht*, “Und so lang du das nicht hast, / Dieses: Stirb und werde! / Bist du nur ein trüber Gast / Auf der dunklen Erde.”

The mention of the natural forces, the religious references to Cain and Abel, hell and to heaven's gate⁷⁰, heave the events of this song to an almost supernatural level. The somewhat apocalyptic⁷¹ imagery of the rain, "the thunder" and "the wind[']s dark moan" also reflect the protagonist's mental state, since for him the world has broken down or at least changed considerably, as "It's the same old world / but nothing looks the same."

Concerning Waits' songwriting and creation of characters, one frequently overlooked element should be pointed out. In the seventies Waits stuck to his routine of the barfly and drunk barroom pianist. In the eighties, and especially after *Swordfishtrombones* (1983), Waits develops "a new concern for absurd and surreal thematics" (Solis 46). However, the way this concern influences his songwriting has been largely ignored. That is, as the above examples of "Make it rain" (*Real Gone*) and "Walk Away" (*Orphans*) show, the characters on more recent records are often similar to those on *Rain Dogs* or *Frank's Wild Years*, for instance, in that their situations and reactions are alike. However, they are characterized differently.

Like the character in "Walk Away" (*Orphans*), the character of Frank O'Brien in "I'll be Gone" (*Frank's Wild Years*) avoids confrontation and rather sees travel as a means of leaving his problems behind. What is significant is the dreamlike, almost psychedelic imagery in "I'll be Gone," which represents a large share of Waits' songs of the same decade. It starts with the following lines, "Tonight I'll shave the mountain / I'll cut the hearts from pharaohs / I pull the road off of the rise / tear the memories from my eyes / and in the morning I'll be gone."

I agree with Kessel, who argues that these lines depict a "sense of adventure" (Kessel 31) in the context of Frank's story. The fact that these are all contemplated acts underlines the character's absorption in a world of big plans and dreams, which will ultimately bring him to ruin (cf. also Kessel 101). The lyrics also express his "mental instability and irrational behaviour" (Kessel 100).

⁷⁰ Cf. "I'm close to heaven / close to the gate".

⁷¹ Waits already shows a weakness for this theme on *Bone Machine* (1992).

One parallel between “I’ll be Gone” and “Walk Away” is the repeated announcement of departure⁷² and the characters’ inability to face their problems.

There are two major differences between the two characterizations, however. First, the dreamlike quality of “I’ll be Gone” and, in fact, of the entire album *Frank’s Wild Years* (cf. Rowland 102). The world of these characters is full of “[h]allucinatory images” (Kessel 101), who often imply intoxication of the protagonist (see “Jockey full of Bourbon,” for example). What is more, since dreams are transient and shapeless, this dreamlike environment at once determines and conveys the nature of its characters (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 61-2), who let dreams rule their lives and never stay put for long. Second, in the case of Frank O’Brien, departure seems more of a personal choice. In “Walk Away,” rather than by choice, Dot King is a wanderer by nature, as she “was whittled from the bone of Cain.” This concept only appears in his later work, for example, in “Face to the Highway” (*Bad as me*), as has been mentioned further above in chapter 4.3.

On some occasions, Waits deals with the downsides of this lifestyle and his characters experience deep regret. Both “Pony” (*Mule Variations*) and “Train Song” (*Frank’s Wild Years*) should be emphasized here. They feature characters who have left on purpose and now regret their choices. The protagonist of “Pony” is drawn through auto-characterization, as he tells us about his life of travel, “I’ve seen it all boys / I’ve been all over / Been everywhere in the / whole wide world.” After setting out on his journey “full of wonder,” he is now “full of hollow” and hopes “[his] Pony / knows the way back home.” Again, as in “Rain Dogs” (*Rain Dogs*) we find indications as to his being lost in both space and time in the lines “Somehow my watch and chain / got lost.” It is significant that the character hopes for his pony to find the way back home, since it implies that he himself is lost and unable to do so.

The protagonist in “Train Song” shares the regrets in “Pony,” as he confesses, “I’m so sorry for what I’ve done / and I’m out here on my own.” The tone is more desperate, however, since he “broke down [...] / On the Kansas City line” and is now stuck there with no means to return. The sorrows of this character are amplified in the chorus, which implies that it is impossible for him to go back to

⁷² “[I]n the morning I’ll be gone” and “I wanna walk away”, respectively.

the home he knew. The home as he left it no longer exists, it has changed, probably because his relationships with people there have changed. “It was a train that took me away from here / but a train can’t bring me home,” indicates that the concept of home is not merely a spatial one, but one created by human relationships (cf. Brett 140 qtd. in Relph 78). Unlike “Pony,” this song features heavy drinking, which is also more typical of this period. Again via auto-characterization and imagery that implies dreams and intoxication, we learn of his downfall, “What made my dreams so hollow / was standing at the depot / with a steeple full of swallows.” Rather than the intent of taking initiative and confronting life’s obstacles, escapism and intoxication have finally won the upper hand and have left this character with despair and self-pity.

Although Waits provides different variations of the doomed wanderer, these characters all share certain characteristics. Some of them are wanderers by nature, that is, they cannot resist the urge to travel since transient space is where they come closest to feeling at home. Most of his characters, however, lack the capacity to confront their problems and consider walking away from them the only possible solution. Every now and then we catch a glimpse of a character that is longing to go back home, but finds it impossible, since a home is not merely a set of coordinates on a map, but a space created by human relationships and interactions. This notion seems to lie at the centre of Waits’ doomed wanderers.

6.2. A different kind of princess

Jacobs points out that Waits’ female characters constitute “one of [Waits’] central songwriting blind spots. So many of his women characters are sketched in broad madonna/whore strokes, untouchable porcelain dolls or alcohol-addicted broken spirits” (Jacobs 145-6). While Jacobs is referring to Waits’ work in the seventies here, he adds “they still have a tendency to creep into his creations” (Jacobs 145-6).

What Jacobs ignores in his brief definition are those of Waits’ female characters that bring disaster with them. As has been discussed in chapter 5.2., love often results in ruin, and the cause is often a woman (see chapter 5.2.). What is striking is that these women hardly ever speak for themselves. They are either only spoken

of, or characterized by other (male) characters. “Gun Street Girl” (*Rain Dogs*) is the typical portrayal of a femme fatale as Waits used to draw them in the seventies and eighties. She is actually not a real character, she does not exist in the same space, but rather in the stories and laments of a male character. As Solis points out, Waits’ “is truly a world of men talking to men, often about women” (Solis 41). The woman character is important in that the male character blames her for his miserable situation. However, she does not usually partake in the events presented in the song, nor does she have a voice of her own.

The same pattern is also featured in more recent songs like “Such a scream” (*Bone Machine*). This woman is a wild force, with supernatural and demonic features, as “She just goes clank and boom and steam” and has “A halo, wings, horns and a tail.” As usual, she is not a present character, but spoken of, as the very beginning of the song indicates, “[P]ale [F]ace said / To the [E]yeball [K]id.” However, this woman is a far cry from the “untouchable porcelain doll” mentioned in Jacobs, nor is she an “alcohol-addicted broken [spirit]” (146).

The heterodiegetic characterization describes her as “made of cream,” with red lips and a “cheetah coat [that] fills up with steam,” once more underlining her demonic nature. However, there are rather masculine images, too. She is “shovelling coal,” is like “nails in cement” and the images of a red plough and “[m]achine gun haste,” too, invoke rather masculine connotations.

She cannot be categorized easily, as she is “[a]ll crooked lines.” She is human and demonic, soft like cream and tough like “nails in cement.” Her attraction and appeal are irresistible, nonetheless. The term “otherworldly” comes to mind. She is an outlaw and a bad omen, since because of her “You’ll ride the only wall of shame / And drag that chain across the state.” It should be emphasized that the narrative situation should be taken into account, too. That is, in this song, two male characters are talking. The masculine images may thus reflect their language, the hyperbolic descriptions and their boisterous attitude. However, other songs with different narrative situations often share these elements, too.

Although “Black Market Baby” (*Mule Variations*) lacks the boisterousness of “Such a Scream” and is more foreboding in tone, both songs share certain elements concerning their women characters. That is, the woman in “Black

Market Baby” is characterized by the male narrator-character. She is an outsider who “lives in a house / that's way back off the road,” and “There's a man with a lantern / and he carries her soul.” According to Kessel, “[s]he is a hooker who has amnesia in her kiss to keep her empowered and free from any emotional liability” (Kessel 83). Kessel’s interpretation implies that the character is at once appealing and dangerous for the ones who get involved with her.

The character is partly inspired by the actress Patricia Arquette (Valania 306-7; see also Hoskyns 425), famous for her role in *True Romance* (1993). Arquette’s character in this movie is a call-girl, who is at the same time a pretty and somewhat naive blonde as well as streetwise and tough, as she kills an assassin with the help of both a pocketknife screwdriver and a shotgun. Similarly, Waits’ “Black Market Baby” also combines beauty and violence in his character, who “is a swan and a pistol.”

The narrator-character cannot break free from her, as he finds that “There's no prayer like desire” and since this attraction is so strong, he forgives her anything as the line “There's amnesia in her kiss” shows. The obsession with her will finally lead to ruin, as “She's a hard way to go / and there ain't no way / to stop / Every time you play the red / the black is coming up.”

The images that her characterization evokes include gambling (“everytime you play the red / the black is coming up”), violence (“pistol”), alcohol (“She’s whiskey in a teacup”), exoticism (“She’s a Bonzai Aphrodite / and a ticket back to Spain”) and hell is mentioned even twice. With the exception of exoticism, none of these have feminine connotations, but rather belong to a quite masculine world typical of Waits.

The woman seems raw and unrefined, and her appeal appears to lie at least partly in her unaffected ways, free of mannerisms or conventions. All her darker aspects are nothing the character is ashamed of, but rather something she has chosen, since “She’s a diamond that / wants to stay coal.” That is, she is an outcast by choice.

The woman character in “Lowdown” (*Orphans*), again, is only spoken of. In fact, the narrator even mentions “she’s a story / they all tell.” This woman, too, is an outsider, “a crooked sheriff / in a real straight town,” which implies that she is

both corrupt and powerful. Loving her bears serious risks, as “she’s a gone lost dirt road” and “there ain’t no way back.”

She is physically attractive, wears a short “leather skirt” and has long legs. However, she is also “a rebel” who will “steal it from you” and “sell it right back to you again,” she even has a “stolen check book” and is compared to “a cold gun of ice blue metal.” That is, physical attraction and a good portion of malice and street wisdom are combined in this character, too. While the “Black Market Baby” is “a diamond that / wants to stay coal,” the character in “Lowdown” is compared to “a wild rose” and “a cheap motel / with a burned out sign.”

That is, beauty is again featured in a natural and raw state. Beauty and violence, this time together with lowlife images like the “cheap motel / with a burned out sign,” are present again, too. Also, the narrator-character is aware of her danger, yet he does not refrain from her, instead he seems to celebrate the way she is, even if he will be the one who pays, in the lines “oh yeah my baby is lowdown.”

In “Dog Door” (*Orphans*) the figure of the femme fatale is taken to new extremes, although still following a similar pattern. Here a male character seems to warn someone about this woman, who is “as mean as a needle” and “like a mean shop keeper / who got an extra gun.” The word “mean” is thus repeated in the first verse and the following characterization draws her highly destructive and oppressive. “[N]ow pigs get fat[,] hogs get slaughtered / you ought to walk away / well you can’t[,] but you ought to.” These lines express both her danger and his inability to walk away from it. A similar situation can be observed in “Black Market Baby” and other songs, for example “Lucinda” (*Orphans*).

This time, however, there are no physical descriptions of her, except for her “long black hair”⁷³ and her height, “about 6’4,” which is related to “a wrecking ball.” The chorus repeats the warning “she got you coming through the dog door” and lists for items, “pitchfork / crowbar / claw hammer / hot tar,” which seem to imply violence again in this context, not to forget the “electricity chair” mentioned in the last verse. This woman is clearly very dominant, tall and powerful. She controls and oppresses a male character, who is likely to be her lover. She is compared to

⁷³ The woman who whispers “you’ll never be going back home” to the protagonist in “Rain Dogs” (*Rain Dogs*) is also described as having “her long hair black as a raven”.

“a small town jail” and has “ruin in her name,” which underlines how oppressive and destructive a power her character is.

Quite differently, “First Kiss” (Orphans) is not a warning, but a love song, similar to “Black Market Baby” and “Lowdown.” As in these two songs, the woman is characterized by a male narrator-character again. Moreover, the use of direct definitions is very interesting. Frequently, they function in a similar way as has been remarked in the discussion on setting-characters in chapter 4.1. That is, some bizarre details and characteristics are provided, but neither explanations, nor any more information are added. This creates a certain tension, since the listener is left without reasons for many of the woman character’s grotesque characteristics. For example, “she always had saw dust in her hair / and she cut two holes in the back of her dress / and she had these scapular wings / that were covered with feathers and electrical tape.” This sort of information appears highly incomplete and thus encourages the listener to enquire further, which is impossible, of course. As has been mentioned in chapter three, what is left out is often important in Waits’ work, and this certainly applies for his characterizations, too.

This woman character is clearly an outsider and, in fact, rather irritating. “She lived in a trailer under a bridge / and she made her own whiskey and gave cigarettes to kids / and she’d been struck by lightning seven or eight times / and she hated the mention of rain” and “she made up her own language.” Again we find almost supernatural powers in a woman character, especially, since “she’s stronger than any man.”

What is also interesting is the use of the past tense, which makes her appear more like a legend, a story heard somewhere some time ago. This impression, as well as the rather negative conclusions that one might draw from the disturbing information given throughout the song, are, however, turned upside-down at the very end of the song. “[A]nd she gave me / my very first kiss” followed by “talking 'bout my little Kathleen / she’s just a fine young thing / someday she’ll wear my ring” turns this piece into a love song dedicated to Waits’ wife, Kathleen Brennan. That is, if direct definitions are too abundant in Waits’ we may frequently expect a twist at the end, or take it as a sign not to trust the information we are given (see page 10).

In “All the time” (*Orphans*) direct definitions of the woman character abound, too. In this song a woman is chased by a man, who wants to kill her (“I want shade and a good place to shoot from”) and characterizes her via flaws. “You’re the tree that you can’t eat the fruit from,” “you’re the ditch in the road where wheels keep spinning / you’re the same dead cat clawing its way back grinning” and “you’re the light that won’t change / that I got stuck at / you’re the fan that won’t work at the motel,” all of these lines employ flaws in the characterization of the woman character⁷⁴. Interestingly, this technique echoes an old observation of Waits’ inspired by Bukowski, “It’s not the big things that drive men mad. It’s the little things. The shoelace that breaks when there’s no time left” (Rowland 105). These direct definitions of the woman character through the words of the man chasing her, turns into an indirect presentation of the narrator-character himself. In the end, they define his mental state more accurately than the actual woman they are meant to describe.

Among all the songs about women characters, “Widow’s Grove” (*Orphans*) constitutes a special case. That is, while the above woman characters are all characterized via male characters, this one has her own voice to tell her story, which is one of “murderous jealousy” (Kessel 84). Hence, this woman is characterized through her actions and the plot events.

She sees her lover waltz “too slowly [...] / with that girl from Widow’s Grove,” which catalyzes the fatal events to follow. The woman is “[c]old and calculating” as she uses her appeals to lure the man away from the party in order to kill him. Furthermore, she feels no pity for him, when she tells “I looked at you / bent to the earth with / just one pleading wish / your skirts brushed to / the furious pounding.” “Complacent in her own righteousness, she displays no remorse for her actions” (Kessel 84) even in his dying moments.

What is new in this character is the fact that she is the narrator-character herself and she is characterized through indirect presentation, that is, through the plot events. Also, in “Widow’s Grove” it is not the man, but the woman who is driven mad by her obsessive love.

⁷⁴ The black cat is, of course, a reference to Poe’s tale of the same name, where the dead cat, killed by the protagonist, returns and ultimately drives the protagonist mad.

Waits' femmes fatales⁷⁵ are commonly characterized through direct definitions by a male character. The imagery often includes weapons and farm tools, which add dangerous and raw connotations to her. Typically, the woman leads to ruin, has a bad reputation of which she is aware but also unaffected by. Her appeal and attraction outweigh her dangers, at least for the male character who indulges in an unhealthy relationship with her which usually ends in obsession and madness.

6.3. Hoppers and dreamers

On a more general level, most of Waits' characters may fall into this category of hoppers and dreamers, since change of space, his most prominent theme, is always motivated by some sort of hope for improvement of one's situation. However, for our purposes we will focus on songs in which a more positive concept of hope than usual can be observed. Also, we will distinguish between songs that contain the hopes of a character and those that have the concept of hope itself at their centre.

The couple in "Hold On" (*Mule Variations*) leave their hometown in order to find a better life in California. Apparently, the woman is rather spontaneous and not ready to compromise her individuality for a small-town existence, as "she left Monte Rio [...] / just like a bullet leaves a gun," in other words, fast and without looking back. She has "hair like wind," which suggests movement and a dynamic character. She is further described as having "charcoal eyes and Monroe hips." The word "coal" is interesting here, since it is often used in the characterizations of attractive women, as has been mentioned in chapter 6.2. This character seems dominant, too, since she makes her lover, Jim, come with her and not vice versa. What distinguishes this woman from the femmes fatales in the previous chapter is that she is in love and stays with her lover, despite their problems.

Furthermore, we find flaw as a means of characterization again. She has "a crooked little heart," for instance, and a "broken-china voice." As so often in Waits, nothing is plain and perfect. Imperfection is much more attractive than perfection. This also accounts for their situation. Waits has classified "Hold on" as

⁷⁵ Note that, for example, the woman character in "Walk Away" (*Orphans*) is characterized differently because she belongs to the category of "doomed wanderers".

“an optimistic song” about a couple “in love” (Schoemer 268). Nevertheless, far from a “perfect” love story, they fall on hard times and the woman starts to work as a prostitute in order to make ends meet. This does not mean, however, that she is drawn “in broad madonna/whore strokes” (Jacobs 146).

Down by the Riverside motel,
it's 10 below and falling
by a 99 cent store she closed her eyes
and started swaying
but it's so hard to dance that way
when it's cold and there's no music

The phrase “she closed her eyes” before she starts dancing is important. It suggests a moment of hesitation and also expresses her desperation, as closing her eyes is like shutting herself off from what she is doing. With this phrase we may not gain exact information about her inner life. However, a certain complexity of character is created, after all, which goes beyond “broad madonna/whore strokes” (Jacobs 146). To this we might add the innocent observation “it’s so hard to dance that way / when it’s cold and there’s no music,”⁷⁶ which underlines once more the bleakness of her situation.

From the liberating escape from her hometown and “her hair like wind” to the desperate situation that leads her to prostitution, this character lives through hard times. These difficulties, that is, the plot events, suggest a certain complexity of character precisely because their love story is flawed, they do not simply go from rags to riches, but must cope with very hard situations. Again, what is left out adds to this complexity. The question, “why doesn’t she go back to her family instead of working as a prostitute?” is obvious, but never dealt with in the song⁷⁷.

The turn of the plot events suggests character development, too. However, this is not elaborated in the characterization, but rather in the listener’s assumptions. Since character is “partly modelled on the reader’s conception of people“

⁷⁶ This line was inspired by Waits’ daughter, Kellesimone. “There was this transgender person [...] standing on a corner wearing a short little top with a lot of midriff showing, a lot of makeup and dyed hair and a really short skirt. And this guy, or girl, was dancing all by himself. And my little girl saw it and said, ‘It must be really hard to dance like that when you’re so cold and there’s no music’” (Montandon 346).

⁷⁷ That is, as opposed to other songs, for example, “Christmas card (from a hooker in Minneapolis)” (*Blue Valentine*) where the character explains that she “went back to Omaha to live with [her] folks / but everyone that [she] used to know was either dead or in prison / so [she] came back to Minneapolis”.

(Rimmon-Kenan 33), one may interpret that somebody going through these changes, learns a lot about life and its hardships and, therefore, develops. This, however, is left to the imagination of the listener. The character in “Hold On” (*Mule Variations*) is characterized by her actions and there is no noteworthy penetration into her inner life. The character is brought alive through her actions and the listener’s filling-in of the gaps between them.

In “Whistle down the wind” (*Bone Machine*), the characterization works almost the opposite way. That is, contemplated acts outweigh the acts of commission, and there is more penetration into the character’s inner life. The lines, “I’ve grow[n] up here now / all of my life / But I dreamed / Someday I’d go” express the character’s alienation from his space as well as his anxiety to see distant places. “I’m not all I thought I’d be” emphasizes the big disappointment with his life thus far. Furthermore, there are many images that convey how he views his own situation. He sees himself “[f]rozen to the ground,” for example, and “stuck like a shipwreck [in the dust].”

Anxiety and disappointment are rather complex emotions, since they are a mixture of other emotions merging into one. Therefore, the character gains complexity, too. “I can’t stay here and I’m scared to leave” underlines these mixed feelings and his state of anxiety. A character who experiences various and contradicting emotions at the same time, can certainly be considered complex.

As concerns character development, there may be less within the episode treated in the song than outside of it, that is, if we follow Rimmon-Kenan and allow the listener to construct “a future for [the character] beyond what is specified in the text” (Rimmon-Kenan 32). At the beginning the character states that “all of [his] life” he has been wishing to leave his town. Therefore, whether there is development in this character or not depends on whether one believes he will really leave this time or not. Apparently, he has had this idea for his entire life, and has thus far never acted upon it. Now he claims that “[he] will take the Marley Bone Coach / And [w]histle down the wind.” However, he also admits that he is “scared to leave,” so considering his past there is still the possibility of him staying.

The character in “Going out west” (*Bone Machine*) is certainly very convinced “that something good may happen” in the future. Contrary to the man in “Whistle down the wind,” this character has no inhibiting doubts or fears. He is full of self-confidence and bragging. Grammar is also significant here, as he does not use the simple future, but the going-to future or even the present continuous, which implies more certainty about the future materialization of a plan. He “[is] goin’ out west” and he is going to “do what [he] want[s] / And [he’s going to] get paid.” This certainty is relatively rare in Waits’ characters and is often used for comic effect.

This is not a very complex character, as his bragging leaves him rather one-dimensional. There is little penetration into his inner life. He may be somewhat self-conscious about his appearance, since he says almost apologetically “my friends think I’m ugly / I got a masculine face.” This remark also holds the key element of this character, which is masculinity. It is especially reaffirmed in the chorus when the character repeats, “I know karate [...] / I don’t need no makeup / I got real scars / I got hair on my chest / I look good without a shirt.” He wants to become successful in film business and is obviously aiming at very masculine roles, since the verses almost appear a sort of curriculum vitae for such parts.

We do learn about his plans and the way he imagines his near future, however, the character remains rather shallow. The fact that his hopes are likely to be frustrated at his arrival, adds a hint of tragedy and the possibility of development. The mention of his parole officer, who “will be proud of [him],” alludes to a past “beyond what is specified in the text” (Rimmon-Kenan 32) and may even imply development prior to the current situation. However, this sort of speculation is not the aim of this paper. The character’s plans imply certain aspects of his inner life, nevertheless. They indicate his dreams and concerns.

In general, this protagonist is characterized by self-descriptions and by both contemplated acts and acts of commission. This is also how the protagonist in “Straight to the top (Rhumba)” (*Frank’s Wild Years*) is drawn, which is why this song will not be analyzed in more detail here. Suffice it to say that this character, Frank O’Brien, is characterized in several songs (and a theatre play), which is what allows penetration into his inner life, and which is also how he gains complexity and development. However, there is not much of either of them in this

specific song, except his hopes and dreams, which are certainly part of his inner life.

The songs mentioned above convey the hopes of their characters and are thus more character-centred. On other occasions, the focus is more on the actual notion of hope and less on character. “Come on up to the house” (*Mule Variations*) is a good example. Here the notion of hope is strong, however, one can hardly speak of fully-fledged characters. The pronouns “I, you” and “we” imply a narrator-character as do the lines “The world is not my home / I’m just a passin thru.” However, it is evident that character is not at the centre of this song and its main focus is the notion of hope⁷⁸.

Similarly, “Down there by the train” (*Orphans*) revolves around this concept. There is a narrator-character, who assures that everyone will find redemption in this place “down there by the train.” However, only one verse out of six focuses on this character, and the reason for this seems of rhetorical nature. In the song, several well-known sinners are mentioned. Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated Abraham Lincoln, “the soldier who pierced the heart of the [L]ord,” Charlie Whitman, who killed “his mother and his wife” and then shot fourteen people “[on] the campus of the University of Texas” in 1966⁷⁹. Another reference is made to infamous bank robber John Herbert Dillinger⁸⁰. All of these sinners are promised redemption and forgiveness.

The verse about the narrator-character seems to have the function of adding verisimilitude and underlining the truth of his promises. He admits,

I’ve never asked forgiveness
I’ve never said a prayer
I’ve never given of myself
I’ve never truly cared
I’ve hurt the ones who loved me
I’m still raising [C]ain
I’ve taken the low road and
if you’ve done the same
meet me down there by the train

⁷⁸ Cf. also Rimmon-Kenan’s discussion of the varying hierarchy between plot and character depending on a text’s focus (34-6).

⁷⁹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/27/mind-murderer_n_1384102.html

⁸⁰ <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/history/famous-cases/john-dillinger>

That is, in those songs that contain the hope of their protagonists, character is more at the centre and receives more attention in Waits' songwriting. However, in these cases, hope is also likely to be frustrated. The hopes and dreams of these characters constitute penetration into their inner lives. Development and complexity appear to varying degrees, while especially the question of development is usually left to the listener's imagination. If hope is at the centre of the song, character moves further into the background and may adopt functions such as serving as an example and adding verisimilitude.

6.4. Humorous characters

Analogous to chapter 5.4., we will focus on characters in songs that satirize religion and show business. In "Jesus gonna be here" (*Bone Machine*), Waits' "most overt gospel pastiche to date" (Hoskyns 390), a sinner is convinced that the saviour's arrival is imminent and that he will be rescued. He is characterized through indirect presentation, that is, the beliefs he tells us about, draw his character. This is neither a complex, nor a developing character. We do learn about his innermost beliefs, however, and they can certainly be described as absurd. The absolute certainty of his own salvation is, especially in the frame of Waits' songs, reminiscent of mad street-corner evangelists (cf. Kessel 117). This impression is maintained in the lines "I've been faithful / And I've been so good / Except for drinking / But he knew that I would." This sounds like the apologetic justification of a drunk man preaching at a street corner, supposedly showing everyone else the right way, while he himself makes but for a very poor example.

The beliefs he preaches are at best absurd. According to him, he has to do nothing but to "wait here." He has "no doubt[s]" and is convinced that he will "leave this world better / than the way [he] found it was" and that he has been faithful enough to deserve salvation. The remark about his drinking, however, puts this in a new perspective. Obviously, he is not a reliable source of information. The contradictions between his preaching and his lifestyle seem absurd and comic, as does the idea of Jesus "rolling on down the lane" in a "brand new Ford."

The sinner in "Chocolate Jesus" (*Mule Variations*) constitutes a similar case. He declines organized religion, as he is utterly convinced that he has found a better

manner of worshipping the Lord, who may love him “just a little bit more” for his unorthodox ways. This certainty appears more than absurd when he starts explaining his way of worship, which comes down to simply eating a chocolate Jesus.

This character is partly drawn by his habitual actions. He “[does not] go to church on Sunday,” he does not pray, nor “memorize the books of the Bible.” Instead, he “fall[s] on [his] knees every Sunday / At Zerelda Lee’s candy store.” He renounces the other sweets there, but insists on his chocolate Jesus. For him, only this sweet can bring stimulation and the satisfaction of his soul.

As in “Jesus gonna be here,” the humorous climax comes towards the end of the song, where the character “eagerly provides helpful hints in caring for a sacred chocolate Jesus in inclement weather” (Kessel 119) and suggests “[pouring the melted saviour] over ice cream / for a nice parfait.” Hence, it seems that Waits tends to add a hyperbolic element at the end that allows a better look at the inner life of the characters and their convictions.

This can also be observed in “Altar Boy” (Orphans). The original version of this song was written in 1992 for the Robert Wilson collaboration *Alice*. It is written in the form of a duet, which explains why the altar boy is referred to by both pronouns “he” and “I.” He lives on the street “majoring in crimes that are unspeakable” while “bound up in leather and chains.” Nevertheless, he is convinced that he is faithful enough. In the early version “[h]e figures he got enough religion already in him” while “he’s leafing through the dirty magazine” towards the end of the song⁸¹.

There is an interesting difference between the characters in Waits’ satirical songs. Apparently, songs that deal with religion feature characters with a focus on their inner lives and beliefs and the tension between them and the outer world. In Waits’ parodies of show business, the protagonists tend to be characterized by lack and flaws. “Big in Japan” (*Mule Variations*) provides a good example. Every affirming self-description is followed by the mention of a flaw taken from

⁸¹ Compare

<http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-songs.html>.

the same semantic field⁸². “I got the sizzle but not the steak / I got the boat but not the lake / I got the sheets but not the bed / I got the jam but not the bread.” Despite these flaws, the character can still claim to be “big in Japan.” That is, in show business, he finds recognition despite his obvious shortcomings, even if it is only in a second-class industry of entertainment (see chapter 5.4.), and thus, an environment that is in itself lacking.

On other occasions, Waits takes this idea one step further and employs physical flaws as a means to characterize showbiz characters. These deformities usually indicate issues on an emotional level. Speaking of the character “Eyeball Kid,” Waits has said that they may refer to “some kind of family disturbance or [to being] damaged in some way or another” (Valania 307).

Among the songs that feature “human oddities” (Kessel 105-11) there are two in particular which serve as fine examples of the above. The most prominent one is the aforementioned character Eyeball Kid⁸³. He is based on a comic character by the same name created by Australian comic writer Eddie Campbell⁸⁴. Waits models his character on the name of Campbell’s, imagining what a character of that name might look like. While the results are vastly different⁸⁵, it is significant of how Waits draws characters with the help of the associations triggered by a proper name (see page 31). This can also be observed in “Table Top Joe” (*Alice*), another fine example of a physically flawed character going into show business. His name is a nickname of Waits’ for Johnny Eck (1911-1991), a human oddity and sideshow attraction “born with no lower half.”⁸⁶ The proper name “Table Top Joe,” together with information “born without a body” already creates associations

⁸² Note that a similar technique is used in other songs, for example, “Face to the Highway” (*Bad as Me*) where each concept is wanting of another to be whole, which is how Waits expresses the character’s special relation to life on the road in that song.

⁸³ He appears in “Such a Scream” (*Bone Machine*), “Hang me in the Bottle”, the demo version of “We’re all mad here” (*Alice*), and in “Eyeball Kid” (*Mule Variations*).

⁸⁴ <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-songs.html>

⁸⁵ Campbell’s Eyeball Kid has twenty eyes, whereas Waits’ is one single eyeball. Compare <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-songs.html>.

⁸⁶ <http://www.johnnyeckmuseum.com/bio.html>, and <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-songs.html>; he is also mentioned in “Lucky Day (Overture)” (*The Black Rider*) as “Johnny Eck, the man born without a body / He walks on his hands, he has his own orchestra and is an excellent pianist.”

which draw a rather adequate picture of the character, if we may allow ourselves a comparison with the real Johnny Eck.



(Fig.1)

“Eyeball Kid” and “Table Top Joe,” likewise, begin with references to the respective character’s family situation. “Table Top Joe” (*Alice*) starts with “my Mama didn’t want me / On the day I was born / Born without a body / I got nothing but scorn.” This negative reaction on behalf of his family is opposed by the situation faced by the Eyeball Kid, whose parents “had sixteen children / in the usual style / They had a curio museum / and they had no guile / All they ever wanted / was a show biz child.” Although these attitudes are very different from each other, both characters ultimately enter show business because of their family situations.

Show business, often in form of the circus, is frequently the only place where such extreme outsiders may find acceptance or even recognition. This may well be considered Waits’ version of the American Dream. He certainly identifies with his outsider characters, and even gave the Eyeball Kid a birth date that coincides with his own. The laugh is therefore on the phenomenon of show business, not on people with disabilities, since Waits merely uses physical deformities to signify emotional flaws that lead to a higher need for attention and recognition.

In the above cases, the construct of character is not very complex. There is development on the story-level, especially. The Eyeball Kid enters show business on behalf of his parents’ wishes, becomes famous and meets a manager whose only concern is to “cut down on the glare.” This manager is also the narrator⁸⁷ and therefore we do not learn much about the Eyeball Kid’s inner life, merely of his

⁸⁷ Compare “I said your name will / be in lights / and that’s no doubt / But you got to have / a manager that’s what / it’s all about”.

actions and his plans to perform in “Carnegie Hall.” The story of “Table Top Joe” implies more development, since at the beginning not even his mother loved him and he “got nothing but scorn.” However, by the end of his story “the man without a body / Proved everyone wrong / [He] was rich and [he] was famous / And [he] was where [he] belonged.” All in all, the focus is more on satirical effect, than on character, as has been shown above.

6.5. Characters that convey a moral message

Those of Waits’ characters that convey a moral message usually depend highly on the context of their characterization. That is, generally a setting or a situation are introduced first, which puts the character into context and already includes certain implications.

In “A little rain” (*Bone Machine*), characterization is achieved through setting (cf. Rimmon-Kenan 65-6) and intertextuality. That is, there is relatively little information about the fifteen-year-old protagonist. The setting created in the first verse through the use of setting-characters is one of a world where nothing seems to fit, as “a man with missing fingers / Plays a strange guitar” and “the German dwarf / Dances with the butcher’s son.” This partly indicates the inner life of a child growing up and trying to make sense of the world. Several lines which seem to constitute parental advice add to this impression. The recurring line “a little rain never hurt noone” provides a good example, while “You must risk something that matters” as well as “If it’s worth the going / It’s worth the ride” also fall into this category. Moreover, the lines “The world is round / And so I’ll go round” deserve emphasis. They are a reference to Gertrude Stein’s children’s book “The world is round” (1939)⁸⁸, whose protagonist, young Rose, wonders about her identity and goes on a journey to find out who she really is.

That is, even before the actual character is introduced, by the use of setting and intertextuality her quest for identity and, therefore, also development (her state of transition), complexity (her anxiety to leave) and part of her inner life (confusion

⁸⁸ It opens with the sentence, “Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around.”

about the world and her identity) are already implied. Waits wraps the character off only in the last verse, providing very specific and emotionally charged information. “She was 15 years old / And she’s never seen the ocean” implies her difficult age and her anxiety to break out and explore the world. “She climbed into a van / With a vagabond,” hints at disaster since a vagabond’s van is certainly not to be considered the place to be for a fifteen-year-old girl. Finally, “the last thing she said / Was ‘I love you mom’,” appears to prove this concern right, as, by implication, she is never again seen after this.

By this way of characterizing the young girl, the character seems more of a general construct that may be applied to many different cases. Furthermore, the relation between the teenage character and the adult world is brought into focus.

“Georgia Lee” (*Mule Variations*) begins with a similar pattern. It is however necessary to point out that here the character is a very specific one. Significantly, the girl in “A little rain” has no name, which allows the character to function as a more general warning. The song is also about a girl struggling to find her identity and a quest that goes wrong and results in tragedy. The eponymous protagonist in “Georgia Lee,” on the other hand, is a specific character and the song starts with the discovery of her body, moves on to giving details about her family situation and then alludes to her being forgotten too soon. Especially the last point expresses a widely spread criticism on the case of Georgia Lee Moses, who was kidnapped and murdered in 1997⁸⁹.

The first line, “Cold was the night, hard was the ground” is a reference to a 1927 by American Blues musician Blind Willie Johnson. Johnson’s piece of the same title deals with “the mourners at Christ’s tomb.”⁹⁰ With this reference, Waits sets up a dark beginning that is further elaborated in “They found her in a small grove of trees / Lonesome was the place where Georgia was / found.” It also implies that the girl was found dead, which is not indicated otherwise. Thus, in the first verse, Georgia Lee is characterized as a victim.

⁸⁹ <http://www.petaluma360.com/article/20060828/NEWS/608280321?p=1&tc=pg>; cf. also <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-songs.html>

⁹⁰ <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/lyrics-by-songs.html>

The following two verses refer to Georgia's family situation. First, a character called Ida is mentioned in the third person singular, "Ida said she couldn't keep Georgia / from dropping out of school." Interestingly, there is a change of focalization and she speaks in the first person, "I was doing the best that I could / but she kept runnin[g] away from this world / these children are so hard to raise good." Through this direct characterization by an internal focalizer (her mother), Georgia's family problems and emotional instability are implied, both of which point towards complexity of character. This sort of focalization has the effect that "the [listener] is drawn into the story and invited to co-experience what it is like to be a participant in the unfolding events" (Jahn 1.17.).

The third verse provides a glance into Georgia's inner life, stating that the reason for her continuous running away is an unfulfilled desire to be cared for. "Close your eyes and count to ten / I will go and hide but then / be sure to find me. I want you to find me / and we'll play all over / We will play all over again."

By implication, the last verse finally characterizes her as a forgotten victim. It describes a setting, which is likely to be the place where her body was found, as there are "[w]ild flowers on a cross by the road." A baby "crying / for her mom" points out the danger of Georgia's story repeating itself, while her case seems to be forgotten as autumn is approaching and "the hills turn from green back / to gold."

As the character of Georgia Lee is based on a real person, the characterization is more specific as in "A little rain" (*Bone Machine*), itself a cautionary tale, however, kept in more general terms.

The character herself is hardly there. The song starts with a description of the place where she was found, then she is spoken about and at the end the song moves back to where Georgia was found and it seems the cross by the road is all that hardly reminds of her since there are already plants growing over it. In the third verse, Georgia seems to speak herself. However, these are not the words of a twelve-year-old. Instead, this is the conclusion of an adult person who imagines her saying these lines, after pondering the young girl's behaviour.

Also based on newspaper articles, "The Fall of Troy" (*Orphans*) is about children brought to death by firearms. However, here the focus is not so much on the

children characters. Rather the question how tragedies like these can happen and the warning against a pitiless world are at the centre of this song. Similar to “Georgia Lee,” the victim’s mother is focussed on in the second half of the song. In the context of the tragic shootings presented in the first two verses, the three simple lines “why cook dinner / why make my bed / why come home at all[?]” express this character’s inner crisis. Furthermore, the lines “out the door and through the woods / there’s a world where nothing grows” underline her new concept of the world outside, which the recent events have suddenly turned bleak and merciless.

The mother’s despair and desolation are expressed in the lines “it’s hard to say grace and thus sit in the place / of someone missing at the table.” She is trying to keep her composure, but is unable to do so, since to understand what has happened and why is beyond her: “mom’s hair sprayed tight and her face in her hands / watching TV for answers [...] / after all she’s only human.” Moreover, the recurring line “she’s trying to find her own way home” implies that she is trying to deal with her grief. In this context, home may refer to the feeling of security that she has lost. The last lines once again underline the moral emptiness in the world and the wearying struggle to make sense of it, “my legs ache / my heart is sore / the well is full of pennies.”

Therefore, the children’s characters are not elaborate in this song, while the mother character is focussed on at the end of the song, offering a look at her inner life, confusion and despair. In this respect, “The Fall of Troy” (*Orphans*) differs from “Georgia Lee” (*Mule Variations*) and “A little rain” (*Bone Machine*). However, it is striking that mother characters are featured in all of them, while fathers are absent.

Among Waits’ political songs, “Day after tomorrow” (*Real Gone*) should be pointed out, as it features a very elaborate soldier character. The characterization takes on the form of a letter, with the soldier writing in first person about his thoughts and feelings as well as his situation. Hence, there is much penetration into his inner life and the character appears complex because of the questions he asks himself. Despite the war, he has not lost faith in the good, as he “still believe[s] that there’s gold / At the end of the world.” Apart from feeling homesick, he questions the war he is fighting. He writes, “I still don’t know how

I'm supposed to feel / About all the blood that's been spilled" and insists that, "You can't deny, the other side / Don't want to die / Anymore th[a]n we do / what I'm trying to say / Is don't they pray / To the same / God that we do?" He even goes as far as to question God's role in this world, "Tell me how does God choose [?]/ Who[se] prayers does he refuse? / [W]ho turns the wheel [?]/ Who rolls the dice"?

He may have developed considerably since starting his service, as he realizes that "They fill us full of lies / everyone buys / [about] what it means / To be a soldier." Furthermore, he admits, "I'm not fighting for justice / I am not fighting for freedom / I am fighting for my life and / Another day in the world here." With no ideological motives, he merely follows orders, of which he is already "tired."

This character must be considered in the song's historical context. It was released in 2004 during the Iraq war under the Bush administration. Its content contrasts highly with the usual war propaganda. This character's point of view sheds a very different light on the notion of a soldier fighting heroically for the ideals of his country. This soldier character thus conveys the moral message that this propaganda has to be questioned and that the situation may look very differently on the battlefield than one might believe at home.

7. Worldviews

7.1. Between religion and nihilism

As Jacobs writes in *Wild Years*, Waits' mother, Alma, who was a very God abiding person, used to take Waits to church when he was a child. However, apparently

[he] never warmed to the undertaking. [...] Which is not to say that Waits never pondered the existence of a higher power or a deeper meaning to life. He just sensed that what he was looking for could not be found in organized religion, and he refused to credit the notion of heaven and hell. (Jacobs 24)

Unfortunately, Jacobs does not mention the age at which Waits started to wonder about God's existence and the meaning of life. In his work, these questions do not start to be raised to a noteworthy extent until the nineties⁹¹.

In general, the notion of organized religion does not receive high value in Waits' work. In fact, "Chocolate Jesus" (*Mule Variations*) ridicules this concept as well as religious worship (cf. Kessel 118). A similar treatment of this issue can be observed in "Jesus gonna be here" (*Bone Machine*). These songs have already been analyzed in more detail in chapter 5.4. For now, they may serve to illustrate the concept of organized religion in Waits' oeuvre. As the church can thus be discarded, the question inevitably arises, what beliefs are endorsed in Waits' work?

According to Waits' own words, all of his albums are "torn between chaos and solace" (Wilonsky 222). In a similar way, his work is also shifting between such opposing worldviews as nihilism and religion. On the one side Waits has released many songs that endorse religion, however, there is a considerable number of songs in which a nihilistic worldview is conveyed, where living by moral standards does not make any difference to living a life of supposed sin. In this subchapter we will examine some of these songs and the views they hold, as well as the concept of God that is conveyed in some of them.

Waits has certainly written enough songs to prove that his work is neither purely nihilist, nor atheist. In fact, he has a weakness for old gospel music reaching very far back in his career⁹². "Lord I've been changed" (*Orphans*), for instance, is an old folk traditional about a man who has been converted and is now a firm believer, celebrating his new faith in God and Christianity. Of course, one must take into account that the lyrics are thus not Waits'. However, our goal is to negotiate the worldviews in his work, of which this song forms part, and not in his personal life. "Lord I've been changed" may certainly be included in this analysis, since it features a shift from one worldview to another as the character finds his way to God. That is, while other songs move from Christian faith to atheism (see

⁹¹ I do not consider Waits' fascination with street-corner evangelists, who already inform some of his characters in the eighties (cf. Kessel 114), as a serious reflection on religious matters. Thus, they are not included here.

⁹² The most obvious is arguably "When the Saints Go Marching in" from the 1979 album *On Broadway*.

page 90), “Lord I’ve been changed” constitutes a shift in the opposite direction and is therefore very positive about the notion of religion.

Likewise, “Take care of my children” (*Orphans*) is highly religious, as it celebrates the protagonist’s “going up to see [his] [L]ord.” This character even suggests “[putting] all of [his] possessions here in Jesus’ name” as he announces that he will go to see his Lord on a “bright and early Sunday morning.” Moreover, before he leaves, he urges his wife to lead a good life and take care of his children. She should “make them a pillow / on the hard ground” and keep them “safe from the devil’s hand.” This last line is alternated in the next verse, when he insists she “remember [to] never trust the devil” and “stay clear of Lucifer’s hand.”

Thus, there are several expressions that contribute to the isotopy of religion in this song, for example, “the [L]ord,” the “early Sunday morning” (the time of the mass), “the devil” and “Lucifer.” The protagonist’s motive for leaving, as well as his serious concern about his family’s religious life, turn “Take care of my children” (*Orphans*) into a highly religious song. The concept of religion is especially positive here, because the Lord is worth leaving the character’s family, while for them a life according to the laws of religion is worth pursuing.

Another song that also conveys a positive concept of religion is “Down there by the train.” As has been mentioned in chapter 5.4, in the world of this song, it does not matter what someone has done, what crimes he or she has committed: in the end, everything and everyone will be forgiven, “even the soldier / who pierced the heart of the [L]ord.” That is, even if one has not lived according to gospel, if one has “never asked forgiveness and / [...] never said a prayer,” as the narrator-character himself admits, one may still expect redemption.

Similarly, the world in “Bottom of the world” (*Orphans*) is benevolent and provides the protagonist with everything he needs in his vagabond life. He even sleeps “on God’s green hair,” which implies a caring and benevolent divinity.

However, not always is religion this idyllic. On the album *Bone Machine* (1992), Waits alludes frequently to the Book of Revelations, creating several apocalyptic scenarios on this record, for example, in “Earth died screaming” and “All stripped down.” On these occasions, Waits does not endorse religion, but merely uses

some of its concepts and imagery in order to create bleak scenarios as well as “to heighten and intensify the evil, dark abyss that engulfs many of his protagonists” (Kessel 119). Besides, it is significant that Waits would choose the Apocalypse, where everything breaks down, as a source of inspiration, rather than the Genesis, for instance.

Whether there is a higher being or power goes together with the question of man’s place and purpose in this universe, of course. In order to negotiate Waits’ worldview, a closer look at the representations of God in his work is rewarding. The protagonist in “Day after tomorrow” (*Real Gone*), a soldier writing home from war, is wavering. At first, he enquires, “how does God / Choose [?]” and “[whose] prayers does he / Refuse?” His meditations seem to lead him to doubt God’s existence, or his influence on the world in general, since he goes on by asking, “who turns the wheel[?]” and, “Who rolls the dice[?]” It is significant, that God is not mentioned anymore after this. The protagonist’s thoughts about God are initiated by the question, “Will God on his throne / bring me back home?” Then the above doubts arise. In the end the conclusion to his reflections is, “only the lucky ones come home.” Luck has nothing to do with God’s will or his existence anymore, but rather points towards a forlorn world with no higher guiding power. Therefore, the song clearly implies a soldier’s losing his faith in God.

However, God’s existence is never explicitly denied in Waits. Instead, he is featured with weaknesses. Not surprisingly, one of them is alcohol. “Don’t you know there ain’t no devil[,] there’s just god when he’s drunk,” the protagonist on “Heartattack and Vine” (*Heartattack and Vine*) tries to convince someone. On this line, Waits has remarked,

I was just sitting on the toilet, and there was this spider web in the corner, and I lit a match and a cigarette, and I held the match up to the spider and the spider started crawling up the web. So I got the match closer. I opened up a can of beer, drank the beer, tried to decide whether I should burn the spider of his web or let him go his way... I figured there must be somebody like that up there: has a couple of cocktails every now and then and there’s trouble on Times Square. (Hoskyns 250)

After the eighties, Waits started to span his net wider than his barfly characters and lowlife aesthetic that more or less summarized his work to that date, and the figure of God developed, too. In “Georgia Lee” (*Mule Variations*), God is “irresponsibly neglectful” (Hoskyns 448), as he did not interfere with the little girl’s fate and left everyone wondering “Why wasn’t God watching? Why wasn’t God listening? / Why wasn’t God there for / Georgia Lee”?

Waits takes this concept one step further in “Road to Peace” (*Orphans*), an anti-war song about the Middle-East conflict. The eighteen-year-old suicide bomber’s last words, “God is great and God is good,” are contrasted in the last verse, after a long list of tragic deaths and violence. “[I]f God is great and God is good / why can’t he change the hearts of men[?]” the narrator asks. Waits does not enter the religious discussion about free will here, the question is merely rhetorical, of course. Hence, the narrator immediately suggests a possible answer, “maybe God himself / is lost and needs help / maybe God himself / he needs all of our help.” It is significant that Waits does not deny God’s existence, but rather questions his power. In the face of the downward spiral of death and retribution presented throughout the song, this final role reversal, that is, the possibility that God may depend on our help and not vice versa, is a remarkable rhetorical device and a novelty in Waits’ oeuvre.

However, these are not the only occasions where God is flawed. In “Little drop of poison” (*Orphans*) the sorry state of the world is alluded to in the question, “did the devil make the world while [G]od was sleeping?” A similar situation can be observed in “Hoist that rag” (*Real Gone*), where the malpractices of the American government have turned the world into a place where “[G]ods go begging.” In “God’s away on business” (*Blood Money*), God is out of town and has left the place in a poor condition and with neither laws, nor values. He is struggling to outrun the devil in “Misery is the river of the world” (*Blood Money*), as “God builds a church / The devil builds a chapel / Like the thistles that are growing / [a]round the trunk of a tree.” He may not be dead in Waits, but from the state of the world they live in, his characters frequently seem to deduce, or it is alluded to, that either God does not care, or he is too weak to properly take control over the events.

Likewise, since there is no caring higher power, the world does not care about the individual and his or her misfortunes, either. The protagonist in “World keeps turning” (*Orphans*) seems at once comforted and puzzled by the fact that there is no reaction on the tragic end of his relationship and that “the world keeps turning” unaffectedly. “[T]he world [doesn’t] care” about the protagonist’s problems in “It’s Over” (*Orphans*) either, nor about the sailor in “Everything goes to Hell” (*Blood Money*). Instead, “[It turns] on nothing but money and dread” in “Sins of the Father” (*Real Gone*).

This is when we reach the other end of the scale, where Waits goes a significant step further towards nihilism. Nihilism means “[dass] die obersten Werte sich entwerten. Es fehlt das Ziel; es fehlt die Antwort auf das ‘Warum’“ (Nietzsche, *Wille zur Macht* 345). If a character finds that the world does not care, or if a soldier realizes that there is no reason or greater good in the war he is fighting (see page 90), traces of this concept are evident. However, does this mean that the manifestations of nihilism in Waits’ work are thus merely expressions of disappointment? In fact, to a certain extent this may be true for cases like “Day after tomorrow.” However, there are others where the references are clearer. For instance, in “Everything goes to Hell” (*Blood Money*), “die Entwertung der bisherigen Werte” (Nietzsche, *Nihilismus* 318) is evident. “Why be sweet, why be careful, why be kind?” the song begins, “A man has only one thing on his mind / Why ask politely, why go lightly, why say please? / They only want to get you on your knees / [...] Everything goes to Hell, anyway.” The bleak worldview in this song is surely a far cry from the one in “Take care of my children.”

A nihilistic element in Waits’ work becomes even more evident when he offers what appears to be his own version of Nietzsche’s “God is dead” with the song title of “God’s away on business” (*Blood Money*). The protagonist announces, “I’d sell your heart to the junkman [...] / For a buck [...] / If you’re looking for someone to pull you / out of that ditch / You’re out of luck.” He goes on by saying that “The ship is sinking” and “there’s a leak, in the boiler room / The poor, the lame, the blind,” the last line implying that all these people are inevitably going to die first. “Who are the ones that we kept in charge [?] / Killers, thieves, and lawyers.” These lines evoke Nietzsche’s words again, “Wir sind abgesotten in der Einsicht, [...] dass es in der Welt durchaus nicht göttlich zugeht, ja noch nicht

einmal nach menschlichem Maasse [sic] vernünftig, barmherzig oder gerecht: wir wissen es, die Welt, in der wir leben, ist ungöttlich, unmoralisch, unmenschlich“ (Nietzsche, *Nihilismus* 306).

Another nihilistic concept is implied in “Top of the Hill” (Real Gone). The protagonist of this song confesses, “If I had it all to do all / Over again / I’d try to rise above the law of man.” The last line is, of course, reminiscent of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, or superman. This concept refers to a “superior man” who “strikes off conventional Christian ‘herd morality’ to create his own values, which are completely rooted in life on this earth.”⁹³ It is interesting that Waits’ character not only wishes to “rise above the law of man,” but he also asks a passerby, “What’s your throttle made of / Is it money or bone”? “Bone” can certainly be considered a concept “rooted in life on this earth,” as it may stand for existence on earth and its transitory nature. Waits does not contrast this with Christianity here, but with capitalism, another “herd morality.” The protagonist wants to break out of this episteme and rise above it.

7.2. Between fatalism and responsibility

As I have mentioned earlier, by “fatalism” I understand the notion “that our human nature dooms individuals or human beings as a group to be stuck in our situations” (Panza & Gale 172). This notion renders the concept of responsibility futile, since no difference can be made. Waits’ work ranges from harsh manifestations of this sort of fatalism to appeals to people’s responsibility.

Blood Money (2002) serves as a good point of departure for the analysis of fatalism in Waits’ oeuvre. Mankind is generally presented as a malign race. Its malevolent nature dooms humanity to living in a world where no kindness of any sort must be expected. There is no way out of this situation and the only certainties there are lie in human recklessness and in death.

Man is but an animal and the more powerful he feels the more he reveals the more he reveals his flaws in “Misery is the river of the world.” The time between cradle and tomb is marked by misery and evil, so one should “[c]all no man happy ‘til he

⁹³ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/574434/superman>

dies” as there is no hope for him in life. Evil is a constant companion and an omnipresent force, as “God builds a church / The devil builds a chapel / Like the thistles that are growing /’round the trunk of a tree.”

This bleak view of the world and its constitution is paralleled by the view of mankind, of which no attempts at changing this must be expected. In fact, man seems by his very nature, responsible for his condition. “If there’s one thing you can say / About mankind / There’s nothing kind about man,” draws a reckless image of humanity. Furthermore, there is no hope of changing this, since although one may temporarily gain control over nature, ultimately it will “always [come] roaring back again.” Thus, because of human nature, mankind is stuck in its hopeless condition, ruled by evil, since “All the good in the world / You can put inside a thimble / And still have room for you and me.”

Hoskyns writes about *Blood Money*, “The notion of human existence as remorseless and unstoppable was a worldview that Waits in any case partly held. [...] [H]umanity was capable of such rottenness that in the end the only sane response was to surrender to its churning flow” (Hoskyns 447). The only possible reaction is to play along to these rules and “row,” since it seems an unalterable fact that “misery is the river of the world.”

A similar worldview is conveyed in “Starving in the belly of a whale.” Life is “a riddle” and “a mistake.” The narrator insists on his word not be taken, but he points out that there is evidence enough. The “[s]ky is darkening” and the “[d]ogs are barking” as in an end-of-the-world scenario. Death is imminent and no one cares about man’s fate, since it is a rule of nature that, quite literally, “[y]ou’ll never get out [of this world] alive.” Therefore, as there is nothing that can be done, “the caravan moves on.”

Nobody is to be trusted and one must accept this reality and not “go dreaming” or “scheming” about the world. The only truth is death and even hope seems a false promise, since those who “live in hope [are] / Dancing to a terrible tune.” At first the lines “[a] man must test his mettle / In a crooked old world” seem to point towards an alternative to complete surrender. However, in the end the crookedness of this “old world” appears too much to deal with. Man is bound to fail and he has no control over his fate, since he is merely “a fiddle that life plays on.”

No kindness is to be expected in “God’s Away on Business” either. In the absence of divine power, mankind has left the world in a terrible state, heading towards its own destruction. The lines “Bloody moon rising with a plague and a flood / Join the mob, join the mob” imply an end-of-the-world scenario again, with groups of people plundering, not caring about anyone but themselves. The narrator character would even “sell [someone’s] heart to the junkman [...] / For a buck.” The lines “ship is sinking” and “it’s all over” are repeated and underline once more that the catastrophe is imminent. The weak of the society are going to die first and cannot expect help from anyone in this world where morality is upside-down and “to be good” is but a “big temptation” that has to be resisted.

Without God, human nature alone is the ruling force for mankind. “[T]he ones that [are] kept in charge [are] / Killers, thieves, and lawyers,” that is, human beings whose occupations are related to murder, greed and recklessness. God is absent, power is in the hand of man and, therefore, unless God returns in time, “it’s all over.” That is, not divine will, but human nature is ultimately responsible for mankind’s inevitable fate.

Waits provides another negative portrayal of human nature in “What Keeps Mankind Alive” (Orphans), a cover version of a song by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. Originally a part of *The Threepenny Opera*, the song presents man as a kind of animal. Its principal concern is food, and morals only “follow on” if this basic need is attended first. What keeps mankind alive? This question leads to some disturbing observations, as the answer is “the fact that millions / are daily tortured[,] stifled[,] punished[,] silenced and oppressed.” Furthermore, “mankind can keep alive thanks to its brilliance / in keeping its humanity repressed.” This last line seems to echo in Waits’ “if there’s one thing you can say about mankind / there’s nothing kind about man,” while here mankind is ultimately “kept alive / by bestial acts.” Considering Brecht and Weill’s influence on Waits’ work in general (cf. Hoskyns 260, 306), and taking into account some of Waits’ work discussed above, their opinions on mankind certainly coincided to some extent.

Waits’ fatalism stems from the combination of his view of human nature, accompanied by the proximity of death in much of his work, especially from the nineties onward. Asked about the strong presence of death as a theme on *Real Gone* (2004), Waits answered in an interview, “I think there’s a pretty heavy

emphasis on mortality in whatever you do [...]. How do you avoid it? We're decomposing as we go. We're the dead on vacation. It's not a theme I need to pursue. It pursues me'" (Hoskyns 461). Waits has written songs with characters who sing from the grave⁹⁴, who are on death row⁹⁵, as well as songs dealing with the apocalypse⁹⁶ and murder⁹⁷. That is, as the quote above shows, death is a constant presence in Waits' work.

Furthermore, "[d]eath hangs like a bad suit"⁹⁸ on several of *Bone Machine's* songs, while the album's title is "a metaphor for the human body and its inevitable demise" (Hoskyns 387). The inevitability of death is especially prominent in "Earth died screaming" and "Dirt in the Ground," both of which share the notion that we can neither go to Heaven nor Hell, and that we are, thus, "chained to the world" and unable to escape the human condition.

Despite all these examples of fatalist views, Waits does not exclusively advocate surrender and acceptance of the ways of the world. In fact, in a variety of his songs, he conveys a sense of responsibility that radically opposes the above views and attitudes.

Interestingly, this awareness emerged in Waits' work at roughly the same time when he increasingly dealt with fatalism. They appear two possible answers to the same question about the human condition. According to Hoskyns, Waits commenced to develop, or display, a stronger social conscience in the nineties. He supported good causes and performed at charity concerts (Hoskyns 414). This social conscience is also reflected in his work.

In Waits's later work, his narratives have contained an increasing sense of consequence. Ranging from the thought-provoking questions raised in "Georgia Lee" (*Mule Variations*) [...], to the politically charged commentaries of some of his more recent songs, Waits is asking bigger questions, addressing universal truths, and challenging people to take responsibility for their decisions. (Kessel 118)

That is, on several occasions the view is held that life inevitably ends in death and one cannot do anything about this fact but surrender. However, there is also the

⁹⁴ "Green Grass" (*Real Gone*) and "No One Knows I'm Gone" (*Alice*).

⁹⁵ For example, "Walking Spanish" (*Rain Dogs*) and "Lucinda" (*Orphans*).

⁹⁶ See "Earth Died Screaming", "All stripped down" (both *Bone Machine*).

⁹⁷ For example, "Widow's Grove" (*Orphans*).

⁹⁸ http://www.tomwaits.com/albums/#/albums/album/16/Bone_Machine/

notion of consequences in much of Waits' work. While life may ultimately seem absurd, the consequences of our actions are real, as they have a direct effect on our lives.

In "Georgia Lee" (*Mule Variations*), the chorus "Why wasn't God watching? / Why wasn't God listening? / Why wasn't God there for Georgia Lee?" at once poses two important questions. On the one hand, as Hoskyns points out, the chorus is "tantamount to asking if God even exist[s]" (Hoskyns 426). On the other hand, it also urges everybody else to ask why they were not there for the little girl. Therefore, by "confront[ing] man's relationship with a senselessly cruel universe" (Hoskyns 426), the song re-evaluates this relationship and questions precisely the fatalist notions brought forth on other occasions.

The suggestion seems that if man's actions have consequences, after all, man is not entirely powerless. Some aspects of life cannot be changed, however, man is capable of influencing his environment through his actions and, therefore, he is at least to some extent responsible for his own environment, and also for the state of the world, in more general terms. If we live in "a world where nothing grows" ("Fall of Troy") and which "[t]urns on nothing but money and dread" ("Sins of the father"), we are partly responsible for this.

Consequently, as "Waits' abiding concern for runaways and kids in danger" (Hoskyns 426) suggests, we must take care of our loved ones ourselves. Views such as "[L]ife is a path lit only / by the light of those I've loved" ("Jayne's Blue Wish"), as well as, "All that you've loved / is all you own" ("Take it with me") underline the vital importance of human relationships and their ability to bring meaning to our lives. Considering how this is sharply contrasted by the indifferent and cruel outside world, taking care of our relationships appears essential to human life and occasionally becomes a responsibility in Waits.

As Waits starts to ask "bigger questions" from the nineties onward (Kessel 118), he becomes more and more politicized, too. This can already be observed in the song "In the Colosseum" of his 1992-album *Bone Machine*. It expresses distrust against the government and the ones in charge, comparing our modern-day political system to a gladiator fight in ancient Rome. Instead of being occupied with creating a stable and just society, the politicians let cruelty and violence rule.

Interestingly, *Bone Machine* was released towards the end of the Bush administration and the United States were involved in the Gulf War. During the Clinton administration, political statements in Waits' *Mule Variations* were largely missing. Although in "Black Market Baby" the woman character "checked in with the president [at a hotel]/ and she ran up quite a *bill* [my emphasis]" may be a reference to Bill Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinski, Waits does not openly speak out on political issues on this album.

This changed with 9/11 and the administration of Bush junior (cf. Hoskyns 457). Now more than ever Waits deals with politics on his albums. Waits has said that "at a certain point, saying absolutely nothing is a political statement all of its own" (Hoskyns 458). In the words of the ancient Greek dramatist Euripides (484 BC - 406 BC), "Your very silence shows you agree." While he used to keep his political views a private matter, Waits starts to feel a stronger responsibility to speak out on certain issues.

Hoskyns calls "Hoist that rag" (*Real Gone*) a "song of coded bellicosity, sung as if by a degenerate Donald Rumsfeld" (461), and "a magnificently unpatriotic attack on America's stars-and-stripes imperialism" (462). The freedom bell is referred to as "the cracked bell," the eagle becomes a "ghost bird" and instead of "hiss the flag," the chorus says "hoist that rag." The symbols of said imperialism are alienated and the system they represent is thus criticized. The next song on the album, "Sins of the Father," "allude[s] none too obliquely to George W. Bush and the electoral rigging in his brother Jeb's home state of Florida" (Hoskyns 462). This growing political concern in Waits' work, betrays a higher emphasis on responsibility in his overall worldview.

Released in 2006, *Orphans* features another highly political track with "Road to Peace," a song that openly criticizes the Middle-East conflict and America's role in it.

the fundamentalist killing on both sides [Israel and Palestine]
is standing in the path of peace
and tell me
why are we arming the Israeli army
with guns and tanks and bullets[?]

This conflict is thus no longer a matter between two peoples of the Middle-East. America is held responsible, too. Waits even accuses Bush of using this issue in his favour only in order to be re-elected.

[...] now our president wants to be seen as a hero
and he's hungry for re-election
Bush is reluctant to risk his future
with the fear of his political failures
so he plays chess at his desk
and poses for the press
ten thousand miles
from the road to peace

The motives of the government are not to be trusted, since it is only acting on behalf of its own interests rather than in defence of values like freedom, peace and democracy. Waits points out that this is no news, since “once Kissinger said / we have no friends / America only has interests.” As the government is indifferent, and God seems powerless, responsibility thus falls back on everyone else, since “maybe God himself / is lost and needs help / maybe God himself / he needs all of our help.”

Since Waits seems to have been politicized by the respective Bush administrations, the question arises if anything has changed under Obama’s democratic rule? In fact, with “Hell Broke Luce” (*Bad as Me*, 2011), Waits’ latest album features his most violent and cynical anti-war song to this date. It can thus be argued that political songs have become a fix part of the stock on more recent albums, not quite unlike Waits’ piano ballads or junkyard stomp on previous records.

Without responsibility there is no politics, and Waits’ political songs seem to negotiate the question of responsibility to the same extent that they deny God’s omnipotence and question the motives of politicians. The lack of absolute values as well as the corrupt nature of human authorities renders the world a rather absurd or even tragic place. Nevertheless, in the notion that our actions have real consequences in our lives, both responsibility and hope shine through on various occasions.

7.3. Existentialism

Affirmations like “I would rather be a failure on my own terms than a success on someone else’s” (Hoskyns 294) betray an existentialist attitude in Waits. Furthermore, in the interviews Waits has given, especially those around the release of *Swordfishtrombones* (1983), he has continually shown a deep concern with authenticity and the importance of choices, both of which are key to existentialism.

Of course, one must not confuse Waits’ life with the worlds of his songs. In fact, around the time he started his own family, he seemed to realized that his life and his songs had to be kept apart for his own good (cf. Hoskyns 339-40). However, as Pesses suggests, existentialist concepts can be found in Waits. For example, when he “effectively produces an existential geography of alienation” (Pesses 44) on *Mule Variations* (1999). Or when he “constructs spaces [that are saturated in anxiety and] designed to find meaning and identity in the world” (Pesses 44). Yet, before starting to analyze Waits’ work in terms of existential philosophy, some key concepts should be defined in advance.

At the centre of atheist existentialism, there is, of course, the presupposition that God does not exist. Man is forlorn. But this forlornness entails freedom. Since God does not exist, there are no absolute values either. As a consequence, life has no meaning per se and our existence is thus marked by absurdity. Sartre’s famous notion “existence precedes essence” (Sartre, *Humanism* 20), however, signifies that life will thus have the meaning that we ourselves give it.

Without God, “man is condemned to be free” (Sartre, *Humanism* 29). The meaning of our lives, as well as our identities depend on nothing but the choices we make. Realizing the weight of our actions entails the feeling of anxiety. Another most central concept is authenticity, which “refers to a mode of being, Dasein, which recognises a man’s freedom and responsibility for his own existence” (Heidegger, 1962; qtd. in Relph 64). For Sartre, man is not only “responsible for what he is” but also “responsible for all men” (Sartre, *Existentialism* 346), since he is “condemned at all times to invent man” (Sartre *Humanism* 29).

Much has been said in chapter four about the importance of space in Waits' oeuvre. Here another crucial element of space becomes apparent. That is, Heidegger's very concept of *being*, "Dasein," consists of the adverb of place "da" (there) and "sein" (being). Thus, he underlines the importance of space to human existence by referring to the latter with the term "being-there." Hence, space is essential for identity, because "living or being in-a-world always involves being situated in a context and a location" (Panza & Gale).

If we allow for change of space to signify a quest for identity (see chapter 4.2) and "Waits' characters are all linked to travel" (Kessel 64), many of his songs may be considered negotiations of the "I" of their characters. After a thorough analysis of Waits' work, it is my belief that the characters' identities and their sense of place are strongly related. This seems even more apparent when we consider Relph's notions of being inside or outside places, which appear so revealing precisely because they draw on concepts from existentialism⁹⁹.

According to Relph, "Existential insideness is part of knowing implicitly that *this* place is where you belong" (Relph 55). In Waits, the search for this place also seems a search for identity. Thus, to some extent space is a metaphor for the characters' consciousness. The constant struggle to achieve meaning and to create space (see page 44) thus reflects some existential issues of *Dasein*. Sartre distinguishes between two forms of *Dasein*, or *being*. On the one hand, there is being-in-itself, which he relates with objects, since they simply are what they are (Suhr 26). On the other hand, there is being-for-itself, which is conscious of itself and characterized by non-identity and "die fehlende Übereinstimmung mit sich: das Für-sich-Sein ist, was es nicht ist, und ist nicht, was es ist" (Suhr 26).

This incongruence can also be observed in Waits' characters' relation to space, which often indicates their consciousness. They are where they are not and are not where they are. Space gives identity, however, this identity is pre-produced and part of a system of meanings that are declared invalid by existential thought. Nevertheless, the set of identities this system provides, is everything there is, even if they do not correspond with the character's authentic "I." Therefore, if these identities are rejected, so is space, and the search for identity occurs in non-places

⁹⁹ In Relph's bibliography we find several works by Sartre, Heidegger, Camus.

or transitional space, instead. As a consequence, however, authenticity cannot be achieved but in a passing moment, since there is no permanent space where it could *take place*.

Fixed identity is renounced, because it never seems to allow authenticity, as “principles that are too abstract fail to define action” (Sartre, *Humanism* 49). They may be sufficient to define being-in-itself. However, it is not precise enough for the much more complex case of being-for-itself. The escape from fixed identity, often in the form of permanent space, can thus be considered a celebration of individuality and freedom, while at the same time the uncertainties that are entailed by this, may lead to a feeling of anxiety.

In “Whistle down the wind” (*Bone Machine*), the protagonist’s discontent is expressed in the first lines, “I’ve grow[n] up here now / all of my life / But I dreamed / Someday I’d go.” The experience of space has led to a strong feeling of alienation. Furthermore, this relation between space and identity is also evident in the character’s lament, “I’m not all I thought I’d be / I always stayed around,” in which identity and space are directly related. The a priori geography determines the character’s identity. However, as a being-for-itself, the character realizes that he is not what he is and is what he is not. This alienation stems from his sense of space and, therefore, trying to achieve a more authentic existence goes together with finding a place that makes such an existence possible.

Moreover, the protagonist in “Whistle down the wind” feels unable to stay where he is, but at the same time is “scared to leave.” The anxiety he feels is reminiscent of existential anxiety. Since existence precedes essence, there are no values or ways that are per se already “right.” Nor is a character a certain way without the possibility of change. This anguish may thus have to do with the realization “that we ourselves choose our being” (Sartre, *Existentialism* 353).

In order to become “all [he] thought [he]’d be,” he must make a choice and leave. However, “das Bewußtsein, seine eigene Zukunft zu sein, in der Weise, sie nicht zu sein, ist genau das, was wir Angst nennen“ (Suhr 52). As we choose our being again and again in every situation, the future self may be different from the present self. Hence, the character is somewhat scared of the future self and his actions. He feels anxiety because he has no control over this future self. Thus, his

choice to leave includes the possibility of his future self's being very different from what the present self hopes to become (cf. Suhr 54-5). „Die entgültige Verhaltensweise wird aus einem Ich hervorgehen, das ich noch nicht bin. So hängt das Ich, das ich bin, an und für sich von dem Ich ab, das ich noch nicht bin, und zwar genau in dem Maße, in dem das Ich, das ich noch nicht bin, von dem Ich, das ich bin, nicht abhängt“ (Suhr 52). Actions determine identity. Since the future self might make choices in a future situation that the character may not make himself at present, every choice he makes, also implies distancing himself from the present self. Waits' characters, however, tend to be egocentric in the sense that they do not want to compromise the way they are, even if this inhibits their development, because they feel uneasy about personal change. This concern is also expressed in other songs, most notably in "Please call me baby" on *The Heart of Saturday Night* and the lines, "if I exorcise my devils / [...] my angels may leave too." As action determines identity, every action comes with anxiety and anguish, since it may change who we are as much for the worse as it might change it for the better. In Waits, as well as in existentialism, alienation and anxiety frequently go together.

In a similar way as the character cannot control his future self, he has no control over his future space either. After all, what if the place he is looking for turns out to be different from what he had thought, or what if it does not exist at all? In a world where space determines identity to so high an extent, the results would be grave. Pesses argues, "Heidegger (1996) spoke of an a priori geography of being; everything in the world exists as a network of connected things, but these connections already exist from a society's history and are not a product of constructed meaning by the agent" (50). Quoting Samuels, Pesses underlines "that a history of man [sic] is a geography of men [sic] in search of their places" (Pesses 50, see also Samuels 35). Therefore, if there is an *a priori* geography, negotiating authenticity may signify negotiating space until identity is found. This search is highly evident in Waits. His characters' tragedy consists in their inability to find that space.

For the character Frank O'Brien in "Frank's Wild Years" (*Swordfishtrombones*) permanent space and fixed identity seem to go together. He and his wife live a middle-class existence in a house in the valley. His existence consists of values that are pre-established, they are not "his," although they define him at the same time. They treat him as a being-in-itself until the day he becomes aware. He is what he is not and is not what he is. In order to escape this state, he must change space. He overthrows the old set of values by burning down his house, and embarks on a journey in search of identity.

Frank certainly believes in the possibility of finding the "right" place. He wants to become a successful entertainer and embarks on a journey to Las Vegas, a highly charged space. He seems convinced that if he finds the right place, identity will follow. However, he overestimates the relationship between space and identity. In the end, it seems that both of them depend on him, on his choices and actions, too. Furthermore, assuming that there is something like a "right identity" for him, would mean treating himself as a being-in-itself and ignoring the notion that existence precedes essence. Frank ultimately dooms his plans by failing to understand this. He allows for dreams and hopes to take over and guide his life, instead of staying alert and choosing himself in the awareness that he is the only one who can do so. Sartre writes,

A man is involved in life, leaves his impress on it, and outside that there is nothing. [...] this may seem a harsh thought to someone whose life hasn't been a success. But, on the other hand, it prompts people to understand that reality alone is what counts, that dreams, expectations, and hopes warrant no more than to define a man as a disappointed dream, as miscarried hopes, as vain expectations. (Sartre, *Existentialism* 355-6)

The story of Frank O'Brien seems to echo much of Sartre's statement. Frank chooses to leave and become an entertainer. However, along the way, he stops steering his own life. Rather, he takes refuge in a dream world. He even wants somebody to "wake [him] up in [his] dreams," so he can escape reality and responsibility, which is "the most blatant feature of inauthenticity," according to Sartre (Cox 81). This behaviour is significant, since Waits' characters tend to get stuck in their metamorphoses, in general. They lack straightforwardness and seem too weak to accept consequences in general.

Waits' characters often treat themselves as a being-in-itself. They want to *be* their identity, and they frequently believe that they may achieve this by finding the right place. However, identity also depends on actions and choices. Since they fail to understand this, they ultimately change space only to find themselves in the same situation again. Gaining a new identity implies losing an old one and it is this loss that they cannot seem to face. Therefore, they rather change town than a habit.

Another existential theme, absurdity, can be observed on various occasions. Some stem from his experimentations with surreal lyrics and imagery, while others are related to Waits' reflections on life. Interestingly, Waits often refers to domestic environments in order to create the impression of absurdity. "The eggs chase the bacon 'round the fryin' pan" in the song "In the Neighborhood" (*Swordfishtrombone*). The line "The dish ran away with a spoon" appears both in "Everything you can think of" (*Alice*), as well as "Jayne's Blue Wish" (*Orphans*)

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All of these examples seem to reject existence as a being-in-itself and advocate breaking out of pre-established patterns. This may take on the form of "[d]isdain for suburbia and domesticity" (Kessel 92) as in "In the Neighborhood." In the lines "Dig deep in your heart for that little red glow / We're decomposing as we go," Waits not only demonstrates awareness of death. He also endorses finding an alternative and more authentic way of life, as there are no rules and our imagination alone marks our limitations in life.

"Jayne's Blue Wish" addresses the question of personal legacy. In an absurd world, the character pauses for a moment to reflect, "will there ever be a tree / grown from the seeds I've sown"? The very narrative situation of somebody reflecting on the meaning of life in an absurd universe can already be considered an existential theme in itself. This also accounts for the emphasis on the character's actions as his legacy, referred to as "the seeds [he has] sown." Rather than wondering about afterlife, he wants to know what will become of his actions.

¹⁰⁰ The only difference is the indefinite article "*a* spoon" in "Everything you can think of", while in "Jayne's Blue Wish" the definite "*the* spoon" is used.

The concept of forlornness is implied in “Dirt in the ground” (Bone Machine) where “hell is boiling over / And heaven is full” and therefore “We’re chained to the world.” While atheist existentialists like Sartre mean by forlornness “that God does not exist and that we have to face all the consequences of this” (Sartre, *Existentialism* 349), Waits’ world is often forlorn, too, however only in so far that God does not interfere with the earthly events. Waits seems unable to “kill” God in his work, like Nietzsche did, but merely, and quite literally, sends him out of town. The consequences, however, are hardly distinguishable. That is, whether heaven does not exist at all, or whether it does, but it is full and you are unable to enter, does not make a difference on our earthly existence. For Waits, the world is as if God did not exist. However, we need not “face all the consequences of this” (Sartre, *Existentialism* 353), because he may not actually be inexistent after all. This indecision about God and our place in the world often results in tragedy, since the hope for divine interference despite all evidence of forlornness, hinders us in learning to rely on our own actions and take full responsibility¹⁰¹.

Waits sings, “What does it matter, a dream of love / Or a dream of lies / We’re all gonna be the same place / When we die,” and that “the wind through your bones / Is all that remains.” However, he is ambiguous about the consequences of this forlornness. On the one side, he says that we are “chained to the world,” which implies that there is no existence beyond this one. On the other hand, he insists, “I want to know am I the sky / Or a bird.” For Sartre, “there is nothing in heaven; man will be what he will have planned to be” (Sartre, *Existentialism* 345). For Waits, we are forlorn as well, but there is still uncertainty as to what this means. Existentialism is concerned with the human condition and finding an authentic way of being and acting. “Dirt in the ground” raises questions about the human condition, too.

Rather than pointing out what we ought to do, it seems to ask what we *are* doing and does not make the next step to taking responsibility. The killer, who is about to be executed, has “nerves made of stone.” He knows no regret, no guilt, since these values no longer exist. Hence, he is even “smiling” as he walks up the stairs to the gallows, because he knows that death has no consequences. The hangman confirms this, as he points out again that “[w]e’re all gonna be / [...] dirt in the

¹⁰¹ See “Georgia Lee” (*Mule Variations*) and “Road to Peace” (*Orphans*) among others.

ground.” The narrator seems to hope that there may be more to our existence, however, he cannot find any evidence. All he suggests is that we “pull” on our chains, which implies that we should start negotiating our identity in the face of forlornness.

Existential concepts can thus be observed in a variety of songs. Even on a less apparent scale in *God’s Away on Business*, where forlornness is contrasted with the question “who are the ones that we kept in charge”? This line certainly makes people responsible for the state of the world. Since God does not intervene, our own actions have created the world as what it is.

8. Conclusion

*There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in*

- Leonard Cohen, “Anthem” (*The Future*).

The present paper has shown that lack may be considered the most vital element in Waits’ work. He uses this tool very deliberately in his oeuvre and allows it to influence his work on various levels, sometimes randomly, and other times in a very conscious decision.

The very beginning of the creative process is already marked by this approach, as discussed in chapter three. Completeness or perfection do not inspire Waits as much as lack or imperfection. A lot in his oeuvre was born from misheard lyrics or music heard “wrong,” filtered through a wall, or mixed together with street noises. Apparently, this technique is similar to Burroughs’ cut-up method. What is particular to Waits’ approach is that his cut-ups are chosen at random, since one cannot control what one does or does not hear. This also reflects Waits’ view of music as something free and in constant movement.

The fact that music is constantly moving is a basic aspect of acoustics. In our daily lives sound waves from a variety of sources are constantly reaching our ears at the same time. Human perception then filters out the ones it considers most relevant. However, for Waits what tends to escape our perception is what is really

appealing. This is true for noises that are not usually given artistic attention, as for example, the screeching noise of a chair as it is dragged over the floor.

Therefore, on several occasions, imperfection is created deliberately. Following Keith Richards, Waits calls this “putting the hair in the gate.” It is important to understand the appeal that imperfection has to Waits. It appears the antithesis to uniformity. A pop song may be clean and perfect according to the books, but it seems that for Waits this inevitably makes it ordinary and even lifeless. As Tolstoy writes in *Anna Karenina*, “Happy families are all alike; [but] each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy 1). In order to be unique, imperfection is paramount. Waits applies this hypothesis to his work by adding elements which may initially appear wrong or out of place, but ultimately contribute to the song’s particularity and make it stand out against the mainstream in pop music.

Lack and imperfection have this effect, because they create wonder. To a certain extent, they create a desire to understand. While perfection already has all the answers, imperfection leads to enquiries as to what is missing. “I like things that have been ignored or need to be put back together” (Hoskyns 383), Waits has said and suggested that the roots of this may lie in his childhood in a broken home. What is left out and forgotten thus finds a place in his oeuvre, on both the discourse level as well as the story level.

“[Waits is] fascinated by music he doesn’t quite hear properly because so much of what he hears has to be imagined” (Pick 160). The lack of information, or its imperfection triggers a creative process in the listener. The same mechanism applies to the story level, where Waits employs this approach in order to create highly open constructs. One of his most frequent techniques is the use of setting-characters. Fictional characters invite the listener to “[construct] for them a past and a future beyond what is specified in the text” (Rimmon-Kenan 32). Waits provides incomplete but nonetheless suggestive information about his setting-characters. With this technique, he creates the atmosphere of his spaces. Since we are more empathetic with characters than with objects, using characters as part of the setting allows Waits to charge his literary spaces with more emotions.

Space is a highly prominent element in Waits. Earlier in his career, most of his literary spaces used to be urban. After moving to the countryside himself, he starts to treat more and more rural spaces in the nineties. In both cases, what is usually ignored is at the centre of his art. On the one hand, “the urban dispossessed” (Hoskyns 304), that is, people who live on the margin of society and have to face terrible realities (cf. Hoskyns 311). On the other hand, there are the secrets, hidden and forgotten pasts, lying underneath the surface of rural communities. Waits drags these secrets up from the cellar. The problems living next door, which are ignored in urban life, as well as the secrets that are hidden from the public in rural communities all receive Waits’ attention, as if saying, “What you choose to ignore is part of the history as well” (Wilonsky 217) and thus complementing the picture.

Describing a 19th century massed proletarian area, Richard Hoggart writes, “To a visitor they are understandably depressing ... street after street of shoddily uniform houses ... But to the insider, these are small worlds, each as homogeneous as a village” (Hoggart 52, qtd. in Relph 80). That is, much like his song “Underground” (*Swordfishtrombones*) is about a different world just “under [our] feet,” Waits’ literary spaces tend to be underneath the surface that is visible to the mere passer-by. He offers a glance at these hidden worlds. Tom Waits creates them in his songs and invites the listener to enter as an insider as if in a conspiracy or secret pact with the owner, Waits himself.

Transitional space is usually presented more desirable than permanent space, as it is commonly preferred by the character, the vast majority of whom are travellers. Augé considers “[t]he traveller’s space [...] the archetype of *non-place*” (Augé 86). Waits’ characters thus tend to live in non-places, or in other words, in the perpetual negation of permanent space. As “[t]o be oneself one has to be somewhere definite” (Wagner 49, qtd. in Relph 44), this negation of permanent space implies self-negation, the rejection of one’s identity. Similar to Waits’ notion that songs dislike being recorded (Gill 49), his characters also seem to shun permanence in the form of ready-made categories and identities in general.

This is complemented by a few exceptions. Sometimes an event, like the end of a relationship, throws a character off balance and takes permanent space and thus identity away from him. Transitional space then appears a sort of curse, and occasionally even references to the myth of Cain can be observed. Interestingly,

however, permanent space is hardly ever experienced as genuinely positive.¹⁰² Instead, it is often constructed as desirable only in nostalgic retrospect, as if wishing back something that went lost and idealizing it, although it was never fully appreciated while it was still there.

On other occasions, permanent space only signifies the protagonist's hopes and dreams while it remains a far-distant place and thus requires entering transitional space first. The character may dream of a successful entertainment career in Las Vegas, like Frank O'Brien, or simply believe that "Maybe things will be better / In Chicago." Both examples show discontent with the actual permanent space, where the system of meanings has forced an identity upon the protagonist which he can no longer consider authentic. "Anyplace you move is going to have an effect," Waits has said (Hoskyns 308). This coincides with both Relph's geographical observation that real places partly influence people's actions (Relph 46-7) and with Jahn's narratological insight that "spatial features can significantly influence characters and events" in fiction (Jahn N6.5.).

Therefore, change of space is often a negation of identity, or the quest for a new one. The protagonists may feel trapped in a dysfunctional relationship, which has turned them into someone they do not want to be. Or they feel the need to escape the narrow-mindedness of their hometown, because it does not reflect their own beliefs and values. Sometimes another place holds the promise of a new identity, as for the characters who go to California, for example, in "Hold On" and "Goin' Out West," or to Las Vegas (Frank O'Brien). This identity is never actually achieved, however. It only exists as a hope or idea, as something which is not.

The fact that the end of a relationship may have such devastating impacts on Waits' characters betrays a rather peculiar notion of love in his work. Frequently, a character's love relationship is presented as obsessive and unhealthy. This is usually the case if the character is under his lover's spell and loses his freedom and capability of self-determination. With the exception of "Widow's Grove" (*Orphans*, 2006), the characters who are driven mad by such relationships are all male. In a number of Waits' songs, love and obsession go together, frequently, because it results in self-denial in order for the relationship to be maintained. Only

¹⁰² The most convincing exception is probably Waits' ode to domesticity "Take it with me" (*Mule Variations*).

on “Raised Right Men” (*Bad as me*, 2011) Waits turns this notion upside-down and partly blames some of his male characters for being too stubborn to let “a good woman’s love” change them for the better.

Waits’ treatment of the concept of hope is similarly ambiguous. Sometimes, it appears as a false promise, a sort of naive self-deception. This is especially the case in Waits’ more nihilistic works, for example, on the album *Blood Money* (2002). One must bear in mind, that those songs were written for a theatre play, Robert Wilson’s production of Büchner’s *Woyzeck*. Part of the negative outlooks featured on *Blood Money* in particular, may thus be attributed to the tragic plot in Georg Büchner’s play. Several songs on other albums feature a very positive concept of hope, providing comfort and reassurance to the characters. Hope thus gives them the strength to go on “despite all adversity.” On a different level, it is interesting that Waits’ albums tend to end with rather positive songs or more cheerful melodies. This seems another manifestation of hope, since it suggests that something positive is still lying ahead.

One may argue that in Waits, “[c]omedy is tragedy that happens to other people”¹⁰³ and that the concept of humour is thus ambiguous, too. Comic effect is often derived from the tension between the way a character sees the world and the way we, as a listener, see it. The characters in Waits’ humorous songs are excessively certain about their beliefs to the point of self-deception. Comic effect is achieved through the protagonist’s being utterly convinced of his redemption by the saviour, or his future success in show business, while the actual lifestyle of the character clearly suggests otherwise. Thus, Waits’ world is often tragicomic (Santoro 236). Interestingly, these songs either treat show business or religion, that is, domains where worship is very dominant. Waits endows his show business characters with physical flaws to imply some sort of emotional damage, which helps to point out the absurd nature of the star cult in popular culture. His religious characters are often flawed, or hold absurd beliefs as to how redemption can be achieved.

The songs with a moral code, as treated in chapter 5.5., are arguably the only ones where Waits remains unambiguous and straightforward about the message.

¹⁰³ <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/27/specials/carter-wise.html>

Frequently, these songs were inspired by real-life events, read in the newspaper, which may serve to underline Waits' genuine concern about these matters. In one way or another, children are at the centre of all of these songs. In the nineties, Waits developed a "concern for runaways and kids in danger" (Hoskyns 426). At the releases of "A little rain" (*Bone Machine*, 1992) and "Georgia Lee" (*Mule Variations*, 1999) his daughter was about nine, respectively, sixteen. Waits' most political songs were written at the beginning of Bush's post-9/11 war on Iraq, when his eldest son, Casey, had already reached the required age to be recruited. Also in 2004, he accused the government of "look[ing] at these 18-year-old kids as shell casings" and underlined that "[he] sure wouldn't want to let [his] boys go [to war]." ¹⁰⁴ Therefore, Waits' cautionary tales, as well as his anti-war songs, are deeply rooted in a real-life concern for children.

There's something quixotic about Waits' definition of his Rain Dogs. These characters find the world different to what they believed it was and are thus disoriented. "They go to sleep thinking the world is one way and they wake up and somebody moved the furniture" (O'Brien 88).

Many of Waits' characters are unable to find a home, or they are lost and cannot find the way back. Others are in a permanent space, but it does not provide them with a real home. Instead they feel alienated and are anxious to leave. Several characters believe that transitional space is where they achieve feeling at home, which is, of course, doomed to be a very transitory experience at best. There are also exceptions, weary wanderers longing for a definite place to stay and be at home. Waits' wanderers are thus looking for authenticity, for the sense of existential insideness, which some believe can be found in a transient lifestyle, while few exceptions believe in domesticity. The present analysis of his work has shown that in the vast majority of cases, human relationships are the most important factor in this respect, more than the question of transitional or permanent space. Significantly, it seems that none of Waits' protagonists ultimately manage to retain their feeling of existential insideness for very long, which should help to emphasize that Waits' worlds are highly transitory ones.

¹⁰⁴ Richard Grant. "Bard Of The Bizarre". *Telegraph Magazine* (UK). October 2, 2004. In <http://www.tomwaitsfan.com/tom%20waits%20library/www.tomwaitslibrary.com/quotes-fatherhood.html>; cf. also Montandon 327.

Waits' femmes fatales constitute a peculiar case. In the masculine worlds of Waits' songs, these woman characters rarely have an own voice, nor do they participate in the plot. Instead, they are spoken of, from one male character to another, or simply characterized in a masculine jargon. Thus, these women characters are usually characterized through direct definitions. Considering that Waits avoids easy categorizations and closed constructs, it is maybe less surprising that direct definitions are not to be trusted easily. Sometimes, they even turn around on the narrator-character and become an indirect presentation of the same, for instance, in "All the time" (*Orphans*). Moreover, they usually imply deception of the reader or ambiguity of the character at issue. For example, "First Kiss" (*Orphans*) ends with an unexpected twist which turns the whole song into an unlikely love song. The femmes fatales in "Black Market Baby" (*Mule Variations*) and "Lowdown" (*Orphans*) are ambiguous in that they are attractive but also dangerous. Frequently, these characterizations make references to farm tools or coal, on the one hand, and more feminine images on the other. In this way, several contrasting concepts, such as beauty and violence, appeal and danger, are combined to express the high appeal as well as the raw nature and the destructive potential of these characters.

Waits' hoppers and dreamers are very interesting, too. With the exception of some songs where the notion of hope is more at the centre than their characters, hoppers and dreamers are usually rather complex constructs. While penetration into their inner lives varies, their characterizations usually imply the presence of several rather complex emotions at once. This complexity arises from the very concept of hope, whose connotations may also range from positive to negative. Sometimes, hope, fear and despair all mix together and the character is wavering whether to follow his dreams or not, because he is not sure whether the hope for a better life, or the fear of the unknown are stronger. The couple in "Hold On" (*Mule Variations*) maintain their hopes, however, they fall on very hard times and have to face terrible situations. Waits subtly endows some of these characters with very human emotions which create empathy. He does certainly less so if the character is too certain about the good that lies ahead. If his characters are boisterous or even bragging, their stories are likely to end in disappointment.

In fact, a character's lack of doubt may even lead to comic effect, as discussed in chapter 6.4. Some of Waits' humorous characters are utterly convinced of their imminent redemption, while the information given in the song implies otherwise. Waits' religious protagonists are frequently drawn this way, while his show biz characters are typically characterized by lack. This can be lack of talent, but also lack in the form of physical deformity, which usually signifies some kind of emotional damage that the character suffered in his childhood. In general, Waits' humorous songs put more emphasis on satirical effect than on character.

The protagonists who convey a moral message, usually depend highly on their context and environment. That is, space is often crucial as it holds several keys to the characters' inner lives, or it is vital in their characterization in other ways. Sometimes, the historical or social context is important, too, since several of Waits' songs in this category were inspired by real-life events, such as the real kidnapping and murder of Georgia Lee, or the war on Iraq. The protagonists in these songs, are usually children. They run away from home or are involved in a war which separates them from their families. In both "A little rain" (*Bone Machine*) and "Georgia Lee" (*Mule Variations*), the characters are hardly present. They appear only to disappear again. Thus, their being lost or kidnapped, as well as their ephemeral lives which already end when they only seem to have begun, are also reflected in the way they are characterized. Frequently, the dead protagonist's mother is also featured in the song, in order to add sympathy and tragic effect. The character constellations in these songs emphasize the importance that family has in Waits' work from the nineties onward.

As has been discussed further above, most characters believe that in order to achieve authenticity, they must change, and since identity and space are so closely related in Waits, they must change space. Hence, Solis suggests that negotiating new identities, Waits' characters are, subsequently, "looking for alternative ways of being in the world" (Solis 28). Thus, part of his oeuvre raises questions about Dasein. While his work up to the nineties generally seems to reflect forms of an anti-American dream with personal failure at the centre, he starts to span his net much wider from that decade onwards, when a more profound concern with human being-in-the-world becomes traceable.

The questions of a deeper meaning in life and the existence of a higher power are certainly present in Waits' oeuvre. A benevolent God can be observed on several occasions too. Religion can be the source of hope for the despaired, or a reason for happiness for others. Significantly, organized religion is not endorsed in the same way and remains largely absent. Waits' characters seem to arrive at their own conclusions and beliefs, which cannot be summed up under one single term.

Consequently, there is a variety of different and often opposing worldviews in Waits' oeuvre. On the opposite end of the religious scale, one can observe the absence of absolute values, which is a quintessentially nihilist notion. Unlike Nietzsche, Waits never "kills" God or explicitly rejects the notion of a divine power. Nevertheless, he sends God out of town, questions His existence or omnipotence, while his characters doubt and lose faith. While some songs endorse religion, the majority of Waits' oeuvre reflects a lack of evidence for God's existence. Since God is inexistent, or simply too weak or indifferent to intervene, humanity is left alone with its problems.

The same question of God's existence, may raise other questions about the extent to which man's actions can make a difference. On several occasions, man is lost, since the world is inevitably moving towards its own destruction. This fatalism may come in the form of the imminent Apocalypse, or the observation that "everything goes to Hell, anyway." Human actions are not always futile, however. Many songs show a strong awareness of their consequences. On these instances, relying on the guiding hand of a God ends in disaster and man is made responsible for his fate and the state of the world.

This combination of fatalism and nihilism on the one hand and the emphasis on responsibility on the other, gives way to several existentialist notions. Life and the world we live in, are often absurd and without absolute meaning. It is transitory and ephemeral, and we are only briefly passing through. The task of creating meaning falls back on the individual. Space is vital in Waits' oeuvre and his characters tend to travel in search of authenticity. The identities they adopt, that is, which are given to them by society, may lead to a feeling of alienation. This may best be summed up in a remark Waits has made in reference to being an actor, "It's not the life I want to have, wearing someone else's clothes and saying

someone else's words" (Hoskyns 457). Likewise, the characters' identities are inauthentic. They are what they are not (the label society gives them), and are not what they are. Therefore, lack is very important again, since the protagonists must travel in order to achieve authenticity.

Moreover, Waits rejects organized religion and herd mentality and he emphasizes man's responsibility on several occasions. Sartre's notion that through his choices man constantly invents and re-invents man, helps interpret Waits' travellers from a more philosophical angle. One may therefore deduce that man must rely on himself and that every individual has different needs to which he or she has to attend in order to achieve authenticity. In general, Waits' world is forlorn by God, and full of characters who are searching and creating meaning. Frequently, their conclusions imply that human relationships and mutual care, rather than religious beliefs or the values of other "herd mentalities," are crucial to life. And these are essentially existential notions.

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vagabond 6, 11, 17, 36, 37, 42, 48,
62, 85, 90

W

woman
women .. 23, 50, 51, 52, 58, 69, 70,
71, 72, 73, 74, 75, 76, 99, 112,
114

Abstract

The majority of literature on Tom Waits is biographical and while he is frequently referred to as a consummate storyteller, narratological analyses of his work are still very rare and lack convincing theoretical frameworks. Therefore, in “Protagonists and worldview in the work of Tom Waits” a narratological analysis of Waits’ oeuvre starting from his groundbreaking album *Swordfishtrombones* (1983) is provided. This approach should facilitate new insights on his work.

Jahn, Chatman and Rimmon-Kenan’s works in narratology form the theoretical basis for this analysis. This theory is complemented by biographies and secondary literature on Waits, especially the works of Hoskyns and Kessel. First, I will discuss selected elements of discourse in Waits and then provide an analysis of space, for which Relph’s *Place and Placelessness* will prove especially useful, as well as themes and characters. Most authors reduce Waits’ literary worlds to the place of vagabonds and outcasts, without taking into account further aspects. Therefore, in this paper, possible worldviews in the artist’s oeuvre will be examined, consulting works by Nietzsche and Sartre among others for a more solid theoretical basis.

This analysis will show that the basic elements of imperfection and flaw are present on all levels in Waits, however, new elements such as responsibility and the negotiation of man’s place and role in a forlorn universe can also be observed in the second half of his career.

Abstrakt

Der Großteil der Literatur über Tom Waits ist biographisch und während er zwar häufig ein begnadeter Geschichtenerzähler genannt wird, sind narratologische Analysen seines Werks immer noch selten und es mangelt ihnen an überzeugenden theoretischen Rahmen. Deshalb wird in „Protagonists and worldview in the work of Tom Waits“ eine narratologische Analyse des Waits’schen Oeuvre geboten, beginnend mit seinem bahnbrechenden Album *Swordfishtrombones* (1983).

Jahns, Chatmans und Rimmon-Kenans Werke zu Narratology bilden die theoretische Basis für diese Analyse. Diese Theorie wird durch Biographien und Sekundärliteratur über Waits ergänzt, insbesondere durch die Werke von Hoskyns und Kessel. Zuerst werde ich selektierte Diskurselemente in Waits behandeln und dann eine Analyse von Raum, für welche Relphs *Place and Placelessness* besonders hilfreich sein wird, sowie von Themen und Charaktere bieten. Die meisten Autoren reduzieren Waits‘ literarische Welten auf Orte von Vagabunden und Außenseiter, ohne weitere Aspekte mit einzubeziehen. Deshalb werden in dieser Arbeit mögliche Weltanschauungen im Oeuvre des Künstlers untersucht, wobei unter anderem Werke von Nietzsche und Sartre für eine solidere theoretische Basis herangezogen werden.

Diese Analyse soll zeigen, dass die grundlegenden Elemente Unvollkommenheit und Mangel auf allen Ebenen präsent sind. In der zweiten Hälfte seiner Karriere findet man jedoch neue Elemente wie Verantwortung sowie die Behandlung des Platzes und der Rolle des Menschen in einem gottverlassenen Universum.

Curriculum Vitae

Emanuel Riedmann

Geb. am 06.11.1983

Lustenau

Beruf & Bildung

- Dolmetschungen bei Pressekonferenzen sowie Assistenz bei der Koordination internationaler Presse bei Montafon Tourismus GmbH für die Spanische Fußball Nationalmannschaft (Mai 2012)
- Arbeit als freier Übersetzer und Dolmetscher (seit 2011)
- Freier Journalist bei economy Austria (2009-2011)
- Studium der Anglistik (2003) und der Romanistik (2003)
- Bundesoberstufenrealgymnasium Dornbirn Schoren. Abschluss mit Auszeichnung (2002)

Auslandserfahrung

- Arbeit als Journalist und Sprachenlehrer in Barcelona (2010-2012)
- Forschungsaufenthalt in Los Angeles, California (Diplomarbeit „Protagonists and worldview in the work of Tom Waits“). (September-Oktober 2011)
- KWA-Stipendium für kurze wissenschaftliche Arbeiten im Ausland (Diplomarbeit „Protagonists and worldview in the work of Tom Waits“). (2010)
- Auslandsjahr an der Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (2008-2009)
- Sprachkurs in Granada, Spanien (September 2006)