**Trumpet by Jackie Kay through a Feminist Lens**

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**How does Jackie Kay represent society’s construction of masculinity?** Gender theory, linking with Feminist criticism, is concerned with the societal defined and imposed stereotypes that are enforced on an individual’s gender. Women are perceived as feminine and non-confrontational, which is subverted in literature such as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth (1606)* and in Kay’s *Trumpet (1998)* with Sophie Stones. While the conventional male is ‘told to act tough, be dominant, objectify women, and be masculine.’[[1]](#footnote-1), in order to be accepted within society, which is also subverted in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth (1606)* and Joyce’s *Ulysses (1922).* Judith Butler believes that ‘identity is performativity constituted’[[2]](#footnote-2), this reveals the notion that society dictates the way individuals are meant to act to fulfill the socially defined category of gender. Alternatively, Butler could be suggesting that individuals feel the need to affirm their gender through their actions to avoid confrontation within a heteronormative society. Butler’s concept of performing gender is evident within Jackie Kay’s *Trumpet (1998)* through the character of Joss, a Black Scottish transgender male who hides his natural, feminine features due to the fear of transgressing gendered conventions of cisgender society and attempts to avoid ridicule. In contrast, the character of Colman can be seen to conform to the ideals imposed within a cis-het society, as Kay portrays the character as believing that someone’s genitals equate to someone’s gender. This may be because of his own fragility regarding his masculinity as a cisgender male, alongside his feelings of resentment towards his father for his identity which conflicts with the fixed gender roles that have been ingrained within him since childhood. Jackie Kay uses characters such as Joss and Colman to present differing views on masculinity through their own perspective and experiences while reflecting on society’s construction of gender and masculinity within the 1950s setting of *Trumpet (1998)*. The character of Joss is presented as beingmasculine in a different way to his son, Colman. Joss has to outwardly perform his true self in order to be accepted as a man within society’s rigid structure; he drinks ‘whisky’, smokes ‘cigars’ and creates a more masculine frame with ‘bandages’ and suits emulating the traditional view of masculinity or is wanting to alleviate dysphoria as Joss ‘was always more comfortable once he was dressed. More secure.’ While Colman uses vulgar language and has an effortless masculine appearance while also conforming to the masculine stereotypes of smoking and drinking.

In the 1950s, jazz dominated and defined the decade’s music. Kay may show this contrast to engage the reader in their lives and sympathise with each character, the author could be attempting to open people’s minds about the concept of gender. Kay may have included this element as a social critique of society’s perception of masculinity and gender as a whole, in an attempt to deconstruct the rigid, binary view cis-het society has on gender. The LGBTQ+ community distances itself from the binary perception of gender and is more accepting of fluidity, contrasting with the cis-het society’s strict perception of gender. On the other hand, Joss can be perceived as conforming to traditional views on masculinity by pursuing a male-dominated career and only wearing suits which can be perceived as an inbuilt perception of masculinity or fear of not passing and the potentially violent reaction of others.

This influential music genre was seen as masculine as there were very few female jazz players. This strong masculine presence in the music industry may be the reason why Sophie Stones, the journalist, suspects Joss of pretending to be a man to be able to play in a jazz band, to gain wealth and fame. Billy Tipton, a twentieth-century pianist and his story may have influenced Kay as people assumed that he “dressed like a man” to attain recognition instead of respecting his true identity. This is mirrored by the reaction of the media in the novel to Joss’ biological sex. The self-centred journalist may take this stance as she is not ‘keen on jazz anyway;’ and believes most people agree with her, however the character comments that she ‘can’t imagine anybody going through all that just to blow a horn’, indicating that she considered that fame may not be a valid reason for Joss Moody to transition. These comments made by Sophie and others are transphobic and uneducated, as they bring gender down to reproductive organs alone, confusing gender with sex, and not considering other elements of masculinity such as fashion, hairstyles, hobbies, etc. Jackie Kay may have included this conservative idea to build up to Colman’s acceptance of his father’s identity, and critique society’s unacceptance towards the LGBTQ+ community.

Compared with McCall’s extroverted way of playing his drums, ‘Moody was private with his trumpet’, this discredits Sophie Stones’ suspicions as Joss was playing the trumpet for himself not to earn fame and validation. Joss’ trumpet is a reoccurring and complex symbol within the novel, its phallic shape and being stored in a velvet, ‘furry case’, which Freud links velvet with sexual fantasies and fetishes. Another argument supporting the sexual imagery of the trumpet is that “Millie’s reference to the trumpet as the jewel in the box is also evocative of female genitalia.”[[3]](#footnote-3) These interpretations suggest that the instrument is representative of Joss’ feminine and masculine identities in one and mirrors his experience while performing as he connects to the deepest part of himself. The stage was a place where Joss could authentically be himself, wearing a suit to alleviate dysphoria and help him to “pass” within cis-het society, the character also is able to enjoy the intimacy between himself and the music. Kay reinforces this idea as his ‘eyes shine’ when he says the word ‘trumpet’. Also, the character closes his eyes as he listens to jazz music and ‘loved to strut his stuff on those dance floors’, reinforces the character’s love for jazz, while undermining Sophie Stones’ argument that he was playing just for fame.

The uneducated comment, from the journalist, was common as the first known British transgender person to medically transition in the UK was Roberta Cowell in 1951. Similarly, to Joss, one could be argued that Roberta conformed to society’s gender norms as she wore poodle skirts, headscarves, and accentuated her femininity with pearls, and makeup, etc, which were popular in the 1950s. Roberta’s gender reassignment surgery allowed her to finally be perceived as her true self and she used fashion to express herself as Joss does by wearing suits and participating in masculine hobbies of ‘fish[ing] and jazz’. Furthermore, Butler’s view that ‘identity is performativity constituted’[[4]](#footnote-4), is continuously mirrored in the character of Joss and his view on masculinity, as he is a transgender male expressing his true self the only way he can to “pass” within a cis-het society, using ‘bandages’ and clothing to create a flatter chest in order to appear more masculine and alleviate gender and social dysphoria. Roberta’s journey reinforces Simone de Beauvoir’s claim that ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’[[5]](#footnote-5) as Beauvoir draws a clear distinction between biological sex and society’s construction of gender, which can be reflected through Joss’ identity.

Colman is portrayed as more aggressive and vulgar in his words and thoughts after discovering his father’s biological sex to affirm his masculinity and identity as a man. Kay’s representation of society’s construction of gender is one that equates genitals to gender which the character of Colman reflects within *Trumpet (1998).* This theme of society’s perception of sex and gender is more prominent after Colman’s discovery of his father’s biological sex. Colman is faced with societal gender stereotypes in his everyday life even from a young age as his friend talks about his dad’s ‘little man’ while Colman feels left out as he has never seen Joss’. Kay suggests that Colman is using his more masculine traits and ideas to affirm his own sex and gender, which could be derived from the confusion of the identity of his father. Joss’ revealed biological sex brings the idea of his black manhood to his attention and also opens up space for Colman to accept femininity within himself. Jackie Kay may have used Colman as a vehicle of social critique as the character has difficulty distinguishing between gender and sexuality, as he thinks of his parents as ‘lesbians’ rather than a heterosexual couple due to Moody’s biological sex alongside Colman’s misinformation of the relationship between sex and gender. Which is also seen through the doctor’s arrival, while Joss is still in his clothes and wearing ‘bandages’ leads the doctor to, correctly, declare him ‘Male’ on the death certificate from his appearance. However, when they start to examine his body, they change it to ‘Female’ because of his un-bandaged chest and genitalia. Medical, social, and educational resources were lacking considering transgender people, which explains the misinformation throughout the novel from Colman, the doctor, Sophie Stones, and Albert Holding, which were perhaps used to represent society’s ignorance and disapproval towards non-cis-het issues. Kay presents society’s construction of masculinity as rigid and binary, while using the character of Joss to subvert these ideas with fluidity which exposes the complexity of sex, gender and gender expression.

# Bibliography

Ashley Mardell (now Ash Hardell), *The ABC’s of LGBT+ (2016)*

2 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble (1990)*

3 Tracy Hargreaves, *The Power of the Ordinary Subversive in Jackie Kay’s Trumpet (2003)*

4 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble (1990)*

5 Simone de Beauvoir, *Second Sex (1949)*

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1. Ashley Mardell (now Ash Hardell), *The ABC’s of LGBT+ (2016)* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble (1990)* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Tracy Hargreaves, *The Power of the Ordinary Subversive in Jackie Kay’s Trumpet (2003)* [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble (1990)* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Simone de Beauvoir, *Second Sex (1949)* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)