



# English Studies in Latin America

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**Source:** *White Rabbit: English Studies in Latin America*, No. 1, (June 2011)

**ISSN:** 0719-0921

**Published by:** Facultad de Letras, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

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## Pop Culture Society in Neil LaBute's *Fat Pig*

Constanza Brahm Smart<sup>1</sup>

The following study discusses the influence of popular culture in American society today by means of analyzing Neil LaBute's play *Fat Pig* and the ways in which pop culture shapes the plot, the characters, and the society depicted in the play. As part of his trilogy devoted to the problems and consequences of the obsession with beauty and physical appearance, LaBute's *Fat Pig* uses pop references mixed with cruel and witty dialogues to create a reflection of a society that has put pop culture on a pedestal and that has let it shape its people. The paper discusses how the play's four characters are off-springs of a society that has been shaped by the media (films, television, and magazines) and how *Fat Pig* is not just about the issues surrounding weight, but goes further in the search for a self-criticism of the way we judge people who are different in any way. In order to analyze all of these areas, three main authors are discussed: John Storey and his book *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*, Manfred Pfister and his book *Theory and Analysis of Drama*, and finally Angela McRobbie and her essays comprised in *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*. To conclude, the link between the theater and the cinema is discussed in order to show how they both enhance each other's strengths.

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KEYWORDS: POP CULTURE, NEIL LABUTE, FAT PIG, CONTEMPORARY AMERICA, PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

“The curious thing about the theater... and its relation to society is that obviously it's the product of the society in which it exists. But the best theater is always prodding the society at the same time.”

—Clurman and Kauffmann

In his productions, the American playwright Neil LaBute accounts for the penetration that pop culture has had in society, together with denouncing behaviors and prejudices that affect human relations today. By doing so, “LaBute implicates the audience through the social critique in his plays. In order to make that critique he relies on the audience's willingness to actively decode what is

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placed in front of them” (Ellison 7). In his 2004 play *Fat Pig* we can see his use of pop culture in benefit of his art at its best. In the following study, I will deal with American pop culture in Neil LaBute’s *Fat Pig*, by means of analyzing the play from three different areas: the various approaches to pop culture that are being studied today, the shaping of the characters in a pop culture society, and the relationship between postmodernism and pop culture.

*Fat Pig* has been described as a “bitter comedy” (Bigsby loc. 2888-95). It is the second installment from Labute’s trilogy “about the contemporary fixation with physical appearance” (Rooney 29), which also includes the 2001 play *The Shape of Things*, and the 2008 play *Reasons to Be Pretty*. *Fat Pig* presents the frustrated love story between Helen, an over-sized librarian with a taste for movies, and Tom, a handsome young executive, who ultimately is not able to overcome his prejudices and his friends’ questionings towards Helen’s weight. Tom’s friend Carter and his ex-girlfriend Jeannie are the supporting characters that both complete and complicate the situation of the play.

*Fat Pig* is a play that depicts characters that are a true mirror of a culture immersed in and dominated by pop culture. Thus, pop culture is the platform over which all of the play’s characters are built, a fact that is reflected in the way they speak. LaBute has said that “[o]ur language is littered with references like that; it’s a way we communicate. There’s solace, a closeness that comes from sharing in like things that we hang on to” (LaBute, *Interview*). In this way, in his plays, LaBute aims at portraying the relevance that pop culture has gained in these past decades by incorporating references and a style of conversation that reflects how society speaks today.

In *Fat Pig* we can see the presence of pop culture primarily in three components: film, television, and magazines. I will study pop culture from the views of Professor John Storey, a researcher on the subject of popular culture and cultural studies, and author of *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction*. I will also analyze the characters as ‘dramatic figure’ and ‘dramatis personae’ according to Manfred Pfister, author of *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*. Finally, I will analyze postmodernism and its relationship to pop culture, from the views of Angela McRobbie, cultural theorist and author of *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, in order to show how *Fat Pig* can be considered a clear example of a postmodern play.

Neil LaBute, born in Detroit in 1963, is a director, screenwriter, short-story writer, and playwright, who is constantly alternating between his cinema and theater careers, having produced a vast amount of works in both areas. *Fat Pig*, which has weight-issues at its core, came to life because of LaBute’s own experience with losing weight:

*Fat Pig* was inspired in part by LaBute’s own experiment with Atkins—losing 60 pounds in the past year [2003], then gaining most of it back... The play’s overt mission is to put carb-counting, *Extreme Makeover* nation in the crosshairs. How much has our relentless pursuit of beauty turned us into an uglier species? Does love need society’s blessing to be complete? Despite the gimmicky title, LaBute hopes

that *Fat Pig* will be understood as more than a satire of modern humanity beating against the Botox current. (Amsden 2)

Thus, *Fat Pig* depicts the modern struggles of a society where pop culture and the obsession with the body (as perpetuated by the media) have taken center-stage, and where everyone is watching television and films in order to guide their lives. The following analysis will explain the different areas where we can see these aspects.

## **Pop Culture**

Defining popular culture is not an easy task, primarily because “popular culture is always defined, implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, dominant culture, working-class culture, etc” (Storey 1). Thus, popular culture is usually defined according to the context in which it is used.

Pop culture is a rather new subject. It only emerged after industrialization and urbanization: “[T]he experience of industrialization and urbanization changed fundamentally the cultural relations within the landscape of popular culture... The result was the production of a cultural space for the generation of a popular culture more or less outside the controlling influence of the dominant classes” (Storey 13). Nowadays, pop culture is a recognized field of study, yet for many years it was seen as inferior or unimportant: “[P]opular culture should not, or at least need not, be studied—on the grounds that it is too slight and ephemeral to be worthy of any sustained inquiry” (Bennet 217). Even when it was studied, it was done as an analysis of its negative sides: “[T]o expose its morally corrupting influences and aesthetic poverty, for example, or, in Marxist approaches, to reveal its role as a purveyor of dominant ideology” (217). However, in the last two decades there has been a shift in society’s view of pop culture: “The study of cinema, popular music, sport, youth subcultures and of much else besides has now developed to the point where these are well-established fields of inquiry, with considerably developed bodies of theory and highly elaborated methodologies” (217). There has been a growth in the studies and theories surrounding pop culture, and the different practices grouped under this concept are now regarded as “being systematically interconnected by virtue of the parts they play in relation to broader social and political processes” (218).

According to John Storey’s views regarding pop culture, in order to define the term one must first understand the term ideology, which can also have several meanings, such as “a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people” (2), or “a certain masking, distortion, or concealment. Ideology is used here to indicate how some texts and practices present distorted images of reality. They produce what is sometimes called ‘false consciousness’” (2). However, for the purpose of our discussion, the definition that pertains to this study refers to ‘ideological forms’: “This usage is intended to draw attention to the way in which texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always present a particular image of the world. This definition depends on a notion of society as conflictual rather than consensual, structured around inequality, exploitation and oppression” (4). Thus, we can say that culture and ideology are related in their domain, yet

“[t]he main difference between them is that ideology brings a political dimension to the shared terrain... [I]t suggests that the study of popular culture amounts to something more than a simple discussion of entertainment and leisure” (5).

Storey attempts to define popular culture by characterizing it from different perspectives. He starts by postulating that “popular culture is simply culture that is widely favored or well liked by many people” (5). This means that society itself decides what it likes, and what is liked by the majority becomes the popular liking. He also explains that “it is the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture. Popular culture, in this definition, is a residual category, there to accommodate texts and practices that fail to meet the required standards to qualify as high culture” (6). This characterization points at a culture that is mass-produced, and that is inferior to high culture. Regarding this, Storey says that “popular culture is a hopelessly commercial culture. It is massproduced for mass consumption. Its audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers. The culture itself is formulaic, manipulative” (8). This relates to our discussion of American pop culture since popular culture has been, for a long time, associated with America and consumerism:

First, as Andrew Ross (1989) has pointed out, ‘popular culture has been socially and institutionally central in America for longer and in a more significant way than in Europe’ (7). Second, although the availability of American culture worldwide is undoubted, how what is available is consumed is at the very least contradictory. What is true is that in the 1950s... for many young people in Britain, American culture represented a force of liberation against the grey certainties of British everyday life. What is also clear is that the fear of Americanization is closely related to a distrust (regardless of national origin) of emerging forms of popular culture. (9)

Storey also states that popular culture “originates from ‘the people’... This is popular culture as folk culture: a culture of the people for the people” (9). This means that popular culture depends on people, and is kept alive by people.

Storey concludes his analysis of pop culture by saying that it relates deeply to postmodernism: “The main point to insist on here is the claim that postmodern culture is a culture that no longer recognizes the distinction between high and popular” (12). Thus, popular culture would no longer be seen as inferior, but just as important or recognized as ‘high culture’. The relation between pop culture and postmodernism will be discussed further in section three of this study.

#### *Popular Culture in Fat Pig:*

In *Fat Pig* we can appreciate the influence of pop culture in several aspects. Regarding Storey’s views, we can say that the play does in fact present a rather particular image of the world. In this play we find a universe that is ruled by the ideas and conceptions that pop culture has preached through the media (film, TV, magazines). The characters go further than just making references to

pop culture, such as quotations from movies, or conversations about TV shows or films. Pop culture is one of the main things that shape the play as a whole, and not just the four characters that we are introduced to. Through these characters, we get a picture of a society that is beauty-adoring, which seeks nothing but physical perfection, and that deeply rejects those who choose not to follow what the mass tells them to do. When Carter talks to Tom about Helen, he takes on the voice of the whole of the society which tells Tom what they think should be the beauty ideal, or at least the common criterion that he should follow regarding who it is proper for him to date or not:

CARTER: Wait... I'm serious, though, if she lost, like, eighty pounds, she'd be kinda stunning. Could probably get on one of those *reality* shows.

TOM: I know, but I just said... here.

CARTER: I mean, I'm only talking. I'm not an expert. Perhaps we should see what everybody in the *cafeteria* thinks... (LaBute, *FP* 54)<sup>2</sup>

In this way, we can say that pop culture in this play is not just a discussion about leisure and entertainment, but a much deeper criticism of society.

Pop culture in *Fat Pig* is what is well-liked by the majority. This is also relevant in the analysis of the pop culture references that we find in the play, since they are introduced into the characters' dialogues, and both the other characters and the audience are expected to understand them, and to be able to decode a vast amount of information from just the mentioning of some movie title or TV show. For example, at the end of the play, Tom tries to explain to Helen how he feels, and he says: "If we were in some other time or a land that nobody else was around on... like that island from the movie, the Sinatra film—*None but the Brave*" (82), a reference he expects Helen to recognize and understand with no further explanation. Nowadays, we understand these references, and we give meaning to them. If someone says 'Love means never having to say you're sorry', like Tom does in the play, everyone will understand that these are not *his* words, but words taken from the film (and also novel) *Love Story*. These words mean much more than just their individual meaning, since they carry an enormous amount of background information that adds several other connotations and possible interpretations to the mentioned words. This aspect will be further discussed in section three of this study, but it is important to mention its importance in shaping the structure of *Fat Pig*.

Films, TV, and magazines are all media of mass production. They are part of our commercial culture. Nowadays, they are particularly associated with America, and thus, this concept has a great relation with *Fat Pig*. The penetration of these media is immense, and we can see that issue reflected most particularly in some of the dialogues we find in the play, that make straight references to the importance given to these media in order to guide the characters' lives. For example, when talking about the different ideas they have about beauty, Carter tells Tom that appearances do matter, and to justify his point he says: "Maybe you should snap on the TV once in a while" (71).

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<sup>2</sup> The abbreviation *FP* is used for citing LaBute's *Fat Pig*.

The media is also understood as the superior or dominant group that influences the inferior or submissive group, which is the vast majority of society. It is a 'selected' group the one that defines what tastes one should have in different areas, such as beauty, clothing, music, and the like. The dominance of mass media can be seen in the fact that everyone knows the films, TV shows and magazines that exist at a certain time, and thus, they have become an essential part of our culture. They are rooted in our society to such an extreme, that we have incorporated them into our general knowledge and have given extra meaning to them, as in the case just discussed about the movie quotation from *Love Story*.

*Fat Pig* is also a clear example of a postmodern play. It is a pastiche of different bits and pieces of movies, television shows, and pop culture ideas. These different pieces add a large amount of meaning to what is being said in the play, and involve the audience in its decoding, interpretation, analysis, and criticism. The audience can give meaning to the play according to their own experiences.

As part of pop culture, *Fat Pig* does not discriminate between 'high' and 'low' culture. As it is done in postmodernism, the play mixes these two opposites, and does not attribute a higher or lower level to any of them. For example, the play incorporates the myth of Helen of Troy when the character of Helen is first introduced. Thus, the name of the protagonist takes on a bigger significance, since it will be the start of the questioning of beauty that is done along the play. The incorporation of the myth takes us back to Homer and what is commonly recognized as 'high' culture. *Fat Pig* plays with these notions and ascribes the same importance to Homer as it does to film and television. In the end, the play gets enriched by the sum of its very different, yet complementing parts.

### **Shaping of the characters in a pop culture society:**

*Fat Pig* is a play with only four characters: the two protagonists, Helen and Tom, and Tom's co-workers, and secondary characters, Carter and Jeannie. They will be analyzed from two different perspectives. The first will be Pfister's 'dramatic figure' and 'dramatis personae', which will work as a basis for the analysis of the characters. The second will be the analysis of the characters as products of a pop culture society.

In his book *Theory and Analysis of Drama*, Manfred Pfister uses the term 'dramatic figure' to refer to what is commonly known as character. He explains that dramatic figures are different from real life people: "[D]ramatic figures cannot be separated from their environment because they only exist in relationship to their environment and are only constituted in the sum of their relations to that environment" (161). What he means is that context helps to define the fictional figure. Pfister also says that "a fictional dramatic figure is a deliberate construct", and that "the set of information that determines a figure in a dramatic text is finite and closed, and at best, can be exhausted, but not extended by precise analysis" (161). Thus, every piece of information about the dramatic figures is very important, and their names reflect particular characteristics associated with those figures.

In the case of *Fat Pig*, one of the protagonists, Helen, has a name with great significance in the text. Helen usually reminds one of ‘Helen of Troy’ from the Greek myth, an association that Tom actually makes in the play. Helen also refers to the significance of her name when she connects it with “the thousand ships and all” (14). The allusion to Helen of Troy is not only in relation to the thousand ships that Helen jokes about, but has a much bigger significance, since “Helen of Troy is famous for two things: her abduction from Sparta to Troy by the Trojan prince, Paris, and her beauty” (Maguire 31). Helen’s abduction is instigated by her beauty, that is why she is widely known as ‘the face that launched a thousand ships’. “As the most beautiful woman in the world Helen of Troy is an absolute—the paradigm, the standard of beauty” (31). This point is central in relation to *Fat Pig*, since one of the main issues of the play is beauty. Helen is an over-sized woman, seen as unattractive and unappealing by society, which is an ironic twist of the common convention, in relation to the myth, that Helen is the most beautiful woman on the face of the Earth. Helen of Troy’s beauty sparked the Trojan war, yet in *Fat Pig* we have a subversion of the myth because it is Helen’s weight problem (which makes her ‘ugly’ in the eyes of society), and not beauty, what sparks a sort of ‘war’ between Tom’s friends, who want him to break up with Helen.

In drama, since we do not have a narrator as we do in short stories or novels, “the possibilities of presenting the biographical and genetic dimensions or the inner consciousness of a dramatic figure are greatly reduced” (Pfister 163). Thus, the consciousness of each figure “can only be portrayed to the extent that it can be articulated by the figure himself in a situatively and psychologically plausible manner” (163). We normally get to know about the characters through their interactions with other dramatic figures, which is mainly via dialogue. In *Fat Pig* we are presented in the first scene with Tom, when he meets Helen, and we see a side of him that is later on contradicted by his conversation with Carter at his office. Carter reveals, through a conversation with Tom, that Tom is as shallow as he is, and that he in fact has serious concerns about Helen’s weight. In this way, Carter, being ‘the best friend’, acts as a confidant, and helps, through a revelatory scene, to unveil Tom’s true nature to the audience:

CARTER: Yeah, I gotta go find my camera... “Tommy Joins the Circus!”

TOM: Asshole.

CARTER: Oh, come on, man! You’d be doing the same thing to me... (46)

The dramatic figure is also “the sum of the structural functions it fulfills in either changing or stabilizing the dramatic situation and the character (in the neutral sense of identity) of a figure as the sum of the contrasts and correspondences linking it with the other figures in the text” (Pfister 163). In the case of *Fat Pig*, we can consider Tom as the dramatic figure that connects the four characters of the play, since he is the only one who has some kind of relationship with all of them. We can also say that Helen is the key to the action of the play, since it is meeting her, and the fact that she is oversized, what triggers the action and the conversations of the four characters all along the play. Carter is also a catalyst, since he instigates Tom in order to make him confess his true feelings, and he also drives Jeannie into the problem, by revealing to her that Tom is dating Helen.



Pfister also defines the term ‘dramatis personae’, by which he means “the sum of all the figures that appear in a play” (164), a term that also includes minor figures, but excludes the ones that are only referred to in a play. He specifies that the length of time that a certain figure appears on stage does not necessarily relate to his/her importance in the play. For example, in *Fat Pig*, Tom appears in every scene, and thus we assume he is the protagonist. However, Helen appears in only four out of the seven scenes of the play, and we still consider her the female protagonist, because, as it has already been indicated, her issues drive all the actions of the play.

Pfister also points out that “the figures are characterized principally by their positive, neutral, or negative attitudes towards other figures... One model for the resulting structure of conflicts is the widespread distinction between the hero and his opposite number, or between the protagonist and the antagonist” (170). In *Fat Pig* we find oppositions as the central point: Tom meets Helen, and Carter and Jeannie show up to attack his actions and turn his mind around. These constant discussions become the source of tension in the play. Carter acts as Tom’s ‘dark conscience’, and serves as the antagonist of the play. Jeannie plays the role of Tom’s ex-girlfriend, and the counterpoint to which we can contrast Tom’s new girlfriend, Helen. Jeannie stands for the ‘ideal’ concept of beauty, since she is gorgeous, thin, and men are attracted to her.

Regarding the dimensions of the characters, we can say that Tom suffers the most changes throughout the play. He is a dynamic figure, who goes back and forth in his beliefs, ultimately admitting his true nature, and leaving Helen. *Fat Pig*’s female protagonist is more static along the play, but in the end she makes a sudden shift and subsides to society’s pressure and offers to change her physical appearance in order to stay with Tom. Carter and Jeannie are static characters, who do not suffer great changes. Their function is to serve the other characters and to allow the audience to get to know them better. Carter represents a ‘social typology’, which means that he is the voice of contemporary America and its obsession with beauty and physical perfection.

#### *Products of a pop culture society:*

*Fat Pig* introduces us to four characters that speak about a culture that can be characterized as violent, misogynistic, subjected to peer pressure, influenced by mass media and its ‘ideal’ standards, concerned about appearances, and worried about what one ‘deserves’ according to how one looks. We can say that the main issues that the play presents are body-image and the strong influence pop culture has on American society, due to the vast presence of mass media.

Tom, Helen, Carter, and Jeannie, are ultimately all products of a society shaped by pop culture. Their personalities and attitudes are direct results of a culture that has been swallowed by pop culture. Yet *Fat Pig* not only deals with the issues surrounding weight, but as LaBute has explained “the story really deals with human weakness and the difficulty many people face when trying to stand up for, live up to, or come out of something they believe in” (Bigsby loc. 2944-50).

The language used by the characters reflects a society that sees appearances as such an important part of how they see other people that they violently reject anyone who differs from the ideal model they follow. The title of the play itself, *Fat Pig*, is the strongest image of this situation, since it refers directly to Helen. The qualifiers used to describe her are crude and extremely harsh, which makes the title of the play very relevant. It is also a very catchy title for a play, because it is so offensive, that it sparks a morbid curiosity in the potential audiences. Calling someone a ‘fat pig’ is a definite sign of aggression, yet watching other people actually say those words on-stage is something that appeals to many people, thus revealing our obsession with appearances.

The play also denounces the issue of misogyny. Neil LaBute himself “has been accused of misogyny, misanthropy and obscenity” (Biggsby loc. 251-58). However, what LaBute does, is write about misogyny in order to denounce its presence in American society today: “If people were really intelligent, they’d realize the author of these plays is deeply moral. They’re morality tales. They’re putting really flawed people under a microscope in order to see the immorality, the *amoral*ity, that surrounds us—in the types of people that we’re a bit like” (Istel 40).

The first character we meet in the play is Helen, and the first image we have of her is described very crudely in the stage directions: “*A Woman in a crowded restaurant, standing at one of those tall tables. A bunch of food in front of her, and she is quietly eating it. By the way, she’s a plus size. Very*” (5). An interesting fact is that in the play’s first production, Jo Bonney, the director, chose to have Helen on stage before the audience came in. She was expected to be overly eating all the while the audience came into the theatre and the play started. When asked his opinion, LaBute approved of the idea “because of the sense of discomfort it inspired and also because the audience are placed in the same position as Tom as he first encounters her. His reaction can thus be judged against their own. They are already implicated in the aesthetic, moral questions raised by the relationship which now unfolds” (Biggsby loc. 2930-37). Thus, we are confronted with an issue that makes us feel uncomfortable, and to which we have very strong reactions: “If beauty carries with it the magical sense of being blessed by the gods, as Goethe says, obesity suggests the opposite irrational aura—being damned in the flesh to be outcast, reviled, untouched” (Lahr 1).

The issue of ‘fatness’ will produce all sorts of reactions that reflect the characters’ true personalities. In this sense, the issue of weight, as presented in the play, is not just a problem for these particular characters alone, but a major situation that pertains to the whole of the American society: “Fat is less of a social issue than a cultural one—that’s to say, what seems unhealthy is the absence of persons of bulk from our movies, TV shows, etc” (Steyn 39). Thus, the problem is that nowadays our perspectives and views about very important issues, such as body image, are being influenced by three of the biggest representatives of pop culture (all of which we can find present in *Fat Pig*): television, films, and magazines. Obesity is known to be a reality in America, however, the media seems to ‘forget’ this fact and portrays its own reality, where issues such as obesity are not present: “If you saw a 250-pound woman on the subway or behind the counter at Barnes & Noble, you wouldn’t give her a glance: they’re part of the American landscape. The only place you don’t see them is in our drama” (Steyn 39).

In *Fat Pig* we find a reflection of a society that aspires to encounter in real life only what they have seen as a model on TV, movies, and celebrity magazines. Their only aim is to find in everyday life what they have been shown to be ‘real’, ‘beautiful’ and ‘accepted’. This ultimately produces a very negative effect, not only because people end up striving for something that is almost impossible to find or achieve, but because this pursuit causes violence, not necessarily physical, but what is sometimes even worse, psychological. In *Fat Pig* we can see violence present in three characters: Tom, Jeannie, and Carter. This violence is triggered by Helen’s physique, and the fact that she is dating a handsome man like Tom. LaBute portrays this violence on stage because he likes using the theater as a means for denouncing important issues, and producing a reaction in the audience: “[H]e saw his function as ‘looking to cause trouble on stage... isn’t that the job description? To turn heads? To deliver something new?’ It was not, he insisted, ‘as if I want to be provocative for the sake of provoking. I at least try to make something that is going to look beyond the momentary shock’” (Bigsby loc. 156-63).

We can see the influence of pop culture in each of the four characters of *Fat Pig*. Helen is obese, a condition she says she is at peace with: “It’s not a shame thing for me. Not anymore” (31). Later on she says: “I’m pretty all right with who I am now. The trick is getting other people to be okay with it!” (32). We can see that even though she says she is all right with the way she looks, Helen still cares about what others think of her. She knows that the rest of the society is not all right with how fat she is. She constantly makes jokes about her weight, as when she associates herself with ‘the thousand ships and all’. She even states that, as the common conception goes, “[b]ig people are *jolly*, remember?” (10). However, all of these jokes ultimately leave us wondering whether she truly feels comfortable with the way she looks, or if they are just a front to put up with all the negativity and cruel comments she is usually faced with. She seems to be covering up all of her suffering using humor as a defense mechanism, just as several other characters from LaBute’s plays do: “In LaBute’s work it [humor] is often self-consciously deployed by characters for whom it is a defense against insecurities, or a means of distancing themselves from the implications of their actions. On occasion, humor is a weapon of choice” (Bigsby loc. 334-40).

Helen’s relation to pop culture is reflected in her constant use of references. For example, when she refers to the way her hair is done: “I have the, you know, “Miss Kitty” hair today. All dolled up” (8), or the time when she and Tom are watching television together and Tom comments on how wonderful it is to just lie there, saying: “Ahhh, this is life”, to what Helen answers: “Like the beginning of *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison*” (57). She makes continuous references to TV shows and movies, assuming the other will understand what she is talking about. She incorporates these references in her daily life interactions, which makes for very interesting conversations, since the rest of the people have to decode what she is talking about and understand a whole lot more from the small reference she makes.

At the end of the play, after Tom tells Helen that he can no longer pretend that the pressure from his friends does not affect him, and wants to break up with her, Helen experiences a major shift regarding the beliefs we have been told she has throughout the play:

HELEN: ... I love you so much, I really do, Tom... But I can't be with you if you're feeling something other than that same thing that I am... I've never said this to anyone, not any person in the world. Ever. My parents or a... no one. I would change for you. I would...

TOM: Helen... that... that's not...

HELEN: I do not want this to end... The kind of ecstasy that you've brought me.  
(81)

What we can see here is that Helen has finally succumbed to the media pressure which says that one must be beautiful and skinny in order to 'get the guy'.

In another play from LaBute's trilogy on beauty and physical appearance, *The Shape of Things*, one of the characters, Evelyn, transforms a man in order to make him more 'socially acceptable': "[O]pen any fashion magazine, turn on any television programme and the world will tell you... he's only gotten more interesting, more desirable, more normal. in a word, *better*. he is a living, breathing example of our obsession with the surface of things, the shape of them" (LaBute, *Shape* 121).<sup>3</sup> In relation to this, we can see how Helen has been changed by the fact that the media has been constantly bombarding her (and everyone else) with its own popular notions of beauty. Its influence and reach are so huge, that people, like Helen, end up thinking that what they broadcast is what should be done.

Tom is also a representative of a society immersed in pop culture. At the beginning of the play he acts as if he were totally all right with Helen's weight. However, when his friend Carter shows up at his office and asks him about the new woman in his life, Tom does not say much: "What I will say is, I'm very happy right now..." (18). We know that he acts like this because his friend is very conscious about body issues. Tom says to him: "I'm not obsessed by bodies the way you are. I'm not" (21). He even goes as far as lying to Carter about his dinner plans, to cover the fact he is seeing Helen. He even admits that he is not really that shallow, but that peer pressure is bigger than what he can handle. He tells his ex-girlfriend and co-worker Jeannie that he hangs out with Carter and those guys at the office not because they are his real friends, but "[b]ecause we all... started out here together, and it's, you know, it's easier to go along sometimes, to just hang out and not make, like, some big tsunami or that kind of thing. I know it's dumb, but... he's [Carter] *funny*. He doesn't bug me that much" (24). Here we can see that social pressure is a key factor in the way Tom manages himself in the world, and that the ideals his friends live up to, which are influenced by the ideals that pop culture perpetuates, seriously affect the way he acts. Whether he wants to admit it or not, those influences guide his life nonetheless: "What Tom suffers is what Alexis Tocqueville identified as a defining characteristic of America: the tyranny of the majority. He retreats behind shared interests, an affected diffidence or humor" (Bigby loc. 3012-20).

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<sup>3</sup> In *The Shape of Things*, LaBute does not use capital letters, but only lower case. When asked why he did so, he said that "it's a simple matter of being able to type faster, to write more and in a way that allows the work to flow out of myself more completely, without stopping for the 'shift' each time it's expected" (Bigby loc. 396-403).

Later in the play, even though Tom is honestly trying to overcome his prejudices against Helen's weight, he cannot help but feel intimidated by how others might react to him dating a woman like her. When he goes on a date with Helen and Carter shows up, he does not introduce her as his date, but lies about his connection to her. Helen does not react negatively to Tom's behavior, but afterwards she lets him know that she feels uncomfortable and isolated because they are always alone. Tom denies that he has been hiding her, yet then he admits that he does have a bit of a problem with her weight: "I can see that we've got something here, I'm not stupid,... and I need you to know. That I know. I'm really just so damn... *overcome* by this" (60).

Despite all of these problems and the stated complications in their relationship, Tom keeps trying to defend Helen and his love for her when Jeannie calls Helen a "fat bitch" (65). He even tells her that "I enjoy her because she's not you, *anything* like you... she's not *obsessed* with looks and money and clothes and useless bullshit like that" (67). However, at the end of the play, at his office's beach party, Tom only introduces Helen to people at the parking lot and sits with her away from the rest of his co-workers. When Helen confronts him, he finally comes out and admits that he cannot handle a relationship with her in the real world: "If we were in some other time or a land that nobody else was around on... then everything might be okay, I wouldn't be so fucking paranoid about what the people around me were saying. Or even thinking... I guess I do care what my peers feel about me" (82-83). He finally breaks up with her, admitting that love cannot overcome social pressure: "Yeah, *love*. But sometimes it just isn't enough. You know? All this love inside and it's not nearly enough to get around the shit that people *heave* at you... I don't wanna fight it anymore. I am just not strong enough for that" (83). In the end, the ideas that have been put into Tom's mind regarding how someone should look like in order to be accepted into society, make him break up with someone he admits he truly loves, but cannot accept. We are faced with a reflection of a society that is obsessed with appearances, or as LaBute himself called it:

A society [American] which had mythicised the self-made man, with winning friends and influencing people, had become increasingly concerned with the reshaping of the self in such a way as to assure... happiness... The plastic-surgery supermarket offered a range of desirable noses and breasts, usually modeled on those of Hollywood stars, themselves often precision-engineered to match a paradigm of the desirable... breeding from the perfection that America had always implicitly claimed as its ultimate objective. (Bigsby loc. 2888-2908)

At the end of the play, Helen finally realizes that Tom is never going to change, and that society has and will always play a bigger role in determining his actions than himself: "As Helen discovers, the problem with Tom is Tom. He has spent his life studying his reflection in the social mirror, not out of vanity but to make sure he is still there. Once he discards his pretensions, he can only be himself" (Kanfer 45). Helen realizes that they live in a place where what people think is more important than feelings, and that being different, or not the social ideal, will always play against her.

Carter, Tom's friend and co-worker, is another representative of the pop culture society depicted in *Fat Pig*. His importance relies on the fact that he is blatantly honest about what he thinks of Helen's weight, and confronts Tom to make him admit that he has issues with her weight too. Thanks to Carter, "the audience finds itself in the position of critiquing their own behavior. Many of Carter's lines are witty. Often they are witty and despicable at the same time" (Ellison 6). It is through Carter that the audience can express and/or feel society's reactions towards an oversized person. He is the one who "consistently reminds Tom and the audience that appearance is paramount in our contemporary society" (Ellison 5), a fact that is stressed in a conversation Carter has with Tom:

CARTER: I'm not saying she [Helen] can't be happy. That she shouldn't meet somebody, but it oughta be a fat somebody, or a bald one. Whatever. Like her. A somebody that *fits* her...

TOM: That's crazy... things aren't just based on *appearance!*

CARTER: Maybe you should snap on the TV once in a while. (*Beat.*) I'm not talking about what people deserve, I'm saying what they *get*. You look one way, you have access to *all* this. Look some other way, all you get is that. Sorry, but it's true. (71)

Here, Carter makes a very crude but real point: what we assume as true today is that people 'get' what they 'deserve', but not based on how good or bad they are as a person, but on how beautiful they are or how 'perfect' they seem by popular standards. Carter even makes a biblical reference in order to justify his position: "[S]o take a glance at Noah and all that flood shit! He didn't pair up the apes with the antelope, right? It's one of the many laws of nature. 'Run with your own kind'" (71).

Carter is the best representation of a society that has been corrupted by the standards and fake ideals that the mass media has been imposing on us, and has tried to make us believe as true and applicable to all. His biggest problem is that he does not even recognize it as something wrong, as when he justifies to Tom why he said that Jeannie seemed to have gained some weight: "It's not like, some derogatory thing I'm saying about her... it's just an idle thought. She seems to be packing it on some. That's the problem with winter: chicks don't get out much and they bloat up" (22).

Carter's problems with weight issues come from his early childhood, because his mother was fat too: "I've got this fucking sumo wrestler... And the thing was, I blamed her for it... she just shoveled shit into her mouth" (48). Carter tells Tom the story about his mother in order to make him admit he *does* have a problem with Helen's weight. Carter says: "We are all—guys, I mean—if it comes right down to it. Very rare is the dude who stands up for the shit he believes in" (49). He tries to make Tom admit his real nature: "You laugh at the same jokes and check out the same asses that I do" (52). He even overstates the fact that TV is constantly telling us that we should watch our weight: "I'm just saying... can't turn CNN without some doctor..." (53). He goes as far as to suggest that Helen "[c]ould probably get on one of those *reality shows*" (54). Here we can see that the media is so concerned about body issues, that nowadays we can find several TV shows, such as *The*

*Biggest Loser*, that pry on the overweight to get big ratings and make money out of their suffering and public humiliation.

Carter tries to make Tom come to ‘his senses’ and realize that he is facing a ‘problem’ by dating Helen:

CARTER: I’m not saying I don’t admire you—I do, actually, ‘cause I know that I couldn’t do it!—but she’s gonna end up a weight around your neck. Forgive the pun...

TOM: You’re... doing that strictly on a “physical” basis... which is—

CARTER: Of course! Fuck, what else can I go on? (*Beat.*) I don’t wanna come off like some *Elton John* here, but you are a good-looking guy. You’re successful, bit of a player in the industry... I don’t understand you taking God’s good gifts and pissing on’em... (70)

In this sense, Carter sees Tom dating Helen as a betrayal to nature.

Carter finally states that “[p]eople are not comfortable with difference. You know? Fags, retards, cripples. Fat people. Old folks, even. They scare us or something” (71). Carter says that the problem with that kind of people is that “[t]he thing they represent that’s so scary is what we *could* be, how vulnerable we all are... too many cartons of Oreos! We’re all just one step from being what frightens us” (71-72). Here Carter makes reference to a cultural problem that says that people are actually *afraid* of being fat, bald, or different in any way, because they fear popular rejection. Even though we might hate him, he is in the end the most honest character in the play. He makes Tom face reality and admit his true nature. Not even Helen is as honest as Carter, since in the end she betrays what she has been preaching all along and offers to ‘change’ herself in order to please Tom.

LaBute is an expert in writing violent characters, and he has admitted that he thinks that “cruelty is a particularly vivid canvas on which to create drama” (Istel 100). In the case of this play, he shows human cruelty “but explores it in the context of a play which does indeed seem to have an unequivocally good character [Helen] as its heart: vulnerable, the victim of other people’s assumptions, of cultural presumptions, but resilient and honest” (Bigsby loc. 2916-23). What LaBute is thus trying to do is bring to the stage a controversial topic and make the audience judge and think for themselves.

Jeannie is Helen’s counterpart. She functions as the representation of the ‘ideal’ beauty one should aspire to, and to which the characters and the audience compare Helen. She is a bully, an exaggerated prototype of a resentful ex-girlfriend, and the most violent character in the play. She is Tom’s ex-girlfriend and the one who reacts more strikingly towards Tom’s new relationship. Jeannie is offended that Tom is dating someone else, and clarifies that she is well-liked among men: “I’m not saying that I’m some, you know, *glamour queen*, but guys do like me. They do” (23). By doing so, she equates beauty and the standards for being liked by men, to what magazines preach as the ‘model’ of

perfection and beauty. She follows this same path all along the play. She is even upset when she finds out that Helen is bigger than her, taking it as a reflection on her own weight: "I'm sure you thought this would hurt me, right? Like, "What's the worst thing I'd be able to do to her?" And this is what you came up with, some self-image killer like this one... She's fat, so does that mean that Tom secretly digs fat chicks, does it mean that *I'm fat?!?*" (68). Jeannie mirrors how thousands of women feel because of what society, infected by a popular belief in 'perfect' beauty, has taught her. She has been trained to aspire to a perfect 'model' that is impossible to achieve.

Jeannie gets more and more upset about Helen as the play develops, and her character is the cruelest one in terms of the language she uses to refer to Helen. She calls her "[f]at chick" (43), "a pig" (44), "fat bitch" (65), and "[a] fat sow" (67). Regarding the use of such strong language, LaBute said in an interview: "I write things on a page I don't want to have to deal with in life... Writing is a safe vacuum for me because I'm not saying those horrible things to someone's face. On the page, I can always find the great retort that doesn't come to me at the right moment in life. I feel I have a kind of bravado in my writing I don't have in life" (Jordan 2).

The four characters of *Fat Pig* can be said to show parallels and counterparts. Tom and Carter are opposites, with Tom representing the 'good' guy, the one who puts love over 'looks'. On the other hand, Carter is the incarnation of a society that puts beauty over everything else, and who tries to shove its beliefs into every other person's conscience. In the end, Carter triumphs over Tom, and is able to break Tom and Helen up, thus winning in the name of the pop culture society in which they both live. Helen and Jeannie are contrasting characters too, since they each represent the opposite side of the 'beauty coin' of society. Helen is oversized and rejected by most people, whereas Jeannie is beautiful and desired by all.

### **Postmodernism and pop culture:**

Postmodernism cannot be easily defined because it has no exact characteristics. It plays with everything, it de-sacralizes everything. It uses irony and satire to laugh at all things. In postmodernism we find an attitude of sarcasm towards serious matters, which is in a way nihilistic. For postmodernism, everything and anything are important. Since all is relative, we find a dark view of existence. Reality cannot be expressed orderly any longer. All rationalism is questioned; significance and authorities are questioned.

In her book *Postmodernism and Popular Culture*, Angela McRobbie uses postmodernism to explain the relevance and importance given today to pop culture as a serious cultural study. The popular has usually been associated to the superficial, yet she states that:

[T]he superficial does not necessarily represent a decline into meaninglessness or valuelessness in culture. In this sense postmodernism emerged like a breath of fresh air allowing cultural critics to shift their gaze away from the search for meaning in the text towards the sociological play between images and between different cultural



forms and institutions. The glossy surface of pop, the intertextual referencing between film and advert and television programme,... all this criss-crossing and fast cutting need not be seen as heralding the death of politics in culture but it does mean that we have to develop a critical vocabulary which can take this rapid movement into account. (loc. 138-59)

McRobbie positions pop culture as a fundamental and relevant element in today's society, stating that it is part of our everyday life: "Real life means talking about what was on TV last night. Reality is the *Nems at Ten* and the images on the news become a reference point for the further experiencing of and construction of reality" (loc. 173-81). She praises postmodernism as a means to study pop culture: "[T]he recent debates on post-modernism possess both a positive attraction and a usefulness to the analyst of popular culture. This is because they offer a wider, and more dynamic, understanding of contemporary representation than other accounts to date... postmodernism considers images as they relate to and across each other" (loc. 314-22). She explains that pop is part of postmodernism since it is a mixture of different elements joined together to achieve a wider meaning: "Pop has never signified within one discrete discourse, but instead combines images with performance, music with film or video, and pin-ups with the magazine form itself" (loc. 329-35).

McRobbie states that postmodernism has expanded fast into the young American generation of today: "It has spread outwards from the realms of art history into political theory and on to the pages of youth culture magazines, record sleeves and the fashion spreads of *Vogue*. This seems to me to indicate something more than the mere vagaries of taste" (loc. 363-70).

Nowadays, pop culture is a reflection of the pastiche found in postmodernism. Pop culture mixes together things found in different areas to create a new whole that is made much richer by the sum of all of its parts. In the case of *Fat Pig* we can see that LaBute incorporated in his play multiple references to three important areas of pop culture: film, television, and magazines. Throughout the play we can find excerpts taken from all of these areas, joined together to create a more realistic picture of American society.

Pop culture incorporates bits and pieces from different parts, and makes references to various means: "Self-referentiality occurs within and across different media forms. One TV programme might be devoted to the production of another... just as television films based on the making of other large-scale cinema productions are becoming increasingly common" (loc. 406-20). Thus, the media depends on the media itself, which shows "the feeding-off effect between mass media today" (loc. 413-20). This cross-referencing has several implications: "It creates an ever-increasing, but less diverse, verbal and visual landscape. It is these recurring fictions and the characters who inhabit them which feed into the field of popular knowledge, and which in turn constitute a large part of popular culture" (loc. 420-28). For example, today it would be impossible

not to know about shows such as *Lost* or *Friends*. People's knowledge of pop culture and the media has increased because they can be found almost everywhere.

*Pop culture references:*

LaBute has always been deeply concerned with dialogue. He has said that he aims at achieving a type of talk that is as much as real as possible: "The theater's a funny place. You try to create speech that sounds exactly like people talk, and yet when you listen to it, it's nothing like people talk. It's a strange no-man's land of language. And I'm quite comfortable there. I put in as many "ums," "likes" and "whatevers" as I can. We... we.... Like I'm doing right now" (Istel 41).

One way of making his dialogues more real is by the use of pop culture references. LaBute has recognized that these types of references are very common in American speech today. They can be understood as intertextual means taken from television shows, movies, and magazine articles, all of which are incorporated into the regular everyday speech of a person. These pieces are joined together and make up a pastiche that adds many positive aspects to the conversation, such as enriching its meaning, widening the topic, and acknowledging a common interest among the people involved that can be shown through the use of a specific kind of reference that either only those people understand, or that has some special meaning for them.

LaBute's plays make use of pop culture references in order to portray how characters relate to one another, show their personalities, and/or express their feelings. He uses references taken from films, literature, music, magazines, and television, which he justifies saying that "[i]t becomes an easy way for people to communicate; they can reach some shared ground and not have to invest a great deal of emotion into it. There's a pleasure that comes from knowing what the other person's talking about" (LaBute, *Interview*).

However, many times he gives incomplete references, or ones that are misunderstood or obscure. LaBute admits it is partly technique: "[I]t's just what my voice as a writer has become... I do often have someone not know the name of something, to describe it without ever giving the actual title of something, or to get it wrong, to kind of bury it in some way in the text or in the title even. I'll embed a line from *Othello* in the text and see how many people come up with it" (LaBute, *Interview*). He enjoys watching audiences wonder about the origin of the references used in his plays, which he explains by making a pop culture reference himself: "It's that feeling I used to have at a Woody Allen movie: half the time people are laughing and going, "What are they laughing at?" and only catching up later on. So it's the Woody Allen laugh I go for every now and then. There's material planted in there that can give varying degrees of pleasure" (*Interview*).

The inclusion of pop culture references in a play can have different functions. They can be used for storyline reasons which demand the use of a reference in order for the action to develop, make sense for the audience, or help to move the action along. They can be employed as a way to set the mood of the play, with each reference having its own more specific purpose. They are a great tool in shaping the characters of a play; the references can reveal important character traits, and help

the audience grasp a wider view and understanding of the characters. They can also reveal the setting, access and/or time period in which the play is set, and allow the audience to feel closer to the play by means of identifying common references that they understand and mean something to them or to the generation to which they belong.

In *Fat Pig*, the protagonists' relationship develops by an attraction sparked by their mutual liking for movies and TV shows. Tom and Helen's connection is shaped and influenced by their use of pop culture references. When they first meet, Helen says that she was just at an interview, which is the reason for her having the "Miss Kitty' hair today". Tom immediately gets the reference by saying "Ahh, cool... I get it. *Gunsmoke*. You look nice" (8). This is the first time they flirt, and the beginning of a strand of references that overflow their first encounter, and that reflect the connection that is forged between them right from the start.

Helen then makes a reference to a wig commercial:

WOMAN: Nope. "I'm not just the president, I'm also a client..." (*Beat*.) That one wig commercial? The Hair Club for Men or something...

MAN: Oh, right... right! (*Laughs*.) That's funny. Yeah. Who do they think is really gonna fall for that stuff?

WOMAN: I dunno! It always looks so cheesy when guys do that... people should just go with it, you know? I mean, whatever they look like. (8)

Helen makes this reference as a way of conveying her own feelings regarding an issue that is close to her: her weight. Thus, it becomes "a statement of intent, seemingly a declaration of her own position as she and the Man begin what she already seems to see as a possible relationship—or why stake out her territory with such care?" (Bigsby loc. 2937-44). In this way, we can see that the reference used by Helen is employed as a device to express both some traits of her personality (her liking for references and the fact that she is funny) and some of her beliefs (regarding looks).

The following reference reveals a key element of Helen's personality. Tom sees that Helen has a bag with videos that she has rented, and he guesses at which videos are probably inside the bag: "So, lemme guess... *When Harry Met Sally*, *Sleepless in Seattle*, probably" (8). Tom guesses that these are the movies Helen has rented because he knows, as most people 'in the know' do, that these movies are commonly known as 'chick flicks' (movies women like), 'feel-good movies' (movies that lift you up), and the stereotypical romantic films women watch alone. All of these explanations are not stated in the play, but are inferred because of the previous knowledge one has about these movies, i.e. the references carry with themselves an added meaning that enriches the dialogues of the play, and that requires that the audience makes the necessary connection to understand the whole intention of Tom's comment. However, Helen surprises Tom and the audience when she responds that the movies she actually rented are all by the novelist Alistair MacLean: "*The Guns of Navarone*, *Where Eagles Dare*... *Ice station Zebra*" (8), all of which are not romantic comedies made for women, but thrillers. This revelation brings about the first 'moment' this new couple shares together:

MAN: ... I love that stuff, but... that's not very 'girlie' of you.

WOMAN: You are probably just dating the wrong kinds of girls.

*They share a smile and a chuckle. (8-9)*

Tom and Helen's relationship evolves as they relate to one another because of their mutual liking for pop culture, which even penetrates intimate moments of their relationship: "*Tom and Helen are lying on top of the covers, watching a movie—Helen is concentrating, Tom is kissing her... Tom continues to kiss her as Helen watches the TV*" (55). Here we can see how television has penetrated into society's most personal moments, and how the theater has identified this issue and brought the television onto the stage as a way of portraying this phenomenon. At the end of this scene, Tom and Helen even make love to the sound of the television: "*Her hand searches around, finds the remote again. Click! Up come the sounds of war and mayhem on the soundtrack. Loud*" (61). This decision relates to Helen's adolescence and the importance she gave back then to television: "[S]he opts for making love while a war movie plays on the television, an echo of the time when such films had constituted the soundtrack of her early life, when she had dealt with rejection by denying her sexuality" (Biggs loc. 2997-3003). This situation is particularly interesting, since nowadays when we go to the theater, at times we find television playing a crucial role in the development of the action, and even occasions when the actors on stage interact with what is going on in the TV program or film that is being broadcasted on the television. Thus, we find the presence of double action, with the audience having to focus both on the TV and the stage in order to fully understand the play.

At one point, when Helen tells Tom that she just wants someone who cares for her, Tom resorts to references once again:

HELEN: I'm not looking for fairy-tale or out-of-the-ballpark or anything... just a person who cares about me like I do him. Simple.

TOM: ... Love isn't simple. It's... *never having to say you're sorry.*

*Tom starts to say more, but Helen stops him. Smiles.*

HELEN: I don't need you to be clever here! No jokes. Or *film quotes*... Just be clear... and honest. (60)

Helen complains because she wants a straight answer from Tom, not opened to interpretations like the usual references they use. This points to one serious problem that pop references pose, because people are so used to them in conversation, sometimes they do not even realize they are using them, and in some contexts they are still seen as not being serious enough. Helen reacts against this because she wants a statement from Tom himself, yet when it comes to another critical point in the play, the ending, both of them still resort to the use of references in order to convey their feelings:

HELEN: ... I would change for you... I don't mean Slim-Fast or that one diet that the guy on TV did... with the sandwiches from Subway. That guy...

TOM: Helen... that... that's not...

HELEN: I'll do something radical to myself if you want me to. Like be stapled or have some surgery or whatever it takes—one of those *rings*—because I do not want this to end. (81)

Tom tells her that his problem is people, and that if they were alone it would be different. To exemplify this last statement he recalls the movie *None But the Brave* (82), again making use of pop references even in times of serious conversations. In the end, they both realize and accept this is the way they have always communicated, and that they are able to understand and connect with each other through these means.

Carter and Jeannie are no strangers to pop references either. They use them to justify or exemplify their views about society and beauty. When Tom and Carter fight about things being or not based just on appearance, Carter says “Maybe you should snap on the TV once in a while” (71), stating that his beliefs regarding body issues come straight from what television and the media tell him is right. Jeannie also makes references in this sense, when she gets angry at Tom for breaking up with her because of Helen, and she says: “Tom ditched me for fucking *Mama Cass!*” (68). ‘Mama Cass’ was an oversized singer who broke up her band partly because of her weight problems, and Jeannie relates her to Helen.

## Conclusions

*Fat Pig's* four characters are all off-springs of a society that has put popular culture on a pedestal. Contemporary American society is suffering from a delusion that preaches impossible standards to young people, with detrimental consequences to everyone that follows its views. This play shows how Americans have been shaped by the media, and how films, TV shows, and celebrity magazines have managed to penetrate into their minds, and thus, have molded an entire nation. In order to show this, LaBute has managed to create a play that reflects these issues in a witty way that is both funny and serious. By creating stereotypes (Carter and Jeannie) and by using a lovable leading lady (Helen) and a regular protagonist (Tom), LaBute is able to connect with the audiences and encourage them to take part in the criticism he is trying to portray. He makes them identify themselves with the cruel comments that the characters express along the play towards Helen, so as to shed light onto a cultural issue that has swallowed a great part of American society.

In *Fat Pig* pop culture originates from the people. The culture of beauty that the media shows and that is reflected in the play, originally stems from society itself who has invented or agreed with those stereotypes and ideals, and has then proceeded to massify them through TV, films, and magazines. It is the community the one who promotes those values we all have to live up to, just as the characters in *Fat Pig* have to do.

In the end, *Fat Pig* is not just a play about being fat. It is a social comment and a step towards a self-criticism of the way we all see people who are different from what we have been told by the media that ‘perfect’ should look like. As we are able to see in the play, the adoration of the

media has shaped Carter and Jeannie in such a way that they can only conceive a world where beauty triumphs over everything else, where love is never enough, and where beautiful people are meant to be together, and the ones that differ from this notion, are left aside and mocked.

The fact that the first scene of the play depicts Tom and Helen as only ‘Man’ and ‘Woman’, not using their names until the very last moment, makes the issues of the play more universal. Since they are not pigeonholed in a specific role, we can wonder if we could be them, and whether they stand for any couple in society that meets and has many obstacles to overcome.

The vast quantity of pop culture references that we find in *Fat Pig* reflects a society that has accepted pop culture into their lives, and has lifted the way people used to see it, and now appreciate it as any other recognized cultural form. The pastiche of quotations taken from several sources that we find in the play allows the audience to engage with the play and its characters, to connect with the generation portrayed on-stage, and to participate more actively in the action of the play, since they are expected to decode what the characters are referring to. This leads us to conclude that the use of these references has penetrated so many aspects of our daily lives that we can even attest to having been shaped by following the models we find in television, films, and magazines. The influence of these media is so extensive that, since these references are recognized by most people, and thus, used by most, we are in a way forced to watch or follow the shows, movies, or articles where the references come from in order to be able to participate in conversations.

The references named in this study are just a few from the wide amount that we can find in *Fat Pig*, but they help to identify two crucial characteristics of LaBute’s work: how he defines the characters and how he shapes the action of the play. The references made reflect a culture and a specific generation and period of time, and they allow the play to become closer to the real America that LaBute is trying to portray. TV shows and movies have a defined temporality, and the characters found in them are off-springs of their own time. What we recognize or identify with today will not be the same for the following generation.

It is important to point out that one could go deeper into the study of the references found in this play, and maybe even separate the ones that come from films and television in order to make a more thorough analysis of why they are used, what they truly refer to, and what each of them provides to the play. Maybe we could even venture to say that movie references could point to a higher status or a higher cultural background, since films are still considered of higher quality as opposed to television. Is TV more shallow? Does the use of movie references reflect a higher status? These questions could amount to a whole new study of LaBute’s play.

But why do the characters of *Fat Pig* resort to the use of pop culture references? Are they hiding behind the use of quotations? Do they just enjoy using references, or do they gain something from their use? Do they employ them as defense mechanisms, or is it just a matter of liking? Several questions arise when trying to analyze the many references found in this play. However, there is not just one answer. One might guess that perhaps globalization has influenced this resource, since we

live in a world where everything is connected, and where people all around the globe are watching the same shows, almost at the same time as they are being broadcasted in the U.S. Here in Chile we constantly make references to American TV shows, and we know that everyone will be able to follow them, and understand the deeper meaning they carry with them. Our world is now a pop world, and the referents we follow, the comments we make, and the way we handle ourselves, are all influenced by popular culture. So, are we appropriating references because they are easier than saying what we truly want to express? I believe it is a new way of communication, one with higher amounts of meaning and a bigger need for decoding. In *Fat Pig* LaBute has managed to identify this issue, and his characters end up talking in a language filled with these types of references. But are they hiding something behind? Perhaps it is not that. It could just be that they live in a place where using those references is normal, and where the use of them expresses different sides of their personalities. Maybe it is a new way to get to know someone else, one that facilitates identifying the likings of others, in order to see if they match our own. Perhaps it is just about being able to reach a common ground and become better attuned with someone else's way of thinking by identifying and relating to his or her references. There is simply just not one answer to these questions.

Pop culture is present in our culture today. It is a fact we cannot escape from. For all of its negative qualities (such as twisted 'role models' and the like) it has also provided us with new elements for discussion, more modern ways to see reality, and fresh ideas for the arts (e.g. pastiche). It is definitely a new field of study, and a fundamental part of our society which we can no longer leave aside. *Fat Pig* is a true example of how pop culture has shaped us all, and an interesting medium by which we can study this phenomenon: "A further imperative is an examination of what we mean by identity, and what value this concept has for cultural analysis in a world where the mass media creates global homogeneity yet where in this global village people and populations are increasingly differentiated" (McRobbie loc. 933-49).

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