“Masculine Stirrings,” “The Bitch of Living,” and “Bodily Filth”: Representations of Adolescence and Adolescent Sexuality in *Spring Awakening* and its Adaptations

THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the representation of adolescents in Frank Wedekind’s controversial *Spring Awakening* and in two twenty-first century adaptations of Wedekind’s play: Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s musical *Spring Awakening* and Thomas Kilroy’s *Christ Deliver Us!*. Although some scholars have written about Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*, and reviewers have discussed Sater and Sheik’s musical and Kilroy’s play, there is no scholarly writing analyzing the teenage characters in these plays in the context of the historical time period in which each piece was written and first performed. This thesis will attempt to fill this gap in scholarship. Chapter one will examine Frank Wedekind’s play, paying particular attention to characters’ gender performance. This chapter will also look at Wedekind’s final scene as an example of liminal space, and will analyze Wedekind’s representations of adolescent gender and access to liminal space in the context of the nineteenth century German school system and gender norms. Chapter two will look at Sater and Sheik’s musical, especially the expression of gender and liminality through musical numbers, focusing not only on Sater’s lyrics and Sheik’s music, but also on Bill T. Jones’s choreography. This chapter will pay special attention to the clash between hyper-sexual culture and the push for abstinence-only education in the twenty-first century United States, and how this conflict may have influenced Sater and Sheik’s adaptation. Chapter three will discuss Thomas Kilroy’s *Christ Deliver Us!*, the only piece not set in 1890s Germany. This chapter will look at gender and liminality in
Kilroy’s play in the context of Irish societal norms. It will also focus especially on the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland as well as the Ryan and Murphy reports, released in 2009, that revealed endemic abuse perpetrated by clergy members against children. The conclusion will examine the shared goals of all three pieces, as well as the common shortcomings of these plays.
Dedication

To my family
Acknowledgments

There are a number of people without whom I could not have completed this thesis. I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Lesley Ferris, for guiding me through this process and constantly directing me to research resources; my committee member Dr. Jennifer Schlueter, for providing invaluable feedback; the cast and production team of Ohio State’s 2011 production of *Spring Awakening*, for inspiring me to pursue this topic; Chris Hill, for directing me to several resources on twentieth and twenty-first century Ireland; my dad, for always believing in me; and Matt, for unconditionally loving me and holding my hand every step of the way.
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Introduction

“In Mainz before the First World War sex education did not exist...In school and household everything connected with sex was strictly taboo.”

(Carl Zuckmayer, A Part of Myself, 110-111)

“On a bright but breezy Texas winter morning at the high school on Clear Creek Road, next to the vast Fort Hood military base, the talk is all about sex. Or, rather, about how you absolutely must not do it or anything close to it outside wedlock. It is part of the sexual revolution in US schools called Abstinence-Only Until Marriage, a programme being cascaded with funding from the Bush administration”

(Joanna Walters, “No Sex is Safe Sex for Teens in America, The Observer 1 Jan 2005)

“I became pregnant with the first child and I don’t even know how. The same with the second child. When I was having the third this woman lent me this book Everywoman. That was the first I ever really learnt about sex.”

(Rosita Sweetman, On Our Backs: Sexual Attitudes in a Changing Ireland, 115)

Although the quotes above refer to different time periods and places, they share one unfortunate but undeniable truth. They all illustrate the lack of sex education and, in some cases, the adolescent sexual repression, present in nineteenth century Germany, the twenty-first century United States, and mid-twentieth to early twenty-first century Ireland. Many have objected to this refusal to teach young people about their developing bodies and desires, but one man in particular stands out as ahead of his time. In 1891, German playwright Frank Wedekind wrote Spring Awakening, a play that presents several adolescents struggling to come to terms with their burgeoning sexuality in the intensely repressive culture of 1890s Germany, also known as Wilhelmine Germany.
Wedekind’s play was not produced until 1906 (and even then it was heavily censored), but in spite of these early struggles in production, *Spring Awakening* has had a lasting impact.

This play has, in fact, become newly relevant in light of the reluctance, both in the United States and elsewhere, to teach young people factual information about sexuality, contraception, and sexually transmitted infections. Two adaptations of Wedekind’s piece have been written and produced in the twenty-first century: a musical version titled *Spring Awakening*, by Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik, which premiered on Broadway in 2006, and *Christ Deliver Us!*, a play by Thomas Kilroy that re-sets the action of the original script in 1940s/50s Ireland. *Christ Deliver Us!* premiered at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre in 2010. Although both adaptations change Wedekind’s original storyline in many ways, some obvious and some more nuanced, both the adaptations and Wedekind’s play offer complex portrayals of adolescent characters and their struggles to come to terms with their burgeoning sexuality, as well as critiques of the repressive societies in which these characters live. Surprisingly, there has been little scholarly writing about the representations of adolescents in these plays. In this thesis, I will tackle this issue by looking at each play’s representation of adolescent characters, specifically teens’ gender performance and access to liminal space. I will also examine the relationships between portrayal of adolescent characters and the cultural conditions in which each play was written and first produced.
Definition of Terms

Before going further into analysis, it is necessary to define certain terms that will occur repeatedly throughout this work. The first, and I believe most important, is “adolescence” and its companion “adolescent.” Although young people have always gone through puberty and its accompanying physical and emotional changes, adolescence is a relatively new concept. In *Rites of Passage* (1977), Joseph Kett states that “[b]etween 1890 and 1920 a host of psychologists, urban reformers, educators, youth workers, and parent counselors gave shape to the concept of adolescence, leading to the massive reclassification of young people as adolescents” (5-6). Kett later describes this newly defined adolescent as “vulnerable, awkward, incapacitated by the process of maturation…” (215). He also points out the significance of G. Stanley Hall’s seminal two-volume work *Adolescence* (1904), which defined adolescence as a time of intense storm and stress. Although Kett and many others disagree with Hall’s analysis of this developmental period, Kett discusses the fact that Hall’s work significantly influenced people developing adolescent institutions and youth organizations, as well as people dealing with adolescent psychology in school and at home (221).

Sterling Fishman’s article “Suicide, Sex, and the Discovery of the German Adolescent” (1970) supports Kett’s assertions, both of when the concept of adolescence developed and of what defines an adolescent. Fishman points out that, until the turn of the twentieth century, most adults in the German middle class “thought in terms of two age categories, childhood and adulthood…So long as one was in school, he remained a child and was treated accordingly. Having left school, one immediately became an adult”
Fishman goes on to discuss the problems associated with the lack of an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood, stating that by the end of the nineteenth century, “an increasing number of young people remained in school for longer periods of time, during which they were expected to behave like children although their bodies and drives were fully developed” (172). He details the high number of teen suicides occurring in Germany at this time (presumably because of emotional and mental issues associated with this protracted childhood), and outlines the recognition by the German middle class of the transitional state of adolescence as a distinct developmental period.

Both Kett and Fishman, then, use historical developments in order to define adolescence as a time in life when teenagers are sexually maturing and are poised between childhood and adulthood. Erik H. Erikson’s definition of adolescence in Identity: Youth and Crisis (1968) is similar, although he views the topic through a psychological rather than historical lens: Erikson describes the period as “a way of life between childhood and adulthood” when teens are “beset with the physiological revolution of their genital maturation and the uncertainty of the adult roles ahead” (128).

In this thesis, I will be defining adolescence as a time of life when a young man or woman is in the process of developing sexually, and though not a child, is also not yet an adult. An adolescent will be defined as someone going through this process. Although the term “teenager” is not always synonymous with adolescent, since one can begin adolescence before the teenage years or vice versa, I will be using the words “teen,” “teenager,” and “adolescent” interchangeably in this thesis.
Another important concept that I will be discussing is gender performance. When referring to the ways that characters perform their gender, or a societally approved gender performance, I do not mean conscious choices made by characters to act in a certain way. Rather, I am using Judith Butler’s concept of gender performance as outlined in her article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (1988). In this essay, she asserts that “what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (901). She also points out that gender is “an identity instituted through a styled repetition of acts” and that it is “a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (900, 903). It is impossible, then, to say who or what creates a “correct” gender identity or performance. It is rather something that becomes ingrained in a society over time through socially sanctioned acts that are performed over and over again until these acts gradually come to be associated with the “correct” performance of masculinity or femininity. When I discuss a character’s gender performance, then, I will be addressing whether the actions that he or she performs conform to the set of acts that make up the socially sanctioned performance of being male or being female. These acts vary between cultures, so I will describe the expected gender performance for men and women in specific eras and locations in each individual chapter.

I will also be looking at liminality and the liminal space allowed to adolescents in each of the three plays discussed here. The Oxford English Dictionary defines liminality as “A transitional or indeterminate state between culturally defined stages of a person’s life.” I will couple this definition with several theorists’ discussions of liminality and liminal space. I will look specifically at Victor Turner and Arnold van
Gennep, who both discuss the role of liminality in rite of passage rituals. I will also use Richard Schechner’s article “Invasions Friendly and Unfriendly: The Dramaturgy of Direct Theater” (2010), in which Schechner discusses the liminal qualities of carnival and revolution. Using these works, I have come to define liminality for adolescents, for the purposes of this paper, as a state between the complete dependence of childhood and the complete independence of adulthood, in which adolescents have the freedom to explore and discover their own sexuality.

**Methodology and Overview**

I will be using several different methodologies in this study. I will focus primarily on close reading of each play text as well as examining each play historiographically, as a critique of or commentary on events and attitudes in the society in which the play was written and first produced. In chapter one, I will focus on Frank Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* (2007) using Jonathan Franzen’s translation, which is the most recent to date. I will pay special attention to scenes that show adolescent characters following or violating expected norms of gender performance, as well as scenes in which adolescents are either allowed or denied liminal space. I will consider these scenes in terms of their historical context, using primary and secondary texts to help establish this context. The main primary source I will use is a translation of Carl Zuckmayer’s memoir *A Part of Myself* (1970), particularly those sections in which he discusses his school days. I will also use several secondary sources, including James C. Albisetti’s *Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany* (1983), Sterling Fishman’s “Sex, Suicide, and the
Discovery of the German Adolescent” as well as his book *The Struggle for German Youth* (1976), and Sol Gittleman’s *Frank Wedekind* (1969). Albisetti’s book and Fishman’s article will supply information about the repressive school environment in Wilhelmine Germany, and Gittleman’s book will help provide relevant information about Wedekind’s life and artistic influences.

I will also use the more theoretical works of anthropologists, including Victor Turner’s “Liminality and Communitas” (1969) and a translation of Arnold van Gennep’s *The Rites of Passage* (1960) in order to analyze Wedekind’s portrayal of liminal space, particularly in the final scene of his play. I will use the unique elements of liminality identified by Turner and van Gennep to support my reading of this final scene as Melchior’s opportunity to experience liminal space. In addition, I will refer back to Judith Butler, mentioned earlier, in order to elaborate on the concept of gender performance and to look at the consequences experienced by characters who perform gender incorrectly.

In chapter two, I will look primarily at the libretto for Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s musical adaptation of *Spring Awakening* (2007). Since I am not a musicologist or a dance scholar, I cannot perform an in-depth analysis of the score or choreography. I will, however, briefly touch on both of these elements in the original Broadway production of this musical. In doing so, I will discuss how the music and dance work in tandem with the text to show adolescents performing their gender and sexuality. I will also identify changes made from Wedekind’s original, focusing on the alterations made to Wendla and Melchior’s relationship. Since Steven Sater initiated this adaptation, I will
look to his preface to the musical’s script, as well as interviews with the writer, in order to gain insight into why he and his collaborators chose to adapt Wedekind’s play in the way that they did.

I will also look at Sater and Sheik’s piece historiographically, specifically in the context of the increase in abstinence-only until marriage programs in the U.S. I will pay special attention to The Waxman Report (2004), a study requested by Representative Henry Waxman that evaluated the content of various abstinence-only programs. I will also look at reviews of several abstinence education programs done by the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS). There are, of course, inescapable biases present in both of these sources: The Waxman Report was requested by a Democratic Representative to evaluate policy implemented by a Republican president, and SIECUS openly promotes comprehensive sexuality education over abstinence education. However, since the program curricula are not readily available, these sources are the best option for examining programs receiving large amounts of federal funding. In order to help detect bias in the Waxman Report and in SIECUS’s reviews, and to avoid bias in my own writing, I will also examine non-partisan research on state policy on sex education done by groups like the Guttmacher Institute. In addition, I will look at several books on issues of teen sexuality including Wendy Shalit’s *Return to Modesty* (1999) and *Girls Gone Mild* (2007), Patrice A. Oppliger’s *Girls Gone Skank* (2008), and Abigail Jones and Marissa Miley’s *Restless Virgins* (2007). In consulting these works, I will establish a sense of general attitudes towards adolescent sexuality and sexual activity in the U.S. during the early twenty-first century.
In addition to texts describing attitudes towards sexuality, I will also use theoretical texts to help delve into Sater and Sheik’s representation of teenage access to liminal space. The primary text I will be using is Richard Schechner’s essay, mentioned earlier, “Invasions Friendly and Unfriendly: The Dramaturgy of Direct Theater.” I will apply Schechner’s analysis of the similarly liminal spaces of carnival and revolution to my analysis of Sater and Sheik’s use of song. I will look specifically at their choice to stage the songs in a contemporary style while the rest of the musical retains Wedekind’s original nineteenth century setting.

Finally, in chapter three, I will discuss the most recent adaptation of Spring Awakening, Thomas Kilroy’s Christ Deliver Us! (2010). As with the other two plays, I will perform a close reading of certain scenes, looking specifically at places where Kilroy shows adolescent gender performance and access to liminality. In looking at liminality, I will turn back to Turner and van Gennep’s writing, focusing on Kilroy’s version of Wedekind’s final scene as an example of liminal space. I will also look at the play in the context of Irish policy on and attitudes towards sexuality and adolescent sex education, using Ivana Bacik’s Kicking and Screaming (2004) and Tom Inglis’s Lessons in Irish Sexuality (1998) to illustrate and explain historical and contemporary views on sex in Ireland.

In addition to a general overview of Irish attitudes towards sex and sexuality, I will look more specifically at the strong influence of Catholicism on Irish policy regarding sex, sexuality, and contraception. I will also look at the Murphy and Ryan Reports, released the year before Christ Deliver Us! premiered, which reveal pervasive
child abuse, both sexual and physical, perpetrated by clergy in Ireland and covered up by the Catholic Church. I will use these documents, as well as news articles written around their release, to suggest a possible relationship, at least in audience perception, between *Christ Deliver Us!* and real instances of clerical child abuse in Ireland.

It is important to note that I will only be using texts that were either written originally in English or that have been translated into English. I acknowledge the limitations inherent in this choice, particularly in terms of Frank Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*, which was originally written in German. Having read multiple translations of this play, however, I believe that the most significant and vital plot points, pieces of dialogue, and stage directions included in this thesis are consistent across translations and thus likely convey the message of Wedekind’s original text. Although text in translation may not be ideal, it does serve the purpose of this work.

**Review of the Literature**

There is a dearth of literature written in English on Frank Wedekind and *Spring Awakening*. The three primary book-length, English-language studies of Wedekind’s work are Sol Gittleman’s *Frank Wedekind* (1969), Elizabeth Boa’s *The Sexual Circus* (1987), and Ward B. Lewis’s *The Ironic Dissident* (1997). Gittleman’s book was the first written in English about Wedekind. The author states in his preface that his goal is “to introduce a generally unheralded literary figure to the American public” (v). His book does provide a basic introduction to the playwright: he opens with a four-page timeline of Frank Wedekind’s life and then devotes his first two chapters to a broad summary of
Wedekind’s work, a brief description of the playwright’s childhood, and an account of his early working years in Zurich, Berlin, Munich, and Paris. Each of the next seven chapters provides an in-depth analysis of one or more of Wedekind’s literary works. Gittleman concludes by summing up Wedekind’s influence on later writers, specifically the German Expressionists, Dadaist dramatists, and Bertolt Brecht.

In The Sexual Circus, Boa focuses on four of Wedekind’s plays: Spring Awakening, Earth Spirit, Pandora’s Box, and The Marquis of Keith. Boa states in her introduction that, in studying these texts, she “shall be concerned with Wedekind’s attack on authoritarianism and conservative morality, with his treatment of the themes of social mobility and individual freedom, with his response to the impact of the market on the arts, and above all with the theme of sexual relations” (4). In addition, she looks at “the turn-of-the-century debate on ‘the woman question,’” the “critical debates provoked by Wedekind’s work,” and Wedekind’s influence on modern theatre in general (5). In her analysis, Boa places Wedekind’s work in the context of other work at the time, looking especially at Romanticism and the “Jugendstil” in relation to Spring Awakening. She also examines the play’s relationship to Naturalism, the dominant style of the time, focusing on what she sees as the piece’s departures from and parodies of the naturalistic mode. Her study of Spring Awakening provides an excellent resource for contextualizing Wedekind’s work with other writing and stylistic movements of the time.

Lewis’s book is largely a summary and analysis of others’ writings on Wedekind, as his full title indicates: The Ironic Dissident: Frank Wedekind in the View of His Critics. Lewis provides an incredibly thorough yet condensed version of the critical
responses to Wedekind’s plays, from their premieres up until the 1990s, when The Ironic Dissident was published. Lewis’s book is an invaluable resource, not only for the overview it provides of the response to each of Wedekind’s works, but also as a comprehensive listing of scholarly writing on Wedekind and his plays.

Leroy R. Shaw includes a chapter analyzing Spring Awakening as a play about puberty and adolescence in his book The Playwright and Historical Change (1970). He points out that a major issue at stake in Spring Awakening is “a situation in which one of life’s fundamental transfers, the transition from childhood to adulthood, is accomplished only at the cost of serious distortion and perversion” (55). He finally comes to the conclusion that the true tragedy of Spring Awakening is that

the youngsters undergoing radical change are not provided with socially acceptable channels for their energies and the transfers normally occurring at puberty do not take place: instead of becoming part of the adult community the children are excluded or isolated from it; the things they should know are kept from them; and they lose their innocence without gaining compensatory values from the system of pieties. (59)

Shaw does not, however, analyze the tragedy of the youngsters in Spring Awakening as representative of Wilhelmine German society, or of the tenuous status of adolescence as a developmental stage in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Wedekind is also often included as a subject of study in books on Modernism and Expressionism. In his book Munich and Theatrical Modernism (1985), Peter Jelavich looks at the “carnivalesque modernism” of Spring Awakening, looking at the play, as do many critics, as an example of Wedekind’s objections to the sexual repression prevalent in Wilhelmine Germany. Jelavich points out that the play, “like carnival itself,” demonstrates “an ambiguous promise of social reform” through the “freeing of personal
fantasy,” in this case the liberation of sexuality and sexual fantasy that is longed for in *Spring Awakening* (96). In his later essay, “Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*: The Path to Expressionist Drama,” (1988) Jelavich echoes many of the points made in his book, but also notes Wedekind’s influence on Expressionist drama, as well as on other dramatists such as Bertolt Brecht. This connection with Brecht is often made in scholarly work about Frank Wedekind—in Jelavich’s words, “Brecht regarded himself as the true inheritor of the Wedekindian tradition” (145). It is therefore clear that a main focus of the scholarly work on Wedekind is his legacy of using theatre as a tool to effect social change, with only a brief nod, in Shaw’s work, to Wedekind’s representation of teenage characters. I will certainly be looking at Wedekind’s theatre as a tool for social change, but I plan to look at Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* as a tool for very specific change: change in the freedom of gender expression and amount of transitional space allowed to adolescents.

Because I plan to have this focus, it will also be necessary to consult scholarly works on adolescence as a developmental stage. Several scholars have studied and written about this time of life. In 1904, American psychologist G. Stanley Hall first connected the idea of “storm and stress” to adolescence in his seminal work *Adolescence*. Ninety-five years later, Jeffrey Jensen Arnett published the article “Adolescent Storm and Stress, Reconsidered” (1999), which revises Hall’s storm and stress hypothesis. Arnett provides evidence that, while every adolescent may not experience “storm and stress,” “adolescence is the period when storm and stress is *more likely* to occur than at other ages” (317). These psychological studies, then, focus on the tumultuous nature of the
teenage years in general, across time periods.

Other scholars have tackled adolescence from a historical perspective. Sterling Fishman and James C. Albisetti both look at the school experience of adolescents in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Germany. Fishman has written several books and articles on childhood, adolescence, and education in Germany, but the one that will be most relevant to this study is an article published in History of Education Quarterly titled “Sex, Suicide, and the Discovery of the German Adolescent.” In this article, Fishman discusses a paradigm shift that occurred in early twentieth century Germany. Before this time, German youths were viewed as children while they were in school and became adults immediately upon leaving. Fishman outlines the growth of the German gymnasium system in the late nineteenth century, which resulted in students remaining in school into their early twenties. He discusses the fact that, as the number of teen suicides rose, both school reformers and authors proposed that these teenagers who were still in school needed to be freed from the harsh, authoritarian rule of teachers. Reformers responded by trying to change the school system; authors (including Wedekind) responded by writing about the horrors they witnessed, sometimes to try to cause social change.

Albisetti, unlike Fishman, focuses largely on school reform, with only a brief mention of representations of school in literature of the period. He goes into the common concern that the gymnasium overburdened the youth of Germany and summarizes reformers’ response to this problem during the early twentieth century. Although Albisetti’s book, Secondary School Reform in Imperial Germany, focuses more on
reformers than on students, his book still offers valuable insight into the adolescent school experience at the time of Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*.

James F. Kett’s *Rites of Passage* provides insight into the development of adolescence in America from 1790 to the 1970s. His work looks at the changes in the role of youth from a time before the term “adolescence” came into being, up through an age when adolescents were viewed as an important age group who were arbiters of their own “youth culture” and were responsible for social change and upheaval. Several other works look primarily at modern adolescents, such as Joy G. Dryfoos and Carol Barkin’s *Adolescence: Growing Up in America Today* (2006). This book provides an overview of teenage sexuality, health, education and drug use in the United States in the 1990s.

In addition to writing on Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* and research on the state of adolescence, I also searched for scholarly writing on Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* and on *Christ Deliver Us!* I had little success. There have been multiple reviews written of each piece, as well as an article by Bryan M. Vandevender discussing the performance of sex through the music and choreography in Sater and Sheik’s musical, but no research or analysis has been done on the significance of these pieces in terms of their representation of adolescence. There has also not been a comparative analysis done on Wedekind’s play, Sater and Sheik’s musical, and Kilroy’s play. This thesis will hopefully fill at least some of the aforementioned gaps in scholarship and will provide an overview of these three plays in terms of their representations of adolescence and their reflection of the state of adolescence in the time and place in which each was first performed.
Chapter 1: Drama as Social Criticism: Wedekind’s Spring Awakening

Playwright Frank Wedekind made a career of going against the grain and breaking with convention. He rejected Naturalism, the artistic style used by many of the writers and artists with whom he worked (Gittleman 11-12). He even went so far as to write Die junge Welt, a play that attacked the style in general, and Gerhart Hauptmann, a well-known Naturalist playwright, specifically (Gittleman 17). Wedekind also wrote several pieces for the German satirical magazine Simplizissimus. Many of these pieces criticized the government so harshly that he was arrested on charges of libeling the crown and imprisoned for almost six months (23).

Even though Spring Awakening, written by Wedekind in 1891, was a play and not an article written as an explicit critique or satire, Wedekind still managed to use his play to criticize elements of the society in which he lived. In this chapter, I will examine Spring Awakening’s critique of the strict gender norms in 1890s Germany, as well as the lack of a liminal space in which adolescents could make the transition from childhood to adulthood.

In looking at gender, I will examine the performance of gender identity and how characters’ gender performances either adhere to or fail to meet societal standards. I will pay particular attention to two characters in Wedekind’s play: Moritz Stiefel and Wendla Bergmann. Moritz, the first of these two characters, is a teenage boy struggling to
succeed in the repressive secondary school system of 1890s Germany, also known as Wilhelmine Germany. He provides an example of how German men should not perform their gender. Overwhelmed by his first “masculine stirrings,” drowning under the pressure of school, and uncomfortable with the mere thought of being sexually aggressive, Moritz cannot handle puberty and the ascent to masculine adulthood. This fear of assuming male power and authority went directly against the ethos of Wilhelmine Germany. This social code dictated that men should govern their families strictly, and that politics and government were male-centric bureaucracies. By having Moritz’s struggles end in suicide, Wedekind demonstrates the punitive consequences inflicted by society upon those who fail to perform their gender “right.”

Wendla does not experience the same desperate struggle and failure to perform gender that Moritz does. She does, however, experiment with different ways of performing gender, including attempts to avoid such performance. This avoidance surfaces early in the play—in the first scene, Wendla begs her mother to allow her to wear the short dress that she has been wearing for years rather than the longer, more adult dress that her mother prefers. This preference indicates that Wendla is trying to remain a child and thus not engage in the gender performance expected of an adult woman. But shortly after she wins this battle, she begs Melchior (a male character in the play who performs masculinity quite well) to whip her, a masochistic act that, for some reason, seems to begin her process of feeling sexually mature. Then, after being raped by Melchior and becoming pregnant with his child, Wendla attempts to retreat into girlish innocence yet again—she insists that she never loved anyone but her mother, trying to
remain a loyal young daughter. Wendla ultimately dies because of a botched abortion, an operation forced on her by a mother who desperately wants her daughter to retain the socially sanctioned appearance of premarital chastity by eliminating the evidence of her unwed pregnancy. Through both Wendla and Moritz’s characters, Wedekind criticizes the restriction and repression that stems from strict adherence to gender roles, as well as the negative consequences doled out by society to those who fail to conform to prescribed gender roles.

Pressure to perform gender correctly is not the only element of Wilhelmine German society criticized by Wedekind. He also explores the lack of liminal or transitional space for young people in nineteenth century Germany. In *Spring Awakening*, there is little to no room for young people to have an adolescence, a time between the strict rules and repression of childhood and the complete independence of adulthood to adjust and transition to physical, intellectual, and emotional maturity. Instead, the young characters in the play have no actual autonomy and are treated like children even though they are clearly approaching or have reached sexual maturity. Wendla’s mother refuses to tell her the truth about sex, sticking staunchly to the myth that the stork brings babies. At the school attended by the male characters, the teachers are horrified by the thought of young people obtaining sexual knowledge. The headmaster even goes so far as to blame such knowledge for Moritz’s suicide. Although Wedekind does not share this view, he does seem to place some blame for both Moritz’s suicide and Wendla’s death on the lack of liminal space provided for teens in late nineteenth century Germany.
In addition to examining the consequences wrought on Moritz and Wendla by their lack of access to liminal space, I will also look at Melchior’s experiences in the final scene of the play, which provides a unique example of liminal space. In this scene, Melchior is able to make the transition from childhood (represented by the ghost of Moritz) to adulthood (represented by the Masked Man). By portraying a young person successfully progressing from youth to maturity through a liminal space, along with the tragic deaths of young people who are denied this room to transition, Wedekind seems to criticize the lack of liminal space for teens in Wilhelmine Germany.

Wedekind’s World

Before delving into *Spring Awakening*, it is necessary to outline some key facts about the time and place in which Wedekind was writing. During the nineteenth century, the Gymnasium, an elite secondary school, had become the cornerstone of the German education system. The Gymnasium’s philosophy focused on “Bildung,” the concept of cultivating general intellectual development. This focus on general development meant that students were not educated with any specific career in mind (Albisetti 16-17). While this may seem like a liberal education policy in theory, it was not liberal in practice. The men running the Gymnasium believed that students developed Bildung primarily by learning classical languages and literature, which often translated into dry lessons on grammar and vocabulary, or minute dissection of Homer or Virgil (47-48). Many students complained that this type of “dry grammatical pedantry” took precedence over gaining a “sense of the spirit of classical antiquity,” which was a goal prioritized by early
proponents of Bildung (47). Students and school reformers also lamented that the Gymnasium curriculum’s focus on classics meant that students were isolated from the real concerns of modern Germany (Albisetti 49). Gymnasiums were also accused of overburdening their students by covering too much content and assigning excessive amounts of homework (123-124). Medical practitioners even blamed a host of medical problems on this overworking of Gymnasium pupils. These problems included nearsightedness, mental illness, and suicide (124-125).

In addition to curricular problems, many students and reformers found fault with Gymnasium teachers. These teachers were accused of lacking sympathy for pupils and of not knowing how to teach. This complaint is not surprising, since teachers in secondary schools were not trained in pedagogy (130). School reformer Ludwig Gurlitt went so far as to blame the insensitivity of Gymnasium teachers and administrators for student suicides. In his article “Suicide, Sex, and the Discovery of the German Adolescent,” (1970) Sterling Fishman describes Gurlitt’s assertion that “[n]o attempt is made [in Gymnasium] to understand the nature and needs of young people. Administrators and teachers deal with students, parents, and colleagues in cold, official tones” (177). Fishman even cites a case of a student suicide in which a Gymnasium director, upon being informed of his student’s death, expressed only relief that the suicide had not taken place on school grounds, in which case he would have had to file a large amount of paperwork (177).

Teachers also treated their pupils as children for the entire time they were in school. Since most young men stayed in school well into their teens and even twenties,
this policy resulted in students’ burgeoning physical and emotional maturity being stifled and repressed. One American observer in a German school wrote, “‘Until the boy is ready for the university he is treated as a minor; he is so regarded by the instructors and so regards himself. He is under a constant supervision that to an American boy would be intolerable’” (qtd. in Albisetti 42). This “constant supervision” manifested in many forms. First, a strong sense of “family pride and personal ambition” kept young men so committed to their studies that one author described a German boy as a “martyr” to his education (Russell 194). This devotion to academia, at the cost of physical activity and camaraderie, meant that some students felt that they were “deprived of harmless liberties” (195). Also, the curriculum in the Gymnasium was extremely narrow and restrictive: as mentioned earlier, instruction centered mainly on the classics, and even these were taught in censored form. In his memoir A Part of Myself (1970), Carl Zuckmayer writes, “In school and household everything connected with sex was strictly taboo. We read the Latin classics, including Ovid, Horace, and Catullus, in bowdlerized editions, and when in Homer the master of the house lay down with his maids, the passage was abashedly skipped over in reading” (111). In addition, students had little freedom in their choice of intellectual pursuits—most were only able to pursue activities such as writing and theatre-going outside of school since, within the Gymnasium “even publishing ventures of a noncontroversial nature were strictly regulated” (Albisetti 53). As a result of such restriction, many pupils viewed their graduation as “an ‘escape from prison’” (53). The German Gymnasium system (of which Wedekind was a product) thus created an environment in which young men had no independence or freedom to transition from
childhood to adulthood, but rather remained heavily supervised and sheltered until graduation, at which point they were presumed to be fully mature adults.

In spite of the many faults of the Gymnasium system, it was still the school of choice for many German families for several reasons. First, a Gymnasium education afforded certain privileges. By the mid-nineteenth century, an exam called the Abitur had become a prerequisite for matriculation at German universities. The Gymnasium was the only school with a curriculum that prepared students for the Abitur, so, as a result, only Gymnasium graduates were able to attend university (Albisetti 23-26). Since only university students could take the examinations to qualify for civil service, the ministry, medical or legal practice, and secondary teaching, these careers were available exclusively to Gymnasium students (25). In addition to these concrete career advantages, there were also certain intangible benefits to being a student at a Gymnasium. In A Part of Myself, Carl Zuckmayer describes the “‘fashionable’ new Gymnasium” that he attended (106). He points out that all of his classmates came from “prosperous middle class homes and were therefore well dressed and cared for,” while the students at the local Volksschule, or elementary school, “ran around in worn suits, many with patches on their sleeves and trousers” (106). Gymnasium students were part of “a special caste,” of which they were well aware (Albisetti 32). There was therefore a great deal of pressure on young men first to attend a Gymnasium, and then to remain in the Gymnasium through graduation in order to obtain a lucrative job.

In addition to examining the German education system with a critical eye, Wedekind also scrutinizes prevailing societal norms of gender and sexuality in 1890s
Germany. Although reformers were urging a move towards a more liberal family structure, the conventional family still consisted of a stern, authoritarian male, and a passive, docile woman (Allen 140, 152). This family structure represented a “microcosm of the state,” in which the man of the house was expected to govern his family with the same authority, sometimes verging on tyranny, that a supervisor would use to oversee workers (152). Women, on the other hand, were brought up in “the cult of romantic love,” holding unrealistic expectations of receiving chivalrous, purely sentimental affection from their husbands (145). Stefan Zweig, a writer at the time, wrote in his autobiography:

Good breeding for a young girl of that time was identical with ignorance of life…I am still amused by a grotesque story of an aunt of mine who, on the night of her marriage, stormed the door of her parents’ house at one o’clock in the morning. She never again wished to see the horrible creature to whom she had been married. He was a madman and a beast, for he had seriously attempted to undress her. (qtd. in Allen 146-147)

Men, then, were expected to exert control over their wives, while women expected gentle and delicate treatment from their husbands.

The issues resulting from differing expectations held by and of men and women were exacerbated by the lack of sex education in Wilhelmine Germany. As stated by Zweig, well-bred women held a certain “ignorance of life.” The same could be said for young men. In A Part of Myself, Carl Zuckmayer points out that, in the area of Germany where he grew up, “sex education did not exist…[p]ublic clarifications of ‘the facts of life’ to a group, presumably of both sexes, might well have a paralyzing effect upon the emotions and imaginations of young people. It would separate love from sex…reducing the whole thing to a hygienic procedure or a matter of free-style gymnastics” (110-111).
The only way that young men became educated about the “facts of life” was through experience, either with “dance-sweaty peasant girls,” “in the beds of servant girls,” or in the town’s red-light district (111). This method of “sex education” has two significant implications. First, because young people did not receive any formal education about sex, they were not necessarily educated about the potential consequences of sexual activity, including disease and pregnancy. Equally important in Zuckmayer’s description of his male peers’ initiation into the world of sex is the fact that their first experiences were all with women of a lower social class than they were. Combining this fact with the prevailing notion of the cult of romantic love we can infer that, in order to be considered well-bred and high-class, young women were expected to have no sexual experience or knowledge prior to marriage.

Although German societal norms dictated that sexual experience and knowledge were undesirable for young women, male homosexuality was even more taboo. In the German Penal Code of 1871, Paragraph 175 condemned male homosexuality, prescribing a prison sentence of up to ten years for the offense (Mueller 101-102). Some psychologists of the time protested this criminalization, stating that homosexuality was an innate condition. Among these psychologists, there were two primary points of view on the nature of innate homosexuality. Some, such as Albert Moll, believed that homosexuality was an innate mental illness, or malformation of the sex drive (J. Jones 55, 67). Others, such as Magnus Hirschfeld, felt that homosexuality was not an illness, but rather a natural occurrence. He maintained that any mental illness in homosexuals was not a result of any disease, but rather came about because of society’s treatment of
them (61). Many practitioners ultimately agreed with Hirschfeld. Even Richard von 
Kraft-Ebbing, who suggested a cure for the disease of homosexuality in his influential 
*Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), eventually agreed with Hirschfeld that homosexuality was, 
in fact, a natural occurrence (J. Jones 59, 63). In spite of the opinions of these leading 
psychologists, however, homosexual activity remained a criminal offense and was thus 
heavily stigmatized at the time when Wedekind wrote *Spring Awakening*.

**Wedekind’s Protest: The Critique in *Spring Awakening***

In his play, Wedekind critiques the strict norms of gender performance for both 
men and women in Wilhelmine Germany. As explained in my introduction, I will be 
defining “gender performance” using Judith Butler’s writing on gender identity as “a 
performatve accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (901). I will 
therefore examine the acts committed by Moritz Stiefel and Wendla Bergmann, analyzing 
how these actions construct the characters’ gender identities. I will also look closely at 
the consequences that occur for these characters when they fail to act their gender 
“correctly,” at least according to the tenets of Wilhelmine Germany.

Out of all the characters in the play, Moritz struggles the most with gender 
performance. As outlined earlier, a German man in the late nineteenth century was 
expected to be a strong, authoritarian, domineering figure in his family. In order to run a 
family and have a lucrative job, that man must graduate from a Gymnasium. Moritz is 
not able to do any of these things, partly because of his failure in school. He is described 
by a teacher as “the very worst” of the class, and, although he is given a provisional
passing grade in the first act of the play, we find out during the second act that he ultimately receives failing grades and has thus not succeeded in school (Wedekind, *Spring Awakening* 22, 43-44). Since matriculating students at German universities were required to take and pass the Abitur, and only a Gymnasium education prepared a student for the Abitur, Moritz’s academic failure would have foreclosed him from being admitted to a university and thus from entering a prestigious career field such as law, medicine, or civil service. This failure also implies that Moritz would never have been able to perform masculinity as successfully as he might have hoped, since he would not be able to provide for a family as was expected of him.

Moritz’s reaction to his academic difficulties further highlights his difficulties in performing masculinity. When he discovers that he has passed his exams (though only provisionally), he tells Melchior “I feel so strange—the ground is spinning...” (21). He also states multiple times that, if he does not pass to the next grade, he will shoot himself (22, 30). Melchior’s mother even tells Moritz that he looks unwell, after he has been staring out the window and pontificating to Melchior about feeling “peculiarly outside of [him]self,” and describing the “council meeting” he believes is about to take place outside between the fairies and spirits (31, 30). This nervous, fanciful behavior does not befit a strong authority figure and thus is clearly not part of the “correct” performance of Wilhelmine German masculinity. In addition, this scene indicates that Moritz is becoming mentally unstable, perhaps because of his inability to perform his gender correctly.
Another factor contributing to Moritz’s descent into mental instability is his extreme discomfort with sex, specifically the male experience of sex. He explains to Melchior that when he was first sexually aroused by a dream (or, as he describes it, experienced his first “masculine stirrings”), he felt not “pangs of guilt,” but rather a “fear of death” (12, emphasis original). Although Melchior tries to educate Moritz about sex by writing a description and sneaking it into Moritz’s history textbook, Moritz can never fully come to terms with it. The closest that he gets to experiencing sex, or being comfortable with any sort of sexual activity, is when he fabricates stories in order to make himself seem more sexually knowledgeable. He does this first with Ilse, whom he encounters shortly before killing himself. He tells her that, the previous night, he was at a bar, where he and some friends were left alone all night with “Arabella, a hot little barmaid, an Andalusian,” the assumption being that they all slept with her (49). This story is completely plausible—according to the cultural attitudes towards sex in nineteenth century Germany, mentioned earlier, young men would likely get their sexual education through experiences with lower-class women, such as barmaids.

Based on Moritz’s fear of sexual arousal, however, this story seems untrue. The fabrication becomes even more obvious when Ilse offers to take Moritz to her house, presumably so he can gain some real sexual experience, and he quickly rejects her advances (51). Ilse, having left home and taken up residence in an artist colony, would be an acceptable sexual partner since she, like Arabella the barmaid, is also a lower-class woman. But Moritz cannot bring himself to engage in actual sexual intercourse with any woman, regardless of social standing. After rejecting Ilse, Moritz contents himself by
creating yet another story, imagining that, after he dies, he’ll say he “had an enormous crystal mirror over [his] bed—that [he] reared a wild filly—that [he] made her prance around on [his] carpets in long black silk stockings and black patent leather boots and black long kid gloves and black velvet around her neck…” (51). He is comfortable only with fantasized sexual activity; the moment that he feels actual sexual arousal or has the opportunity to pursue romantic contact with a girl, he becomes anxious and even frightened. Moritz knows that, in order to perform masculinity, he is supposed to desire sex and be sexually aggressive—he has learned this from Melchior, who serves as Moritz’s teacher about all things sexual. Earlier in the play, when discussing sex, Melchior tells Moritz, “I don’t want anything I haven’t had to fight for,” implying that aggression and force are part of the male sexual performance (34). Moritz, however cannot bring himself to carry this performance out. The only way that he is able to be the sexual aggressor is through his elaborately constructed fantasies.

Although all of the above instances detract from Moritz’s ability to perform masculinity correctly, perhaps the most glaringly obvious evidence of his failure at gender performance is the repeated comparison of Moritz to a girl. This comparison first occurs when Moritz asks Melchior, in an extremely roundabout fashion, to write a description of sex and reproduction for him. He instructs Melchior:

Write down everything you know for me. Make it as short and clear as you can and stick it in between my books during gym tomorrow. I’ll take it home without knowing I have it. At some point I’ll come across it unexpectedly. I’ll have choice but to glance through it, with a weary eye…If it’s absolutely unavoidable you might also add a couple of illustrations. (15)
Melchior retorts, “You’re like a girl” (15). He does not give any further explanation, but his comparison likely refers to Moritz’s insistence on taking a passive role in learning about sex by insisting that Melchior hide his writing in a place where Moritz will happen upon it and be forced to read it. Since girls in Wilhelmine Germany were supposed to have little to no interest in sex, Moritz’s passivity seems to make him like a girl.

Moritz’s femininity comes up again later in the play, when he tells Melchior a fairy tale, “the story of the Queen Without a Head” (31). At the end of the story, Moritz says, “Whenever I see a pretty girl I see her without a head—and then suddenly it seems like I’m a headless queen myself…” (31). In addition to the explicit comparison in this line between Moritz and a woman, there is also a deeper implication about Moritz’s gender confusion. Peter Jelavich points out that Moritz “vacillates between conventional male and female roles” throughout the play, and that he is a man attracted to the “passivity, sensuality, nature, mental and bodily submission, [and] loss of self” that goes along with femininity (“Wedekind’s Spring Awakening” 132). Jelavich states that Moritz’s line of logic, progressing from seeing a pretty girl without a head to becoming a headless queen himself, sums up the character’s vacillation between male and female gender roles.

Moritz’s desire to experience femininity is emphasized at the end of this same scene. He tells Moritz that, while he believes male sexual satisfaction to be “stale and flat,” the pleasure that a woman experiences from sex, the sensation of “submit[ting] to such a sweet wrong” and “keep[ing] herself from any kind of bitterness right until the last second, so she can suddenly be transported straight to Heaven” must be rapturous
(Wedekind, *Spring Awakening* 34). Interestingly, while Moritz is terrified by experiencing his own sexual arousal, the idea of feminine sexuality fascinates him. This desire to experience female sexual pleasure seems to imply that, at some level, Moritz may be attracted to men. As mentioned earlier, any form of sexual relations between men was a criminal offense and thus was absolutely not part of the correct performance of masculinity and masculine sexuality.

The clearest critique of the pressure placed on young men to perform masculinity properly comes across in Moritz’s suicide. At the point in the play when Moritz kills himself, he has failed to pass to the next grade in school, he has repeatedly expressed revulsion and fear at being a sexual aggressor, and he has expressed his fascination with and desire to share the female sexual experience. He has, therefore, essentially failed to perform masculinity as expected of him. As Judith Butler points out in her article on gender performance, “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (903). In Moritz’s case, that punishment is suicide. Although this punishment is self-inflicted, Moritz mentions before his suicide that he doesn’t “fit in” (Wedekind, *Spring Awakening* 45). Moritz’s parents and peers certainly make it clear that he does not fit in and are not kind to him about his failures: Moritz states that his father would “have a stroke” if Moritz failed in school and thus failed to become an authoritarian male provider. His father also explicitly says about Moritz, after his son’s suicide, “The boy was no son of mine!—Even when he was little I didn’t like him!” (59). His teachers refer to him as a terrible pupil, emphasizing his failed attempts to become the man society expects him to be (22). Even the young female characters scoff at Moritz and his failure
to perform masculinity. Thea refers to him as a dope and says that he once offered her chocolates that were “all soft and warm” (19). Softness is not a masculine trait, and Thea is clearly disgusted by it. Therefore, although Moritz does cause his own death through suicide, the ill treatment he receives from other characters as a result of his failed gender performance is an implicit factor in his decision to take his own life.

Wendla, on the other hand, does not fail at gender performance quite as explicitly. While Moritz is clearly conflicted about being a man, as he tries to perform masculinity while secretly desiring the feminine experience, Wendla is decidedly happy in her gender. When her friends state that boys are more interesting than girls, and that they would like to be boys if they had the choice, Wendla disagrees, saying, “Every day I think how happy I am to be a girl. Believe me, I wouldn’t trade places with the son of a king” (18). Wendla goes on to explain that her primary joy in being a girl comes from the fact that “it must be a thousand times more uplifting to be loved by a man than by a girl” (18). Wendla delights in her own femininity. This delight reveals Wedekind’s own feelings on the subject of women remaining feminine. In an earlier play, *Die junge Welt*, Wedekind harshly criticized the efforts of women who tried to gain equality by becoming more like their male counterparts. He believed that women’s power came from what made them unique and different from men. This quality was termed “das Weibliche” (loosely translated as “the female” or “femininity”), and Wedekind believed that it must “be preserved and developed if the female mystique was to have an effect on society” (Gittleman 39). Some aspects of Wendla’s character, therefore, represent Wedekind’s
ideal woman, one who delights in being different from a man and treasures the qualities that make her feminine.

Parts of Wedekind’s representation of the ideal woman are questionable, though, especially in *Spring Awakening*: a large part of Wendla’s delight in being a woman stems from being loved by a man, which implies that a woman is somehow incomplete without a man’s affection. Although Wedekind never directly stated this, his views on sexuality seem to affirm it. He believed that acknowledging and fulfilling sexual desire was important for both men and women, and he uses *Spring Awakening* to critique the dictum that young people, especially women, should remain ignorant of and loath to engage in sex. This idea was prevalent in Wilhelmine Germany, both among women fighting for equality and those who were content with the way things were: many young women subscribed to the notion of romantic love, described earlier, and women’s emancipation groups believed that, if women remained chaste, they would not be beholden to men (Gittleman 40). Wedekind believed that both groups were wrong and that by “denying sexual life,” women were denying “the essential truth and function of the female’s existence” (Gittleman 40).

Throughout *Spring Awakening*, Wendla vacillates between trying to remain a child and deny her own sexuality, and attempting to understand and embrace her developing sexuality and womanhood. In the play’s opening scene, for example, Wendla begs her mother not to lengthen her dress for her fourteenth birthday, and instead to allow her to keep wearing her girlish pinafore. This exchange implies that Wendla is content to remain a child forever. Wendla’s mother does refer several times to how short Wendla’s
dress is, which may seem sexually suggestive, but Wendla’s references to being “dressed like a fairy queen” keep her in the realm of innocence, and she thus remains a non-sexual little girl (8).

As the play progresses, however, Wendla becomes increasingly curious about sex. This curiosity first surfaces, albeit in a veiled way, when she meets Melchior in the woods. After the two have talked for a while, Wendla reveals that she desperately wants to know what it feels like to be beaten (26). She begs Melchior to beat her with a long, thin stick; he refuses at first, but ultimately he agrees. He hits her once, which she cannot feel through her skirt. She asks him to hit her legs, which he does. She responds, “You’re just patting me!—You’re patting me!” to which Melchior answers “Wait, you witch, I’ll whip that Satan right out of you!” (27). Wedekind’s stage directions then dictate that Melchior “throws the switch aside and flies at her [Wendla] with his fists so violently that she bursts into a terrible scream” (27). Although neither Wendla nor Melchior explicitly refers to sex during this scene, there is clearly a sexual, sadomasochistic tinge to their interactions. The fact that this seems to be Wendla’s first foray into the world of sex brings up a disturbing question: is Wedekind saying that whipping and beating should be part of a normal or desired entry into adult sexuality? Or is he implying that these violent actions are a negative effect of the repression of young sexual desire? While it would be comforting to choose the latter unequivocally, analyzing Wendla and Melchior’s interaction in conjunction with Wedekind’s later work brings a different and more complicated interpretation.
In 1892, about one year after writing *Spring Awakening*, Wedekind began writing a “gigantic work,” titled *Die Büchse der Pandora (Pandora’s Box)* (Gittleman 66). This massive play was later broken into two pieces: *Der Erdgeist (Earth Spirit)* (1914) and *Die Büchse der Pandora (1918)* (66). Both plays feature Lulu, a woman who represents human instinct and the pleasure principle (73). As a result, she is in constant conflict with the male characters who represent civilization, which Wedekind felt repressed the human instinct and sex drive. One such character, Schön, who is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by Lulu, attempts to “beat her into submission” at one point, because Lulu is taunting him about his impending marriage to another woman (70). Lulu’s response to his threats is to say, “Strike me! Where is your riding-whip? Strike me across the legs—” (Wedekind, *Erdgeist* 74). This is not the only sadomasochistic interaction in which Lulu participates—another male character, Schwarz, threatens to “punish” her as part of the courtship that ensues shortly before he marries her, and after Schwarz has died and Lulu marries Schön, Schön threatens to kill her (25, 89-90). There is a constant interweaving between sexual attraction and violence in *Erdgeist*, which continues in *Die Büchse der Pandora*. In this play, Lulu turns to prostitution and is ultimately killed by her client Jack, modeled after Jack the Ripper (Wedekind, *Pandora’s Box* 79). If we interpret the men in the Lulu plays as representative of dominant civilization, while Lulu herself represents the unrestrained sex drive, then this violence takes on a new meaning: it portrays the inevitable aggressive suppression of sexual instinct in a society ruled by repressive norms. Since the meshing of sex with violence in the Lulu plays bears a striking similarity to Wendla and Melchior’s exchange in the
woods, it would seem that the violence in *Spring Awakening* may be interpreted similarly. When it is not socially acceptable for people (especially women) to express their sexual desires, those desires will be quashed and people will be punished for them in one way or another. In the case of *Spring Awakening*, it seems that Wendla feels sexual desire, but at the same time tries to follow society’s dictum to quash this desire by asking Melchior to punish her physically, which he does with enthusiasm. Through the disturbing and violent whipping scene, Wedekind critiques the societal taboo on following one’s sex drive.

Wendla’s desire surfaces again, though, when she asks her mother where babies come from. She begs her mother to tell her the truth, saying:

> I have a sister who’s been married for two and a half years, and I’m an aunt now for the third time myself, and I have absolutely no idea how it all happens…Don’t get mad, Mommy; don’t get mad! Who in the world am I supposed to ask if not you! Please, Mommy, tell me! Tell me, Mommy! I’m ashamed of myself. I’m begging you, Mother, say something! Don’t tell me not to ask things like that. Answer me--what goes on?--how does it all happen?--You don’t seriously expect me to keep on believing in the stork when I’m fourteen years old. (37)

Within this speech, Wendla shifts from a young girl trying to escape her sexual desire to a young woman who is attempting to become sexually knowledgeable. Initially, she uses the term “Mommy” and pleads with Mrs. Bergmann not to get mad, both child-like actions that imply she is not ready to face the adult world of sex. About two thirds of the way through the speech, however, she transitions to using the word “Mother” and, rather than pleading, she begins to command her mother not to evade her questions and to tell her exactly how reproduction happens. In spite of these strong commands, however, all that Mrs. Bergmann ultimately tells Wendla is:
--In order to have a child—you have to—*love*—the man—you’re married to—*love him*, I tell you—in a way that you can only love a husband! You have to love him so much, *with all your heart and all your soul*, that—that it’s impossible to describe! You have to *love* him, Wendla, in a way that you at your age absolutely can’t…Now you know. (38)

Even though Wendla is trying to transition into womanhood and wants to perform her gender in a mature, sexual way, her mother refuses to give her any honest information to enable her to do so.

Eventually, Wendla learns what sexual intercourse is and where babies come from all at once: she is raped by Melchior. Although Wendla seems to have been experiencing some sexual desire and curiosity throughout the play, she is extremely resistant to Melchior’s advances. This is not at all surprising, since Melchior forces himself on Wendla, ignoring her repeated requests for him to stop what he is doing. Like much of Wedekind’s characterization of Wendla, this rape scene is extremely problematic. It would seem that Wedekind is critiquing the sexual ignorance and repression that was prevalent in Wilhelmine Germany by showing that the consequence of such restriction is violent rape. But the rape itself is not really portrayed as negative. Afterwards, Wendla seems simultaneously happy and guilty about what happened. She appears onstage, in her family’s garden, asking herself, “Why did you sneak out of the room?—To look for violets!—Because Mother sees me smiling…The path is like a thick carpet…My feet don’t touch the ground…Shush, Mommy. I’m ready to put my sackcloth on.—Oh God, if only somebody would come who I could throw my arms around and talk to” (Wedekind, *Spring Awakening* 44-45). Wendla’s references to smiling and to her feet not touching the ground make it seem as though she is happy to have been raped, while her
statement about putting on her sackcloth (a penitential robe) and wanting to confide in or confess to someone make her seem guilty. Rather than condemning the rape, Wedekind implies that despite Wendla’s denial, she really wanted to have sex with Melchior and is thus content with what happened in the hayloft. He also implies that, in spite of her happiness, she still cannot resist societally imposed guilt. Wendla’s reaction to being raped demonstrates Wedekind’s confusing and somewhat disturbing critique of gender performance in Wilhelmine Germany: he critiques female sexual repression, but seems to support going to whatever means necessary to “free” women from such repression, including rape.

Wedekind gets in one last jab at female sexual repression through Wendla’s final scene. In this scene, a doctor visits Wendla because she has been suffering from headaches, chills, dizziness, and indigestion (70). After the doctor leaves, Mrs. Bergmann tries to convince Wendla that her symptoms can be attributed to nothing more than anemia, refusing to acknowledge the possibility that her daughter might have had intercourse. Finally, Mrs. Bergmann tells Wendla that she is pregnant. Rather than offer her daughter sympathy or guidance, however, Mrs. Bergmann becomes furious and accusatory, asking Wendla “Oh, why did you do this to me!” and “Wendla, Wendla, Wendla, what have you done!!” (72) Mrs. Bergmann assumes that her daughter has violated social norms and voluntarily had sex. Rather than discuss this issue with her daughter, she yells at her and attempts to destroy the evidence of this supposed norm violation by calling an abortionist, Mother Schmidt. We discover, in the play’s final scene, that the abortion kills Wendla. Mrs. Bergmann’s determination to cover up what
she believes to have been her daughter’s serious misstep eventually leads to Wendla’s death, providing another example of Wedekind’s critique of societal refusal to acknowledge female sexuality. Although Wedekind’s stance on this topic of female sexuality is extremely problematic, given the fact that he seems to approve, or at least does not condemn, Melchior’s rape of Wendla, he does ultimately critique the lack of openness and education regarding sex and sexuality (especially for young women) in Wilhelmine Germany.

This dearth of sexual knowledge in young people is not just an effect of strict gender roles. It also stems from a lack of liminal or transitional space for teens, which is another aspect of Wilhelmine German society critiqued in Spring Awakening. In this analysis, I will be using Arnold van Gennep’s book The Rites of Passage (1960), as well as Victor Turner’s article “Liminality and Communitas” (1969) in order to define liminal space. Van Gennep writes that, as part of transitional rituals in many cultures, “[w]hoever passes from one [state] to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds” (18). Turner builds on van Gennep’s work, further pointing out that liminality “has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” and that it is “frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness…” (89, 90). From these descriptions of the liminal state, we can conclude two things. First, that liminality is an integral part of a person’s passage from one state or phase to the next, and second, that the qualities of liminality are distinctly different from the qualities of either the previous or subsequent phase. In fact, based on van Gennep’s use of the term “magico-
religiously” and Turner’s comparison of liminality to qualities such as invisibility, it seems that being a liminal person or entity is an almost supernatural experience. As I analyze liminal space and lack thereof in Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*, I will rely on these definitions and connotations of liminality.

The majority of the young characters in *Spring Awakening* have no liminal space whatsoever: the adults in their lives force them to remain ignorant and childish, not allowing them any freedom to transition into the adult world of emotional and sexual maturity. This repression of the adolescent urge to explore blossoming sexuality leads to disastrous consequences for multiple characters. I have outlined one example of this above: Wedekind expresses Wendla’s simultaneous sexual desire and societally constructed urge to quash said desire through the violence of Melchior whipping and beating Wendla. He also presents the negative consequences of repressing teenage sexuality by showing Wendla’s mother insisting on an abortion when Wendla becomes pregnant. Although Wendla became pregnant through rape, Mrs. Bergmann either ignores or is not privy to this fact and assumes that her daughter had consensual sex; an abortion would therefore erase the evidence of this perceived severe misstep. Since this abortion kills Wendla, Wedekind seems to be critiquing Mrs. Bergmann’s insistence on pretending that female adolescent sexuality does not exist. Had Wendla’s mother been willing to listen to her daughter and discuss what had happened, thus acknowledging the fact that teens have sexual desires and sometimes either have intercourse or, in Wendla’s case, are forced into intercourse, she may not have been so quick to call Mother Schmidt. Had she not called the abortionist and instead acknowledged what had happened to her
daughter and discussed the facts of reproduction and sex with her, Wendla would not have died. Instead, Wendla might have been able to understand some of what had happened and, with her mother’s support, transition into adulthood and healthy sexuality. The fact that she does not get this space to transition and instead is killed implies a critique within *Spring Awakening* of the lack of liminal space for teenagers as they transition from being children to being adults.

Moritz also suffers dire consequences due to a lack of liminal space, both from repression at school in general and from repression of sexuality. The repression that Moritz is subjected to at school mirrors the conditions of a real-life Gymnasium in nineteenth century Germany. Moritz declares in the second scene of the play; “As far as school is concerned, I’d rather be a cab horse!—What do we go to school for?—We go to school so they can give us exams!—And what do they give us exams for?—So we can flunk” (9). He sees school as analogous to (or worse than) being a beast of burden, and the only purpose he sees in it is to be tested and declared a failure by adults. He also complains of the exorbitant homework, pointing out that “[t]here’s nothing you can think about without homework getting in the way” and that he plans to “work and work until [his] eyes pop out of [his] head” (9, 30). Because Moritz is obsessed with working to meet the impossibly high standards set by his teachers, he has no time or space to transition from being a child, dependent on adults for guidance, to being an independent adult himself. *Spring Awakening* therefore criticizes such pressure and overburdening (a common complaint among school reformers of the time, outlined above) as one more part
of the repressive society that denies young people the transitional space they need to enter adulthood successfully.

We also see a lack of liminal space for Moritz in his dearth of knowledge about sex. No one in school has ever taught him about sex, and the only way that he learns anything at all about it is through an essay that Melchior writes for him (13, 33). Moritz and Melchior’s teachers are so anxious for their students to remain ignorant regarding sex that they eventually blame Moritz’s suicide on Melchior’s essay, referring to it as able to “satisfy the most sophisticated demands a depraved libertine could make upon pornographic literature” (56). This denunciation of an informative essay on sexuality reflects the norms of the time regarding young people’s knowledge of sexuality: as outlined above, Gymnasium pupils were considered children until graduation and were treated as such, receiving no education about sex.

These norms seem ingrained in Moritz. Even when he has the essay that Melchior wrote for him, the instinct to stifle his sexuality remains strong: he tells Melchior that he could not read the essay all the way through, but rather that he “read most of it with [his] eyes closed,” and that the “explanations sounded to [him] like a series of vague memories, like a song a person used to sing to himself when he was little, and then hears again when he’s just about to die and it comes out of someone else’s mouth and breaks his heart” (34). Moritz is unable to absorb and fully understand information about sex and reproduction; instead he merely lets himself receive vague impressions. This inability to transition into sexual maturity seems to be a part of Moritz’s motivation for killing himself: in the scene preceding his suicide, he bemoans
his lack of sexual experience, and later cries out that he wishes he could be Ilse, a
character who freely discusses sex and her own sexual experience (51). While some of
this desire may be due to Moritz’s gender confusion, discussed above, it is also directly
related to his desire for, and inability to obtain, sexual knowledge and experience. Since
he expresses these desires shortly before shooting himself, there is an implication that his
inability to achieve his desire to be Ilse, and thus be comfortable with sexuality, is closely
related to his reasons for suicide. Moritz, therefore, is yet another character who dies
because there is no room for him to be independent and explore his developing sexuality.

Another character who experiences negative consequences as a result of a lack of
liminal space is Ilse, a character who appears only briefly but is quite important. Like
Wendla, Ilse represents part of Wedekind’s ideal woman—she is “sensual, animalistic,
and thoroughly innocent” and has found “complete contentment” by living in an artist
colony and indulging in sexual relations with many of the residents (Gittleman 44, 37).
Because Ilse not only acknowledges her own sexuality, but also revels in it, it may seem
like she has had access to liminal space and has thereby made a healthy transition from
childhood to adulthood. But she, like Wendla, provides a complicated portrayal of
female sexuality. Ilse seems happy about her sexual experiences and relates them
joyously, but the content of her stories is disturbing. For example, she tells Moritz:

Fehrendorf [one of the painters with whom she lives], I’m telling you, is a first-
class crackpot. I squashed one of his tubes last time? He wipes his brush in my
hair! I smack him in the ear. He throws his palette at my head. I knock over his
easel. He comes after me with his palette knife and we go charging over the sofa
and tables and chairs, around and around the studio. There was a sketch behind
the stove: Be a good boy, or I’ll tear it up!—He promised me amnesty and ended
up attacking me—I’m telling you, attacking me—with kisses. (Wedekind, Spring
Awakening 48)
She tells similar stories about other artists, such as Heinrich, who put a gun to her chest every morning and told her frequently, “When you’re asleep you look so pretty I could kill you” (50). Once again we see Wedekind mixing sex with violence, but in this case the violence seems to have nothing to do with sexual repression—instead, he implies that it is part of Ilse’s regular sexual interaction. While Wedekind does not represent Ilse’s sex life as problematic, it is clearly not healthy or normal for a fourteen-year-old girl to live in the kind of environment that she describes. It seems, then, that because she has gone straight from childhood into adulthood with no liminal space, her transition to maturity and independence has not been as successful as it could have been.

The only character who actually gets to experience liminality, and who Wedekind represents as making a healthy transition from childhood to adulthood is Melchior. This representation, though, like many in Spring Awakening, is not as simple as it first seems. Throughout the play, Melchior seems to have the most transitional space of any of the young characters. He is the only one with any real knowledge of sex, and at first his parents seem the most liberal and the most likely to allow him some independence. Although Mrs. Gabor is hesitant to approve of her son reading Goethe’s Faust, which she sees as too mature for him, she ultimately tells him, “I will always prefer to place my trust in you, rather than in any given educational method” (33). Later, though, after Melchior is blamed for Moritz’s suicide, due to the essay describing sex that he wrote and gave to his friend, Melchior’s father decries the independence that has been given to Melchior and demands that he be sent to the reformatory. This punishment seems like it
will deprive Melchior of the small amount of independence that he has previously enjoyed, and thus preclude the possibility of his experiencing liminality.

The final scene of the play, however, serves as a unique example of liminal space. In this scene, Melchior has escaped the reformatory and is wandering in the graveyard where Moritz and Wendla are buried. As he walks through the cemetery, Moritz suddenly appears with “his head under his arm” (77). Moritz describes the raptures of death, saying that the dead are “sublime” and “can do anything” (78, 79). He even invites Melchior to join him in death, saying to his friend, “Give me your hand! In the snap of a neck you’ll be sky-high above yourself” (79). Moritz, who will remain forever a child since he committed suicide in his early teens, wants Melchior to accompany him in eternal childhood and never transition to adulthood. After he makes this offer, though, a Masked Man enters to debunk Moritz’s claims of death being joyful and make Melchior a counter-offer. The Masked Man tells Melchior that he will “open up the world” for him, and allow him “to broaden [his] horizons in the most fabulous way” (81). There have been many scholarly interpretations of the Masked Man’s significance—some believe him to be one with Wedekind; others see him as the devil; still others see him as Wedekind’s homage to Goethe’s *Faust* (Lewis 8-9). I interpret him, though, as representative of adulthood. He is offering Melchior the opportunity to join him, a grown man, and experience the world, rather than remain forever caught in childhood. In this final scene, therefore, Melchior is literally caught between childhood and adulthood and given the room to make a choice and transition between the two. The scene fits van Gennep’s and Turner’s descriptions of liminality outlined above: it has “few or none of
the attributes” of the rest of the play, and it does have a rather “magico-religious feel,”
what with the appearance of a previously dead character carrying his head under his arm
and a man in a mask who has never been seen before. Ultimately, Melchior chooses to go
with the Masked Man, telling Moritz “I don’t know where this person is taking me. But
he is a person…” (83). Because Melchior is able to enter the liminal space of this final
scene, he is the only one of the young characters in the play who is able to make a
conscious, reasoned decision to move on to adulthood rather than being stuck in
childhood, as Moritz is, or forced into maturity with no transition, as Wendla is when she
gets pregnant.5

This implies that, because Melchior has access to liminal space, he is able to make
a healthy transition to adulthood, unlike the other adolescents in the play. But a large part
of Melchior’s experimentation with sexual maturity is his rape of Wendla. What does it
mean that the only adolescent who we see go on to adulthood has committed such a
crime? Granted, Melchior does feel some guilt for what he has done—while at the
reformatory, he says to himself, “She hates me—she hates me because I stole her
freedom. No matter what I do, it’s still rape” (69). After he discovers Wendla’s death,
this guilt increases, as Melchior says, “…I murdered her.—I murdered her!—I have
nothing left except despair” (77). But shortly after he utters these words, the Masked
Man appears to save him from this despair and self-loathing, and it seems that his
punishment for raping Wendla is over. This final scene seems to confirm that Wedekind
did not see this rape as a significant issue—he wanted to critique sexual ignorance and
repression, and he used whatever means necessary to send his message. If this meant that
the sexually knowledgeable character (Melchior) violated a character who was more repressed (Wendla) on his way to attaining maturity and freedom, so be it. Wedekind demonstrates through the character of Melchior and through the final scene of Spring Awakening that access to liminal space may be a solution to the problem of stifled sexuality and repression in general for children and adolescents in Wilhelmine Germany. The events leading up to this solution, though, particularly Melchior’s rape of Wendla, seriously problematize Wedekind’s suggestion by suggesting that such sexual violation can be a part of a healthy transition to adulthood and sexual freedom.

Conclusion

At heart, Frank Wedekind’s Spring Awakening is a critique of societal norms in 1890s Germany and a call for drastic changes to those norms. Censored for years due to what some saw as pornographic content, Spring Awakening examines the strict and prohibitive gender roles that were assigned to both boys and girls in Wilhelmine Germany. Wedekind critiques the harsh and restrictive nature of these roles through the characters of Moritz and Wendla. Both of these characters ultimately fail to perform their gender correctly—Moritz is unable to be the academically successful authoritarian figure that he should be. Wendla’s mother believes that Wendla has failed to fulfill the societal expectation that she remain chaste and pure, since Mrs. Bergmann falsely believes that her daughter willingly engaged in sexual intercourse. These failures (or supposed failures) eventually contribute to both characters’ deaths.
Failure to perform gender correctly is not the only factor in Moritz and Wendla’s deaths, though. Both characters also suffer from a lack of liminal space in which to transition successfully from childhood to adulthood. Because the adults in both characters’ lives are unwilling to give them any information about their developing sexuality, these characters have no room to explore or even discuss their sexuality with adult approval or guidance. They must therefore learn from peers or through experience, which causes extreme hardships for both—Moritz is unable to handle sexual knowledge when he finally receives it, and Wendla becomes pregnant as a result of someone else forcing sexual knowledge and experience on her. This issue factors into Wendla’s death: she dies due to a botched abortion, which is a direct result of her pregnancy.

Moritz’s suicide is also influenced by his difficulties with sexuality, if indirectly. He bemoans his lack of sexual knowledge and experience directly before shooting himself, and, by shooting himself, he is able to remain a child forever and avoid the difficulties of sexual maturity. The only character who is able to make a healthy transition to adulthood is Melchior, who enters a liminal space in the play’s final scene. This successful transition is extremely problematic, though, since a significant event in Melchior’s sexual maturation is his rape of Wendla. Through Moritz, Wendla, and Melchior’s fates, *Spring Awakening* takes a critical but complex stance on the social norms of Wilhelmine Germany: the repression and strict gender roles that were prevalent at the time would lead to hardship and even death. Freedom, on the other hand, especially through sexual liberation (and, unfortunately, up to and including non-consensual sexual liberation), seems to make for a healthier society.
The actual cause of these maladies, and particularly the rash of suicides that came to be known as the

Interestingly, there was no explicit prohibition of female homosexuality in the Penal Code of 1871. Also
intriguing (and horrifying) is the fact that, in addition to condemning male homosexuality, Paragraph 175
also forbade bestiality (Mueller 101-102).

Ilse’s joy in sexuality have led some, such as Sol Gittleman, to see her as a precursor to Lulu (37).

For a summary of several critics’ views on the Masked Man, as well as on Spring Awakening as a whole,
see Ward B. Lewis’s The Ironic Dissident: Frank Wedekind in the View of His Critics.

There are other young characters in the play who make some sort of transition to maturity, but none are as
clear or as positive as Melchior’s. Ilse, for instance, tells stories of her sexual exploits in act two, scene
seven, but these stories have a dangerous, violent element, as mentioned earlier. Hanschen and Ernst also
explore their sexuality, in the second to last scene of the play. This scene, set in a vineyard and removed
from the action of the rest of the play, seems like an example of liminal space. Unfortunately, though, we
do not see Hanschen and Ernst leave this space to move on to maturity, as we see Melchior do in the play’s
final scene.
Chapter 2: Broadway’s Spring Awakening: Genuine Rock Rebellion or Hollow Hope?

While Frank Wedekind’s Spring Awakening (1891) was ahead of its time in decrying the strict repression of Wilhelmine Germany, Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s 2006 musical adaptation of the play seems, at first, a bit backwards. What relevance could a play about sexually ignorant and repressed teenagers in 1890s Germany have to the United States in the twenty-first century? At first glance, the two eras seem to have nothing in common. While a postcard of a nude painting was considered obscene in nineteenth century Germany, toddlers in the early twenty-first century played with Bratz Babyz, tiny dolls wearing revealing ensembles.¹ Twenty-first century teens are also far more sexually knowledgeable and experienced than those of 1890s Germany. On January 24, 2005, for example, the prestigious Milton Academy in Massachusetts was hit by a sex scandal, when five male students received oral sex from one younger female student in a school locker room. The incident resulted in expulsion of the five boys involved, as well as revelations of what some call “a student-body social life of Bacchanalian proportions” at Milton (Silverglate and Lewis).

But at the same historical moment that two year olds were playing with scantily clad baby dolls and a highly ranked prep school was rocked by its students’ sexual exploits, the Bush administration was allocating large amounts of money to abstinence-only until marriage education. Title V, Section 510 of the Social Security Act dictates
exactly what guidelines a program must adhere to in order to be eligible for the federal funding set aside for abstinence education. There are eight requirements, the most notable of which are that programs must teach that “a mutually faithful relationship in context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity,” and that “sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects” (“Separate Program for Abstinence Education”). Therefore, while some children and teens were learning about and experimenting with their developing sexuality, sometimes without regard to the law or without considering their own safety, others found themselves in school or community education programs that preached abstinence until marriage and either withheld information about contraceptives or grossly misrepresented their effectiveness. In this chapter, I will explore how these political discourses intersected and clashed, and the impact that this may have had on Sater and Sheik’s adaptation of Spring Awakening.

From “No” to “Yes”: 1890s Germany Meets 2006 Gender Norms

Although Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik kept Frank Wedekind’s original setting of 1890s Germany, twenty-first century attitudes towards adolescent sexuality clearly impacted their adaptation in many ways. The most obvious shift from Frank Wedekind’s Spring Awakening to Sater and Sheik’s musical is in the treatment of female sexuality. In Wedekind’s play, when Moritz expresses his fascination with the rapture he imagines a woman experiences when succumbing to male sexual advances, Melchior responds disgustedly, saying, “I don’t want anything I haven’t had to fight for!” and “Imagine it
however you want, but keep it to yourself.—I don’t like to imagine it…” (34). Melchior, the play’s protagonist and the only adolescent that the audience sees make the transition from childhood to adulthood, feels that the only way he can get sexual satisfaction is by aggressively fighting to overcome a woman’s resistance. Furthermore, he is so repulsed by female sexuality that he is unwilling even to imagine how a woman might feel during sexual intercourse.

Melchior in Sater and Sheik’s musical, on the other hand, is enraptured by the female experience of sex. When Melchior writes an essay describing sex for Moritz, Moritz is particularly intrigued by Melchior’s insight into female sexuality:

MORITZ: What you wrote about the…female…I can’t stop thinking about it. (Pulls out the essay) This part of it here—is it true?
MELCHIOR: Absolutely.
MORITZ: But, how can you understand that, Melchi? What the woman must feel.
MELCHIOR (“Why not?”): Giving yourself over to someone else?...Defending yourself until, finally, you surrender and feel Heaven break over you?...
(Moritz nods.)
I just put myself in her place—and imagine…
MORITZ (“You’ve got to be kidding”): Really?! (Flipping through the essay—one diagram after another—increasingly mesmerized) What it feels like?...for the woman?... (34)

This scene provides a stark contrast to the Melchior of Wedekind’s play. Instead of rejecting female sexuality, Melchior embraces it. He is so enamored of it that, immediately following the exchange quoted above, he describes the pleasure he imagines a woman might feel during sex via the song “Touch Me.” Steven Sater, in fact, describes this song as Melchior’s “articulat[ion of] his sense of ‘the female’ yearning for pleasure, singing in some hypothetical woman’s voice…” (Sater, Preface x).
This sensitivity to and fascination with female sexuality is emphasized through Melchior’s relationship with Wendla. The mere fact that the two characters have a relationship is a drastic change from Wedekind’s play, in which Melchior and Wendla meet once in the woods, where he beats her, and then again in the hayloft, where he rapes her. We do not see any sort of intellectual or emotional connection between the two characters. In Sater and Sheik’s musical, however, the characters first appear together onstage in act one, scene five. In this scene, Wendla and Melchior engage in a discussion about the nature of charity. Unlike Wedekind’s Wendla, Sater and Sheik’s Wendla is able to hold her own with Melchior intellectually. For example, while Wedekind’s character’s only answer to the question of why she helps those in need is that she does so “because they’re poor,” Wendla in Sater and Sheik’s musical has clearly considered the motivation behind her charitable acts and gives Melchior her well-reasoned opinion that “what serves each of us best is what serves all of us best” (Wedekind Spring Awakening 24; Sater and Sheik 38). Melchior wholeheartedly agrees, and this intellectual connection forms the basis for Melchior and Wendla’s relationship in the musical.

Even more notable than Wendla’s considerably increased intelligence in the musical is the fact that there is no violent physical contact in the characters’ first scene together. In Wedekind’s play, Wendla and Melchior’s first onstage interaction ends with Melchior violently beating Wendla, first with a switch and then with his fists. Their first moments of physical contact in Sater and Sheik’s version are far more tender. This tenderness is expressed not only through Steven Sater’s dialogue, which shows the emotional connection between the characters, but also through Duncan Sheik’s music for
“The Word of Your Body,” the song that Wendla and Melchior sing in this scene. The music in the song starts out as “a classic arpeggio,” and the individual notes plucked out first on guitar and later on chimes or bells seem to reflect the gentle, delicate interactions between the two characters (Sater and Sheik 39).

But perhaps the clearest indicator of the tenderness of Wendla and Melchior’s affection comes through Bill T. Jones’s choreography for “The Word of Your Body.” As Wendla and Melchior begin to sing this song, the musical’s stage directions dictate that “Melchior reaches, tentatively takes Wendla’s hand. They begin a private pas de deux” (39). In his article “A Substitute for Love: The Performance of Sex in Spring Awakening,” (2009) Bryan M. Vandevender describes Bill T. Jones’s choreography for this “pas de deux”:

From their seated position, Melchior uses the back of his hand to gently caress Wendla’s arm. Wendla responds by raising her arm and slowly wrapping it around his. She sings the lyric ‘Grasping at pearls with my fingertips […]’ and their fingers graze each other once and then return for a second moment of contact (Sater 2007:39). They clench hands…The pair then rise to a standing position and come together…They turn to face the audience again, holding hands…They continue to face front until Melchior sings “Playing with her in your fantasies” (Sater 2007:40). At this moment, he pulls Wendla close to him, wraps his arms around her torso, and clasps his hands just under her bust-line. They linger here for a moment…before working their way back to their original seated positions. (300)

Although this interaction certainly shows the sexual attraction between Melchior and Wendla, particularly when Melchior “pulls Wendla close to him” and “wraps his arms around her torso,” the sexuality is subtle, and the inclusion of hand-holding also demonstrates affection between the two, implying that their attraction is both emotional and physical. The intricate choreography of the hand-holding, though touched on only
briefly by Vandevender, also illustrates the tentative and gentle tone of Melchior and Wendla’s interactions in this early scene. Their initial moments of physical contact contain much more than simple arm raises and finger grazing: as Melchior “caresses” Wendla’s arm, Wendla’s arm moves in reply to his touch.⁴ She moves her hand and arm back towards her body, as if to shy away from his advance, but then, in one fluid, sensuous motion, she extends her arm again, brushing her hand and forearm along Melchior’s arm until her hand is past his. As she draws her hand back in again along Melchior’s arm, she twists her hand to face palm-up, then palm-down, and finally brings her palm in contact with his to arrive at the moment when they “clench hands.” This vocabulary of tentative touches is repeated moments later as Wendla sings the line “Watching his world slip through my fist…” (Sater and Sheik 40). Before she sings this line, the two are holding hands. As she sings, she releases his hand, stroking his palm with her fingers once as she folds her hand towards his wrist. Then Melchior and Wendla both rotate their hands at the wrist while keeping their wrists in contact, as if their hands are circling each other carefully before finally uniting in a tight grasp once again. These moments, clearly choreographed quite deliberately by Jones, indicate that Melchior and Wendla are attracted to each other but are progressing slowly and tentatively towards physical sexual contact.

The final moment of the scene strengthens this implication. Although the two drop hands immediately after the song is over, Melchior then offers to walk Wendla home and extends his hand to her. The stage directions dictate, “She hesitates, then allows him to take her hand. They walk off together” (40). This scene builds the
foundation for the relationship between Melchior and Wendla in the musical, a
relationship based not only on physical attraction, but also on emotional and intellectual
bonds.

Sater and Sheik do include Melchior’s beating of Wendla, but they place it later in
the musical and revise the incident to emphasize the characters’ intellectual connection.
When Wedekind’s Wendla asks to be beaten, she says, “I can hardly imagine how it feels
to be beaten. I’ve tried beating myself to see what it does to you.—It must be a dreadful
feeling” (26). This request seems based on a desire to experience the physical sensation
of being hit. Sater and Sheik’s Wendla, however, is curious about the psychological
effects of beating. She tells Melchior, “I’ve tried hitting myself—to find out how it feels,
really, inside” (48). She then implores him to beat her because she has
“never…felt…Anything” (48-49). Wendla’s speculation on the internal effects of beating
implies that she wants Melchior to beat her in order to combat an emotional, rather than
physical, numbness.

Although Sater and Sheik’s Melchior resists at first, he does finally consent to
beat Wendla. Even then, his beating is tamer than the beating in Wedekind’s play. As
described in the previous chapter, Wedekind’s Melchior first beats Wendla with a switch
and then throws her on the ground and beats her with his fists. After she begins
screaming, the stage directions state that Melchior “pays no attention, but thrashes her as
if enraged, while thick tears run down his cheeks. Suddenly he jumps up, clutches his
temples with both hands, and plunges into the woods, sobbing piteously from the depths
of his soul” (27). The fact that Melchior does not pay attention to Wendla, and then
“clutches his temples” before running away, implies that his flight stems more from internal horror than from guilt or regret at what he has done to Wendla. Sater and Sheik’s Melchior, on the other hand, “flings the switch aside and throws Wendla to the ground, so violently that she begins sobbing. Suddenly, he realizes what he’s done. He stumbles, sobbing, into the woods” (50). Sater and Sheik explicitly state that Melchior runs away because “he realizes what he’s done.” His flight is directly related to the violence he has perpetrated against Wendla. This violence is also less extreme than in Wedekind’s play—rather than beating Wendla with his fists once she is on the ground, as Wedekind’s Melchior does, Sater and Sheik’s Melchior stops after he has pushed her down. While this beating scene is still difficult to read about or watch, Wendla’s intellectual plea to Melchior and Melchior’s guilt over his actions significantly alter the tone of this scene from the original. Wedekind’s scene is a dangerous and violent experimentation between children who are practically strangers. In the musical, however, the interaction becomes a (regrettable) foray into sadomasochism between consenting teenagers.

This issue of consent between Melchior and Wendla is perhaps the most important change that Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik made in adapting *Spring Awakening*. In Wedekind’s original play, Melchior rapes Wendla in a hayloft, presumably for his own physical pleasure. In Sater and Sheik’s version, however, the two clearly engage in consensual sex. Sater even states in his introduction that Melchior’s advances towards Wendla stem from his eagerness to help her experience the rhapsodic sensations that he described both in his essay for Moritz and in the song “Touch Me” (Preface x). Both the spoken lines and stage directions in the musical’s
hayloft scene support this assertion. As Melchior begins to kiss Wendla in this scene, she
does initially resist. Melchior asks if her hesitation is “[b]ecause it’s good? …Because it
makes us ‘feel’ something?” (Sater and Sheik 59) His discussion of feeling refers back
to Wendla’s assertion in act one, scene eight (the beating scene) that she had never felt
anything. Melchior, then, offers Wendla an opportunity to feel sexual pleasure, perhaps
to make up for the pain he inflicted when he tried to help her feel by beating her.
Whatever his reasoning, this argument clearly sways Wendla, since the stage directions
dictate that, after his line, Wendla “suddenly reaches and pulls Melchior to her. She
kisses him” (59). This cycle continues throughout the scene: Melchior advances and
Wendla initially resists, but ultimately agrees to experience the pleasure that Melchior
offers. Her final and most explicit consent comes towards the end of the scene, with the
following exchange:

(Melchior reaches inside Wendla’s undergarments, strokes her gently.)
WENDLA: Now, there—now, that’s…
MELCHIOR: Yes…?
WENDLA: Yes.
(As the song continues, Melchior climbs on top of Wendla, lowers his pants.) (61)

While Wedekind’s Melchior ignores Wendla’s many protests and rapes her in spite of the
fact that she repeatedly says “no” and “don’t,” Sater and Sheik’s Melchior backs off each
time Wendla resists and does not attempt to engage in intercourse until she explicitly says
“yes.” In the musical, therefore, not only do Wendla and Melchior have an emotional
and intellectual relationship before any sexual activity takes place, the sex between them
is also clearly consensual. These alterations make it seem that both characters’ sexual
urges and desires are developing in a fairly positive and healthy way: Melchior is
sensitive rather than aggressive and violent, and Wendla is a deliberate and willing participant in sex, rather than an innocent young victim of rape.

Of course, this encounter is still problematic, largely because it enacts a “no means yes” scenario. Although Melchior does wait until Wendla explicitly says “yes” before they have intercourse, he essentially gets her to consent by pressuring her each time she says no or hesitates. The scene suggests, then, that if a young man just persists, a girl will eventually relent and say yes to sex, regardless of her initial response. Although this problem is not insignificant, it is still important to note that Sater and Sheik at least make a concerted effort to portray teen sexuality as a normal, healthy aspect of adolescent life by replacing Wedekind’s violent rape scene with a scene of consensual intercourse.

This portrayal of adolescent sexuality, particularly female adolescent sexuality, as an acceptable, healthy part of growing up continues in the second act of the musical.

Sater describes one of the alterations that he and Duncan Sheik made to Wedekind’s play:

From the top of Act Two, we wanted to see Wendla confusedly awakening to her own womanhood, owning her lovemaking, claiming her part of the pleasure. Where Wedekind gives her an Ophelia-like morning after, our young heroine celebrates in song the sweet unknown world she’s just discovered. (Preface xiii)

By giving Wendla a voice and letting her “own her lovemaking,” Sater and Sheik empower her. Rather than a victim, Wendla is a young woman who chose to have sex and enjoyed it. One of her final songs, “Whispering,” emphasizes her power and agency.

She sings:

Had a sweetheart on his knees,  
So faithful and adoring.  
And he touched me,
And I let him love me.
So, let that be my story… (Sater and Sheik 83)

Wendla essentially takes the power to create her own “story” of her experiences with love and sex. By giving their female protagonist this agency, Sater and Sheik try to portray female adolescent sexuality in a more positive way than Wedekind does.

This acceptance of female sexuality, and of adolescent sexuality in general, is a reflection not only of Sater and Sheik’s personal sensibility, but also of the reality of life for teens in the twenty-first century United States. Surveys reveal that sexual activity is fairly prevalent among teens in the U.S., although levels of teen sexual activity have recently begun decreasing. A 2003 survey done by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention revealed that 47% of teens in ninth through twelfth grade had ever had intercourse, as compared to 54% in 1991 (Dryfoos 27). 47% is still a significant number, though, and is presumably higher than the percentage of unmarried teens who engaged in sex in nineteenth century Germany. But perhaps the most significant difference in teen sexuality between the twenty-first century U.S. and nineteenth century Germany is access to sex education. Adolescent sexuality is discussed more openly and is more widely accepted as a fact of life, at least in some segments of U.S. society, than it was in the late nineteenth century, when Wedekind wrote his play. Sex education is also often a part of school curricula: as of January 1, 2012, twenty-one states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education in schools (Guttmacher Institute 1). And school is not the only resource teenagers have to learn about sex and sexuality. The website Scarleteen, for example, offers articles on teen sex and sexuality, as well as discussion boards and resources for teens to find doctors or testing for sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in
their area. It would seem, then, that society in the twenty-first century U.S.
acknowledges teens’ developing sex drive and accepts the reality that teenagers want to,
and often do, have sex.

Although this acceptance is generally a good thing, as it means teens have access
to important factual information about sex, it can also translate into a hyper-sexualized
youth culture, which can in turn put pressure on teens, pre-teens, and even children to
engage in sex before they are ready to do so. As described in the introduction to this
chapter, toys such as Bratz and Bratz Babyz dolls expose girls to sexually suggestive
imagery from the time they are toddlers. In addition, these dolls essentially
commercialize child sexuality, a trend which is exacerbated by shows like TLC’s
_Toddlers and Tiaras_. This show documents life on the beauty pageant circuit for children
as young as three. Although a few boys have appeared on the show, the contestants
featured on _Toddlers and Tiaras_ are almost all girls. These girls often wear costumes that
expose their midriffs and legs, and during some portions of the pageants, many toddler
contestants perform routines that are extremely sexually suggestive. Shows like these
and toys like Bratz dolls encourage young children to act as though they are sexually
mature.

As a result, as both girls and boys reach puberty and actually become sexually
mature, this encouragement can turn into pressure to engage in sexual activity. Abigail
Jones and Marissa Miley’s _Restless Virgins_ (2007) describes the hyper-sexualized school
culture that can be created by such pressure. The book describes events at Milton
Academy in the year leading up to a notorious incident, mentioned earlier, in which one
fifteen-year-old girl performed oral sex on five older boys. Interviews with boys at the school revealed that some pursued sexual encounters just for an outrageous story to tell the other guys in the locker room. Girls told stories of “hooking up” (a term that describes anything from making out to oral sex to sexual intercourse) for social prestige or just for the sake of having done it. This book has engendered some controversy—students at Milton, including some who were interviewed for the book, feel that the authors skewed the information given to them. But even though Jones and Miley may have overemphasized the sexual culture of Milton, the fact remains that in the U.S. in the early twenty-first century, teenage students at Milton and at other schools were often engaging in sexual activity, and these actions seemed to be generally accepted by the student body.

Although some might say that the appropriate response to scandals like the one at Milton would be to educate young people about sex through sites like Scarleteen, mentioned above, and comprehensive sex education programs, there are other segments of society that would move to discourage any and all expression of adolescent sexual desire. This desire to resist and repress teen sexuality is most obvious in the push for abstinence-only education. In the early twenty-first century, federal funding for abstinence-only programs in the United States skyrocketed. A report requested by Representative Henry Waxman in 2004, frequently called The Waxman Report, states: “The federal government will spend approximately $170 million on abstinence-only education programs in fiscal year 2005, more than twice the amount spent in fiscal year 2001” (United States, H.R. Committee on Government Reform i). The actual amount
allocated to the Department of Health and Human Services for abstinence-only programs for fiscal year 2005 ended up closer to $230 million (United States, Department of Health and Human Services 82). These heavily funded programs teach that abstinence is the only way to prevent pregnancy and STIs. They do not acknowledge that teens or adults might have a healthy sexual relationship outside of marriage. This means, first, that such programs do not consider the possibility that a homosexual relationship could be fulfilling and loving. They also resist the fact that teens might engage in sex before marriage, which means that they do not offer information about contraceptives or access to any other resources that could be useful for a teen who is engaging in sex and wants to avoid pregnancy or STIs. In some cases, this bias against homosexuality and disapproval of contraceptive use has to do with religious affiliation—many programs contain religious undertones, which is extremely problematic considering that some of these programs receive federal funding from a government that is constitutionally bound to separate church and state.7

In addition to a very limiting and biased definition of what constitutes a healthy sexual relationship, several of the abstinence-only programs funded by the federal government provide misleading or inaccurate information about sex. For example, multiple curricula exaggerate the failure rate of condoms in preventing pregnancy, HIV, and other STIs. One curriculum states that 14% of women who use condoms “scrupulously,” or perfectly, for birth control become pregnant within a year (United States, H.R. Committee on Government Reform 12). This number is actually the failure rate for typical, not scrupulous or perfect, use. Other programs state that condom failure
rate is 14 or 15%, which implies that “the chance of pregnancy is 14% to 15% after each act of protected intercourse” when, in fact, that number refers to the chance of pregnancy over an entire year for couples with “typical use” of condoms (11-12).8

In addition to misrepresenting the effectiveness of contraceptives, some programs also teach inaccurate reproductive science. One curriculum states that intercourse is not the only way to get pregnant: it claims “that touching another person’s genitals ‘can result in pregnancy’” (United States, H.R. Committee on Government Reform 12). The program “Me, My World, My Future” uses data from the 1970s to inform students about potential complications of abortions, stating that abortions may result in sterility or in premature birth or ectopic pregnancy in future pregnancies. The program also claims that abortions have serious psychological effects and that “[f]ollowing abortion, according to some studies, women are more prone to suicide” (13-14).

Although I was unable to access the curricula themselves, I did find other reviews of the materials that supported the claims made in The Waxman Report. The Minnesota Sexuality Education Resource Review Panel, for example, reviewed the program “Me, My World, My Future” and unanimously rejected it for use in schools, based on many of the reasons listed above (Minnesota Sexuality Education Resource Review Panel). The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) has also reviewed several of the programs that The Waxman Report identifies as frequently used by government grant recipients. Ten of the thirteen programs covered in The Waxman Report were categorized by SIECUS as “fear-based” abstinence-only programs, and reviews of some programs reveal the absurd lengths to which teachers are instructed to go
in order to tell students that premarital sex is inappropriate. One guide, for example, suggests that teachers place a goldfish in a bowl in front of the class. The teacher is to suggest to the students that the fish must be bored and then, once students agree, the teacher is to remove the fish from the bowl and put it on the desk for a few seconds so that students can see it writhe and struggle to survive out of water. The conclusion to be drawn is that the fish in the bowl is like sex within marriage, while the fish out of the bowl represents premarital sex. Teachers are supposed to “[u]se this opportunity to point out that boundaries provide freedom, safety and comfort. They’re not dull, they’re healthy” (qtd. in “WAIT Training Review”). This hands-on exercise is just one example of the tactics used not only in the WAIT program, but also in some other abstinence education programs, in order to instill fear of premarital sex into adolescents.

Many of the findings outlined above must, of course, be taken with a grain of salt. The Waxman Report was prepared at the request of a Democratic representative in order to protest funding appropriations requested by a Republican president. SIECUS is an organization that openly promotes comprehensive sex education. But even so, SIECUS’s reviews and The Waxman Report cannot be disregarded. These evaluations of abstinence programs become especially important when examining state laws regarding sex education. While twenty-one states and the District of Columbia mandate sex education, and thirteen additional states mandate HIV education, only thirteen states require that instruction in these subjects be medically accurate. Thirteen states also require that information on the negative outcomes of teen sex and pregnancy be covered, and more than half of states require that when sex education or HIV education is taught, abstinence
is stressed (Guttmacher Institute 1-2). Therefore, while it is certainly true that adolescent sex and sexuality in the twenty-first century U.S. is more accepted and more openly discussed than it was in nineteenth century Germany, there is still significant resistance to disseminating accurate and useful information to teens regarding sex and contraception.

In addition to this resistance, there is also a subtle undertone of misogyny in some abstinence education programs. Both The Waxman Report and SIECUS found that some abstinence-only curricula treat stereotypes about boys and girls as scientific fact. Such stereotypes include: women care less about achievement and the future than men do; women need financial support while men need domestic support; girls are helpless and dependent on men for protection; and men’s basic needs include “sexual fulfillment” and “physical attractiveness” while women need “Affection,” “Conversation,” “Honesty and Openness,” and “Family Commitment” (United States, H.R. Committee on Government Reform 17-18; “Why kNOw? Review”; “Choosing the Best SOUL MATE Review”). Presentation of these stereotypes as fact not only reinforces women’s dependence on men, it also implies that men derive pleasure primarily from physical intimacy, while women’s primary source of pleasure should be emotional intimacy.

Such stereotypes are emphasized by books and articles that have cropped up in recent years bemoaning the hyper-sexualization of young girls. Books like Wendy Shalit’s Return to Modesty (1999) and Girls Gone Mild (2007), and Patrice A. Oppliger’s Girls Gone Skank (2008) discuss what these authors see as a moral decline in the female youth of the United States. Shalit argues for reclamation of female modesty and the mystique surrounding sexuality, while Oppliger summarizes a plethora of what she sees
as overly sexual and therefore negative influences on girls, female teens, and young adult women. While both of these authors may have valid points, what is disturbing is the fact that there is little equivalent literature about sexualization of male youth. Oppliger has written about connections between wrestling and hypermasculinity, and some newspapers, newsletters, and journals have published articles outlining concerns surrounding the sexualization of boys, but the primary concern in the U.S. seems to be about the negative effects of female sexuality on young women.

Although Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* may seem to contradict this trend, the musical does privilege male sexuality over female sexuality. Bryan M. Vandevender points this out, stating that “[t]he libretto depicts the adolescent boys as hyper-sexualized and ruled by their hormones…[c]onversely, the girls of the company do not speak of sex nearly as much” (298). The focus on male sexuality emerges in one of the musical’s first numbers, “The Bitch of Living.” The song is performed by the adolescent male ensemble and contains descriptions of multiple boys masturbating, one boy’s fascination with his piano teacher’s breasts, and another boy’s attraction to a male student who “looks so nasty in those khakis” (Sater and Sheik 24). The focus on purely physical attraction, as well as physical gratification through masturbation, shows that the boys’ focus is on carnal pleasure, rather than romance or emotional attraction.

The music and choreography for this song also demonstrate the boys’ focus on physical or carnal gratification through intense rock beats and wild dancing. The music for this piece is clearly of the rock genre—it begins with “[a]n intense alt-rock guitar riff,” and the entire song is heavy on percussion and aggressive electric guitar chords,
driven by what Vandevender calls “a palpable urgency” (Sater and Sheik 23; Vandevender 297). The choreography emphasizes the boys’ intense drive to find physical pleasure and gratification—within the first few lines, most of the boys onstage “begin tapping their feet and pulsing their shoulders in time to the music” (Vandevender 297). As the song progresses, their movements become even more energetic, almost to the point of being frenetic—at one point, “stomping evolves into jumping and leaping” and “[t]he students bound across the stage, mounting chairs and kicking the air” (298). They look almost like rock musicians in the middle of a live concert, jumping in full circles, head banging, and sprawling across chairs with their legs in the air. This impression of rockers in concert seems to be the intention of both actors and choreographer. Bill T. Jones describes his instructions to the actors when choreographing “The Bitch of Living”: “I told them I wanted them to channel every rock star they’d ever seen. I said, think of Jim Morrison, think of Mick Jagger, you know, think of Jimi Hendrix, everybody who is saying ‘To hell with the world’” (B. Jones). These aggressive, rebellious movements serve as the boys’ way of physically venting their sexual frustration and therefore finding some outlet, though perhaps not an ideal one, for their sexual urges.

The girls, however, express different desires. In the first song performed by all of the female adolescent characters, the reprise of “Mama Who Bore Me,” the girls bemoan their lack of knowledge about sex and their own bodies. They sing, “Mama who gave me/No way to handle things” (Sater and Sheik 18). Rather than being able to fantasize about sexual satisfaction, the girls can only attempt to puzzle through their sexuality and
burgeoning desires with no help from anyone. The music and choreography do provide them with some freedom to rebel and release physical urges, but this freedom is miniscule compared to what is allowed to the boys in “Bitch of Living.” The music is upbeat, but rather than the “intense alt-rock guitar riff” of “Bitch of Living,” the reprise of “Mama Who Bore Me” is described only as “[c]ontemporary music” (Sater and Sheik 17).

The choreography for the girls’ song is also much less intense than the boys’. While the boys leap about the stage, the girls spend most of the song with their feet planted, using just their shoulders and upper bodies to express their emotions and yearning. One or two of the girls stomp their feet on occasion, and at times they do move either up or downstage, but they move only in straight lines, and they walk rather than leap or jump. These styles of movement are much more contained than the boys’ movements in “Bitch of Living,” which implies that the girls do not have as much freedom to express their sexual desire, even in the world of song, which Steven Sater describes as a way for the young characters to express themselves and escape “the nineteenth-century repression” that pervades the scenes of the musical (Sater, Preface ix). Bill T. Jones admits that finding a way for the girls to dance in Spring Awakening was difficult: “For ‘Spring Awakening,’ I was trying to find a language of rebellion, which was easier for the men than the women. How does a rebellious young woman behave physically?” (qtd. in Sulcas 7). Jones leaves this question unanswered, and it seems that, although the young woman get to express their rebellion to some degree through songs
like the reprise of “Mama Who Bore Me”, they never get the opportunity that the boys have to express their frustration through physical movement and dance.

The second number in which the girls play an important role, “My Junk,” further highlights this fact. The song title uses “junk” to mean a drug or addictive substance, and the song begins with Wendla singing, “In the midst of this nothing, this miss of a life,/Still, there’s this one thing—just to see you go by” (29). The other girls join in and continue in this vein, claiming that their “junk” consists of fantasies about what a crush might be doing, or watching from afar as that crush passes by. This expression of attraction is very naïve and innocent: rather than thinking about physical contact or sexual fulfillment, the girls merely want to see the object of their affection, even for a brief moment. Again, the music and dance emphasize this focus on emotional affection rather than physical attraction. The opening chords are described as having “an innocent uptempo feel,” and as the young women begin to sing, they are “glistening in girl-group light” (29). The beginning of the song does sound strikingly similar to “girl-group” music of the 1950s or 60s. As the girls sing, they sit on the edge of the stage, their only movement a subtle swaying of their bent knees. As the song progresses, they do get to echo the boys’ dancing from “Bitch of Living”: the girls stand up, move onstage, and begin jumping and twirling. But even though the young women get to move more freely in this song than they did in the reprise of “Mama Who Bore Me,” their choreography is still tame when compared with that of the two boys featured in “My Junk.” Georg sings about his piano teacher, Fraulein Grossebustenhalter and, as he does so, she “rips open her bodice, exposing her bustier” (31). At this point, Georg pulls her onto his lap and
buries his face in her breasts. Hanschen, who sits center stage, spends most of the song masturbating and thus actually achieves sexual gratification. Within this one song, we can see the stark contrast between representations of male and female sexuality in Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening*: while the boys fixate on physical pleasure and actually get to experience this pleasure during the songs, the girls focus on emotional affection and attraction, and the only physical gratification they get is through dancing.

One of the few times that we hear about the female desire for sex is in the song “Touch Me.” As mentioned earlier, Sater describes this song as Melchior “articulat[ing] his sense of ‘the female’ yearning for pleasure” (Preface x). The problem, though, is that the solos in this song are performed by Melchior, Moritz, Ernst, Otto, and Georg; the girls only sing the ensemble sections (Sater and Sheik 35-37). Furthermore, although the song may begin as Melchior voicing a female sexual yearning, it transitions into a song about male sexual yearning since in the third verse, Ernst implores an unseen listener to touch him “lower down, where the figs lie…” (35). The reference to “figs” implies that he is talking about testicles. This reference, along with the fact that this one song about female desire is sung primarily by the boys, demonstrates once again Sater and Sheik’s privileging of male sexuality over female.

This privileging is certainly present in Wedekind’s original play: none of Wedekind’s young women know much about sex, and Melchior essentially gets away with raping Wendla with no consequences. The problem with the focus on male sexuality in Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* is that they did not change Wedekind’s original, even though they had the opportunity to do so. Sater, in fact, has said that “the
greatest critical misperception of our show is that we took this original play and added songs to it. In fact, what you’re seeing is our version of Wedekind’s play” (Sater, Interview with Josh Skinner). In addition, Sater describes the songs as “subtext,” a way for each character to “give voice to his or her inner landscape” (Preface viii). By not allowing the girls to express sexual desire, even in the interior monologues of the songs, Sater and Sheik seem to imply that young women do not feel the same sexual desire that young men do. The question, then, is why they chose to keep Wedekind’s implication that men feel more sexual desire than women, if this musical is indeed “their version” of his play.

Although I believe that some of the privileging of male sexuality stems from the fact that this musical was created by a male writer, male composer, and male choreographer, some elements of Sater and Sheik’s treatment of female sexuality may serve as a subtle critique of modern sexual repression and gender roles. For example, in the song “The Dark I Know Well,” we learn that Martha is being sexually abused by her father, and that Ilse was sexually abused by her father before she left home (Sater and Sheik 44-45). 11 There is a similar scene in Wedekind’s Spring Awakening, although Wedekind’s scene focuses only on Martha, and the abuse that Wedekind’s Martha receives from her father is more physical than sexual, although it does contain sexual undertones. Why, then, did Sater and Sheik change this scene to add not only an additional female victim of abuse, but also an overtly sexual element to this abuse? There are several possible reasons, but one significant possibility lies in the juxtaposition that Sater and Sheik create between 1890s Germany and the twenty-first century United
States. Although the contemporary songs do provide the teens with an escape from the nineteenth century repression present in the scenes and thus show some difference between the 1890s and the twenty-first century, Sater and Sheik also use this “time-jumping structure” to draw a parallel between the repression of the 1890s and the sexual repression that is still rampant today (Sater, Preface ix). By showing two young female survivors of sexual abuse, Sater and Sheik critique the misogynistic sexual repression that is still present today, in a society where authors like Wendy Shalit and Patrice A. Oppliger preach the importance of female virginity with little discussion of young men abstaining from sex. The final moments of the song support this critique: although Martha and Ilse sing the first verses separately, by the end they have come together and are singing into one microphone, with their arms wrapped around each other’s waists. Through this song, Sater, Sheik, and presumably Jones both hint at the importance of women coming together to stand against abuse and sexual repression and provide a subtle critique of modern society’s treatment of women.

This critique of modern sexual repression continues later in the musical, particularly in the scene in which Wendla has an abortion. After Wendla has consensual sex with Melchior and enjoys it, she is forced into an abortion by her mother and is subsequently killed by Schmidt, a male abortionist (79-80, 86-87). At first glance, this forced abortion makes Sater and Sheik’s representation of female sexuality extremely problematic. First, any agency that Wendla gained by creating her own story of her love for Melchior in the song “Whispering” is snatched away by her mother, who forcibly takes her to Schmidt and then runs away after promising to be “with [Wendla] every
moment” (87). Wendla thus loses her power and independence, first to her mother and then to the back-alley abortionist. Furthermore, Wendla’s death is essentially a consequence of having sex, albeit an indirect consequence. This portrayal of her death via abortion seems to support the abstinence-only educators, described above, who broadcast any and all potential negative effects of abortion and of premarital sex in general.

When this scene is examined in the context of Sater and Sheik’s juxtaposition between nineteenth-century Germany and the modern U.S., however, it could be interpreted as a criticism of abstinence education. Sater himself writes that Wendla’s abortion was, in a sense, transported into our own century: a century in which a ‘bourgeois’ idea such as abstinence is still widely preached as the only form of safe sex; where the widespread dissemination of contraceptive devices is described by some within our Department of Health and Human Services as demeaning to women. (Preface xiv)

It seems that Sater and Sheik use Wendla’s abortion to critique what they see as the regressive nature of American policy on abstinence-only education and contraceptive use.

The scene could also be interpreted as a criticism of male control over women’s reproductive rights. This issue surfaces in an alteration that Sater and Sheik make to the scene in which Wendla meets the abortionist. In Wedekind’s play, the abortionist is an unseen woman, Mother Schmidt, who comes to the Bergmann home in order to perform the abortion (Wedekind, Spring Awakening 73). In Sater and Sheik’s musical, however, Wendla’s mother takes her to “a darkened street,” where she hands her over to a male abortionist (Sater and Sheik 86). We see Mrs. Bergman pay Schmidt, who leads Wendla offstage as Wendla cries “Mama, don’t leave me! Mama??!!?” (87). Mrs. Bergman
“looks around nervously, then bolts up the block” (87). Wendla is abandoned by the primary woman in her life, and has her power and ultimately her life taken from her by an adult man. This change seems to critique the fact that, in 2006, a male president was creating legislation and a budget that funneled hundreds of millions of dollars to a male-run Department of Health and Human Services, in order to fund abstinence-only education programs that refused to give young women information about how to avoid becoming pregnant should they choose to have sex. Although changing the gender of the abortionist may seem, on the surface, to disempower young women, it could actually serve as a critique of modern male-dominant society and thus call for more power and agency to be given to, or taken by, young women.

The main problem with this critique, as well as the societal critique in “The Dark I Know Well,” is that both are extremely subtle. Sater and Sheik’s criticism of sexual repression imposed on young men is obvious: Moritz and the other young men are furious during “The Bitch of Living,” and they act out their frustration physically. We also see the negative effects of male sexual repression through Moritz’s suicide. The critiques of female sexual repression are far less overt, which could be very problematic: if an audience member does not take the time to analyze Martha and Ilse’s moment of unity at the end of “Dark I Know Well,” or does not bother to think about why Schmidt is a man rather than a woman, these societal critiques are lost. Thus, although Sater and Sheik do attempt to work towards the empowerment and agency of female adolescents by critiquing the sexual repression of women, their musical still has a definite and unfortunate tendency to focus on male sexual desire and the problems inherent in
repressing that desire rather than on female desire or the issue of young women being repressed.

**Carnivalesque Liminality: The Freedom of Music**

Like Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*, which shows Melchior moving from childhood to adulthood through liminal space in its final scene, Sater and Sheik’s musical also calls for liminal space for teenagers, although it does so in a very different way. While Frank Wedekind includes one obviously liminal scene, Sater and Sheik use musical numbers to provide their teen characters with room for transition, thus sprinkling opportunities for young people to experience liminality throughout their adaptation of *Spring Awakening*. Sater writes that the songs provide the play’s “young characters a momentary release into contemporary pop idiom” from the scenes set in “the world of nineteenth-century repression” (Preface viii, ix). This “momentary release” strongly resembles the carnivalesque liminality of revolution described by Richard Schechner in his article “Invasions Friendly and Unfriendly: The Dramaturgy of Direct Theater” (2010). In this article, Schechner posits that “both revolution and carnival propose a free space to satisfy desires, especially sexual and drunken desires, a new time to enact social relations more freely” (463). The songs in *Spring Awakening* certainly allow the teenage characters to satisfy, or at least fantasize about satisfying, forbidden sexual desires. The song “The Bitch of Living,” for example, opens with the following lyrics, sung by Moritz:

God, I dreamed there was an angel, who could hear me through the wall,  
As I cried out—like, in Latin: “This is so not life at all.
Help me out—out—of this nightmare.” Then I heard her silver call—
She said: “Just give it time, kid. I come to one and all.”
She said: “Give me that hand, please, and the itch you can’t control,
Let me teach you how to handle all the sadness in your soul.
Oh, we’ll work that silver magic, then we’ll aim it at the wall.”
She said: “Love may make you blind, kid—but I wouldn’t mind at all.” (23-24)

From the song’s first lines, we can tell that Moritz feels repressed, based on the fact that he is asking for help escaping from the “nightmare” in which he exists. An “angel” offers release through masturbation, which, though never mentioned explicitly, is clearly referenced in the lines “[g]ive me that hand, please, and the itch you can’t control” and “[l]ove may make you blind.” This song thus gives Moritz and the other boys room to express their burgeoning sexual desire and the frustration they feel at society’s repression of that desire.

The song “Touch Me” provides another space for young characters to express sexual desire, this time through both words and movement. In this number, Melchior leads the adolescent ensemble in describing a fantasy of being touched sensually, presumably with the goal of achieving satisfaction through orgasm. For example, Ernst sings:

Touch me—just like that.
And that—O, yeah—now, that’s heaven.
Now, that I like.
God, that’s so nice.
Now lower down, where the figs lie… (35)

This musical phrase is repeated several times with lyrical variations, including changing “where the figs lie” to “where the sins cry,” “where the sins lie,” and “where the winds sigh” (37). These phrases all refer to the genital region, and through these lines the singers commands the unknown listener to touch his or her genitals, in order to help the
singers satisfy sexual desire. The movement during this song also plays a role in helping the teen characters find a space to satisfy burgeoning sexual needs. Bryan Vandevender describes Bill T. Jones’s choreography for “Touch Me”: the actors begin by placing their hands over their eyes and slowly sliding them down their necks and past their sternum. Then they gently trace their bust-line with their palms, twist their wrists to face their palms upward and then cross their arms and embrace their torso. Pulling their hands down to their waist, the dancers slowly slide them to the small of the back and then down the side of the legs. The movements that follow are a variation on this theme, forming a lexicon of gentle touches and caresses. (299)

Through this song, therefore, the characters are able to find satisfaction not only by verbalizing their desires, but also by sensually touching themselves, thus simulating being touched by a lover.

Opportunity for sexual satisfaction is not the only benefit found in the liminal space of song in Spring Awakening. The teenage characters also get the opportunity to experience independence and to take power from the normally authoritarian adult characters. In his book Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics (1973), Mikhail Bakhtin describes a similar phenomenon occurring in carnivals. He points out that, during carnival, “[t]he laws, prohibitions and restrictions which determine the system and order of normal, i.e. non-carnival, life are…suspended; above all, the hierarchical system and all the connected forms of fear, awe, piety, etiquette, etc. are suspended” (101). Richard Schechner takes this idea of carnival as a place where hierarchy is overturned and connects it to revolutions. Schechner points out that, like carnival, revolutions provide a liminal space where the ruling class can be challenged, and where there is vast opportunity for “experimenting with behavior and identity slippage” (477). This is
certainly true in many of the songs in *Spring Awakening*. A particularly illuminating example is the song “Totally Fucked,” in act two, scene four of the musical. This scene begins with Melchior being harshly questioned by two professors. They are trying to coerce him into admitting that he wrote an essay to help Moritz understand sex, titled “The Art of Sleeping With.” The teachers believe that, once they force Melchior to admit authorship, they can blame Melchior for Moritz’s suicide. The teachers discuss this scheme callously, viewing Melchior as a regrettable but inevitable “casualty” in their war on “moral corruption” and “creeping sensuality” (73). These adults, who are reminiscent of modern-day supporters of what some call fear-based abstinence education, are in a clear position of power over Melchior. They are essentially running an interrogation, presumably with the institutional support of the school. They can thus pursue their goal of expelling Melchior with little or no impediment.

In the middle of the scene, however, things change. Suddenly, “a dirty electric guitar chord” sounds, “[t]he lights shift,” “[a] rocking beat kicks in,” and Melchior and the other teenage characters burst into the song “Totally Fucked” (74). The first way this song creates a redistribution of power and “identity slippage” is by giving Melchior and the other teen characters a voice. In the two pages of dialogue prior to the song, Melchior has been allowed to utter sixteen words total and has not been permitted to complete a single sentence. Once he begins singing, however, he and the other adolescents can complete full sentences and even stanzas, venting their frustration that they have ended up in a “dead-end zone” where they are “fucked if [they] speak [their] mind[s]” (74-75). By voicing their anger, the teen characters temporarily usurp a space that was controlled
by adults. They demonstrate this takeover first by parodying their teachers: about halfway through the song, Melchior sings the line “Blaa blaa blaa blaa blaa blaa blaa,” which is echoed by the adolescent chorus. Sater and Sheik’s stage directions dictate that this line is “[m]ocking the professors,” which the actor playing Melchior emphasizes by holding one hand up and pressing fingers to thumb repeatedly, mimicking a talking mouth. After a verse and two more choruses, the song ends with two stanzas of the word “blaa” repeated over and over. What is notable about these final stanzas is that the adults join in, so everyone onstage is singing these mocking lines. The adolescents have dominated the adult characters, turned them to the side of the teens, and taken over the space of the schoolroom.

Jones’s choreography in this song also shows the teen characters gradually taking power from their adult oppressors. At first, the movement is minimal. Melchior stands center stage with a microphone and the rest of the adolescent actors sit along the front of the stage, acting as an audience for Melchior rather than participants in the scene. During the first chorus of the song, the teens begin to stomp their feet, and then rise and run upstage, where they stand in a straight line from left to right. The next time the chorus is sung, Melchior begins a rapid choreographed movement phrase. He runs his hand over his face and torso, then clasps his hands behind his back, runs them down over his legs, and then brings his hands back up and runs his left hand down his right arm. Although this phrase is reminiscent of Jones’s slow, sensual choreography for earlier songs like “Word of your Body” and “Touch Me,” Jones has Melchior (and later the other adolescents) perform the movements for “Totally Fucked” at an almost manic speed.
These contained movements, in which Melchior keeps his hands and arms very close to his body, seem to build up to the explosion of Melchior’s confession: directly after performing these frenzied movements, Melchior admits to writing the essay “The Art of Sleeping With” by uttering a simple “Yes” (76). Although Sater and Sheik do not specify in the script how an actor should speak this line, Jonathan Groff, the actor playing Melchior in the original Broadway production, yelled the line aggressively and defiantly, with arms thrown out to the sides. This motion stands out as a sharp contrast to the way Melchior had been standing before the confession, with hands clasped behind his back, almost as though he was under arrest. The defiant tone and motion of the admission indicates that, rather than buckling under adult pressure, Melchior is freeing himself and taking power by owning up to his own actions. This admission is an interesting moment—although it is preceded and followed by the liminal space of song, the confession itself takes place in the “real world” of the musical, in a nineteenth century German schoolroom. The power that the adolescent characters have usurped through song bleeds into their real lives, if only for a few moments.

This overlap between the world of song and the world of the scenes continues through the song’s ending. As mentioned before, the song ends with two stanzas of the word “blaa” repeated over and over, sung by both adolescents and adults. This unity between teens and adults is emphasized through Jones’s choreography. For most of the song, the adolescent characters other than Melchior have been standing or sitting in a straight line, either at the very back or the very front of the stage. At the start of the final stanza, though, the teen characters break out of this straight line and invade the stage,
taking seemingly random spots and abandoning their previous orderly configuration. At the same moment, the professors throw off their hats and begin dancing almost exactly like the adolescents. All the characters onstage leap, jump, kick their feet, and wave their hands as psychedelic lights flash in the background. Even Melchior, who was escorted out after his confession and sits on a ladder above the stage, kicks one foot against the wall and rocks out in time to the music. As Schechner would point out, the adolescents have staged a temporary revolution, breaking out of their repressive straight line to create a “vortexed, whirling” mass of movement that replaces the structured environments, such as the schoolroom seen in previous scenes, that are favored by the adults (Schechner 462).

Based on the descriptions of the songs above, it might seem that the adolescent characters in Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* have ample access to liminal space. However, the fact that the primary location of liminality in this piece is in song has disturbing implications. First, Sater states that the songs in this musical “function as interior monologues,” or as a way for each character to “give voice to his or her inner landscape” (Preface viii). Even though the world of song occasionally bleeds into reality (as in “Totally Fucked”), the vast majority of the action that takes place in song, and therefore the vast majority of the adolescents’ liminal space, exists only in characters’ minds. This is a departure from Wedekind’s play: although the original *Spring Awakening* only provides liminal space for Melchior, and only in the rather surreal final scene, nothing indicates that this scene does not take place in the real word of the play.
Why, then, does Sater and Sheik’s musical only provide transitional space in the imagined world of song?

The answer to this question might be found, at least in part, in the musical’s final scenes and in Sater and Sheik’s feelings on Wedekind’s mysterious Masked Man. Sater and Sheik chose not to include the Masked Man in their musical, stating that “the music already performs the role of the Masked Man, for it gives our adolescent characters a voice to celebrate, to decry, to embrace the darker longings within them as part of them, rather than as something to run from or repress” (Sater, Preface xi).

The problem with this comparison, however, is that in Wedekind’s play, the Masked Man leads Melchior offstage, and the play promptly ends. Some have interpreted the Masked Man as a Mephistophelian figure who leads Melchior to death or into temptation, but I have interpreted the Masked Man as a figure who leads Melchior into his adult life. The songs in Sater and Sheik’s musical do not, at first glance, seem to lead the teens into adult life—they allow the characters to explore maturity and adulthood, but when each song ends, the adolescents must return to their normal lives of restriction and repression.

This pattern changes, though, with the show’s last two songs. In the musical’s penultimate scene, Melchior wanders through a graveyard, much like in Wedekind’s final scene. After he discovers that Wendla is dead, the stage directions state that “Moritz appears—in song light—as if rising from his grave” (89). Other than the “song light,” Moritz looks exactly as he did when alive—he is not carrying his head under his arm, nor is he trying to tempt Melchior to kill himself as Wedekind’s Moritz does. In fact, Melchior himself comes up with the idea to commit suicide and is stopped by Moritz and
Wendla, who appears moments after Melchior pulls out a razor to cut his own throat. Melchior ultimately decides not to kill himself, and instead he “draws the ghosts of Wendla and Moritz to him” and “holds them,” declaring in song that they will “walk on [his] arm through the distant night” (91). While Sater and Sheik’s Melchior, like Wedekind’s, chooses life over suicide, his choice has a different implication than that of Wedekind’s Melchior. In choosing the Masked Man, Wedekind’s Melchior chooses to move on and leave his childhood behind. Sater and Sheik’s Melchior certainly chooses to move on, but in making this choice, he decides to keep the memories of his youth and adolescence with him rather than leave them behind. In fact, it seems that he may even want to use Moritz and Wendla’s experience to make life better for future adolescents: he sings that he “will read all their dreams to the stars” and that “one day all will know” about his friends’ struggles (91, 92). Although these lines on their own may not explicitly show Melchior’s determination to improve life for teens, they become clearer when looked at alongside his writings throughout the play. In a letter to Wendla, for instance, he says

…I have now seen, Wendla, how this contemptible bourgeois society works—how everything we touch is turned to dirt. In the end, we have only each other—we must build a different world. Despite what those whispering elders may say, I must set my head against your breast. We must let ourselves breathe and move again in that Paradise— (79)

Melchior is determined to change societal norms for adolescents, and in the final scenes of the musical, it seems that he wants to use his friends’ memories in order to motivate and help him to do so.
This suggestion of changing societal norms continues in the final song of the musical, “The Song of Purple Summer.” This song begins immediately after the end of the scene discussed above. This final number opens with only Ilse onstage. She sings directly to the audience:

Listen to what’s in the heart of a child,  
A song so big in one so small,  
Soon you will hear where beauty lies—  
You’ll hear and you’ll recall…  
The sadness, the doubt, all the loss, the grief,  
Will belong to some play from the past;  
As the child leads the way to a dream, a belief,  
A time of hope through the land… (92-93)

These opening lyrics instruct the listener, presumably the audience attending the show as well as anyone who may listen to the soundtrack or read the libretto, to allow children to “[lead] the way to a dream, a belief,/ A time of hope through the land.” This sentiment suggests that young people know what is best for them, and perhaps for the world at large, which emphasizes and supports Melchior’s determination to go forward, keeping his friends’ memories with him, in order to change the world for adolescents. This ending is vastly different from Wedekind’s, particularly because it highlights the independence of young people. Although the whole company, both adults and adolescents, sing this final song, the song’s lyrics clearly suggest that the young should take charge. This suggestion presumably applies both to the play and to real life, since Ilse’s lyrics are delivered directly to the audience, almost as instructions. The songs throughout the musical seem to have paved the way for this final suggestion: since the adolescent characters in Spring Awakening have repeatedly created their own liminal
space, through song, it is only natural that they continue this independence by creating a less repressive society for themselves and future generations.

This idea of an almost utopian future, formed through adults listening to the thoughts and feelings of adolescents, creates an extremely optimistic tone in this final scene. By ending with the entire company singing, washed in a glowing “song light,” Sater and Sheik end their musical in the contemporary world of song, rather than the repressive world of the nineteenth century (92). This ending suggests that alternatives to today’s adolescent sexual repression are within reach, and that a hopeful future is on the horizon.

Although this optimistic scene is a heart-warming way to end a musical, the final song is somewhat problematic, primarily because it is easy to forget that both Wendla and Moritz are dead. They sing this final song along with the rest of the ensemble, both dressed in the costumes they wore for the majority of the show rather than the costumes they wore when they appeared to Melchior as spirits in the graveyard. At the song’s end, they each stand on one side of Melchior, slightly in front of him, and Melchior puts one hand on Wendla’s right shoulder and one on Moritz’s left shoulder. By putting Moritz and Wendla in this final scene with no reminder that they both died because of the repressive society in which they live, Sater and Sheik lessen the emotional impact of these young people’s deaths and thus undermine the societal critiques that they created through the characters’ tragic ends.
Conclusion

Frank Wedekind’s Spring Awakening may seem like an unlikely candidate for Broadway adaptation, but Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik managed to mold Wedekind’s play into a wildly popular rock musical. In order to turn Wedekind’s story into a marketable musical, however, Sater and Sheik significantly changed certain aspects of plot and character to suit twenty-first century societal norms. For example, Sater and Sheik portray female sexuality in a more positive light than Wedekind does, showing Wendla engaging in consensual sex and enjoying herself. They also alter Melchior’s character, changing the male protagonist from a rapist who is horrified at the thought of imagining female sexual pleasure into a sensitive young man who desperately wants to help Wendla experience sexual satisfaction. For a society that eagerly consumes merchandise such as Bratz and Bratz Babyz dolls, as well as television shows like Toddlers and Tiaras, such a change seems wise, if not absolutely necessary.

But even though Sater and Sheik portray female sexuality and sexual pleasure as acceptable, they certainly do not focus on female sexuality. Instead, male physical sexuality is privileged through songs such as “The Bitch of Living,” while female sexuality is pushed aside or located in emotional rather than physical affection through songs like “My Junk.” Although this privileging of male sexuality does, in some way, serve as a critique of twenty-first century society by comparing modern society to the repressive nineteenth-century, these critiques are, at times, a bit too subtle and difficult to detect.
In addition to altering Wedekind’s portrayal of teen sexuality, Sater and Sheik also change the access to liminal space enjoyed by *Spring Awakening*’s adolescent characters. While Wedekind shows only one example of liminal space, liminality permeates almost all scenes of Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* since the musical numbers offer access to a transitional space where teens can experience some degree of independence and power. The final two songs also subtly suggest that, in order to ease teens’ transition into adulthood and create a less repressive society, adolescents should help lead the way to a new, brighter future. While this ending is optimistic and heart-warming, it is also a bit problematic: it is so optimistic that it is easy to forget that Wendla and Moritz have both died as a result of a sexually repressive society. This overly hopeful ending dilutes Sater and Sheik’s underlying social critique, and it is in this way that their musical diverges most sharply from Wedekind’s play. While Wedekind’s play was a clear and harsh (although somewhat misogynistic) critique of societal norms in 1890s Germany, Sater and Sheik’s musical cannot quite decide if it is a rebellious criticism of twenty-first century society or a feel-good rock musical without a social message.

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1 Notable examples of Bratz Babyz are the “Twinz” dolls, who wear what appear to be sports bras and underwear adorned with bows. One of them covers this ensemble with a leather jacket, while the other wears a pink feather boa. Both carry baby bottles.

2 All five boys involved in the case were charged with statutory rape, since the girl involved was 15. All five boys struck a deal to undergo counseling and community service, in exchange for charges being dropped (Slack, “Deal OK’d in Milton Academy Sex Cases”).

3 All discussions of choreography in this chapter refer to the original Broadway production, which I viewed in person and reviewed through a recording of the August 18, 2007 matinee performance on *YouTube*. To view this recording, posted by user WendlaBergman and split into nine parts, see: “Part 1 of 9,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7EN8QceszA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q7EN8QceszA)

“Part 2 of 9,” [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvijUtG9eMU&feature=relmfu](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvijUtG9eMU&feature=relmfu)
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Head of School Robin Robertson described these

in a letter to Milton parents as ‘‘a short and unfortunate pattern of behavior by a small group of
students’’ (Slack, “Milton Academy Cites More Sex Cases”). In this same letter, though, Robertson also
calmed parents about ‘‘the gulf between parents’ assumptions about their children’s sex lives and the
reality,” and stated that ‘‘[t]he mainstream mores of teenage life today are alarming to adults”’ (Slack, “Milton Academy Cites More Sex Cases”). These statements imply that, while the extreme nature of the January 24 incident may have been an aberration from normal behavior at Milton, sexual behavior was still thought of as a normal and accepted part of life by students. A psychologist writing an opinion piece about the Milton incidents extended this implication to teens in general, referring to the increase in oral sex among teenagers as “an epidemic problem” (O’Connell). He also stated that the young people with whom he spoke claimed that oral sex was “just a thing to do. It doesn’t mean anything” (O’Connell).

According to SIECUS, some of the programs that contain religious elements or undertones are: Why kN\OW?, Sex respect, Passion and Principles, and Healthy Image of Sex (“Curricula and Speaker Reviews”). Some ways that religion is included in these programs include references to sex as a “gift from God” in Why kN\OW?; material from religious organization True Love Waits being used in Passion and Principles; and encouragement to adhere to the Ten Commandments in Healthy Image of Sex (“Why kN\OW? Review,” “Passion and Principles Review,” “HIS (Healthy Image of Sex) Review”).

According to the Guttmacher Institute, “Researchers have two different ways of measuring the effectiveness of contraceptive methods. ‘Perfect use’ measures the effectiveness when a contraceptive is used exactly according to clinical guidelines. In contrast, ‘typical use’ measures how effective a method is for the average person who does not always use the method correctly or consistently” (Daidl). This article also points out that no researcher has yet measured the “typical use” failure rate of abstinence, and it is thus misleading to compare typical use failure rates of contraceptives to the perfect use failure rate of abstinence (Daidl).

In addition to being rather one-sided, much of the research in Shalit and Oppliger’s books is anecdotal and thus unverifiable, or employs solid statistics to draw extreme and somewhat illogical conclusions. Shalit, for example, bases much of her book on individual e-mails from girls and women rather than statistics. She describes one girl who told her in an e-mail that at least one teacher made crude sexual jokes in class, and that another “advised her that ‘sex is something you should be doing after the third date or get ready to be

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dumped’” (Shalit 21-22). While these incidents are certainly horrifying if true, there is no way to know if these incidents were isolated to one school or if they are a common occurrence. There is also no way to know if such statements were accepted practice at the school or if teachers received disciplinary action afterwards, since Shalit either did not follow up or chose not to share anything she learned in subsequent communication and research. Patrice A. Oppliger, on the other hand, does use statistics and verifiable data, but draws rather unlikely conclusions from said data. For example, after citing articles and research studies on the tendencies of teens to binge-drink and engage in risky sexual activity while on spring break, Oppliger refers to Natalee Holloway, the teenager who disappeared while on spring break in Aruba. The conclusion that she draws from this case, however, is rather unexpected: she blames Holloway’s mother for her daughter’s disappearance, stating that “she used poor judgment in letting her young daughter go to a foreign country known for its partying with little chaperone supervision. She asked tourists to boycott Aruba, with no mention of her responsibility in the tragic incident” (96). While this may be true, Oppliger ignores a plethora of other factors that may have been in play in this case, placing blame solely on the mother with no data to back up her attribution of responsibility.

For one of the few discussions of the sexualization of boys, see the October 2010 issue of The Watchful Eye, written by Mary Bailey and titled “The Sexualization of Boys, The Other Half of the Story.” Interestingly, although Sater’s Ilse was sexually abused by her father (a plot point that was not in the original play), she claims far less sexual knowledge than Wedekind’s Ilse when describing her time with the artists of the Priapus Club. Therefore, unlike Wedekind’s play, in which Ilse engages in consensual sex (if we believe her stories) while Wendla is raped, in Sater’s musical Wendla is the only female character to engage in consensual sex, while Ilse and Martha are raped by their fathers.

This change may have been purely practical: all of the adult female characters in Sater’s musical are played by one female actor, and all the adult men are played by one male actor. Therefore, in order to show the abortionist and Wendla’s mother in the same scene, the abortionist had to be a man. However, these practical considerations do not change the effect that such a scene might have on audience members.

Early versions of Sater and Sheik’s Spring Awakening did feature The Masked Man; in one workshop, this character was played by Michael Cerveris (Sheik and Sater, Interview by Brian Scott Lipton).
Chapter 3: Christ Deliver Us!: An Irish Catholic Spring Awakening

Four years after Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s musical version of Frank Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* premiered on Broadway, Irish playwright Thomas Kilroy created his own adaptation of the German play, titled *Christ Deliver Us!* (2010), which premiered at Dublin’s Abbey Theatre in February 2010. Unlike Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* (2007), *Christ Deliver Us!* does not maintain Wedekind’s original setting of 1890s Germany. Instead, Kilroy’s play is set in 1940s/50s Ireland. Looking at the massive success of Sater and Sheik’s musical, one might ask why Kilroy would make such a choice. Why not leave the action of the play in 1890s Germany? Or, if Kilroy felt compelled to change the setting, why choose sixty years ago in Ireland? Why not the present?

Part of Kilroy’s motivation lies in his own history—he states in an *Irish Times* article that he drew on his “growing up in 1950s Ireland” for inspiration in writing this play (Kilroy, “Adaptation”). Kilroy’s personal upbringing, however, cannot be the only explanation. After all, the piece was performed by Ireland’s national theatre, the Abbey Theatre, whose artistic leadership must have had a reason for choosing to produce this play in 2010. I believe that at least some of their motivation lies in what was going on in Ireland in the early twenty-first century, particularly surrounding the Catholic Church.
Catholicism is the main religion in Ireland—according to the 2006 Irish census, 86.83% of the population identifies as Roman Catholic. Previous censuses showed even higher percentages of the population identifying as Catholic, with a high of 94.86% in 1961 (Central Statistics Office Ireland, “Census 2006” Table 1). Because of this religious dominance, the Catholic Church has traditionally played a large role not only in everyday life in Ireland, but also in creation and implementation of government policy. For example, Éamon de Valera, head of the Irish government from 1932 to 1948, consulted a Catholic archbishop when writing the 1937 Constitution (Bacik 29). As a result, in spite of some religious language being removed in the 1970s, the Constitution is still clearly influenced by Catholic doctrine. The Preamble, for example, begins “‘In the name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred’” (30). In addition, the majority of Irish schools are run by the Roman Catholic Church, as are many schools and homes for impoverished children, children whose parents are unable to care for them, and youths convicted of criminal offenses (34-35, 51-54). All of these facts demonstrate the Catholic Church’s huge influence over daily life in Ireland, as well as its role in the upbringing of Irish children and what moral codes are taught to them.

In spite of the fact that Ireland is still a predominantly Catholic country, the control held over the country by the Church began to decline in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In her article “How Ireland Lost Its Faith,” (2011) Patsy McGarry points out that, while the church had “unparalleled influence throughout most of the twentieth century” over the Republic of Ireland, during the end of the century “its
influence began to wane due to increased affluence and a better-educated population.”
This waning influence has manifested in several ways, including a drop in weekly mass attendance—in 1973, 52% of Irish Catholics attended weekly mass, but according to recent surveys, that percentage has dropped to 43 (McGarry). There are also fewer young Irish men entering the priesthood: one Irish archbishop said that “his archdiocese will soon have barely enough priests to serve its 199 parishes” (McGarry). According to McGarry, multiple factors have caused the decline in religious practice, including the Second Vatican Council and the introduction of free secondary education and state university grants in Ireland.

But in addition to the gradual movement away from devout Catholicism caused by these events, there was, for some, a rather sudden disillusionment with Catholicism. This drastic shift came with the release of the scandalous Ryan and Murphy reports in May and November 2009, respectively. These reports revealed that many clergy members in Ireland had consistently abused children, both physically and sexually, and that this abuse had been systematically covered up by higher-ups in the church. The Murphy report focused on Dublin’s Catholic archdiocese, while the Ryan report delved into conditions in residential institutions run by religious congregations, particularly the Christian Brothers. Although Thomas Kilroy has pointed out that he wrote *Christ Deliver Us!* before the publication of the Murphy report and that his writing was therefore not influenced by it, it is vital to acknowledge that audiences attending his play would have been aware of the report, and would inevitably have connected his play about children being educated in a Diocesan college with the contents of the report (Kilroy,
“Adaptation”). Several reviews of the play mention the recent scandals in the church, supporting the fact that these scandals would have been on audience members’ minds as they viewed Christ Deliver Us!.

Taking into account the close chronological proximity of the release of the Ryan and Murphy reports and the premiere of Christ Deliver Us!, I will focus much of my analysis in this chapter on the play’s portrayal of the effects of religion on adolescents. I will examine Kilroy’s representation of gender roles in mid-twentieth century Ireland, and how societal and religious influences—which, in Ireland, often overlap—helped to form these gender expectations. I will also look at the relationship between school and home life in 1950s Ireland and Kilroy’s portrayal of teenagers’ access to liminal space in which to transition from childhood to adulthood. In looking at these elements of the play, I will analyze ways in which Kilroy may be commenting on and critiquing Irish society, both in the 1950s when his play is set and in 2010 when it premiered.

The Church and the Bedroom: Religion, Gender, and Sexuality in Christ Deliver Us!

Gender roles and expected gender performance for both the female and male characters in Christ Deliver Us! are heavily influenced by religion and by Irish governmental policy (which, as mentioned above, is largely influenced by the tenets of Catholicism). For the young women in the play, this means that they are expected to follow the teachings of the Bible, perform charitable works, and remain chaste and wholly ignorant of their own sexuality. Throughout the play, the female characters’ adherence or lack of adherence to these Catholic teachings seems to correlate with their
curiosity about and willingness to explore their own sexuality—those characters who are more devout in their religious practice do not explore sexuality, while those who question or reject Catholicism are more curious. Three characters who exemplify this correlation are Monica (who corresponds to Wedekind’s Martha), Winnie (Wedekind’s Wendla), and Vivie (Wedekind’s Ilse).

Monica is the most extreme in her adherence to religion, at least on the surface. When her friend Tess declares, “I hate that feckin’ Bible,” Monica is scandalized (Kilroy, *Christ Deliver Us!* 21). She also quickly leaves when Vivie Hackett, a girl whose family “believe[s] in nothing” and are thus presumably atheists, tries to join the girls for a conversation (24). Monica’s parents also seem to be rather devout, as indicated by the way they treat their daughter. They frequently punish her by making her sleep in a sack, which they call “mortification of the flesh” (19). By using the word mortification to describe this punishment, Monica’s parents reveal that they are (or believe they are) strictly following their religion in doling out this consequence, since in Catholicism, mortification describes the process by which an ascetic might “[slay] the disease of the soul” and thus purify himself (“Mortification”). Monica’s parents seem to believe that they are purifying their daughter of sin by punishing her.

This punishment is connected not only to religion, but also to Monica’s gender performance. Monica’s parents tell her that they are punishing her because she is a “slut” (18). Calling her a slut implies a severe violation of expected gender performance—women were expected to remain chaste until marriage, since according to Catholic teaching sex is for procreation, not recreation. Irish law backed up this belief through
policies on contraception—birth control was not readily available until the sale of condoms was deregulated in 1992 (Bacik 102). Whether or not Monica is actually sexually active, her parents’ use of the term “slut” demonstrates their belief that she has committed a sin through violating prescribed gender norms, and that she thus needs to be purified of this sin via physical punishment.

Monica also seems to believe in religiously prescribed gender roles. For example, her snubbing of Vivie, described earlier, does not stem solely from Vivie’s family’s atheism. She also leaves because, as she says, “Daddy says that [Vivie’s] a dirty—and I won’t use the second word” (23). Monica shuns Vivie, then, because Monica believes Vivie is sexually active. Monica also shuns Winnie, who was once her close friend, after Winnie becomes pregnant—when Winnie asks Monica if she’ll still be her “best friend,” Monica responds, “Me father’ll murder me when he hears about this!” and offers only to be Winnie’s “secret best friend” (48). Because Monica believes that both Vivie and Winnie have failed to adhere to Catholic expectations of young women by engaging in premarital sex, she refuses or is too scared to associate herself with them. Monica exemplifies a young woman who seems to take societal and religious gender expectations very seriously, although it is hard to tell if she actually believes in these religiously dictated rules, or if she fears parental punishment should she befriend those who break them.

Vivie is at the opposite end of the spectrum—she does not seem to care whether or not she performs her gender correctly and thus openly flouts societal norms and religious tenets. Vivie reveals that her parents are not Catholic when Winnie asks her if
it’s true that her “mother and father believe in nothing” and Vivie responds “They believe in me” (24). Based on this exchange, Vivie’s parents seem to be atheists, which means that Vivie does not have the same staunchly Catholic upbringing as the other young characters in the play. Vivie later demonstrates her rejection of prescribed gender performance when she shows up drunk and tells Mossy that she is going to Paris and is “going to be a whore” (42). She then asks him, “You want to? You know? Mess around. I’m hot” (42). Vivie’s lack of adherence to Catholicism correlates with her willingness to explore her sexuality, even though such exploration blatantly violates expected gender performance for young Irish women in the 1950s.

Winnie is somewhere in between Monica and Vivie. In the first scenes of the play, she seems devoted to her religion and does not really explore her sexuality. She demonstrates her religious adherence when she tells her friends Tess and Monica:

   He said something terrible to me, Michael Grainger. It was so terrible—I shouldn’t be saying it now but he said I could broadcast it to the whole wide world for all he cared. He said he didn’t believe in anything at all. God or Heaven or Hell or anything. He said there was nothing out there in the sky. Just all empty. I felt this icy coldness come into me when he said that. I felt I was frozen stiff even though the sun was still shining up there in the heavens. (21-22)

Winnie is so deeply affected by Michael’s (Kilroy’s version of Melchior) professed atheism that she experiences her horror physically, through the “icy coldness” that she feels. This extreme negative reaction to a peer not believing in God implies that Winnie herself does believe in God quite strongly. She demonstrates her devotion to Catholicism again when she is talking to Michael. He asks her about the work that she does for the elderly, and she tells him he is not supposed to know about it, saying that she took “a vow. Like the nuns. To keep it a secret. That way it’d be—works a’charity” (29).
revealing that, like a nun, Winnie vowed to keep her good works secret, she demonstrates her adherence to Catholic teaching, which places a high value on performing acts of charity, especially when done discreetly (O’Neill, Ryan).

Both this declaration and Winnie’s description of Michael’s atheism take place in the first half of the play, during which Winnie knows little about her developing sexuality and, though she is curious about it, she also seems scared to learn anything. For example, in one of the play’s first scenes, Winnie, like Wedekind’s Wendla, is upset that her mother wants to lengthen her dress. But unlike Wendla, Winnie says, “I want to be grown up. It’s just I want everything to stay—beautiful, like, OK?” (12) She is torn between wanting to mature and wanting to keep the beautiful “doll’s dress” that she has been wearing as a young girl (12). This ambivalence surfaces again a few scenes later, when she asks Vivie, “Have ya ever—ya know—ever been with a boy? No! Don’t answer! I don’t want to hear!” (25). She then runs away before Vivie can even try to answer. In these early scenes, when Winnie still seems devoted to Catholicism, she cannot bring herself to go against the expectations that she remain chaste and sexually ignorant, even though there are hints that she might want to violate these norms.

But as the play progresses, Winnie moves away from Catholicism. In fact, in the same scene in which she reveals her charitable works, she also reveals that she finds “most things ridiculous entirely” and asks, “If ya can’t laugh at it what hope is there?” (29-30). She does say that she is afraid of being punished for laughing at others, which implies that she has not completely rejected her previous devotion to charity, kindness, and religious teachings (30). However, the mere fact that Winnie reveals her
transgression and seems content to continue laughing in spite of potential punishment indicates that she is no longer completely devoted to following her religion to the letter.

With this decrease in religious adherence comes an increase in sexual curiosity. This curiosity takes the same bizarre path that we see in Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*. Like Wendla, Winnie asks Michael to beat her with a switch, because she knows that Monica gets beaten and would like to know what it feels like (30-31). Since Monica has revealed that her father accuses her of being a “slut” before beating her, and also revealed that her father “likes hurting [her]”, Monica’s experience and now Winnie’s take on a sadomasochistic, sexual undertone (19). Winnie and Michael’s dialogue during the beating emphasizes this aspect of the interaction. After Michael “taps her lightly with the switch,” they exchange the following lines:

WINNIE: Not that way. On me skin. I want to see what it feels like. Please!
MICHAEL: (*Wildly*) I’ll teach you please! Say please! Say please!
WINNIE: Harder! Until it hurts!
MICHAEL: Harder! I’ll give you harder, little bitch! You asked for it, didn’t you? You asked for it! (31)

Winnie’s request to be hit on her skin rather than through her clothes and her plea to Michael to hit her “until it hurts” imply that she derives some kind of masochistic pleasure from being hit. Michael, too, seems to take pleasure from beating Winnie, since he tells her to beg to be hit more and eventually begins beating her with his fists. Michael’s pleasure ends, though, when he realizes that he may have hurt Winnie—Kilroy’s stage directions dictate that eventually, Winnie “cries out and [Michael] stops, collapsing into tears. He rushes away, sobbing, head down” (31). Michael’s reaction is similar to Melchior’s in both Wedekind and Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening*—in
both pieces, Melchior flees once it dawns on him that he may have hurt Wendla.

Winnie’s reaction, however, is different—while Wendla in both versions of Spring Awakening remains silent at the end of the scene, Winnie speaks. She calls out, saying “Michael! No! Don’t go!” (31) This reaction indicates that she does not necessarily want her interaction with Michael to end, further emphasizing the idea that she may have derived some pleasure out of being beaten. Like the beating scene in Wedekind’s original, this scene is disturbing in that it shows violence as a part of developing sexuality without explicitly condemning this violence. But, condemnation or lack thereof aside, this scene does demonstrate that, as Winnie’s religious faith begins to falter, she starts to explore her sexuality and desires, albeit in a rather unhealthy way, and thus violates the gender norms of 1950s Ireland.

As the play goes on, Winnie becomes less concerned with Catholic teachings and societal expectations and more curious about her own burgeoning sexuality. She demonstrates this curiosity immediately after the beating scene described above. After Michael leaves, Winnie goes home, where her mother, Mrs. Butler, tells her that her sister Una has just given birth. Winnie laments that she does not know how babies are conceived or born, and asks her mother “Why don’t ya tell me things? Why? Why?” (32). She goes on to reveal that when she first got her period, her mother sent her to talk to the priest, who told her “to pray for all the women of the world,” even though she did not think she could pray for them all at once (32). Through this line, Winnie once again reveals that she is not fully convinced of the value of religious teachings.
This doubt surfaces again later in the scene. After Winnie’s mother tells her that she should not talk to boys because it is not “modest,” Winnie responds that she “feel[s] the strangest things going on inside a’[her]” and that she feels like she is “being taken over” (33). Winnie seems to be describing being consumed by sexual desire, which terrifies her mother—she immediately tells Winnie that she wants her to “see the priest” once again, but Winnie refuses, asking her mother to talk to her instead (33). Her mother, though, refuses to talk to Winnie about sex and conception until Winnie gets married. Here, Winnie’s doubts about religion are explicitly related to her desire to learn about her maturing body—Winnie rejects her mother’s reliance on the church and priests and instead wants actual information about sex and sexuality.

Unfortunately, Winnie’s mother never really tells her the truth about conception and childbirth. She only learns how a child is conceived by becoming pregnant after she is raped by Michael. Unlike Sater and Sheik, Kilroy did not alter Michael and Winnie’s encounter to be consensual. He did, however, change the scene to contain an element of religion. At the scene’s end (also the end of the first act), the stage directions dictate that, as Michael begins to rape Winnie, “The CANON and a line of impassive priests, soutanes and birettas, appear, looking out into the audience. The lights come down on MICHAEL and WINNIE” (44). The priests, though, are still lit, so the image that the audience is left with immediately before intermission is a line of priests looking on while Winnie screams “You’re hurting me! You’re hurting me!” (44) By ending act one with this horrifying moment, Christ Deliver Us! critiques the Catholic Church’s stance on sex and sex education. The play implies that the Church’s determination to repress and ignore the
reality of adolescents’ sexuality and desires, exemplified by Winnie’s discussion with a priest about her period and her mother’s eagerness to send her to the church rather than talk to her about sex, may lead to disastrous consequences.

This image, of clergy remaining silent and impassive during a rape, also calls to mind the Murphy and Ryan Reports on clerical child abuse in Ireland. Since these reports were released the year before *Christ Deliver Us!* premiered, they would likely have been on audience minds during the show. These reports discussed the prevalence of child abuse perpetrated by clergy or under clerical supervision, both in industrial schools and in regular parish life. One of the primary points made in both investigations were the massive efforts made to cover up abuse, both by the Catholic Church and by the Christian Brothers who ran industrial schools. The Murphy Report (2009) states: “The Dublin Archdiocese’s pre-occupations in dealing with child sexual abuse, at least until the mid 1990s, were the maintenance of secrecy, the avoidance of scandal, the protection of the reputation of the Church, and the preservation of its assets. All other considerations, including the welfare of children and justice for victims, were subordinated to these priorities” (Commission of Investigation 1.15). Since the Murphy Report, even more information has been released about Catholic authorities’ role in covering up clergy members’ indiscretions: in early May 2012, it was revealed that Cardinal Sean Brady, the leader of Ireland’s Catholics, was part of a secret meeting in the 1970s regarding Father Brendan Smyth, who twenty years later was convicted of several charges of sexually abusing children. In this meeting, then-Father Brady was given the names of several boys who had been sexually molested by Father Smyth, but rather than contact police or
warn parents, Brady kept the information secret. Although the Cardinal was called on by
many to resign, as of mid-May 2012 he had done nothing more than issue a public
apology (McDonald, “Cardinal Sean Brady issues apology”).

It is also important to note that, in addition to covering up or ignoring abuse by
priests, there were clergy members, particularly the Christian Brothers in charge of
industrial schools, who turned a blind eye to sexual abuse perpetrated by boys against
their peers. The Ryan Report (2009) stated that such willful ignorance was particularly
bad at St. Joseph’s Industrial School, Tralee, where “[a]n inadequate and indifferent
regime of supervision [by Christian Brothers] allowed older boys to prey on younger
boys” (Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse 9.308). Although the situation in Christ
Deliver Us! is not a case of peer abuse in an industrial school, or of clerical sex abuse, it
still brings to mind the problems, revealed in the Murphy and Ryan Reports, of clerical
indifference to obvious sexual offenses. By including the clergy in the rape scene, Kilroy
(intentionally or not) connects Michael’s assault on Winnie to the real-life problems
facing Ireland and the Catholic Church in 2010.

It seems, then, that religious teachings have failed Winnie—she was not allowed
to learn about her own body and sexuality, since her mother, following the Catholic
Church, refused to give her daughter any real information. It also seems that clergy
members were complicit in Michael’s rape of her, since they looked on while it
happened. Ultimately, Winnie rejects the Catholic faith, particularly after she becomes
pregnant. When she tells Monica that she is pregnant, she says that, although her mother
wants to send her to a convent to hide her, she will “never go near them nuns” (48). She
also rejects the societal norm dictating that young women should hide premarital pregnancy, a norm heavily influenced by the Catholic Church’s harsh views on premarital sex. Winnie tells Monica that, although her mother wants her to hide her pregnancy, she thinks that “[t]is better to talk about things. That way it’s out in the open…[d]oesn’t matter who knows about me. I mean it don’t matter to me…[Y]ou are what you are what you are. That’s the beginning and end of it” (47-48). Although Winnie initially followed religious teachings, even to the point of hiding her charitable works so that they would be more like a nun’s work, she now thinks that it is better to be honest, in spite of what the Church says or what her peers might think of her. Winnie has thus rejected religiously imposed silence and ignorance in favor of openness and knowledge, especially regarding sexuality and her own body.

Unfortunately, Winnie dies at the end of *Christ Deliver Us!*, as she does in both Wedekind and Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening*. Unlike either of these plays, though, she does not die via abortion. Instead, she dies giving birth to a stillborn baby on a river bank. This scene is reminiscent of several infamous incidents involving stillbirth, maternal mortality, and abortion in Ireland in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the most notable cases was that of Ann Lovett, in 1984—Lovett, a fifteen-year-old girl, died giving birth in a graveyard. Her newborn child died as well (Bacik 87). Other than the fact that Lovett died in a graveyard and Winnie dies on a riverbank, the two situations are identical. Lovett’s death, along with other maternal and infant deaths in Ireland in the late twentieth century, shed light on the myriad problems with Ireland’s contraception and abortion policies. At the time of Lovett’s death, no form of contraception was easily
accessible, and although condoms are now readily available in Ireland, the Catholic Church is still staunchly opposed to birth control in any form (Bacik 100, 102). Since the Church still has a significant influence in Ireland, especially over education, many schools are reluctant to teach students about contraception, in spite of the fact that Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) is now a required part of school curriculum (Inglis, Lessons in Irish Sexuality 63, 59). Young people therefore often do not have adequate information about birth control, should they choose to engage in intercourse.

If a young woman does choose to have sex and then becomes pregnant, she has few options since abortion is illegal in Ireland. The Eighth Amendment of the Irish Constitution, passed in 1983, states, “The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right” (Ireland). Not only does this amendment make abortion illegal in Ireland in almost every case, it has also resulted in lawmakers preventing organizations from distributing information about abortions in other countries, and stopping women from traveling internationally to have a pregnancy terminated (Bacik 113-115). For example, in 1992, a fourteen-year-old girl (referred to as “X”) became pregnant after being raped and wanted to travel to England to have an abortion. Her parents took her, after notifying the police of what they were doing, since they wanted to use DNA from the fetus to try and identify the girl’s rapist. Once Ireland’s Attorney General found out, he got an injunction to stop X from traveling abroad to have her pregnancy terminated. Ultimately, X was allowed to have the abortion, but only because the Court found that she was suicidal as a result of
her pregnancy and that continuing the pregnancy would therefore put her own life at risk (Bacik 116-117). Although this one girl was allowed to have an abortion, the fact that X was prevented from traveling until her case was decided implied that, unless a woman’s life was at risk, not only could she not receive an abortion in Ireland, she also could not travel to a country where she might obtain a legal abortion. Ultimately this restriction was not enforceable, due to European Union regulations on freedom of travel between member states to obtain paid services. But, even if women are legally allowed to travel to terminate a pregnancy, the fact remains that such a trip is not always financially viable, especially for a very young woman.

As a result, some teenagers have resorted to extreme measures to avoid the problems and shame that accompany unwed motherhood in Ireland—there have been cases of infanticide, as well as cases like Lovett’s in which both mother and child die (Inglis, Lessons in Irish Sexuality 1). By altering Wedekind’s story so that Winnie does not have an abortion, but instead dies in childbirth, Kilroy highlights the problems accompanying Ireland’s harsh stance on abortion, particularly the country’s reluctance to grant abortions even in case of rape. Instead of showing an abortion killing a young pregnant girl, which could potentially have added fuel to anti-abortion activists’ cause, Kilroy shows the negative effects of a young girl being forced to carry a fetus to term. By showing Winnie’s transformation from a girl who follows her religion fairly devoutly to a young woman who questions the Church’s forced sexual ignorance and ultimately dies in childbirth after being raped, Kilroy critiques the repression of adolescent sexual desires imposed by the Catholic Church and Irish society.
The young men in *Christ Deliver Us!*, particularly Mossy (Kilroy’s version of Moritz) and Michael, also demonstrate this critique of religious sexual repression. Mossy and Michael clearly have very different feelings about both religion and sex. Mossy is the more devout of the two, although he does still question his faith at times. He is also much less comfortable with sex than Michael. His discomfort with sex is indirectly linked to religion. After asking Michael to write a description of sex for him and then telling Michael that he once saw a naked woman, Mossy “jumps up nervously” and flees on his bicycle, telling Michael that he has to “go to Confession” (23). Although we later learn that he confessed to cheating on an exam, not to any sinful sexual feelings, the fact that he runs nervously to Confession directly after discussing sex, not directly after discussing his cheating, implies that his guilt over talking about sex and nudity is the primary factor driving him to Confession. This close relationship between religious guilt and sex is present throughout this scene, as well as in other interactions between Mossy and Michael. For example, when Mossy and Michael discuss masturbation, shortly before Mossy flees for Confession, Mossy reveals that he does masturbate, but it “[m]akes [him] feel terrible afterwards” (18). Again, by satisfying his own sexual curiosity and desire, Mossy feels that he has committed a sin.

The boys’ teachers, who are all priests, reinforce this idea of sexual knowledge and desire as a serious sin in their discussions of sexual writing and pictures discovered in the male students’ possession. Shortly after the exchange between Michael and Mossy described above, we see a conversation between Father Joseph and the Canon, the head of the Diocesan College attended by the boys in the play. Father Joseph has come to the
Canon to tell him that Mossy confessed to sneaking into a priest’s office to change his exam papers. He also brings up the fact that there is “[b]odily filth” infesting the College (26). Although he does not specify exactly what he means here, it seems likely that he is talking about sex and sexual knowledge. Father Joseph is very focused on these problems of bodily filth, almost to the point of obsession—while the Canon spends most of the scene trying to decide what to do about Mossy’s cheating and discussing the nicknames given to the priests by students, Father Joseph insists on returning to the problem of sex, asking, “But what about the filth, Canon? The filth!” (27)

He continues to harp on the “filth” in the College during a teachers’ meeting. At this meeting, he reveals pictures of naked women that some of the boys have torn from magazines. The main evidence he has of the students’ filthy minds, though, is the essay describing sex that Michael wrote for Mossy, which Father Joseph calls “a book of fornication” written by “[a] depraved scut” (38). Based on this harsh language, Father Joseph seems intent on ridding the school of this depravity, presumably by severely punishing Michael. Interestingly, his opinion is the most extreme—the other priests seem more shocked at what has happened than angry or out for revenge. But the fact remains that Michael is punished by the clergy at his school for writing about sex, supporting the relationship between religion and sexual repression that is present throughout Christ Deliver Us!

Michael’s own religious beliefs also emphasize this idea. When Mossy asks Michael how he has learned so much about sex, Michael responds, “Books mostly. About evolution and stuff. It’s made me into an atheist” (22). Kilroy draws a direct
connection between Michael’s learning the truth about sex and biology and his disillusionment with religion. Interestingly, although Michael’s lack of religious belief and his sexual curiosity and knowledge are closely linked, like Winnie’s are, Michael does not receive the harshly punitive consequences that Winnie does for violating the societal norms of religious devotion and sexual ignorance. He is briefly punished for his violation by going to an Industrial School, and he does feel some guilt about sex later in the play, since he believes that he caused Mossy’s death by sharing sexual knowledge with him. But these consequences are minute compared to the fact that Winnie dies from a premarital pregnancy caused by Michael’s raping her.

These differing consequences illustrate the gender-based double standard that has historically existed in Irish society. For example, female prostitutes have traditionally been penalized for selling sex, while their male clientele are not punished for purchasing it (Bacik 149). This disparity stems partly from a reluctance to leave behind Victorian moral standards, which dictate that “men’s sexual impulses had to be indulged,” while women were degraded by sexual experience (149). This double standard is also evident in early to mid-twentieth century sentencing laws for sexual assault. Until 1981, the sentence for sexual assault against a woman was significantly less than the sentence for “indecent assault” on a man (which was a similar crime, but with a different name) (Bacik 142). These different penalties for offenses against women and men implied that, for some reason, forcing a woman into sex was not as bad as forcing a man to engage in homosexual intercourse. The different names given to assault against men and women also caused issue since it meant that, until laws were changed in 1990, only offenses
against women could be called rape. This may not seem significant, but it becomes problematic when viewed in conjunction with certain contentious elements of rape trials. These contested elements are the ease with which defense attorneys can introduce evidence that a “victim has had sexual intercourse with others, or with the defendant, at some time in her life prior to the rape” and “the warning traditionally given by the judge to the jury that it is dangerous to convict on the uncorroborated evidence of a rape victim (‘the corroboration warning’)” (146). The Irish legal system seems rife with ways to lead a jury to think that a rape victim (who, until 1990, was always a woman) was “asking for it” by being sexually promiscuous, or to think that she was lying about being raped, perhaps in order to preserve her reputation. Although there have been minor changes made in trial proceedings, such as recommending rather than mandating that judges give juries the corroboration warning and allowing a victim to appoint a lawyer to contest sexual history being admitted as evidence, these changes are so minute that they do not make much of a difference in the overall atmosphere of the trial. This bias against (traditionally female) victims is clearly echoed in Michael and Winnie’s very different fates in Christ Deliver Us!

Sexuality, then, is not as significant a component of gender performance for young men as it is for young women in Christ Deliver Us! The primary measure of success in gender performance for men seems to be academic success. This comes across most clearly through Mossy. Although Mossy is concerned about sex, his primary problem in Christ Deliver Us! is school. During his first conversation with Michael, he reveals that he has snuck into a teacher’s room in order to correct his answers on an exam
that he failed (16). Although this admission is similar to events in Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*, Kilroy made two significant changes. First, while Moritz sneaks in to the teachers’ conference room to confirm that he passed an exam, Mossy sneaks in and actually changes answers on an exam that he has failed, indicating that he is in a more dire position academically than Moritz. Second, Kilroy moves this exchange earlier in the play—while Wedekind’s Melchior and Moritz discuss sex and then, a couple scenes later, Moritz reveals that he snuck in to the conference room, Kilroy makes this academic issue one of the first topics that Mossy and Michael discuss. This alteration increases the importance of Mossy’s academic struggles, implying that they are as significant, if not more significant, than his struggles with his developing sexuality.

Mossy’s suicide confirms the significance of his academic struggles, since unlike Wedekind or Sheik and Sater, Kilroy makes Mossy’s suicide primarily about his problems in school and his father’s resulting disappointment rather than about his sexual failure. Kilroy does this in several ways, one of which is to divide Mossy’s suicide from his conversation with Vivie. In both Wedekind’s and Sheik and Sater’s *Spring Awakening*, Moritz runs into Ilse while he is contemplating suicide. Ilse propositions Moritz for sex—overtly in Wedekind, more subtly in Sheik and Sater—and Moritz rejects her offer. He kills himself immediately after his conversation with Ilse, which implies that, even if academic failure was his original motive, his sexual failure is also a large factor in his suicide. In *Christ Deliver Us!*, though, Mossy runs into Vivie, Vivie suggests that they have sex, Mossy declines, Vivie leaves, and then Mossy walks offstage (43). Immediately after this scene, Michael rapes Winnie, there is an act break, and then,
in the first scene of act two, Mossy kills himself. The time that elapses between Mossy’s refusal of intercourse with Vivie and his suicide loosens the connection, present in Wedekind’s and Sheik and Sater’s pieces, between Mossy’s suicide and his failure to be a sexually aggressive male.

The actual scene of Mossy’s suicide also emphasizes the fact that he does not kill himself over sexual failure, but rather because he feels he has disappointed his father through his academic failure. When act two begins, Mossy is trying to open a large locked wardrobe while talking to himself. As he tries key after key, he wonders to himself, “Maybe Daddy just keeps the right keys in his pocket? Keeps everything in his pockets. In his waistcoat, maybe, steal in at night, root around. Oh, Daddy, Daddy, Daddy! No, Daddy! (Daddy voice) No son of mine—no son of mine will let me down in front of everyone. Hah! Fuck him, anyways” (45). The use of the term “Daddy” makes Mossy seem very childlike, and his cry of “No, Daddy!” followed by a stern imitation of his father implies that he fears punishment for not living up to his father’s expectations. This fear is justified by an earlier remark from the Canon: when told about Mossy’s cheating on an exam, the Canon says, “That father of his will have a fit. Not a nice man, that father. Dangerous” (26). It is clear, then, that Mossy is rightly afraid of what his father will do to him, since Mossy has let his father down by failing academically and thus failing to be the model son that his father wants.

The image onstage when Mossy finally manages to open the wardrobe strengthens the link between his suicide and his relationship with his father. The stage directions describe the inside of the wardrobe:
The interior is like a lit shrine and the boy shrinks before it. A full army officer’s uniform hangs inside, facing out like a disembodied presence. This is achieved by the way the cap is placed above the uniform jacket and the high polished boots and leggings below the ballooning knee-pants. Draped across the uniform is a Sam Browne belt and holster. He [Mossy] reaches for the holster, flaps open the cover, and removes the revolver. Pause. He pushes the gun into his chest, bending over. As the lights come down: a single shot. (46)

This army uniform, placed to resemble “a disembodied presence,” stands in for Mossy’s father, who the Canon has already mentioned is in the army (26). This image emphasizes Mossy’s father’s power over Mossy, particularly through the description of the wardrobe as a “lit shrine,” suggesting an object of worship, and the direction that Mossy “shrinks before” the uniform. In addition, by having Mossy use his father’s gun, Kilroy gives Mossy’s father a much more active role in his son’s death than Wedekind or Sheik and Sater give to Moritz’s father. It is almost as though Mossy’s father has killed Mossy for failing academically.

The dire consequences of Mossy’s failure may be a reference, though subtle, to the dominance of men in the Irish workforce at the time of Christ Deliver Us!. A man was expected to be the family breadwinner—Ivana Bacik points out that “the stereotypical ‘Irish family’” consists of a housewife, several children, and “a stern but kindly Father who goes out to work everyday and comes home tired but smiling” (60). Irish census records confirm that men would likely be the economic head of household—the 1951 census shows that 86% of men were gainfully employed, while only 31% of women were (Central Statistics Office Ireland, “Census 1951—Volume 3” Part 1, Table 1). This means that Mossy would be expected to support a family someday and would thus need to be successful and industrious. By failing in school, he fails to live up to the
expectations of success that go along with being a future breadwinner, which was the role assigned to young Irish men at the time. The numbers of men and women in the workforce are still rather disparate, although they have evened out a bit—according to the 2006 Irish Census, 52% of women were working, compared with 71% of men. Kilroy, then, may be commenting not only on the pressure put on boys in the 1950s to succeed, but also a similar pressure on young men in twenty-first century Ireland.

Through the young male and female characters in *Christ Deliver Us!*, Thomas Kilroy demonstrates the complicated and problematic gender performance expected of men and women in 1950s Ireland. He shows the societal pressure to adhere to religious teachings, and the subsequent repression of sexuality, especially for young women. He also portrays the high academic expectations and stringent home environment that lead Mossy to kill himself. By showing these narrow roles and the consequences given to young people who step out of these roles, Kilroy offers a commentary on the society and policies of the Ireland in which he grew up, as well as the Ireland of the present.

**Liminal Space and Adult Mentorship in *Christ Deliver Us!***

Like Wedekind’s and Sheik and Sater’s *Spring Awakening*, *Christ Deliver Us!* shows a society that allows teenagers little to no liminal space in which to transition from childhood to adulthood. Kilroy portrays this repression primarily through the harsh school environment, first at the Diocesan College attended by Michael and Mossy and then at an Industrial School. The play’s opening scene shows a group of schoolboys at the Diocesan College being punished for smoking by receiving “a caning on the
hands…six wallops to each hand” from Father Joseph (11). This corporal punishment continues later in the play—Father Joseph again canes three boys on the hands for smoking, this time performing the punishment in front of the entire school (36). By doling out humiliating and physically painful consequences for relatively minor offenses like smoking, the priests teaching at the Diocesan College seem willing to go to whatever lengths necessary to ensure that students are obedient and stay in line. The forced obedience seems even harsher when the characters’ ages are taken into account—while Wedekind’s and Sheik and Sater’s teen characters are thirteen or fourteen, Kilroy’s characters are fifteen or sixteen. It seems like these teens should have some freedom and independence, since they are older, but they do not.

This strict and repressive school environment was not uncommon in Ireland in the 1950s. In an article about Christ Deliver Us!, Thomas Kilroy writes that physical abuse by both teachers and parents “was violent and systemic in [his] school days. Like all abuse this violence seeped through the whole culture” (“Adaptation”). The Ryan Report, mentioned earlier, had recently revealed the prevalence of physical abuse in church-run institutions. Although most of the play’s school scenes take place in a regular church-run school, not in one of the institutions for criminal or destitute children mentioned in the Ryan Report, it is still important to note that audiences and critics would likely have been primed to notice any and all instances of corporal punishment or physical abuse carried out by clergy members.

It is also vital to point out that a few of the play’s later scenes do take place in an Industrial School like those studied in the Ryan Report. In these scenes, Kilroy shows a
Christian Brother “carrying a leather strap,” which he uses to hit a boy who is waiting in line for a shower, in order to indicate to that boy that it is his turn (51-52). Another Christian Brother “beats [a] boy about the head” for being unable to answer a question (58). Both these punishments penalize boys for not following orders, and thus not being obedient and submissive to the older men around them. By showing corporal punishment being used by adults to maintain control over children and teens, Kilroy shows a repressive environment that was not unlike the reality of mid-twentieth century Irish school life, both in regular schools and institutional schools.

In addition to showing repression of children through physical punishment, Kilroy also shows repression of young people through forced ignorance. Winnie, for example, finds it impossible to learn the truth about several issues throughout the play. When she asks her mother about sex and procreation, her mother quickly tells her to go to a priest rather than give her any facts (32-33). Later in the play, when Winnie has become pregnant and is trying to figure out what will happen when she gives birth and after, her mother is extremely reluctant to tell her that Michael’s parents have paid for a doctor and for some sort of provision after the baby is born—presumably adoption fees (56-57). Mrs. Butler only tells Winnie the truth because Winnie refuses to give up, yelling “I have to know! I have to know!” (56).

Winnie’s frustration at knowledge being withheld from her has a negative effect on her transition from childhood to adulthood, since it seems to make her less likely to talk to her mother and thus leaves her without a support system to make this transition. When she first asks her mother how children are conceived, for example, she responds to
her mother’s resistance by asking “Why won’t ya talk to me?” (33) When Mrs. Butler tells Winnie that she will talk to her when she gets married, Winnie responds, “I don’t want to get married! I’m not even sixteen!” and then runs offstage, crying (33). Winnie’s separation from her mother is highlighted when Winnie finds out that the Graingners have given her mother money. Winnie begins crying and says, “They’ve put a price on me! They’ve put a price on me!” and Mrs. Butler can do nothing but “look at her, helplessly” (57). Mrs. Butler does not know how to deal with her daughter, or how to help her mature from a young girl into the mother she is about to become.

As a result of Mrs. Butler’s refusal or inability to help her daughter mature and to share information with her, Winnie ends up giving birth and dying alone on a riverbank (61). Again, it is impossible to say for certain that Winnie’s ignorance caused her death—it is conceivable that, even if she had known how childbirth would occur and was willing to have her mother there with her rather than pushing her away, she still might have died in the process. And, of course, Winnie’s death corresponds to Wendla’s death in Wedekind’s original play. But, regardless of these facts, there is still a clear relationship between the ignorance forced upon Winnie by her mother, Winnie’s frustration with her mother at this lack of knowledge, and her final decision to give birth alone rather than with a doctor or Mrs. Butler by her side.

Winnie’s ignorance also reflects the reality of Irish sex education (or lack thereof) in the 1950s. In Lessons in Irish Sexuality (1998), Tom Inglis points to a study done in the 1970s on sex in Ireland. One woman interviewed said, “I became pregnant with the first child and I don’t even know how. The same with the second child. When I was
having the third this woman lent me this book *Everywoman*. That was the first I ever really learnt about sex”’” (3). Another survey, published in the 1990s, revealed that only about 49% of women had received sex education, and that only 15% of those between 55 and 60 (who would have been in school in the 1950s) had received sex education (3). In addition to a lack of formal sex education, young women were often not taught about sex at home—this was largely due to parents’ assumption that their children would follow Catholic teachings regarding the immorality of sex outside of marriage, and so saw no need to discuss sex and contraception (3). Unfortunately, this ignorance regarding sex did not end after the 1950s—Ireland is still struggling to implement successful sex education programs in schools. Although schools do have “Relationship and Sexuality Education” programs, there is still a reluctance to discuss “controversial issues such as masturbation, oral sex, abortion, contraception, and gay and lesbian sexuality,” which is due in large part to the lasting influence of the Catholic Church over Irish education (63). Parents, too, still seem hesitant to discuss sex with their children—in interviewing a small group of parents at one Irish school, Inglis determined that “direct communication” concerning sex and what sexual activity children might be engaging in “was not very evident between parents and children” (131). This study was, of course, based on a small sample group, but the discovery is still illuminating, especially considering the fact that, in a 1992 survey, only 23% of young adults in Ireland cited their mother as their main source of accurate information about sex (13). To some extent, then, *Christ Deliver Us!* critiques not only the sexual ignorance forced on young people in the past, but also the current sexual repression and lack of knowledge among young people.
Ignorance and knowledge play a significant role in how characters transition from childhood to adulthood in *Christ Deliver Us!* As mentioned already, Winnie is kept ignorant of the facts of life, although she desperately wants to know how children are conceived. Mossy, too, is largely ignorant of sex, since he has to ask Michael to write him an essay explaining the biology behind conception. Michael is the only character who explicitly discusses learning about sex and the positive aspects of this knowledge. After Mossy’s funeral, Michael tells Father Seamus, “I thought I was doing good! Talking to [Mossy]. Telling him things. I wanted him to be—free! And now look! They say ‘tis good. Knowing things. Understanding things. But for what? ‘Stead I was just feeding him poison. Why so? Why would something good destroy him?” (51).

Michael, then, previously believed that giving Mossy knowledge about sex would help set him free. This freedom would then help him transition from childhood to adulthood. Now, Michael believes that what actually happened was that his essay killed Mossy rather than set him free. Although Mossy’s suicide is more connected to academic failure than sexual failure, it is true that Michael’s essay does not really seem to help Mossy in any way. Mossy does not experience any freedom as a result of reading it, and is instead harshly questioned about it in an interrogation that he says is “like the bloody Koreans” (34). The ineffectiveness of this sexual knowledge may be due to the way that Mossy receives it. Rather than being able to discuss his burgeoning sexuality and learn gradually about the physical and emotional effects of maturing and developing, Mossy has a plethora of purely biological information thrust on him all at once. Although he receives knowledge, he does not have any liminal space in which to explore and question
his newly developed feelings and desires, in order to help him make the transition from being completely ignorant of sex to being completely knowledgeable about it. As a result, he cannot successfully make this transition.

Michael, though, does manage to deal with and absorb knowledge about sex and sexuality and subsequently makes the transition from childhood to adulthood, more or less successfully. He makes this transition by traveling through a liminal space not unlike the final scene of Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*. The first indication that this scene represents a liminal or transitional space is in the set. For most of the play, the set consists of two levels, one of which is “the main acting area, the world of the three young teenagers, WINNIE, MICHAEL, and MOSSY,” while the other is “used for more public scenes such as the college, the Industrial School, cemetery, etc. This area is dominated by a high, grim wall…” (11). Although Kilroy does not specify that the second level is the adults’ world, it is used for areas, like various schools, that are controlled by adults. The adults’ world and the children’s world are thus physically divided into two separate spaces. Shortly before the end of the play, though, the stage directions dictate that “[t]he large wall has now become a tower connecting upper and lower stage levels” (57). The set thus indicates that a bridge of sorts has been created between the world of the children and the world of the adults. In the final scene, after Michael escapes the Industrial School, he actually emerges from within this connecting tower—the stage directions describe his escape as follows: “He climbs down the side of the tower, to the lower stage, falling the last few feet and disappearing from view. The front of the ramp slowly opens up. The effect is of a dark cave or tunnel opening up. MICHAEL appears within and
staggers forward downstage into light” (63). Michael actually travels through a physical space of transition or liminality by emerging from behind the ramp that connects the two playing areas onstage.

The liminal elements continue when Michael meets Mossy and Father Seamus after emerging from the tunnel. As mentioned in chapter one, Arnold van Gennep describes a person in a liminal space as finding him or herself “physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds” (18). Michael’s encounter with his dead friend, as well as the unexplained appearance of his teacher, certainly seems “magico-religious” and almost supernatural. Michael also seems to be wavering between two worlds, like Melchior does in Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*—Mossy offers to take Michael to the world of the dead, while Father Seamus offers to help him to the next step in adult life. Mossy, then, like Wedekind’s Moritz, represents a chance at eternal childhood, while Father Seamus represents adulthood. This dichotomy is even clearer in Kilroy’s play than it is in Wedekind’s—while the Masked Man has been interpreted many different ways, it is fairly clear that Father Seamus represents Michael’s path to adulthood. Father Seamus explicitly tells Michael that he must “take the next step away from here,” and that he should “[b]e true to [his] own nature,” because “[t]hat’s all there is, finding one’s manhood, finding one’s womanhood, and being true to it, no matter what form it takes” (65). He also gives Michael fairly clear instructions on how he should proceed towards adulthood: “Know nothing! A clean slate! Ignorance is the start of everything, Michael. That’s what drives us forward! Questions. Always questions. We are born under the
sign of a question-mark, Michael. And that’s how we end, too. Questions, questions!” (66). Father Seamus, then, amends Michael’s previous assertion of knowledge bringing freedom—rather than knowledge, the desire to question and learn is what brings progress and perhaps even freedom. Through Father Seamus, Kilroy gives a more specific suggestion than Wedekind does of what might help young people transition from childhood to adulthood. While Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* vaguely suggests that some sort of liminality is necessary to make a successful transition, *Christ Deliver Us!* points out that it is not just liminal space that is necessary, but also an eagerness to learn new things and question what you have previously been taught.

*Christ Deliver Us!* also presents a successful transition to adulthood via liminal space as much more attainable than Wedekind’s play does, primarily through Kilroy’s use of Father Seamus in the final scene rather than the Masked Man. Kilroy has written that he changed the character and the scene because the Masked Man was “very German,” and he was “trying to tell Irish stories” (“Adaptation”). But the change has the additional effect, intentional or not, of giving the audience hope that there might be real adults in the world who can help children transition into adulthood successfully, since Father Seamus is an actual character in the rest of the play. What makes this final scene complicated, though, is that the Father Seamus of the final scene is likely not actually Father Seamus, but rather a creation of Michael’s imagination. The Father Seamus of the final scene has lost the very pronounced stutter that the character has in the rest of the play, he is dressed in layman’s clothes rather than clerical garb, and Michael “never looks directly at” him (64).
Although the changes in Father Seamus do complicate my previous suggestion of a hopeful final scene, I believe that the characteristics shared by the Father Seamus of the final scene and the “real” Father Seamus are more important than the differences between the characters. The most important of these characteristics is his sympathy towards the boys at Michael and Mossy’s school. For example, when all the teachers are discussing Michael’s essay on sex, Father Seamus does not take part in condemning the young man. Instead, he and the Canon have the following exchange:

.FR SEAMUS has risen to his feet, shaking, but at first the others pay no heed to him. He then goes into a kind of spasm and the others are shocked by his behaviour.

FR SEAMUS: Hypo-hypo-hypo-hypocrites! The lot of us! Whi-whi-whi-whited sepulchres! That’s—what-we-are!

CANON: (Kindly) Now-now, Seamus—

FR SEAMUS: Who among us is p-p-p-pure? Who ca—a-can ca-ca-ca-cast the first stone? Which of us is fi-fi-fi-fit to judge?

CANON: (Sternly) Seamus!

But FR SEAMUS has become even more frantic. He throws off his soutane and clerical collar, becoming a shivering old man in a ragged white shirt and braces. FR SEAMUS: Hi-hi-hi-hiding under the black! Hi-hi-hiding our transgressions, seeeeeecret sins! Off with it! Off with it! The truth! The truth will out! (39)

Father Seamus is clearly sympathetic towards the boys and refuses to side with his colleagues who want to repress any hint of sexuality. He continues to be kind to his pupils when he speaks to Michael about Winnie after he has officiated Mossy’s funeral. Father Seamus tells Michael, “Go to the girl! Tell her that you will—that you will stand by her in love! Through th-th-th-thick and th-th-th-thin! Then so-so-so-something may grow out of all this hell” (51). Therefore, even though the character appearing in the final scene is likely not actually Michael’s teacher, Father Seamus’s attitude throughout the play as a whole indicates that he could potentially serve as a sympathetic mentor to help
his pupils transition from childhood to adulthood. By using a version of this character instead of the Masked Man in the final scene, Kilroy suggests that liminality and a successful transition to adulthood are attainable and realistic.

Of course, Kilroy’s portrayal of Michael successfully transitioning to adulthood contains the same problem that Wedekind’s portrayal of Melchior does—part of this supposedly successful transition is his rape of Winnie. Kilroy, though, does address this problem to some extent. As soon as Michael emerges from the tunnel in the final scene, the stage directions state, “Behind him walks the figure of a white-faced WINNIE in a simple dress. She remains some distance behind him, looking at him. She finds a place to one side, never taking her eyes off him from now until the end of the play” (63). In the play’s last moments, as Michael is about to leave, it looks as though he “might be about to acknowledge the presence of WINNIE who is still looking at him. But he walks past her without seeing her and exits. She looks after him and then slowly follows him and the play ends” (66). By having Winnie follow Michael offstage, Kilroy implies that her presence, and by extension, a reminder of what Michael did to her, will remain with Michael for the rest of his life. Although it is still problematic that Michael rapes Winnie and does not suffer any real or lasting consequences for it, Kilroy does at least imply that, just because a teenager has access to liminal space and is willing to question and learn, he does not automatically make a healthy transition to adulthood. Michael’s past crime will presumably affect his future.
Conclusion

At first glance, Thomas Kilroy’s *Christ Deliver Us!* may seem focused on critiquing Ireland’s past. It is, after all, based on a play set in the late nineteenth century, and Kilroy set his adaptation in the 1950s rather than 2010, when the play premiered. Kilroy does draw out troublesome aspects of Ireland’s past, but more notable is his implicit commentary on Ireland’s present. Through Winnie’s character, Kilroy shows the sexual repression and lack of sex education that, though improved slightly since the 1950s, are still problems in Ireland due to reluctance to implement Relationship and Sexuality Education programs. He also shows, through Mossy, the expectation that a young man should be the breadwinner in a family. Again, though this has improved slightly, there is still significant disparity in the percentage of men and women in the Irish workforce.

Perhaps the most obvious commentary on current Irish society, though, comes through Kilroy’s portrayal of clergy. Although Kilroy does not explicitly mention the Church’s cover-ups of physical and sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy members as revealed in the Murphy and Ryan Reports of 2009, the fact that these reports had recently been released when Kilroy’s play premiered means that audience members would likely have connected the priests in *Christ Deliver Us!* to those priests discussed in the reports. *Christ Deliver Us!* , while not delivering a heavy-handed or blatant message about clerical abuse, does clearly critique those clergy who are intent on keeping pupils in line via physical abuse, as well as those who desperately want to repress any hint of sexual desire or knowledge revealed by male students. At the same time, though, Kilroy shows a
glimmer of hope through his final scene. By using a version of Father Seamus as a mentor to guide Michael to adulthood, Kilroy suggests that there may be a possibility for real-life teachers or priests to guide young men successfully to maturity. But even though Kilroy’s final scene has a mostly hopeful tone, there is also a note of warning. This caution comes through Winnie’s following Michael offstage, which implies that he will eventually have to deal with the consequences of having raped her. Through this final scene, Kilroy creates a more nuanced and, arguably, a more realistic vision of attaining adulthood through liminality and guided mentorship than either Wedekind or Sheik and Sater. Although much of Kilroy’s play serves as a critique of Irish society, both past and present, he ends with a somewhat hopeful vision for the future of Irish adolescents.


2 In addition to showing Father Joseph’s obsession with ridding his school of “filth,” this scene also suggests that Father Joseph may not be the most scrupulous priest, since after hearing Mossy’s confession, he forces Mossy to repeat what he has said outside the confessional, so that Father Joseph may repeat it to the Canon (25).

3 This exchange is quite similar to one that is included in Eric Bentley’s translation of Frank Wedekind’s *Spring’s Awakening*. The exchange, which takes place while the teachers are interrogating Melchior about the essay he has written on sex, reads as follows:

STICKYTONGUE: B-b-but you might as well make the b-b-boy responsible for bb-being b-b-born! Gave serious th-th-thought to serious series of events, wrote seriously about them! Had the m-m-makings of a N-na-Natural Scientist!

FLYKILLER: I am a Natural Scientist and I have NEVER written about such a series of events!

STICKYTONGUE: I f-f-feel compelled to st-st-state that the lad is g-g-going through a tr-tr-transition during which N-n-nature f-f-forces such m-m-materials into the foreground!

FLYKILLER: You need to have the frontal cavity of your cerebrum drained!

STICKYTONGUE: When you and I were t-t-together in s-s-school you made counterfeit money which I-I-later you s-stole from the b-b-boy’s p-p-pocket!

FLYKILLER: Onanism! That’s what you did! O—

SUNSTROKE: Oh! Oh!

CULPLE: Oh! Oh! Oh!

ALL TOGETHER: Oh!

STICKYTONGUE: Which of us didn’t? (55-56)
The similarity between Father Seamus’s lines and Stickytongue’s, as well as Stickytongue’s stutter, suggests that Kilroy was likely familiar either with Bentley’s translation or with the 1894 version of Wedekind’s text which contains this exchange, according to Bentley (55n).
Conclusion

Frank Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* was controversial when Wedekind wrote it in 1891, and its themes of adolescent sexuality and forced sexual repression remain contentious to this day. When Toronto’s CentreStage Theatre produced Wedekind’s play in 1986, using teenage actors instead of young adult professionals to play the adolescent roles, hundreds of people walked out, horrified by what some called “grotesque” and “revolting” content (“Audiences leaving controversial play”). When asked why the play was so shocking to modern audiences, CentreStage’s artistic director Bill Glassco said, “The fact we tell our children about sexuality now has not changed things very much. The level of hypocrisy in our society and the fact that children still contemplate suicide because they don’t understand the world they are being offered, means the play still has great impact. We talk more about sex now, but we are no wiser about it” (“A shocking awakening for spring theatre-goers”). Although almost thirty years have passed since that controversial production, some would say that we are still no wiser about sex, sexuality, and how to help adolescents come to terms with the transition from childhood to sexual and emotional maturity. Two twenty-first century adaptations of Wedekind’s play—Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* and Thomas Kilroy’s *Christ Deliver Us!*—clearly demonstrate the continued relevance of Wedekind’s critique of societal repression of adolescent sexual desires.
As I have discussed in this thesis, Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*, Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening*, and Kilroy’s *Christ Deliver Us!* all provide a commentary on and critique of treatment of adolescents. Each piece does so differently, focusing on the specific issues facing adolescents in the culture in which the play was written and first produced. Wedekind focuses on the extreme repression of teenagers in Wilhelmine Germany, highlighting both parents’ and teachers’ reluctance to give children factual information about their developing bodies. He also emphasizes the restrictive school environment of the late nineteenth century German Gymnasium, largely through the teachers. He portrays them as extreme caricatures in order to critique the real priorities of Gymnasium teachers, who were notorious for being more concerned with academia and bureaucracy than they were with the well-being of their adolescent pupils.

Steven Sater and Duncan Sheik bring twenty-first century American culture into the mix, while still maintaining Frank Wedekind’s original setting of 1890s Germany. Sater and Sheik set these two worlds next to each: as Sater writes, “[T]he scenes set out the world of nineteenth-century repression, while the songs afford our young characters a momentary release into contemporary pop idiom” (Preface ix). The songs, then, give the adolescents a place to vent the frustration, sexual desire, anger, and sadness that they cannot speak about in their real lives. Although this contrast between nineteenth-century repression and the freedom of contemporary rock may make it seem that Sater and Sheik are singing the praises of modernity while critiquing the past, they are in reality commenting on the sexual repression that was still rampant in 2006. After all, for fiscal year 2005 the government allocated over $200 million to abstinence-only education,
essentially giving communities and states money not to teach teenagers about birth control or STI prevention (United States, Department of Health and Human Services 82). Through the contemporary rock songs, particularly the final song, “The Song of Purple Summer,” Sater and Sheik present an idealistic (perhaps impossibly so) view for a future in which teenagers can be free from sexual repression, while simultaneously critiquing policies and societal attitudes towards adolescent sexuality in 2006 America by comparing them to those of 1890s Germany.

Thomas Kilroy re-sets Wedekind’s play in 1940s/50s Ireland, which makes it abundantly clear that he is critiquing Irish views on adolescent sexuality. He highlights the close link between the dominance of Catholicism in Ireland and the prevalence of sexual repression by showing Michael and Mossy’s teachers, Catholic priests, condemning sexual desires and urges. Kilroy also critiques the Church’s reputation for covering up sexual abuse by showing several priests looking on and doing nothing as Michael rapes Winnie. But, like in Sater and Sheik’s musical, Kilroy’s setting has the potential to be deceptive—while Kilroy set his play in the past, the piece critiques societal attitudes and problems of both the past and the present. This critique of present-day Ireland becomes especially apparent when we look at the Murphy and Ryan Reports, both released in 2009, the year before Christ Deliver Us! premiered—both documents revealed myriad instances of child abuse perpetrated by clergy, either in their parishes or in church-run juvenile institutions. In almost all cases, this abuse was systematically covered up by Church officials. Such abuse went on well past the 1950s and its effects are still being felt in Ireland today. Although Kilroy has been quick to point out that he
wrote *Christ Deliver Us!* before the release of the Murphy Report, the fact remains that when Irish men and women went to see his play in early 2010, they would likely have had both reports on their minds and thus viewed the production in the context of the information revealed in the reports. In addition to these issues, Ireland, like the United States, is still figuring out its sex education policies—although Relationship and Sexuality Education programs have been implemented in Ireland, they often do not cover controversial topics like masturbation, abortion, and contraception. *Christ Deliver Us!* thus takes Wedekind’s themes and, by re-setting the story, uses these themes to comment on the many issues surrounding teen sexuality in Ireland.

Although each of these three plays deals with issues of adolescence specific to the time period in which it was written and first produced, many of the problems critiqued span across all three pieces. One of these shared issues is teens’ access to liminal space, or a space in which to transition from childhood to adulthood. All three plays not only critique society’s unwillingness to allow adolescents this transitional space, they also give teenagers some way to access liminality. In Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening* and Kilroy’s *Christ Deliver Us!*, this liminal space comes via the final scene. In both plays, the final scene shows Melchior/Michael being given a choice—he may remain a child forever by killing himself and going with Moritz/Mossy, or he may enter adulthood by going with the Masked Man/Father Seamus. There are certainly important differences between these two scenes, most notably Kilroy’s use of Father Seamus rather than the new character of the masked man, but the basics are the same: Melchior/Michael inhabits a liminal space
between childhood and adulthood that seems like a different, almost supernatural world, and only Melchior/Michael gets the chance to access this space.

Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening* takes a different approach to liminality. Rather than limit transitional space to only one scene, Sater and Sheik essentially make all their songs liminal. Although there is no way to know if they intended to create this liminal space, the fact remains that every song gives one or more teenage characters the chance to break out of the nineteenth century world in which they are forced to remain ignorant and childlike and are not allowed any room to explore their sexuality and transition to adulthood. In the songs, the teens can explore their desires and angst in their own space, separate from the “real world” of the scenes. In this liminal space of song, the teens can also take power, at least temporarily, from the adults. Sater and Sheik, then, give all the teen characters the chance to experience liminality, although they never show a character definitively passing into adulthood as both Wedekind and Kilroy do.

The other major issue that runs through all three plays is gender and adherence to gender roles. Each play shows the gender roles of its time period and portrays both characters who purposely violate gender norms and characters who try (but often fail) to perform their gender in the way society dictates. The plays show the fatal consequences meted out to those who violate socially sanctioned gender performance, either willingly or unwillingly. In this way, Wedekind’s *Spring Awakening*, Sater and Sheik’s *Spring Awakening*, and Kilroy’s *Christ Deliver Us!* all critique the strictness of both male and female gender norms and decry the punitive consequences assigned to those who fail to perform correctly. But at the same time, all three plays also privilege the male characters.
Of the three primary teenage characters (Melchior/Michael, Wendla/Winnie, and Moritz/Mossy), only Melchior/Michael survives in all three plays. Furthermore, in both Wedekind’s and Kilroy’s plays, Melchior/Michael is essentially absolved from raping Wendla/Winnie, since his only consequence is a brief stint in a reformatory or Industrial School. Both of these plays also privilege Melchior/Michael’s relationship with Moritz/Mossy over his relationship with Wendla/Winnie: Wedekind’s final scene focuses on Melchior and Moritz’s friendship with no appearance whatsoever from Wendla, and although Winnie does show up in Kilroy’s last scene, Michael talks only to Mossy. Winnie remains silent and unacknowledged for the entire scene. Even in Sater and Sheik’s musical, in which Wendla and Melchior’s sexual encounter is consensual rather than forced and Wendla is given equal priority with Moritz in the final scenes, male sexuality is privileged. The boys get to sing about sex while the girls sing primarily about romantic longing, and Wendla is ultimately punished for having premarital sex by being forced into a fatal abortion performed by a man. While Sater and Sheik may have intended scenes such as Wendla’s abortion to serve as a critique of twenty-first century gender norms by saying that these norms are regressive and comparable to nineteenth century gender roles, this critique is not clear enough to come through. Instead, Sater and Sheik’s musical becomes another story that allows boys and men to feel sexual desire, while women are permitted only to desire affection and romance.

This analysis begs the question—why? If these plays are about the repression of adolescents, why focus on the boys over the girls? Although there are many possible answers to this question, one of the most likely is that all of these plays were created by
The original *Spring Awakening* and *Christ Deliver Us!* are both by male playwrights, and their premiere productions were directed by men. The musical version of *Spring Awakening* had a male writer, composer, and choreographer, and its Broadway premiere was also directed by a man. It seems inevitable, then, that these pieces would focus more on the male experience than the female. But this does not mean that there is not a need for a play focusing on the female experience of dealing with adolescent sexuality. I hope that, through this thesis, I have shown the potential for theatre to be used as a critique of the sexual repression and ignorance that is too often forced on adolescents by society. With this in mind, perhaps it is time for someone to adapt Wedekind’s play anew, but this time tell the story of a Wendla who successfully navigates her adolescence and combats the sexual repression that seems to pervade societies across time and space.
Bibliography


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