WITHNAIL

AND THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION

WITHNAIL

AND THE ROMANTIC IMAGINATION
a eulogy

by

MAISIE ROBSON

The King's England Press
2010

ISBN 978.1.872438.64 1

Withnail and the Romantic Imagination
is typeset and published by
The King's England Press
Cambertown House
Commercial Road
Goldthorpe
ROTHERHAM
S63 9BL

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
MPG Biddles
24 Rollesby Road
King's Lynn
Norfolk
PE30 4LS

The publisher is pleased to record that all the photographs for this book are the work of die-hard *Withnail* fan Mr Mal Greenley. He can be contacted for photographic work at mal@greenlie.karoo.co.uk

CONTENTS

1	Introduction	**7**
2	Withnail: I feel unusual	**19**
3	Marwood: No, I don't have the time	**37**
4	Monty: We're at the end of an age	**49**
5	Danny and the minor characters: Law rather appeals to me, actually	**59**
6	No love interest, scarcely any plot? How *Withnail* works as a film	**71**
7	Withnail and pastoral: Bollocks to the Wellingtons	**89**
8	Withnail and Romanticism: Lake District Gothic	**93**
9	The Joy of Words*:* *Withnail'*s screenplay	**107**
10	The cult of Withnail: Will we never be set free?	**127**
11	The Queering of Withnail, or Paul McGann's Pants	**133**
12	The soundtrack of *Withnail and I:* an appreciation bySteve Rudd	**141**

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Withnail and I was made in 1986, directed by Bruce Robinson from his own screenplay. It follows the fortunes of two unemployed actors, Withnail and Marwood, over two weeks in the autumn of 1969. Although Marwood is never addressed by name in the film, his surname is given in the screenplay and it is legible on a telegram he receives in the course of the film. Their country holiday in a remote Lake District cottage is disastrous, largely owing to the sexual attentions pressed on Marwood by Withnail's Uncle Monty, owner of the cottage. After being stopped by the police on their way home, the pair return to London to find Danny the drug dealer has broken into their flat. It is over-run with rats and their landlord is taking them to court for non-payment of rent. Marwood learns he has been offered the lead part in a play and he moves out to take up the job, leaving Withnail behind.

First, a plot summary and some observations about the structure of the film. (Die-hard fans who know the plot and dialogue by heart might want to skip straight to the next section.)

The form of *Withnail and I* is simple and chronological, a linear plot without flash-backs. The symmetry is apparent on a

first viewing. Act I is a roughly 20-minute sequence in London; Marwood and Withnail's sojourn in the Lake District is played out over about an hour, constituting the Second Act; and the film concludes with a 20-minute Third Act back in London.

WHAT HAPPENS IN *WITHNAIL*

The thematic strands which make the film such a rich and enjoyable aesthetic experience are discussed in some detail in chapter 6, but the architecture of the plot can be simply described here.

Act I shows Marwood ill from the effect of drugs. There is a scene in Regent's Park where he expresses a desire to take a holiday in the countryside. This idea of his is the *inciting incident* of the film, that is to say it sets the plot in motion. The big scene of Act I introduces Withnail's Uncle Monty and takes place in his Chelsea flat.

Act II includes the drive to, and arrival at, Uncle Monty's cottage. Monty is again central to the biggest scene of this Act, his attempt to force himself on Marwood. Marwood's realisation that it was Withnail who set him up for this unwelcome intimacy is the *revelation* which solves the *mystery* of Withnail and Monty's off-screen chat in Chelsea. This revelation proves the *turning-point* in Marwood's relationship with Withnail.

Act III includes the calamitous drive back to London and Withnail's arrest, and another episode of illness for Marwood in the flat. The big scene of this Act, which is also the *story climax*, is the parting of Withnail and Marwood which occurs in the same setting, Regent's Park, where the plot began.

For new fans, an expanded description of key events may be useful.

Act I: London

First there is the establishing scene in the two actors' Camden Town flat. It is a Sunday morning in September 1969, around 6.20 a.m. if the little silver clock is accurate. The setting is a squalid and eccentrically furnished set of rooms. The camera plays over Marwood's young face. He is alone and appears ill at ease.

After offering Withnail a cup of tea (refused, from behind Withnail's closed bedroom door), Marwood is seen in a greasy-spoon café, reading sordid Sunday newspaper stories about sex. Marwood's commentary on the scene is given in voice-over.

Withnail appears for the first time as Marwood returns to the flat. Seizing the newspaper his flatmate has brought home, he gleefully reads aloud a newspaper article about a certain Jeff Wode, a drug-abusing athlete. The kitchen sink is in such a vile and insanitary condition that the men are almost too afraid to tackle it but an attempt is made before Withnail decides they must go out.

In Regent's Park, they look at wolves in a wired enclosure then sit aimlessly on a bench as it is four hours before the pubs open. Withnail complains about being out of work and about his health, spitting voluminously and stating he has eaten nothing for days. Marwood suggests they need to refresh themselves by leaving London and having a holiday in the country.

Back home again, Marwood is writing in a notebook with a candlewick bedspread over his knees because the flat is so cold. Withnail jeers at a newspaper article about a successful young actor, suggesting the director is using the boy for sex. Practically naked apart from his coat, Withnail then smothers himself in Deep Heat ointment in an attempt to keep warm. He demands alcohol, drinks lighter fluid and vomits on Marwood's boots. They walk to the pub together.

At the Mother Black Cap pub, Marwood persuades Withnail to phone his Uncle Monty with a view to borrowing his country cottage. Marwood is taunted by an Irishman and frightened by 'I fuck arses' scrawled on the urinal wall. There is a confrontation with the Irishman who calls them 'ponces'. Withnail tries to disown Marwood, pretending they are not friends. They both run out of the pub and down an ugly city street.

Switch to an interior scene in the bathroom of the flat. Marwood is sitting in the bath, shaving, and thinking about drugs. The voice-over is literary in tone, indicating these ideas are not spontaneous thoughts but are destined for Marwood's notebook. Withnail brings fish and chips into the bathroom and eats them seated on the toilet. Expresses his rage that no one will give him a job.

Danny the drug-dealer appears, walking out of their kitchen. He has brought a 'voodoo' doll with drugs stored in its head and a device to defeat drink-driving charges: this is as yet unexplained but appears to comprise an old washing-up liquid bottle and a length of rubber tubing. Marwood dresses in his best clothes in the background while Danny describes his idea to set up a toy-making company with his business partner Presuming Ed. Withnail tries to get free drugs from Danny and is abusive when Danny resists the idea.

That evening, they visit Withnail's Uncle Monty in Chelsea. He owns a vintage Rolls Royce and has decorated his luxurious apartment with vegetables growing in silver pots. Withnail speaks to Monty in private, out of Marwood's hearing, and gets the key to Monty's cottage.

Act II: Lake District

There is an unspecified lapse of time here before the filmed action begins – probably a few days. Then we see Marwood driving his battered Mark II Jaguar away from London, Withnail in the passenger seat, demolition taking place in the background. Withnail drinks wine out of a bottle, shouting insults at a trio of schoolgirls and a long-haired man standing by the kerb. He demonstrates Danny's device for overcoming drink-driving charges which involves refusing the breathalyser when stopped by police and giving a urine sample composed of someone else's urine; this is accomplished by Sellotaping rubber tubing to the drunken driver's penis and dispensing drug-free urine from a washing-up liquid bottle.

Darkness falls and they are lost in the Lake District in pouring rain. Withnail complains of a head-ache and won't even try to read the map. They arrive at Monty's cottage, Crow Crag, in a storm and are reduced to breaking up the furniture for firewood, it is so cold.

On the following morning, Marwood doesn't wake Withnail but walks out alone to enjoy the scenery. He tries and fails to buy fuel and food from the farm; the farmer's mother is deaf and unfriendly. He falls flat on his back in mud when returning to the cottage.

Withnail and Marwood eat a skimpy meal then, hearing the farmer passing in his tractor, chase him through the rain to ask for essential supplies. He agrees and they are triumphant. Marwood persuades Withnail to go out and dig for potatoes. Marwood is memorising a part from *Journey's End*. The farmer delivers logs and a live chicken, which Withnail kills and Marwood prepares for the oven. Withnail is excited to find a shotgun.

Withnail telephones his agent from a public phone box and angrily refuses a job as an under-study.

As they walk across the farmer's fields, Withnail carelessly leaves a gate open. A bull appears, preparing to charge, and Withnail vaults over a wall to safety leaving Marwood to chase the bull away.

They spend an evening at the Crow and Crown pub, talking to 'the General', its inebriated upper class publican. Withnail tells a variety of lies to win the General's admiration and receives free drinks in return. Jake enters and threatens them when Withnail tactlessly identifies him as a poacher and puts in an order for eels and pheasants. Once they are out of the pub, amidst beautiful scenery, Withnail stages a histrionic display of ego, boasting of his talent and cursing those who snub or thwart him.

Marwood serves a meal and Withnail complains vociferously about the vegetarian diet. As a result of his disdain for vegetables, they go 'fishing' with Monty's shotgun, Withnail trying to catch fish by shooting into a waterfall.

Jake is seen lurking near the cottage and they go to bed afraid, ending up in bed together. Uncle Monty breaks in, having driven up from London. He apologises for frightening them and goes off to sleep in the second bedroom.

Monty cooks and serves breakfast the following morning. The cottage is now clean, tidy and full of food. Monty is flirtatious with Marwood, wrapping him in an apron and attempting to embrace him as they empty the shopping bags. This makes Marwood so uncomfortable that he pretends they must leave immediately to sign on for unemployment benefit in London. Neither Monty nor his nephew like this idea.

Monty drives them to the nearest town, Penrith, in his Rolls Royce and gives them money to buy Wellington boots to replace the plastic carrier bags they have been wearing on their

feet. They drink heavily in the pub and are thrown out of the Penrith Tea Rooms for being drunk.

Back at the cottage, Monty is very angry about their churlish behaviour in Penrith and torments Marwood by pretending he is the bad influence who leads Withnail astray. A reconciliation is achieved and they prepare and eat lunch. Over the meal, Withnail talks down the threat of Jake while Marwood argues for a rapid return to London. All three go for a walk in lush, deserted countryside, Monty reciting French poetry and talking about his youth. Marwood's irritable thoughts about his host are delivered in voice-over.

That night, all three play cards for bottle-tops. Monty and Withnail, both very drunk, talk about Marwood in Latin; he listens, uncomprehending but on his guard. Withnail breaks his agreement with Marwood and insists on sleeping alone in his own bedroom (the only room with a lock on the door). When Withnail is out of the way, Monty tries to question Marwood about his sexual preferences. Making little progress, Monty apparently gives up and agrees to sleep on the couch.

Later that night, Monty breaks into Marwood's bedroom, declares his love and his determination to have sex with him, whether Marwood consents or not. It emerges that Withnail secretly told Monty that Marwood is gay: this is what persuaded Monty to lend them the cottage. Cornered and half-naked, Marwood blurts out that he and Withnail are in a long-term gay relationship. Monty apologises, weeps and retreats. Marwood bursts into the other bedroom, confronts Withnail with the lies he has told Monty and seizes the shotgun for his own use, should it become necessary.

On the morning after Monty's failed seduction attempt, Marwood reads aloud Monty's touching goodbye letter. Monty has gone home to London alone. A telegram arrives for Marwood with news about a job. He decides to drive back to London at

once, disregarding Withnail's protests that he wants to finish his meal.

Act III: London

It is dark and raining heavily. They are in the Jaguar driving back to London. Withnail is drinking and eating food off his lap while making casual attempts at navigation (there is a broken windscreen-wiper on the driver's side and Marwood can see nothing). Exhausted, Marwood goes to sleep on the back seat. Withnail starts the car and drives it recklessly despite not having a licence and not being sober. They are pursued by the police and Withnail is arrested.

In the police station, Withnail staggers around, too drunk to operate Danny's invention and spraying urine up the wall.

Returning to their Camden Town flat, Marwood and Withnail find a silent black man having a bath. He turns out to be Presuming Ed, Danny's business partner. In Marwood's bedroom, Danny is asleep in bed and has to be turned out. Danny makes a giant reefer, the 'Camberwell Carrot', and reports he has seen rats in the flat and killed them with his drugs.

Marwood goes to a phone box to call his agent, learning that he has been offered the lead role in the play, *Journey's End,* for which he was auditioned, albeit for a smaller part.

Danny delivers a monologue about London and the end of the 1960s. They all smoke the Carrot, Marwood stoned, Withnail rolling hysterically on the floor, Ed chanting mantras and laughing eerily.

Danny reports the landlord's intention to evict Withnail and Marwood for unpaid rent. Marwood discovers Danny has intercepted their dole cheques. Danny delivers his second speech about the end of the 1960s.

There is another lapse of time, of a few days perhaps, then we see Marwood, short-haired, packing a case in his bedroom. He packs two novels and the notebook recording recent events in his life and his thoughts about them.

In the sitting room, Marwood refuses a final drink with Withnail. Withnail persists in accompanying him to the station by way of Regent's Park, drinking out of a bottle as they go.

Rain is pouring down. Marwood insists they separate in the park. They both say they'll miss each other. We don't see Marwood go.

Withnail recites a soliloquy from *Hamlet* Act 2, scene 2, to an audience of wolves, then walks off.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE AND BACKGROUND TO THE FILM

The character of Withnail was played by Richard E Grant in his first major film role. The part of Marwood brought Paul McGann to the big screen after television work including the title role in a disturbing World War I drama, *The Monocled Mutineer,* written by Alan Bleasdale.

Richard Griffiths played Uncle Monty, head-hunted for the role after Bruce Robinson saw him in Alan Bennett's comedy, *A Private Function.* The role of Danny the Dealer could go to no one but Ralph Brown after he turned up at the audition fully garbed as Danny, wig and all. Michael Elphick had known writer-director Bruce Robinson at drama school, and despite being so drunk he couldn't remember which film he was in, turned in a perfect cameo performance as Jake the Poacher.

In these days of DVDs, it is easy for viewers to hit the pause button and analyse in detail the visual look of the film. The superb work of *Withnail*'s Production Designer, Michael Pickwoad, is apparent in frame after frame; his contribution has not been fully acknowledged in the literature of *Withnail* fandom.

The emotional bones of the story, a miserable holiday in the Lake District and a young man being propositioned by a powerful older one, are autobiographical. As a young actor, Bruce Robinson had played the part of Benvolio in the film of *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Franco Zeffirelli. In a Rome apartment, Zeffirelli subjected Robinson to the same sort of sexual harassment Monty inflicts on Marwood at Crow Crag.

The Lake District holiday was taken with Robinson's friend Michael Feast who intermittently shared the Camden Town flat with Robinson and glamorous unemployed actor Vivian MacKerrell, the original of Withnail. Robinson had seen an advertisement in *The Times* for an 'idyllic cottage' for the bargain rent of £10 a week and drove north with Feast in a bashed-up borrowed Jag.

Both men were cold, hungry and uncomfortable in the leaky barn they found they'd paid for, but Robinson recognised their ordeal as perfect material for a novel. He hammered it out on a manual typewriter as soon as they returned to London but never got it published. In the 1980s, Robinson laboriously rewrote the story as a screenplay and it was eventually filmed in 1986 and released the following year.

The production history of the film, and the way its release was bungled, is an oft-told tale. These difficulties fit the general template expected of films categorised as 'cult': made with parsimony, yielding almost no profit at the box-office, and only

appreciated later, attracting a wildly loyal fan-base who form a community of worshippers.

As a result of the film's slow-burning fame, its key location, Sleddale Hall in the Vale of Eden, has been hideously knocked about and damaged. The casual vandalism inflicted on this defenceless building, holy of holies in the *Withnail* cult, is the equivalent of the disrespect meted out to Robinson by the men in suits meant to be supporting his project. *Withnail and I* had a long gestation and a very painful birth, but cultists can at least console themselves that it is also immortal.

Withnail and the Romantic Imagination is an attempt to both explain and celebrate this enigmatic work of popular art. Chapters 2 to 5 examine the film's characters, particularly the central quartet of Withnail, Marwood, Monty and Danny. The mysterious figure of Withnail is the focus of much of the film's continued fascination.

Themes and characters provide the components of the film, but how does it work? Chapter 6 analyses the film in detail, exploring the creative effects achieved by skilful plotting, editing, choice of locations and set design.

Chapter 7 looks at Withnail and Marwood's picaresque progress through the Lake District and relates this rural episode to the ancient genre of pastoral literature.

Characters cannot be understood in isolation. Their behaviour makes little sense apart from their historical and geographical context and the choices contemporary life offers them. Chapter 8 explores Romanticism, the unstated philosophical premise underlying the permissive 1960s. Gothic motifs, vampire stories, confessional narratives and the concept

of the Byronic Hero can all be detected in this apparently simple but very English, very deep film.

Chapter 9 examines the vitally important contribution made by the verbally ingenious screenplay; and in Chapter 10, the nature of the *Withnail and I* cult is considered.

Chapter 11, 'The Queering of Withnail, or Paul McGann's Pants', demonstrates how the film, like a Shakespearean play, can lend itself to the most diverse of interpretations.

Chapter 12. One of Withnail's most memorable threats in the Tea Rooms is 'We'll get a fucking juke-box in here to liven all you stiffs up a bit', and the book concludes with a discussion by Steve Rudd of the film's soundtrack.

CHAPTER 2
I feel unusual: Withnail

I

Withnail and I is not fantasy. The authenticity of the shared lifestyle in that Camden Town flat has been testified to by thousands of fans who watch the film to relive their misspent youth. We therefore should be able to approach the characters naturalistically, as if they were real people met at a party or wanting to rent the spare room. Moral standards apply to realistic fictional characters just as they do to real people. Enabling us to freely make these judgements, allowing us to define and refine our own standards, is one of the valuable things art does for us.

Without Withnail, the charismatic drama queen with his weird learning and outmoded slang there would be no film. So right at the start of this book we need to ask, Who is Withnail?

Any mystery surrounding Withnail as a character cannot be assigned to vagueness on the writer's part. We know that Withnail is a month away from his 30th birthday which means he must have been born in October 1939, weeks after the outbreak of the Second World War. He is a privileged Old Harrovian with upper class tastes and a verbal delivery that shows he expects to be obeyed.

Although the film is set very specifically in late September 1969, Withnail is not a child of his time. He is as much an anachronism as Monty is. If Montague H Withnail represents

the idle rich, his nephew is the idle poor: idle by temperament and profession, poor thanks to his having fallen out with his own family for reasons that are never properly explained. A malevolent and displaced Bertie Wooster, he has stumbled into 1969 without the good sense to keep up with the aunts who might finance his self-indulgence. The frustration Withnail feels about his circumstances fuels his rage.

A vermin-infested flat-share is a far cry from the 'swinging London' of the 'beautiful people' whose dazzling progress mesmerised the media of that time. Camden Town in the sixties lacked even the fashionable down-and-out chic of places like Notting Hill. There was no self-conscious *cachet* about living in Camden, among the Irish navvies who thronged the cafés and pubs. In a few short years the area would become trendy, but in 1969 nobody lived there unless they had to. Withnail's very address proclaims him a failure.

Failure is sometimes tragic and sometimes merely pathetic. If Withnail is a tragic figure, as repeated references to *Hamlet* suggest, his tragic flaw must surely be his outdated assumption that success is his birthright, that it ought to just drop into his lap. Marwood, who knows him better than anyone else, describes him perceptively as a 'stopped clock'. 'My cousin's a QC' pulls no strings at all in this brave new world.

Debate continues to rage about Withnail's acting ability, based on the *Hamlet* soliloquy which ends the film. What is indubitable is that his ambition to be a 'star' is wildly out of step with the aspirations of late 1960s counter-culture. In 1969, young people properly attuned to the *zeitgeist* wanted to 'drop out' and live in a wigwam or take off to the Hebrides in a gypsy caravan. The trendy pose was to scorn power trips and hierarchies. Public school-educated bohemians were common in late-60s London but Withnail isn't one of them. At nearly-30, Withnail is not only not fashionable, he is no longer young either. In fact there are no

young people in this film at all, apart from the schoolgirls who are viewed *en passant* through a car window on the journey to the Lakes.

His clothes are even less trendy than his attitudes, and although drugs get his immediate attention, neither rock 'n roll nor sex interest him. Withnail's lack of interest in women is apparent throughout the film. Parting from Marwood he repeats the final line from Prince Hamlet's soliloquy, emphasising a lack of enthusiasm for women. Earlier, disappointed by his agent, he expressed loathing for Chekhov's plays because they are 'full of women staring out of windows, whining about ducks going to Moscow'. An efficient portmanteau insult, this, dismissing women, Chekhov (*The Seagull, Three Sisters)* and Ibsen (*The Wild Duck)* at a stroke.

Withnail is not, then, a trendy sixties drop-out but a would-be success story who is offended and outraged to be left behind in the race. Even Marwood's role in a worthy-sounding little theatre in Manchester is more in keeping with the times than Withnail's grandiose Hollywood-style dreams. Withnail jeers at Marwood for his willingness to accept a small role in a small theatre, and angrily rejects his agent's offer of an understudying job. Patience is for the *hoi polloi* and compromise is not Withnail's style. His uncle understands him perfectly: 'You're incapable of indulging in anything but pleasure' Monty states, when Withnail claims improbably that he doesn't know how to peel vegetables. Withnail's grievance-fuelled outrage is, of course, what gives the film its comic energy. The anarchy and mayhem caused by his super-human selfishness are what make the film compulsive viewing.

The co-dependency that has developed over years between Withnail and Marwood might or might not be a love affair but it

has affected their individual personalities quite as much as if it were. Withnail, a hero in his own head, is encouraged by Marwood's loyalty and acquiescence to believe that reality can be moulded for his own convenience.

Withnail has turned Marwood into his 'fag' in public school terms. His first word to Marwood in the film is the monosyllable 'No', uttered with that relish for musical vowel sounds that we later observe in his uncle. On Marwood's return to the flat, Withnail's opening remark is that the wine has run out. He drops this problem into Marwood's lap and demands a solution while hastily swigging the last of the wine himself, unwilling to share it with the friend who has offered to go and fetch him tea from a café. Even the Deep Heat is greedily commandeered for his own exclusive use, the limp tube flung disdainfully in Marwood's direction with the obvious lie, 'Wasn't much in the tube.' He feels righteous indignation at seeing Marwood drink 'soup' (coffee, actually) that has not first been offered to him.

While Marwood describes feeling ill, Withnail keeps his back turned, preening himself in the mirror and holding his comb like a knife. Marwood is sick and frightened but Withnail chooses this moment to indulge himself in an elaborate fantasy about a certain Jeff Wode whose story is written up in the Sunday papers. It might have been amusing if his flatmate were not so unwell.

Withnail announces that he is a great actor who will astonish the world: 'When I strike, they won't know what hit 'em.' On the evidence of serial lying and a memorised speech out of *Hamlet*, it is hard to know whether this belief is a delusion or not. His uncle predicts Withnail would be 'marvellous' as Prince Hamlet but given Monty's own hammy performance of Marcellus's lines from the play, he is not a reliable judge. Withnail's professional acting ability might be contested but his zest for lying and story-telling in real life is not.

Acting is an art form but lying is usually seen as a strategy adopted to achieve an advantage or to avoid punishment. Withnail, however, is not 'usual' and he turns lying into an accomplishment. Perhaps it compensates him for his failure to get acting jobs where he could be *paid* for misrepresenting himself. Squandering on booze the money intended for the purchase of Wellington boots causes him no anxiety at all since he can, at the drop of a hat, invent 'a farmers' conference' and talk Monty into believing Penrith is entirely bootless.

When Marwood confronts him with the result of Withnail's lies about his alleged misfortunes as a 'toilet trader', Withnail makes no attempt to make his apology sound convincing. His self-congratulatory smile shows satisfaction at reliving one of his mendacious masterpieces, and an effortless one at that – 'sort of said it without thinking.'

Related to Withnail's mendacity is his willingness to manipulate and exploit anyone and everyone, though his manner is sometimes so ham-fisted that the attempt backfires. He usually knows which buttons to press to get others to do his bidding. Hence he is able to coax his uncle into lending the cottage by offering his trusting friend as sexual bait. He tricks an alcoholic publican into giving them free drinks by inventing a shared experience in the armed forces. But it doesn't work with people of a different social class from himself. The Irishman in the pub is unimpressed by Withnail's assorted attempts to talk himself out of trouble; the police are merely contemptuous; and his patronising approach to Jake is so offensive that it blows up in his face, creating a dangerous situation which was quite avoidable.

The apparently random monologue about Jeff Wode has in fact an organic part to play in the film's plot since it reveals Withnail's interest in both violence and substance abuse. He understands cruelty and imagines Jeff Wode enjoying his power

and making his victim plead for mercy. The second newspaper article to attract Withnail's revulsion, envy and contempt is an account of a successful young film star. Withnail declares the boy must be paying for the role by sleeping with the (male) director. The audience is prepared for future events – Marwood's tragic-comic persecution at the hands of Monty – at the same time as we are given an insight into Withnail's personality.

Withnail is materialistic yet loftily insouciant about the valuable and beautiful *objects d'art* that surround him both in the Camden Town flat and Monty's Chelsea pad. These he takes for granted. Although he has let the filth in the sink mount up to catastrophic levels, he recognises good quality when he sees it and wants to protect the glaze on his dinner service. The many-layered mess in the flat is at least one of *glamorous* squalor.

Washing-up does not come naturally to him and he only insists on doing it as a way of asserting himself – defying Marwood's warnings and thereby maintaining his dominance over the younger man. Withnail's suggested technique for cleaning the sink involves pliers which are about as useful for the task as a gun is for catching fish. In the end it's Marwood, anyway, who intrepidly dons the rubber gloves and puts his hand in the sink.

If friends are to be judged purely by the kindness and help they offer us, Withnail is a very bad friend indeed. His betrayals of Marwood escalate in the course of the film. First Withnail abandons his friend to the angry Irishman, changing 'friend' to 'acquaintance' in an effort to distance himself from the imminent unpleasantness. Believing that Jake the poacher is breaking into the cottage, he urges Marwood to 'offer him yourself' as a sacrifice to ensure Withnail's own safety. This itself was practically a

reprise of the bull scene, where Withnail was quite happy to leave his friend facing danger alone. He then undermines Marwood's plan to escape Monty and go back to London by craftily choosing words that minimise the danger posed by Jake ('this local type hanging about') and leave Marwood looking foolish.

The betrayal that leads to the break-up of the friendship began during their visit to Monty's Chelsea flat but is not revealed – either to Marwood or to the film's audience – until the night of Monty's attempted seduction of Marwood. For the sake of a few days' free holiday, Withnail has misrepresented his friend as a homosexual and laid him open to interference by the love-starved and sex-starved Monty. Friendship with Withnail might have been worth it for the entertainment value, but placing an unsuspecting Marwood in his uncle's path like this is fiendish. Two decent men, Marwood and Monty, end up humiliated and shaken by an encounter which would never have happened but for Withnail's self-interested mendacity.

There is even scope for arguing that Withnail plays a Mephistophelean role in the friendship, trying to drag Marwood down to the damnation he cannot escape himself, as in the Faust legend. In the Penrith pub, he dismisses Marwood's best chance of a job – 'You don't wanna go to Manchester …. Not much of a part …' His insistence in the closing scenes that Marwood share a bottle of wine with him, instead of catching his train, could represent a last ditch attempt to wreck his friend's future and keep Marwood in Camden Town, a failure just like him. Misery loves company and without Marwood, Withnail's life will be unbearable.

The contrast between Withnail and Marwood's approach to their job search is revealing. Withnail's deliriously funny outbursts at his agent and the telephone operator in the Bampton phone box are self-destructive. Unlike the reticent and self-controlled Marwood, Withnail hasn't the patience and tolerance

needed to survive in any walk of life, let alone an overcrowded profession like acting.

When not shouting and demanding that his needs be met, Withnail is happy to issue orders and dispense advice, whether he knows what he's talking about or not. 'Bear right, bear right'; 'Don't attempt anything without the gloves'; 'Keep your bag *up*'. The content of the advice is irrelevant. It is delivering it that matters. He comes from a class that takes for granted its superiority over everyone else. For most well-born Englishmen, these expectations were scaled back after the last war in which all social classes had fought and suffered together. Social deference and respect for those at the top of hierarchies had declined dramatically. But Withnail's schooldays at Harrow have taught him he is officer class, that it is in his DNA and other ranks should obey him. Marwood is 'other ranks' and his integrity and innate politeness make him a natural victim.

Given Withnail's disdain for any authority exerted over him, his birth in October 1939 was extraordinarily fortunate; only by a whisker did he avoid being called up for National Service. The young Edward Heath, as Minister of Labour, announced in the House of Commons in December 1959 that 'men born on or after 1st October, 1939, will not have to register under the National Service Acts'. Between 1947 and 1962, healthy young men were expected to go into the forces for two years, and Withnail's social class would not in itself have exempted him.

He might not have been such a bad officer, at that. He is clearly fascinated by guns and is revealed snuggled up in bed with the shotgun when Marwood confronts him after Monty's seduction attempt. In other words, even on a night when there was no threat of an intruder, and when he has gone to bed paralytic, Withnail was not too drunk to remember his gun.

Withnail avoids unequal contests, for example with the Irishman in the pub or with Jake the poacher. But he has to have the last word and once he is in a place of safety, his rage is operatic: 'I'll take the bastard axe to him …. You'll all suffer.' Whenever his frustration boils over and his opponent is weaker – the unfortunate chicken, the hypothetical rat in the sink – he is violent and impulsive.

The 'You'll all suffer' aria by the lake demonstrates how deep the instinct of revenge runs in Withnail's character. He has a strong need to punish those who have not fully recognised and paid obeisance to his assumed superiority. Even the chicken he kills is resented after the fact, with Withnail fantasising about how much he would have enjoyed 'gunning this pullet down' had he only found the shotgun in time. Withnail's air of menace is reminiscent of the Machiavellian malcontents who were stock characters in Jacobean Revenge Tragedy, the genre to which *Hamlet* belongs. The occasions that provoke his rage may be petty, such as the lack of alcohol or the sole flapping off his shoe, but the rage itself is cosmic.

There are few moments in the film when Withnail is with others yet apparently at peace. One of them is at breakfast with his uncle when Monty holds the two young men's hands. Sated with his uncle's food and booze, Withnail is content to act the part of devoted nephew. Yet there is a sense that he is simply conserving his strength for the next explosion of rancour.

Withnail's cavalier disregard for authority ultimately brings about his downfall. Patronising and bullying an elderly tea shop owner might be safe (though contemptible) but defying the police is not. On his arrest, he clearly has no inkling of what the police can do to him, if they have a mind. He blows smoke in the face of the older policeman and treats him with the 'be off with you, my man' arrogance of a bygone age. This approach is predictably disastrous. One wonders how he will cope in court

when they catch up with him for drink-driving, not to mention non-payment of rent. Will the cousin who is allegedly a Queen's Counsel barrister offer any advice, or has Withnail been entirely disowned by his family?

We don't seriously expect Withnail to evade the police but we enjoy his presumption that he is capable of tricking them. The comic pay-off when Danny's drink-driving device is shown to have a fundamental design flaw – it is inoperable by a drunk – is worth waiting for.

Withnail's legal problems are unlikely to cause him as much grief as his separation from Marwood. His weak smile on hearing Marwood has gained the lead part in *Journey's End* is as false as Marwood's embarrassed grin while being pursued by Monty. Withnail is clearly unhappy at the development but how much of this unhappiness is envy of his job and how much is fear of life without his flat-mate? Richard E Grant's bravura, high-energy performance for most of the film presents a man driven by the will to power. However, Withnail's response to Marwood's job is ambiguous and could just as well be muted panic at what he knows is the end of the affair – love, not power-lust, being the motivating force here.

As we edge towards Withnail's final scene in the film, the question of his future life becomes ever more uncomfortable. He is as disorientated by Marwood's defection as the spectator is shocked at the tragic turn this comic film has abruptly taken. There has been a reversal of fortune and the man who victimised Marwood has become a victim himself. Withnail blots out his grief with a bottle and a fragment of Shakespeare. He has learnt nothing, and will try to forget this pain, resuming his moment-by-moment struggle for flattery and chemical oblivion.

Given his alcoholic intake in the two weeks or so that the film covers, Withnail is a true dipsomaniac and it no longer seems to afford him much comfort. Is he afraid to sober up (ever) because he'd have to face up to the mess he has made of his life? Withnail's near-heroic devotion to the bottle has left him with nothing, not even his health. He has entered the arena of the unwell which will eventually claim Vivian MacKerrell, Robinson's Camden Town flatmate on whom the character was based.

Whereas he invented fluent lies about Marwood's 'arrest in the Tottenham Court Road' – the precision of the fiction lending it a spurious authenticity – it is in fact Withnail who is facing court. Again, he told Monty that he had rejected Marwood's love but by the end of the film it is Marwood who has rejected him and gone off to start a new life away from Camden Town. Lies are all the easier to frame when they draw on one's own fears.

Withnail's grandiose 'star' announcement in the Lake District was performed against a backdrop of one of nature's grander statements. The corresponding speech at the end of the film, courtesy of Mr Shakespeare, is delivered in the rain to an audience of bored and caged animals. The phrase 'paragon of animals' gains irony from the circumstance of its performance, in front of damp and dispirited wolves who like him are failures – prisoners. 'Wolfe', we remember, was one of his suggested stage names. Withnail in that speech on the mountain, legs and arms akimbo, was perhaps dramatising himself as General James Wolfe storming the Heights of Abraham.

It is significant that Withnail is entirely alone in the final scene of the film. Marwood has left him without a backward glance. Withnail had begun to panic back at the flat when Marwood scandalously refused even a 'best of the century' wine at their leave-taking. The rift is clearly final. He is drinking

alone and this is what the rest of his life is going to be like. Without Marwood and his old-maidish concern with watches, clocks and the passing of time, Withnail will be stranded and his tendency to spend a lot of his life asleep or with a bottle to his lips will be exacerbated.

Marwood departs and Withnail, in close-up, follows him with his eyes. He is now bereft of his audience. This is also disorientating for us, the film's spectators. With very few exceptions (examined in chapter 6) we have watched the entire action through Marwood's eyes and have therefore identified with him. Now we literally don't know where to look. This is uncomfortable and we feel some of Withnail's fear at this point. Because Marwood has been abruptly taken from us, we suddenly feel the force of Withnail's personality full on. The opening question of this chapter, Who is Withnail?, becomes urgent, and after nearly two hours, we still don't know.

Bruce Robinson has stated that the ending he originally wrote involved Withnail going back to the empty flat and blowing his brains out with Monty's shotgun. Controversially this idea was dropped; some have argued that a darker ending would be more fitting. Instead we have the soliloquy from *Hamlet* which, delivered in these circumstances, is rich in ambiguity. Is it a howl of pain that Marwood has left him? Or is it a performance, a *tour de force* to cheer himself up by proving he is good enough for the Royal Shakespeare Company? Bruce Robinson's stage directions imply that Withnail is just deluding himself (again) and has managed to overcome his depression by pretending he's a star. Adolescent posturing and a generous swig of someone else's liquor are all he needs to restore his equanimity.

But a film is more than stage directions and three factors convince me that Withnail is presented as in real emotional distress. First, the fine multi-layered performance of Richard E Grant demonstrates both that Withnail *can* act when he puts his

mind to it, and that he is genuinely distraught at Marwood's departure. This compassionate and favourable view of the character allows the audience to forgive Withnail – for his lying, greed and lack of compassion for anyone else – in a way that Marwood has found well-nigh impossible.

Second, the horror of what might lie ahead for Withnail is accentuated by the fake-jaunty soundtrack music which hints at a fairground only to undercut and withdraw the gaiety of the suggestion, turning it to mockery and a terrible warning.

Finally, there is the desperately sad final shot of him. Withnail is filmed diminishing to a tiny figure in the distance, a silent but frank acknowledgement that this character is doomed. It is of course raining, as in the Lakes. The men have brought Lake District weather home with them; the consequences of that holiday will last.

Viewed naturalistically, then, all the evidence shows us a fallible individual trapped in circumstances of his own making. Withnail is a failure and his story has the predictable trajectory of a parable. His energy is compelling and invigorating to watch, but we are relieved that Marwood has escaped such a bad influence. As soon as Marwood is off the scene, safely on the way to a new job, Withnail shrinks in stature from a twentieth-century Lord Byron to a homeless drunk shambling round a park in disintegrating shoes. It's the end of the sixties, the end of his youth and any talent he might have had will never be realised or recognised. The moral of the tale is obvious and inescapable.

II

And yet, and yet … The film would never have cast such a spell on audiences if it were *only* a morality tale and nothing else. Careful consideration of the fictional character, Withnail, suggests that philosophical debates about conformity *versus* creativity,

control *versus* freedom, are largely beside the point. To scold the character for not conforming to Sunday School morality is as inept as trying to clean a kitchen sink with pliers. We are applying the wrong tools.

To speculate about Withnail's future court appearance (will the QC cousin help out?) is as irrelevant to the film, as an aesthetic experience, as it is to wonder whether he would have dialled 999 for the despised police on the Night of the Intruder, if the cottage had had a phone. We might guess the answer to these questions but they are fundamentally the wrong type of question. That is because the presentation of this character is not principally realistic. Bruce Robinson is not attempting a faithful *reproduction* of real life but creating a work of art to inspire us to *re-evaluate* a life: our own. To do this, he has invented a character who inhabits a world of myth more than a particular place at a particular time in history.

The concept of time haunts this film. Although we can infer a great deal about Withnail's past, he does not belong in the 1960s present, and his future is almost unimaginable, unlike the possible fate of other characters in the film. Withnail's indeterminate relationship with time is something he shares with other cultic characters that haunt the imagination —Count Dracula, or those romantic figures that inhabit our dreams (courtesy of *Wuthering Heights)* emoting from the top of craggy landscapes, their cloaks billowing behind them. Withnail appears to be drawn to the wrong scale for this film. He exists on a different plane from the other characters.

Although Withnail's lack of self-control might be judged a character defect if approached by a moralist, from a creative angle it is an inspiring exercise in testing the boundaries. Withnail's gift for polysyllabic outrage – experiencing it and exciting it in others – is exhilarating.

There is nothing paltry about Withnail's defiance of law-abiding society. Drunk on someone else's liquor, he drives someone else's car dangerously and without a licence, then argues with the police. It's fatuous, of course; but there is also something heroic about his Byronic disdain for the regulations that run society but which, he profoundly believes, do not apply to him. He lives outside the causal mechanism of actions that lead to consequences. Marwood's threat, 'What you have done will have to be paid for', might as well be in a foreign language for all the meaning it has for Withnail.

Withnail's equivocation about names is important. Judged realistically, his belief that to change his name is to change his fortune is superficial – infantile, even. Calling himself 'Wolfe' is easier, one might argue, than working, sobering up, accepting a job as an understudy and trying to get on with people. However, there is more to names than this and they are important in the film.

In a patriarchal society, fathers are the source of both authority and naming. Society depends on names and on fixed identities. Marwood, wanting to be polite, makes a point of asking the farmer his name. Monty is so well-adjusted and confident of his social position that he has three names, signing himself Montague H Withnail. (And as if that were not enough, on weekend love-ins with his young boyfriends, he has told the farmer he is called Adrienne de la Touche.) By contrast, we never learn Withnail's first name, and no one in the film addresses Marwood by any name whatsoever, using only the pronouns 'you' and 'he'.

So few proper names are used (instead we get 'the poacher', 'the wankers', 'the farmer') that Marwood's drunken admonition, 'All right, Miss Blenehassitt, I'm warning you', is bizarrely funny. Danny, on the other hand, uses naming as a way of giving verisimilitude to his story-telling, laboriously

explaining that his drug supplier is called Juan and his business partner, Presuming Ed. Even Danny's drugs have two names, trade and street.

Withnail is estranged from his family – 'We're incompatible' – and therefore free to invent his own identity and place in the world. This is a liberation, particularly for a Withnail, educated for generations at Harrow and expected to play a part at the centre of the Establishment. He feels 'unusual', a romantic outcast. When Marwood makes a casual remark about his family, Withnail prevaricates and toys defensively with an épée (rapier). Marwood's questions here have struck a nerve.

III

The mystery surrounding Withnail's character and function in the film can be explored by going back in Western cultural history to the ancient Greeks. A fundamental concept in Greek philosophy was the distinction between Apollonian and Dionysian principles. The god Apollo stood for rationality, civilisation and order, while Dionysus (whom the Romans called Bacchus) represented instinct, ecstasy, self-assertion and intoxication. A Dionysian character rejects any restriction placed on his self-expression.

It is the extreme Dionysian elements in Withnail's personality that turn him into a mythic and larger-than-life character. Bram Stoker's Count Dracula constantly comes to mind. Withnail's dramatic entry into the film is his rather vampiric appearance on the staircase, shot so as to exaggerate Richard E Grant's height and emaciation as he gulps down a red liquid.

The under-confident Marwood is a perfect foil, so used to hearing mad and dangerous schemes from Withnail that he is

perpetually on edge, ready to cope with the damage, clear up the debris. Hence his split-second alarm when Withnail states in the car that he wants to 'get hold of a child': 'What do you want a child for?' Withnail can recklessly smash his way through life knowing that Marwood is behind him, sweeping up.

Seen as a creature of myth, Withnail energises the temporal and geographical space he occupies without being limited to them. He no more belongs in the late 1960s in a disintegrating Camden Town than to the static pastoral idyll that is the Lake District. He is an archetype that lives somewhere in our collective psyche, the pure outsider whose anarchic self-regard both appeals and repels. List his qualities, actions and relationships as we may, he remains an irreducible mystery.

Withnail's creator, Bruce Robinson, has not made it possible to unravel the enigma at the heart of this film. This is deliberate. Withnail cannot be normalised or explained away with moral judgements and predictions about his future. 'Who is Withnail?' is ultimately unanswerable because it is the wrong question. We should instead be asking *'What* is Withnail?' and trying to understand his function in the film.

The original Withnail, Vivian MacKerrell, lived long enough to see the film he had inspired, commenting simply that the sink in Camden Town was much worse than the one on set. Vivian dressed with flair and had an attractive voice once described as a 'pleasant amber cadence'. Within a few years, the drink had done for him. He quickly lost his looks and cancer of the throat eventually took his voice away. He died in 1995 at the age of 51.

But the genius of art means that neither MacKerrell nor his voice are quite forgotten. Bruce Robinson and Richard E Grant have, vampire-like, sucked the power out of him. Their reward or punishment is to be accosted in the street by strangers shouting 'Scrubbers!' This curious devotional exercise is perhaps a fitting epitaph for the late Vivian MacKerrell a.k.a. the indestructible Withnail.