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# “It Lurks in the Saying, Not What’s Being Said”:

## Gender Performativity and Possible Worlds Theory in Marina Carr’s *Low in the Dark*

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### Abstract

*Low in the Dark* by Irish playwright Marina Carr is an absurdist play that focuses heavily on concepts of gender as performance. It does so mainly through role-playing scenes in which two same-gender characters reenact a heterosexual relationship. These scenes can be tied to Marie-Laure Ryan’s conceptions of the four kinds of textual alternative possible worlds (TAPWs) within possible worlds theory: fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge. An analysis of the play’s role-playing scenes in conjunction with gender performativity and these four types of APW reveals the constructed-ness of gender norms within the work, which further calls into question a strictly policed gender binary both in the world of the text and our own world. Further, the relationship between Carr’s work surrounding the gender binary calls into question the nature of what makes her work absurd: not the mismatch between the characteristics of gender performance that we observe in *Low in the Dark*, but rather the absurdity of a strictly enforced gender binary itself.

### The Play

**Setting:** “*Stage left* Bizarre bathroom: bath, toilet and shower. A brush with hat and tails on it. *Stage right* The men’s space: tyres, rims, unfinished walls and blocks strewn about” (Carr 5).

**Characters:** Bender, “in her fifties, attractive by ageing;” Binder, “Bender’s daughter, in her mid-twenties, a spoilt brat, whimsical;” Baxter, “in his mid-thirties, Curtains’ lover;” Bone, “in his late-twenties, Binder’s lover;” Curtains “can be any age, as she is covered from head to toe in heavy, brocaded curtains and rail. Not an inch of her face or body is seen throughout the play” (Carr 5).

### Repeating Narrative Element: Role Play

**Baxter** Do you like my lipstick?

**Bone** Yes, I do.

**Baxter** And my sock?

**Bone** Yes.

**Baxter** I want a baby.

**Bone** So do I.

**Baxter** Will you buy me a present?

**Bone** Of course I will.

**Baxter** I want a bath.

**Bone** You want to trap me.

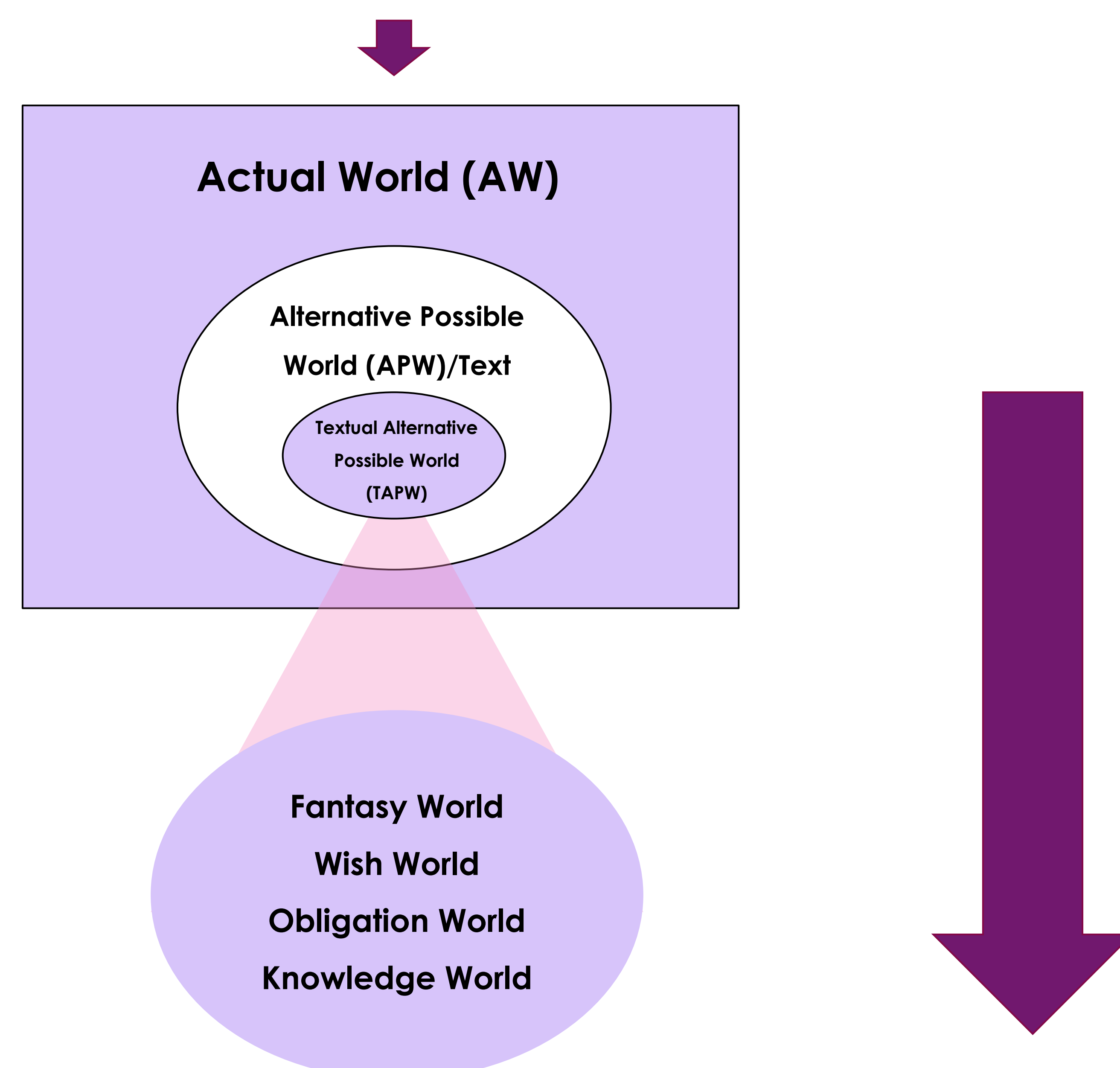
**Baxter** I do not.

**Bone** Yes, you do, you women are all the same.

(Carr 42)

As an absurdist piece, *Low in the Dark* contains no classic narrative arc. Instead, it focuses on repeating narrative elements, such as the role-playing scenes as seen on the left. The role-playing scenes consist of two characters of the same gender acting as a heterosexual couple, with one character playing themselves and the other character playing a partner of another gender.

“In fiction, the writer relocates to what is for use a mere possible world, and makes it the center of an alternative system of reality. If this recentering is indeed the gesture constitutive of fiction... [fictional worlds] refer to a system whose actual world is from an absolute point of view an alternative possible world (APW)” Ryan 24.



“Acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive sexuality” (Butler 136).

### Abridged Works Cited

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- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
- Carr, Marina. *Low in the Dark*. Marina Carr: Plays, Faber and Faber, 1999, pp. 1-99.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure. *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*. Indiana University Press, 1991.
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### Conclusions

The role-playing scenes in *Low in the Dark* function as all four types of TAPWs: fantasy, wishes, obligations, and knowledge. All of this is possible through the avenue of gender performance. When we see that gender so integrally forms each of these types of TAPWs in the role-playing scenes, we can also see the ways in which gender in the actual world functions as each of these types. We, too, experience gender as a *fantasy* or a *wish* for ourselves and others, or possibly an *obligation* in a socially regulated framework, which all the while functions as a reaction to or a display of our knowledge in regards to gender performance. In this way, when we interact with gender roles in our everyday lives, we are interacting with our own and other people’s APWs, not something necessarily external or “natural” in a sense of “non-constructedness.” Some of us, too, may participate in our own forms of role-play as we come to terms with our fantasy, wish, obligation, and knowledge worlds in regards to gender performance.

Still, the gender performances of *Low in the Dark* may look absurd in comparison to our own notions of gender. But differences in notions of gender performance between the actual world and the world of the text are not what makes *Low in the Dark* absurd, or at least it should not be. After all, when we think past some of the stranger aspects of the play, we might even recognize some elements of our own world within the text: spaces separated by sex, obligatory heterosexuality, and the absurdity of a strict gender binary itself. What we can gather from the work instead is that gender *functions* in the play much as it does in the actual world, although some of its literal manifestations may look different. When we consider gender performance as a function of TAPWs, either fantasy, wish, obligation, or knowledge, we put it into the realm of the private. Gender in this case becomes separate from how it is interpreted by the outside world, and we see this not in the manifestations of gender specific to Marina Carr’s *Low in the Dark*, but rather in the fact that she posits gender as separate from the TAW and in the realm of the TAPW in accordance with Butler’s notions of the distinction between anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance (137). The meaning of the play lurks in the fact that Carr makes this distinction through absurdity, not in the mismatch between our own conceptions of gender performance and those of the play. In the words of the play itself, “it lurks in the saying, not what’s being said” (Carr 59).