

ENGLISH CULTURE IDENTITY MANIFESTATIONS IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S WORK

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*Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse the aspects related to English culture present in Graham Swift's work through the grid provided by culture identity manifestations, which includes values, symbols, rituals and practices, and heroes/ personalities (Baciu 2013). The analysis offered by this paper wishes to complete the analyses in previously existing papers and works of literary criticism regarding Englishness and Britishness in Swift's work, which can be used to understand the frame of mind that is specific to Great Britain during various historical ages, from 1947 in his debut novel, *The Sweet-Shop Owner* (1980), to the present age in his short stories collection *England and Other Stories* (2014).*

Keywords: values, symbols, rituals, practices, London.

1. Motivation

Graham Swift (born 1949) is a writer whose background is typically British, as he has been born in England and has studied in London, at Dulwich College, Cambridge, and at the University of York. In his fictional work, London and its suburbs are frequently present, and the characters living in this setting can be considered examples of the everyday Englishman. According to O'Mahony (2003), "Graham Swift was born in south London, where he still lives, and the area's particular kind of Englishness infuses his novels." Swift will pass on his British frame of mind to his characters in his fictional work, as well as to their relationships with the setting. The frame of mind specific to English identity during various ages in history, from 1947 as portrayed in Swift's debut novel, *The Sweet-Shop Owner* (1980), to present-day England portrayed in the short story collection published in 2014, *England and Other Stories* is visible and could be better understood by analyzing it using the grid offered by culture identity manifestations (Baciu 2013). The present paper will analyse cultural aspects in Swift's work through this grid, by focusing on values, symbols, rituals and practices, traditions, as well as heroes and personalities. We shall see that some of the culture identity manifestations are not restricted to British culture only, and are instead shared by all cultures, since they are part of human nature. What is more, it is expected not to find heroes and personalities in Swift's work, since it "deals with the life of ordinary people" that "live in the UK after WWII" (Gledić 2016: 321).

In order to begin the analysis, we should take a look at the definition of culture: "Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede 2011: 3). The culture identity

manifestations offer a means of analysis that can distinguish one culture from another and that can help understand cultural specificities. These elements are present throughout Swift's work.

2. Culture identity manifestations

2.1. Values

First of all, values are defined as the most resistant elements in time in any culture. We could say that they form the basis of any culture. As a definition, values "constitute the nucleus and the basis of any culture... are seen as the relative utility, relevance or importance of a certain state of affairs which is preferred over another or others" (Baciu 2013, 36). Frequently encountered values in Swift's novels are related to the role of history. For instance, in *Waterland*, Gledić (2016: 320) notices that Swift introduces "the meaning of history, man's place in history and the role of history and legacy in the lives of the most ordinary of people". As a rule, "Swift's protagonists, however, cannot seem to find their own identity or their own place in history (which is usually the period between post-WWII and the contemporary Britain of today)." As a result, we deal with a conflict between private and public history, as society's mainstream values may be doubted or not shared by the characters in Swift's novels. For instance, in the novel *Shuttlecock*, public history and image are no longer coinciding with personal values. This is since Prentis, working in the police in the dead crimes department, finds out about some files which make him see the possibility of his father's not actually being a hero during World War II, since the files claim that he had betrayed a friend while working as a spy in France at the time it was under Nazi occupation. Prentis sees his father in a different way, but also manages to come to terms with his own weaknesses, and chooses to destroy the files in order to keep his father's public image as war hero. Thus, the value of truth becomes subject to personal interpretation, no longer having a fixed meaning, established by mainstream culture. Generally, history would be expected to be synonymous with truth, and to reveal truth, yet, in the age described by Swift, since we deal with a questioning of values, this mentality is reflected in his fictional work. Swift's work reflects the questioning of reality, values and truth which is common to Modernism and then taken further by Postmodernism. Another character who discovers that a family member may not have been an actual hero is the one in the novel *Wish You Were Here*: his brother's death may not have occurred on duty as a soldier, but instead may have happened by accident.

Self-questioning becomes one of the individual values of Swift's characters. For instance, Bill Unwin in *Ever After* is such a narrator, George Webb in *The Light of Day*, William Chapman in *The Sweetshop Owner*, since they try to understand themselves and the others in various situations. According to Malcolm (2003: 23), "self-questioning narrators" analyse their past in Swift's work. Through the multiple perspectives presented, Swift also prompts the reader to take an active position, and sympathise with various characters, in spite of what a mainstream perspectives of values would expect to be the truth. The way that Swift's narrators self-question their own identity shows a separation of individuals from what is expected from them and imposed on them by

society. As a result, his narrators reflect the individualist dimension that has grown stronger and stronger with Modernism, Postmodernism and the present age:

'Who am I?' seems to be an interminable question for human beings, and the answers to it have changed greatly over time. This question is nested in the unconscious of Swift's characters. Tom believes he is a 'waterman', which implies that he is not merely a rational thing. In any case, the very concept of the self is not as simple as it looks; it is not as transparent as many people have viewed it. In Swift's work we see both the person and his 'persona', meaning the mask which the individual wears in public. (Niazi 2011: 119-127)

The individualist vs collectivist cultural dimension is described by Hofstede (2011: 8) as referring to the "integration of individuals into primary groups". Individualism focuses on the achievements and freedom of the individual, while collectivism focuses on the good of the whole group and on welfare. With the advent of economic development, most cultures has shifted towards the individualist dimension, leaving behind the collectivist one. What is more, the way in which people think of themselves in individualist cultures is different: they will describe themselves through personality traits, e.g. "smart", "funny", while, if belonging to collectivist cultures, they will think of themselves and describe themselves in terms of relationships with the others, e.g. as a good friend, son, husband (Lu and Wan 2018: 823-37).

Since Swift's narrators have mostly problematic relationships within their families, being at odds with the values imposed on them by traditional society and constantly questioning them, we could claim that we are able to witness the change from a collectivist mindset to an individualist mindset. Everything seems perfect in their future family life and in their present life as a couple for Mary and Tom in *Waterland* when they are young, and when they see reality through the frame of fairy-tales. The frame of fairy-tales can be thought of representing the equivalent of a stable, traditional, collectivist society when everything was clear and fixed. However, in time, Tom Crick comes to the conclusion that "Perhaps history is just story telling." (Swift 2008: 115) This shows that, in time, values change, and for those still hanging on to them, life seems to become less stable and everything becomes more confusing. Until then, history was supposed to present cultural products, as well as events and personalities that would simply reinforce the commonly held values of a mainstream culture. However, in time, with its meaning being questioned, the characters discovered that history was simply like storytelling, simply a means of bringing comfort and protection to the members of the respective culture. It showed by no means the truth, or rather, the truth is constantly changing and dependent on the perspective we judge it from. Once we reach the age when we are told that there is no objective truth, that everything is subjective, since it is prone to interpretation, we cannot know something for certain. Some characters, like Prentis in *Shuttlecock* and the character in *Wish You Were Here* realize that those that had been presented to them as heroes may not have actually been so. Cultures change, and with them, their culture identity manifestations, such as values, and personalities, since they should be chosen function of their relevance for the respective community

and respective time. Once they are no longer relevant, we deal with conflicts between society and individual values and concerns. One common trait to Swift's characters is isolation, which allows them to analyse themselves, those around them, as well as their past and present events and their significance. Through their isolation, they take a distance from the values imposed by society and may not identify them with these values. From here, they start having identity issues and dilemmas regarding who they actually are and what is the relationship they have with the others as well.

William Chapman, in *The Sweetshop Owner*, expected to have a traditional family. Instead, he realizes that his wife has always been distant to him, and so has his daughter. In *Out of This World*, we see the conflict between father and son as far as Harry Beach and Robert Beach are concerned, while in his turn Harry Beach becomes estranged from his wife and his daughter. Eventually, Harry and his daughter decide to reunite. *Last Orders* shows the estranged relationship between Jack and his wife Amy. In *The Light of Day*, we witness a couple's growing apart. In *Tomorrow*, we witness the story of a family traditional in mindset, wishing to be together, yet the way in which the children were conceived was not a usual one, but through artificial insemination, an issue which makes their mother believe she should confess to them when they are old enough. Tom and Mary in *Waterland* will show their concern for not being able to become a traditional family due to their mistakes in their youth.

Exploring further the question of who they are, and in need of a sense of stability, some of the characters in Swift's work consider their identity related to their profession, such as Jack Dodds who works as a butcher and William Chapman who becomes the owner of a sweetshop. According to Lea (2005: 39), "Willy Chapman and Jack Dodds embody Swift's conviction that identity develops as a psycho-social hybrid that encompasses gender, class and nationality, but is also firmly implied by the roles we perform and the professions we assume. [...] Like Dodd's butcher's shop, Chapman's sweetshop is a landmark of stability, a focal point for the local community and a bastion of nostalgic Englishness." In the novel *Here We Are*, Ronnie identifies himself as a magician since childhood, and pushes things to an extreme when he magically disappears for real after his last act from the lives of all those who had known him, after Evie leaves him for his friend. Tom in *Waterland* will identify himself with his profession of history teacher, and will explore history from all perspectives, from both public and personal sides.

One of the values Swift holds personally, and which is passed on to the characters in his fictional works, is storytelling. He claims that "fiction – storytelling – is a magical thing." (Swift 2009: 11). He also writes about "being under a story's 'spell'", stating that "the power of a good story is a primitive, irreducible mystery that answers to some need deep in human nature" (Swift 2009: 12). For instance, while Bill Unwin in *Ever After* has been called an unreliable narrator (Winnberg 2003: 139-142), he may be regarded as a "novice writer", due to features

such as his predilection for reminding the reader that he is telling a story rather than the truth: 'Or that is how I like to see it. That is how I wish it to have happened. I give to

Matthew's life that very quality of benign design that he had already glimpsed might be lacking from the universe. I choose to believe that Matthew first met Elizabeth...' (114). The reader, however, has no choice but to accept Bill's version because he possesses the Pearce Notebooks and only divulges certain sections of them in his narrative. Much of the story is told through imaginative re-enactments, such as the one Bill offers of the initial meeting between Elizabeth Hunt and Matthew Pearce at his father's shop. At its conclusion, the narrator undercuts the entire scene: 'I invent all this. I don't know that this is how it happened. It can't have been like this simply because I imagine it so' (120). (James 2011)

Another character exemplifying the value of storytelling is George Webb in *The Light of Day*: "Swift would go on to create another novice storyteller in George Webb, the narrator of *The Light of Day*. He too pushes his interpretations on the reader and, although he is a policeman turned private detective without any of Bill Unwin's academic training, it is significant that the two narrators share the same persuasive tone." (James 2011).

Tom Crick is also a storyteller: "For *Waterland* is not just about history and the history-master, it is a didactic tale about the limitations of history, and the greater value both of pure story-telling - fiction - and of what Swift calls 'natural history.' These two tensions or polarities - between history and story telling and between history and natural history - dominate the novel." (Brewer and Tillyard 1985: 155) In this case, storytelling could be related to the value of individualism, and to the personal level, while history could be related to collectivism, and to the values of public image and values. This separation leads to the question of who an individual is.

Regarding individual identity, DeGay (2013: 565) underlines what makes personhood in Swift's novel *Last Orders*. She notices that this novel "looks for redemption in the face of broken relationships and relative crises of identity, and also shows how Swift defends the moral personhood of the disabled and the recently deceased." Swift shows that there are no absolute values according to which to judge a character, instead, there is empathy for the respective character, and invites the reader to better understand and know the characters. Empathy becomes, thus, a value in Swift's fictional universe.

In today's world we recognize the values of multiculturalism, which have not been present in Swift's work until the collection of short stories *England and Other Stories* (2014). According to Gledić (2016: 322), "one gets the feeling, as one critic mentions, that when Swift's characters are described what he is in fact describing and discussing are aspects of the nation (Malcolm 2003: 21). Something that is instantly recognizable in Swift's fiction is the complete absence of the multicultural society the UK has become in the past decades." This shows that Swift prefers a traditional British mindset in spite of the changes in society. However, in spite of these changes, at the same time, multiculturalism claims that we should respect each and every culture and its aspects related to identity. According to an interview with Swift published by foyles.co.uk (2021), we find out the following:

One of the ironies or implications of the title - *England and Other Stories* - is that England itself might be a 'story', a made-up idea, beside which the reality is very different and hard to pin down. Certain aspects of the physical country persist, but there's no doubt that England has become less homogenous and definable over the years.

Thus, the value of storytelling is extended by Swift to understanding today's world. After all, England as a place is part of the idea everyone has in mind about it.

2.2. Symbols

In any culture, symbols are defined as "elements represented by words, gestures, objects, signs, landmarks, artistic forms, but they may also be concrete representations of ideas, concepts or other abstractions" (Baciu 2013: 32).

In Swift's work, we can notice the constant presence of British settings, especially of the London suburbs. These can be considered symbolic landmarks of British identity.

Swift's novel *The Light of Day* is an example of writing where the author details walking in the London suburbs by mentioning places Londoners are familiar with:

You could take a short drive - or open your London A to Z - and cover every inch of the journey Graham Swift's characters make in his intensely local new novel, *The Light of Day*. Up from Wimbledon Broadway to the Hill, off to the right along St Mary's Road, up Parkside to the hospital, across the common to the Putney Vale crematorium: the plot of this book is bounded by the postal district of SW19, with excursions as far as Chislehurst and Heathrow. (Lee 2003)

The setting is, thus, showing verisimilitude and shows cultural landmarks we can find in reality. Swift is, in this sense, showing that he has a good knowledge of the area and that it means preserving the local atmosphere and identity. His characters are behaving as local inhabitants of these areas. For the readers, the sensation of verisimilitude becomes very strong, and this is what makes them relate even more to the characters and to their experiences. Other settings show the same cultural landmarks specific to Britain:

As in his first novel of 23 years ago, *The Sweet Shop Owner*, where the character's life is "set out like a map" over a few miles of south London; or the remarkable *Shuttlecock*, "a psychological thriller" bounded by Clapham Common and a Wimbledon childhood; or *Waterland*, where a whole history is unforgettably mapped on to the Fens (with a sad terminus in Greenwich); or *Last Orders*, with every inch of its ritual journey traced from Bermondsey and New Cross to Gravesend, Rochester, Canterbury and, at last, Margate Pier, Graham Swift's genius is for putting the strangest of lives into the most provincial of English landscapes. (Lee 2003)

In this way, Swift's novels contain both a universal component, that is related to personal experiences that are universal and part of human nature, and a specific component, made clear through mentioning landmarks of Britain.

Regarding artistic forms that are mentioned in Swift's novels, literature of the past that is specifically British is frequently mentioned in intertextual references. We notice the use of previous texts in Swift's writings, such as certain lines from British Romantic poems or plays by William Shakespeare.

The Sweetshop Owner shows readers the idea that things remain, which is a lesson reminding of the one taught in John Keats' Romantic poem *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. The characters become preoccupied with the acquisition of objects, especially under the influence of William's wife. The ending of one of her lyrical monologues shows readers her focus on material objects: "What poise, what balance, Willy, this room, this moments. Nothing must be touched, nothing must be changed" (Swift 1993: 55). Another intertextual reference to John Keats' poem can be found in the scene where William reads a line while looking at the books his daughter is studying: "Bold lover, never, never canst thou kiss..." (Swift 1993: 147). This line reinforces the lack of emotional closeness in William's marriage.

In *Last Orders*, we can find references to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. The name Margate, where the ashes of Jack are scattered, is present in Book III, where "the river Thames declares" (Kundu 2005: 118): "On Margate Sands./ I can connect/ Nothing with nothing./ The broken fingernails of dirty hands./ My humble people who expect/ Nothing." As a link to the novel's title, in Book II, we notice how the text "is constantly interrupted by the landlord of a pub", calling "Hurry up please it's time", indicating "that the time for last orders has passed". The passage of time can be linked with the passing of life and of the moments Jack and his friends had spent together.

Other intertextual references can be found in *Ever After*, during the moments in which Bill Unwin identifies with Hamlet, and, as a result, attributes roles from this play to those around him.

In *Wish You Were Here*, before the novel begins, Swift introduces a quotation from William Blake's *A Little Boy Lost*: "Are these things done on Albion's shore?" "Albion" represents a poetic reference to England. Blake's poem is used to compare the fate of the young boy to Tom's, a soldier killed in the Iraq war, as both are innocent victims. In *Ever After*, we similarly find before the beginning of the novel a quotation from Virgil: "...et mentem mortalia tangunt (*Aeneid*, I)" ("and our mortality cuts to the heart"). It shows that death is a main issue in the novel, as the main character, Bill Unwin, tries to overcome his wife's death and his own suicide attempt.

Mentioning these literary products of the past which are part of British culture shows the relevance of this legacy in shaping the mentality of the characters living in the contemporary world.

2.3. Rituals and practices

Rituals and practices are defined as "collective activities recognized to have an important social cohesion value" (Baciu 2013: 35).

One ritual which is mentioned in two of Swift's novels so far is that of scattering the ashes of a dear one, in *Last Orders* and in *Here We Are*. While in *Here We Are* it is just a detail which remind of the previous novel, in *Last Orders* it is present throughout the action, as it is the purpose of a group of friends to travel in a pilgrimage to Margate where they should scatter their friend's ashes. The journey in *Last Orders* reminds of another practice, the traditional pilgrimage from *Canterbury Tales*, a well-known cultural landmark for British culture and civilization.

Rituals and practices are part of presenting the lifestyle that is specific to a certain class of British culture, as we can find in *Wish You Were Here*, according to Markovits (2011):

Like *Last Orders*, *Wish You Were Here* centres on a series of funeral arrangements. Like *Last Orders*, it describes the decline of a kind of heart-of-oak, lower-middle-class Englishness, though Swift moves the action from city to country, and the betrayal, of father by son, involves not only the rejection of a profession (butcher in one case, farmer in the other) but a patch of land.

In this case we can see the emerging individualism in the case of different generations. The young generations are not as attached to maintaining the old traditions (involving a profession and an inheritance), but are more likely to question and to wish to break free from those traditions, as well as from the ties of the family. The family rules seem to lose from their degree of authority. This could be since the movement towards individualism is also accompanied by the movement towards low power distance. Low power distance means a less degree of authority, and treating individuals as equal. High power distance means respect for and obeying authority, as well as the existence of a hierarchy.

For the traditional family in *Wish You Were Here*, family and patriotism are both among values and among practices, since loyalty to the family and preserving tradition should be a ritual, together with fighting for one's country: "The Luxton boys are the last descendants of an old farming family in north Devon. Farming and patriotism run in the blood, and when Tom, the younger son, turns 18, he runs away from unhappiness at home to join the army, leaving Jack to look after their father and the farm." (Markovits 2011)

Among the practices we could also mention Mothering Sunday, which is found in the novel with the same title, published in 2016. The time the story begins in in 1924, when Jane Fairchild, a formed abandoned orphan, is a maid for the Niven family, in Berkshire, at Beechwood House. The story illustrates the past life of British noblemen. To contrast the holiday, which is Mother's Day, Jane has no mother, and in the end, she will lose Paul, the son of the Sherringhams, her lover, both since he has an arranged marriage with someone else and since he will have an accident on his way to meet his fiancée.

Another practice which is associated with British culture is that of the detective's work. Anyone can associate detectives' work with the way these characters have been portrayed by British authors such as Agatha Christie. Swift shows us two characters that are detectives, Prentis in *Shuttlecock*, who is working for the police, in the dead crimes department, and George Webb, in *The Light of Day*. While, traditionally, the detective would find the guilty person and expose him/her, the situation is different for Prentis, who chooses to hide the truth about his father for the public eye. George Webb, instead of blaming Sarah, who kills her husband, for her deed, sympathizes instead with her and actually becomes emotionally involved with her, waiting for her sentence in prison to finish to be together again. George tries to understand the story from the side of all the characters involved in the story.

In *Here We Are*, we can read about the practice of magic shows at the seaside in Great Britain, in 1959, in Brighton, which took place on a famous pier.

Swift presents, thus, aspects of everyday life associated with British culture.

2.4. Personalities

Personalities, through whatever they may feature and exhibit (merits, skills, exceptional performance that can make them unique) definitely remain connected to a certain domain, a field of activity, a certain area of interest and applicability – literature, arts, history, architecture, science, politics etc.” (Baciu, 2013: 34)

While the common man is mainly the protagonist in Swift’s novels, we could say that Swift has used personalities in the field of British literature in intertextual forms to compensate for typical British culture personalities and even heroes. For instance, Bill Unwin identifies himself with the famous literary hero Hamlet. Personalities in British literature, such as Shakespeare, Keats and T.S. Eliot which were previously mentioned in the section regarding symbols are thus, present, through intertextual references. However, “Most of his characters are the kinds of people you might find walking their dogs on the common: office clerks, put-upon schoolteachers, washed-up academics or shop proprietors whose grainy lives have led one critic to note: ‘Swift's characters seem uncomfortable unless they are unhappy.’” (O’Mahony 2003).

However, the contrast between common man and the famous writers of British culture highlights the presence of these personalities in his novels.

3. Conclusions

Graham Swift could be seen as a writer willing to preserve the traditional side of British culture, through mentioning its landmarks, practices, and through references to cultural products of the past, as well as to values. We can see that Swift illustrates a changing world, which is visible in the change in values. He tries to compensate for these changes through creating a very strong connection among the characters and their place. Their place is described in specific terms, creating the real-life setting known to any inhabitant of London. At the same time, Swift has also illustrated the multicultural side of England in his volume of short stories *England and Other Stories*.

According to Hofstede-Insights.com, the UK scores high on the individualism scale (89). The British are “private people”, and their “Children are taught from an early age to think for themselves and to find out what their unique purpose in life is and how they uniquely can contribute to society”. Regarding power distance, Britain scores 35, which is low, meaning that it seeks to reduce social inequalities. However, power distance is lower for high class and higher for working classes. Swift has captured the individualist dimension in his novel through the characters’ feeling isolated, and thus preoccupied with their own thinking and questioning, as well as through their problematic relationships. Through portraying the common man, Swift has shown the emerging low power distance dimension. However, in novels such as *Mothering Sunday*, with the character of the maid and the portrayal of the high class, we can see a different attitude to power distance, during a different age.

Graham Swift presents his readers with elements specific to contemporary-age Britain, elements which they can find when checking the places. Swift also uses references to writers anyone should be familiar with if interested in British culture.

They are indeed present in our contemporary times in an attempt to understand the past, and they are also still relevant today.

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