



## Write about the topic of 'Family' in *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *The Child in Time*

Emma Lautman

In both George Orwell's *A Clergyman's Daughter* and Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*, the presentation of 'family' drives much of the plot. This goes further than the portrayal of a conventional nuclear family, to encompass the ways in which the local community can act as a family, notably the hop-pickers in Orwell's novel, and also how the public state can influence private family structures. Both novels were written during periods when the relationship between the individual and the state was strained. Orwell's novel was published in 1935, before the introduction of the welfare state guaranteed universal minimum standards of living, and McEwan's in 1987, at a time when Thatcherite individualism had once again become key. In both texts the family is presented as a solid institution on which one can depend in these times of crisis. With reference to *The Child in Time*, Paul Edwards states that only through a strong sense of family unity can any political opposition become possible'.<sup>1</sup> The family is reaffirmed as not only a way of surviving but also as a means to enforce political change. It is inevitable that these attitudes result in the family becoming highly idealised — a romantic vision of overcoming suffering through familial support networks, often ignoring the pain and physical hardship of Dorothy's experience and Stephen's grief for his missing daughter, Kate. However, I will argue that both McEwan and Orwell take up complex positions. Whilst they do often sentimentalise the family in a way that can be construed as detrimental to their overall message, they are more critical than a surface reading might suggest. Ultimately, the authors' use of language and the metafictional elements in the texts draw attention to alternative possibilities and suggest that they do not necessarily endorse the views of family so valued by their protagonists.

The strength of community values is certainly made apparent in *A Clergyman's Daughter*. When Dorothy loses her memory and inexplicably finds herself lost in London, she promptly discovers people willing to help her. In fact, the first person she meets, Nobby, instantly takes responsibility for her welfare: his grin was so frank and wide that it was impossible not to smile back at him'.<sup>2</sup> The hop-picking community are equally accepting of Dorothy. The sense of a 'warm' and kind community is heightened by Orwell's repeated references to the fires and smoky atmosphere of the camp. For example, the reader is informed that 'you were dropping with sleep, but the huge fires that people used to build between the huts were too agreeable to leave'.<sup>3</sup> Dorothy is literally and metaphorically greeted with warmth. Loraine Saunders has argued that Orwell's excessive use of 'you' in the novel is exemplary of his ability to understand and suitably represent the lower class way of life: 'consciously moving away from the upper-class accents of 'one''.<sup>4</sup> We get a realistic sense of the unity and spirit of working class communities.

However, it is more plausible that this use of second person pronoun, rather than

<sup>1</sup> Paul Edwards, 'Time, Romanticism, Modernism and Moderation in Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*', *English: The Journal of the English Association*, 44 (1995), p.55.

<sup>2</sup> George Orwell, *The Clergyman's Daughter*, (London: Penguin Books, 1935), p.89.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.115-6.

<sup>4</sup> Loraine Saunders, *The Unsung Artistry of George Orwell*, (Oxon: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2008), p.48.

demonstrating Orwell's knowledge of the working class, draws the reader into the text in such a way that we buy into ideas of camp fires and singing, rather than empathizing with the hardships endured. We are left with the impression that the poor actually have a rather jolly time. Orwell's earlier essay on his experience of hop-picking is far less cheerful. He tells the reader that 'the hop-picker has to put up with rules which reduce him practically to a slave'.<sup>5</sup> In his literary description of the same experience, however, this becomes: 'you had an hour for dinner, and you made a fire of hop-bines – this was forbidden, but everyone did it.'<sup>6</sup> This hardly seems like the work of a 'slave' which Orwell previously lamented. Once again, the use of 'you' forces the reader to see themselves as part of this united group. There is a prevailing sense of community spirit triumphing over the individual suffering emphasised in the original essay.

Similarly, the only song mentioned in the essay is one which expresses anger at the inspectors. Yet, in *A Clergyman's Daughter* the pickers join together to sing *Auld Lange Syne* until 'long after midnight', a deliberate reference to a song readers recognise as representing a time of celebration and unity.<sup>7</sup> Orwell's concern over the state of the poor becomes a saccharine cliché of working class communities who cheekily disobey rules and sing round campfires to forget the horrific nature of their existence. In contrast to Saunders' argument, it is clear that Orwell has failed to escape from his comfortable middle class position to represent the true nature of poverty.

In the same way that, by sticking together, families are able to overcome the painful experience of poverty in Orwell's novel, so too is the grief and anguish felt by Stephen throughout *The Child in Time* diminished once his family is reunited. The tragic news that his friend Charles has committed suicide is juxtaposed with Stephen's discovery that his estranged wife is pregnant – a sentimental device in which coping with the sudden loss of a loved one is made easier by the creation of new life. As he rushes to Julie's side 'all the sorrow, all the empty waiting had been enclosed within meaningful time, within the richest folding conceivable'.<sup>8</sup> It is surely not possible that Stephen sees the birth, the new addition to his family, as providing meaning for the lengthy period of isolation and grief he has been experiencing? Following the birth, the family is depicted as 'they lay watching planet and moon descend through a sky that was turning blue'.<sup>9</sup> The imagery of the 'planet and moon' seems to suggest a supernatural inevitability that they would find happiness in the end. Moreover, the fact that the sun begins to rise at the end of the novel is a sentimental metaphor for the renewed possibility that their relationship can move past the all-consuming grief. The completion of their family allows them to enter a new, brighter day.

It is relevant to consider the similarities in the contexts in which the two novels were written. David Malcolm notes that the England in *The Child in Time* is what one might imagine to be a version of the future had Thatcher remained in power, with privatised ambulances and governmental responsibilities which 'had been redefined in simpler, purer terms', taking no account for individual welfare.<sup>10</sup> This certainly mirrors Thatcher's assertions in a 1987 edition of *Women's Own* that 'there are individual men and women and there are families' and famously 'there is no such thing as society'.<sup>11</sup> In *The Child in Time*, the family must support each other in the absence of state help. In an extreme example,

<sup>5</sup> George Orwell, *Hop-picking* (1931), <<http://www.georgeorwellnovels.com/essays/hop-picking>> [Accessed 15 April 2011]

<sup>6</sup> Orwell, *The Clergyman's Daughter*, p.113.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.140.

<sup>8</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time*, (London: Vintage, 1997), p.210.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.220.

<sup>10</sup> David Malcolm, *Understanding Ian McEwan*, (South Carolina: University of South Carolina Press, 2007), p.97; McEwan, p.28.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret Thatcher, *Interview for Women's Own*, <<http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/106689>> [Accessed 21 April 2011]

McEwan even allows Stephen to break the conventional barriers of time to metaphysically observe and influence his mother's decision to keep rather than abort him whilst he is still in the womb. This striking example of Stephen taking responsibility for his own welfare by persuading his pregnant mother to 'be in love with it, whoever it was' again demonstrates that keeping families together is necessarily in a time of individualist attitudes.<sup>12</sup>

This is also the case in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, written during the 'hungry thirties'. As in the novel, Orwell's 1941 essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn' suggests that in times of adversity, community spirit prevails. Despite England being 'a land of snobbery and privilege, ruled largely by the old and silly', Orwell asserts that the poor are able to forget this and there is a 'tendency of nearly all its inhabitants to feel alike and act together' – what has become known as 'Blitz Spirit'.<sup>13</sup> Recent historical debate has examined this phenomenon in greater depth. Angus Calder's *The Myth of the Blitz* stresses that the perception of prevailing unity is the result of post-war films and propaganda (and therefore quite possibly writing such as 'The Lion and the Unicorn') rather than any sort of reality.<sup>14</sup> These revisionist historians assert that Orwell was very much mistaken, and the rhetoric of a 'People's War' is merely sentimental nostalgia. Both Orwell and McEwan adhere to this 'myth' of an idealised 'family' which triumphs in times of national struggle.

Yet, it is unlikely that either McEwan or Orwell would appreciate this interpretation of their novels. Throughout his career, Orwell demonstrated a passion for exposing the plight of the poor such as the dreadful work of the coal miners in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Similarly, in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, he goes to great lengths to explore how the poor live. In the 'Trafalgar Square' scene, Dorothy, who we previously see as perfectly capable of articulating her opinions such as in her debate with Victor Stone, is reduced to merely repeating 'this cold, this cold!'<sup>15</sup> Destitution is portrayed as an endless physical and mental struggle, certainly not something which can be overcome simply by coming together as a community.

Furthermore, McEwan has spoken about his distaste for stereotypes. His play-script for *The Ploughman's Lunch* was motivated by his knowledge that the dish is 'an invention of an advertising campaign mounted to persuade people to eat in pubs'.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, in *The Child in Time*, McEwan makes reference to the use of the Darkes' village by filmmakers 'because of its resemblance to what was generally accepted as the English countryside'.<sup>17</sup> Earlier in the novel, we learn the reality of England's landscape: 'restrictions on water use had reduced the front gardens of suburban West London to dust'.<sup>18</sup> The ruined England is hidden from sight. McEwan is acutely aware of the gulf between appearance and reality, and the dangers of creating false perceptions. This begs the question – why, with their preoccupations with making visible what is invisible, would both Orwell and McEwan sentimentalise and idealise the institution of family?

The portrayal of the family' in these novels is more complex than has been suggested. Our attention is frequently drawn to the fact that the texts are literary constructions rather than journalistic accounts. In *The Child in Time*, the narrator often asserts knowledge as yet unknown to the reader. For example, we are informed that Stephen attended the sub-Committee meetings during 'what was to turn out to be the last decent summer of the twentieth century'.<sup>19</sup> We are made aware that a narrator is constructing the story from the

<sup>12</sup> McEwan, p.175.

<sup>13</sup> George Orwell, 'The Lion and the Unicorn' (1941), <[http://george-orwell.org/the\\_lion\\_and\\_the\\_unicorn\\_socialism\\_and\\_the\\_english\\_genius](http://george-orwell.org/the_lion_and_the_unicorn_socialism_and_the_english_genius)> [Accessed 21 April 2011]

<sup>14</sup> Angus Calder, *Myth of the Blitz*, (London: Pimlico Books, 1992)

<sup>15</sup> Orwell, *The Clergyman's Daughter*, p.165.

<sup>16</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Ploughman's Lunch*, (London: Methuen, 1985), p.v.

<sup>17</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p.101.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.85.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

future, in the privileged position of knowing the plot before we do.

This use of metafiction is also present in *A Clergyman's Daughter*, in which many events seem pre-ordained – too planned to be a coincidence. Just at the moment Dorothy is forced to leave the school by Mrs. Creevy and face further destitution, a boy arrives with a message for her, shortly following by Mr. Warburton – she is rescued in the nick of time. Similarly in McEwan's novel, just as Thelma is about to inform Stephen of Julie's pregnancy, Julie calls to summon him. Thelma begins telling him that the answer to his problems is obvious: 'right in front of you was –'.<sup>20</sup> The use of the dash highlights the fact that the phone call comes at the ideal moment, romantically allowing Julie to announce the good news herself. In both texts there is a sense of a plot being conveniently driven. As Malcolm argues, this serves to remind any reader of the presence of story and storyteller'.<sup>21</sup> The presentation of the family may be sentimental, but it is quite clear that it is fictional and plotted, one version of events.

McEwan makes this particularly explicit. Frequently in his novel, one momentary decision takes the character in a very specific direction. When Stephen meets with Julie at her cottage he is confronted with two choices, one to sleep with his wife and the other to remove himself from the situation and accept the offer of the bath she has prepared for him: 'their hesitation was brief, delicious before the forking paths'.<sup>22</sup> This is an implicit reference to Borges' 'The Garden of Forking Paths', in which Ts'ui Pen has both written a novel and created a labyrinth demonstrating that for every decision we make, 'a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times' fork away from each other – the alternative 'parallel world', in which you do not exist, included.<sup>23</sup> This inter-textual reference highlights that the novel could easily have arrived at a different conclusion had Stephen taken a different path. This is certainly the case as his decision results in Julie's pregnancy which he discovers nine months later. However, as he deliberates, the reader is informed that both choices were 'equally weighted, balanced on a honed fulcrum'.<sup>24</sup> He could easily have selected the alternative option, meaning his reunion with Julie might never have taken place. McEwan also dwells on Stephen's earlier decision as to whether he should get back into bed with Julie or head to the supermarket with Kate. Going for the latter resulted in his daughter's abduction. Whilst his journey down one path led to the birth of his new child and the somewhat biblical image of his family reunited under the stars, an earlier, irreversible choice, ended in misery and self-destruction. As Malcolm argues, this makes the reader aware that 'what he/she has read is only one possibility, only one account of the world' – other paths could have been taken.<sup>25</sup> Whilst the presentation of the family is sentimental, we are constantly alerted to the fact that McEwan is only telling one version a story which, with minor details altered, could have turned out very differently for the characters. Stephen was not destined for his tale to end happily

Just as we should not fully accept the sentimentality of *A Child in Time*, neither are we meant to accept Dorothy's view that 'mere outward things like poverty and drudgery, and even loneliness, don't matter'.<sup>26</sup> This is not by any means the opinion of the author, nor the message which readers should take from the text. Daphne Patai has complained about Dorothy's assertion, asking 'if Dorothy Hare's adventures do not matter, why has Orwell

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.204.

<sup>21</sup> Malcolm, p.95.

<sup>22</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p.63.

<sup>23</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Garden of Forking Paths' in *Labyrinths* trans. and ed. by Donald Yates and James Irby, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p.125.

<sup>24</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p.63.

<sup>25</sup> Malcolm, p.109.

<sup>26</sup> Orwell, *The Clergyman's Daughter*, p.291.

spent 150 pages on them?’<sup>27</sup> She neglects to consider that Dorothy’s destitution does matter to Orwell – he does not necessarily agree with the opinions of his character. Much of the hop-picking incident reads like a fairy-tale, such as the foliage being compared to ‘the plaits of Rapunzel’s hair that came tumbling on top of you’.<sup>28</sup> Saunders notes that this is language ‘one more readily associates with a young woman than with an older, hardened, objective political journalist’.<sup>29</sup> Much of her experience of poverty is recounted from Dorothy’s perspective – she idealises the need for community, in the same way she willingly returns home to her old routine. As the novel reaches a close with Dorothy back to working on costumes ‘with pious concentration’ the reader is left not with a sense of the importance of family, but of the tragedy that she has been unable to fully understand the significance of her brush with poverty. Orwell wants to critique Dorothy’s ‘fairy-tale’ view of family, not validate it.

Just as the horrors of poverty linger with the reader even after Dorothy insists it does not matter, the memory of Kate continues to haunt *The Child in Time*. Stephen cannot forget about her, and so neither can the reader. At his committee meeting, in an attempt to use her to illustrate a point, Stephen says ‘I remember Kate, my daughter...’<sup>30</sup> The use of ellipses demonstrates his inability to even speak coherently about Kate, for he becomes too overcome with grief. As with Orwell, McEwan did not spend an entire novel discussing the effects of grief only to suggest that it can be solved in an instance with familial support. Even at the very moment he is reunited with Julie ‘they begin to cry together at last for the lost irreplaceable child’.<sup>31</sup> The word ‘irreplaceable’ is key – the sentimental ending is muted by the overwhelming sense that the new baby will never replace Kate. This ending, far from emphasising the solace which can be found in being part of a united family, problematises this ideal. For Dominic Head, ‘when the new child is born, we cannot help but recall the abducted Kate, whose disappearance, so terrifyingly depicted at the outset, is never explained.’<sup>32</sup> In both novels it is apparent that the power of the family structure is not always adequate, and certain memories cannot, and in the case of Orwell should not, be simply forgotten.

It is comforting for a reader to believe that familial support networks are all we need to get by, no matter what circumstances we face. This is why, particularly during times of uncertainty, such as when the novels were published, readers are willing to accept that Dorothy will be fully content in her tiresome but comfortable life, and that Stephen and Julie will enter a new day as happy and loving parents. These conclusions are far easier to digest. Yet, Orwell and McEwan do not want their readers to be entirely comfortable with this portrayal of the family. By making us aware that their stories have been constructed, we are forced to consider the possibility of alternative, less cosy denouements. Ultimately, the reader’s knowledge that, whilst Dorothy is home, her companions remain on the streets living a life of destitution, and that, in spite of the new baby, a young child remains lost from her parents, leaves us ‘deeply unsettled’.<sup>33</sup> In both *The Child in Time* and *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, we are encouraged by the authors to question the validity of the idealised and romantic notion of family that they themselves have created for us.

<sup>27</sup> Daphne Patai, *The Orwell Mystique: a study in male ideology*, (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984), p.103.

<sup>28</sup> Orwell, *The Clergyman’s Daughter*, p.109.

<sup>29</sup> Saunders, p.54.

<sup>30</sup> McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p.79.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.214.

<sup>32</sup> Dominic Head, *Ian McEwan*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.87.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.12.

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