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## THE SYMBOLIC PAST IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S *LAST ORDERS*

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**Abstract:** *This essay examines the concept of the past in Graham Swift's Last Orders, showing that it is illustrated through symbols in a postmodernist manner, being associated with the figure of a dead character perceived as a living presence and with a book whose analysis can offer multiple interpretations. Focusing on the symbols of the past and evincing the metafictional condition of Graham Swift's novel, this essay remarks that the past is open to the readers' analysis and different interpretations.*

**Keywords:** *duty, the past, the present, respect, unity of vision.*

### 1. Introduction

Illustrating the idea expressed by Linda Hutcheon (2002) who claims that “knowing the past becomes a question of representing, that is of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording” (Hutcheon 2002:70), this essay shows that in Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, the past is represented by the figure of Jack Dodds, a dead man perceived as a living presence whose life is associated with a book of requests, wishes and unwritten rules regarding the way the living protagonists should fulfil their obligations towards him. The characters in Graham Swift's novel do their best to understand these requests and rules, accepting them out of a sense of duty and respect. As these rules are not written, they have to be inferred based on the suggestions in Jack's symbolic book of life, which his family and friends remember and review. Representing the past as a book of unwritten rules to be inferred and obeyed by the living protagonists opens the past to various interpretations. We are shown that the present world just carries out and obeys the orders of the world of the past, fulfilling its wishes. The world of the present does not emphasize its novelty and principles. Its ideals and wishes are not given any importance. The narrators in Graham Swift's novel attach the utmost importance to their duty to meet their spiritual obligations to the past, complying with its requests.

The novel consists of 75 chapters whose titles are either the names of the characters, who are the narrators of the novel, or the names of the places these characters visit on their way to Margate or *Dreamland* (Swift 1996:273). The 75 chapters do not present a chronological story but only these characters' perspective on their duty towards the past associated with Jack Dodds, the dead man whose wishes they have to take into account and fulfil. We are not presented any precise time when the events take place but only the living characters' determination and energetic action to pay their last respects to Jack, the symbol of the past. The only reference to time is made by the presence of the clock in the pub where the living characters gather to discuss the latest news and aspects of their life and duty. Time is an eternal present moment. It only

stands still. Jack's vision on time indicates the lack of historical progress: "But it aint ever gone nowhere, has it?" (Swift 1996:9). The 75 chapters of the novel are presented concisely and with no importance attached to language accuracy. Ray, Amy, Vince, Lenny, Vic and Mandy are the narrators of this novel and have their own chapters which mainly focus on dialogues evincing their present concerns and moral obligation to do their duty to Jack whose will asks them to spread his ashes in Margate. The present is associated with these characters' pilgrimage to three destinations in order to pay their last respects to Jack: *The Naval Memorial*, the Canterbury Cathedral and Margate. They admire the world from Vince's car as if they did not have the chance to know it so far, as if the dead offered them an opportunity to understand their present world. The car drive to Margate turns into a "sightseeing tour" (Swift 1996:107), the characters discovering their world and its past in a breathtaking rush which brings back their memories, urging them to respect the past and do their duty towards it. Their dialogues, gestures and attitude create the photo of a present which is not as important to them as their past. They do not reveal their ideals, ideas and plans for the future but just bits and pieces of their remembrances concerning their past – their youth and childhood, their business and sense of duty. They do not seem to regret Jack's death, considering it just a passage to a different spiritual condition in the *Dreamland* of Margate, near the sea, a paradise world and a part of their present world.

Despite his physical condition of a dead man, Jack Dodds seems to play the role of the main character whose voice is still heard as if it were real. Married to Amy, Jack is a butcher running his own shop, *Dodds&Son. Family Butcher*. He survives a war and has a daughter, June, whom he abandons in a hospital, never wanting to see her, and an adoptive son, Vince, who comes to secretly hate him despite the parental help he has been offered. Jack's life is associated with a book, which is the metaphor of the world of the past and which is open to different interpretations. It is his wife Amy who makes references to Jack's book which is nothing but his life: "the living come first, even the living who were as good as dead to him, so it'd be all one now, all the same, in his book" (Swift 1996:228). Enlarging upon this metaphor, Graham Swift's *Last Orders* shows its condition of a "metafictional" novel as defined by Patricia Waugh (1984): "Metafiction pursues such questions through its formal self-exploration, drawing on the traditional metaphor of the world as book, but often recasting it in the terms of contemporary philosophical, linguistic or literary theory" (Waugh 1984:2-3). Jack's symbolic book seems to be seriously reviewed by the living characters in Graham Swift's novel as they appreciate its importance and do their best to comply with its requests based on their education and vision. Focusing on his story and reflecting on his past, Jack Dodds's book of life stands for his identity as, according to Mark Currie (1998), identity "exists only as narrative" (Currie 1998:17).

The next part of this essay will analyse the symbols of the past, emphasizing the idea that the different narrators' perspectives on the past and on their duty towards it end up in their unity of vision.

## **2. The Symbolic Past in Graham Swift's *Last Orders***

As postmodernist novels invite their readers to fill in their interpretation and to share their concerns with the approached themes, Graham Swift's *Last Orders* focuses on a series of symbols to be deciphered by the readers in order to grasp the truth of the past. For instance, the characters' vision on their obligations to the past represented by Jack Dodds stands for unity in diversity. Despite their different names which are the titles of some chapters, these characters' unity of vision regarding the respect they should have for the past prevails. They support the idea that "a man is just a name" (Swift 1996:128) whose duty is to carry out his obligations towards

the past, preserving its memory and holding it in great respect. Moreover, the places, which are the titles of a couple of chapters – Bermondsey, Blackheath, Dartford, Gravesend, Rochester, Chatham, Wick's Farm, Canterbury, Margate – stand for unity in diversity as well. These places represent the symbolic past the living characters should revisit and understand, calling for their unity of vision in terms of the necessary respect for the past. Furthermore, these places stand for the eternal time all generations go through and enjoy. The living characters only pass them in their pilgrimage to *Dreamland*, which is Margate or the holy land of all the spirits of the past.

The title of the novel, *Last Orders*, is an invitation extended to the living characters to pay homage to the past by fulfilling a dead man's wishes and requests. The *last orders* are the orders sent by the past generations to the present ones with a view to preserving the human values of respect and love for the ancestors, for the parents and grandparents, for their great work and wishes. Jack Arthur Dodds is the silent voice of the past which urges the living characters to meet his requests. Jack's dream is to sell his shop and have a little house in Margate to live with his wife, Amy. But his dream comes true after his death when his ashes are spread in Margate. He turns into ashes, which are spread across the world by the wind, the symbol of new life and energy. His ashes symbolize the living memory of the past which lies heavily upon the present world. The energy of Jack's ashes stimulates the living characters' desire to ponder on the heritage of the past in order to understand it. Ashes can fly like pigeons, filling the world with the smell and the hopes of the past. Pigeons, the symbol of the Holy Spirit and of eternal life, are compared to "bits of ashes with wings" (Swift 1996:16). Thus, Jack's ashes, which are associated with the past, are given a spiritual value which must be attached much importance to in order to assume and carry out our moral obligations towards it.

Analysing Graham Swift's *Last Orders*, we witness what Frederick M. Holmes (1997) calls an "exercise of the historical imagination" (Holmes 1997:82). What Frederick M. Holmes (1997) shows referring to other postmodernist novels is also valid for Graham Swift's *Last Orders* as the living protagonists' efforts in this novel aim at turning their past into an eternal value which they reconstruct in their imagination based on their remembrances, experiences and education, feeling respect for it and gratitude to it:

It is obvious that the exercise of the historical imagination in these novels carries with it great risks and rewards. The aim goes beyond the desire to establish continuity with the past or to impose order upon it. The goal is to transcend time altogether and to overcome death, to supply immortality. And owing to the equation made by the novels between historical representation and imaginative literature, the immortality which they seek is essentially that which has traditionally been claimed for great art (Holmes 1997:82).

Ignoring Jack's condition of a dead man and considering him their own living interlocutor with important wishes to be fulfilled, the characters in Graham Swift's novel transcend Jack's past time and do not attach physical death any importance to. By their actions, they just claim the immortality of the past values which they hold in great respect. Their effort to pay homage to their past is evinced by Ray, Vince, Lenny and Vic's decision to stop at the *Naval Memorial* and at the Canterbury Cathedral, carrying Jack's ashes in the plastic jar as if the ashes were a living presence watching them. Their pilgrimage to Margate with their stops at the *Naval Memorial*, at the Canterbury Cathedral and at a pub is an act of paying their last respects to Jack. This pilgrimage is also the symbol of our journey through life with the definite purpose of understanding the importance and the value of the past in our present. The difficulty of finding the *Naval Memorial* stands for their great effort to discover and understand the past. They make a sacrifice, being determined to successfully accomplish their mission:

Lenny says, panting, 'He never said it was up no bleeding hill'. [...] It's a funny memorial that no one remembers the way to. [...] I reckon Vic is making a sacrifice, he makes a good martyr, and anyhow there must be some old lost mates of his with their names chalked up on that memorial for having made their own sacrifice, as they call it, once, so it don't do to deny them. If we ever get there (Swift 1996:119). It's like an effort at dignity, that's what it is, it's like a big tall effort at dignity (Swift 1996:122).

The obelisk, which they find at the *Naval Memorial* and which seems to be "floating" (Swift 1996:122), can symbolize the unstable truth of the past meant to be interpreted and understood by the readers of Graham Swift's novel. Having gone up the "bleeding hill" (Swift 1996:119) and having seen the list of names on the obelisk, Ray understands that what we call present life is in fact an act of survival. At this point, he admits that he has understood the world, which is his past and his present. The obelisk is an instance of what Linda Hutcheon (2002:55) calls "the traces" of the past which enable us to understand it. According to Linda Hutcheon (2002),

The past is something with which we must come to terms and such a confrontation involves an acknowledgement of limitation as well as power. We only have access to the past today through its traces – its documents, the testimony of witnesses, and other archival materials. In other words, we only have representations of the past from which to construct our narratives or explanations (Hutcheon 2002:55).

To show that he has understood the past, Ray frequently uses the verb *see* with the meaning of *perceive, understand*: "I could see the world" (Swift 1996:128). One of the consequences of having understood the past is the characters' determination to respect it by enforcing the *orders* sent by the "High Command" (Swift 1996:132), which is the Divinity and the voice of eternal time:

It's a question of duty. There's a soldier's duty, a sailor's duty. Heligoland. Jutland. But if you ask me, that aint duty so much as orders. Doing your duty in the ordinary course of life is another thing, it's harder. It's like Ray always said that Jack was a fine soldier, Jack should've got a medal, but when it came to being back in Civvy Street, he didn't know nothing better, like most of us, than to stick like glue to what he knew, like there was an order sent down from High Command that he couldn't ever be nothing else but a butcher. [...] It's a question of paying your dues (Swift 1996:132).

The pilgrimage to the Canterbury Cathedral with Jack's ashes in the plastic jar broadens the living characters' perspective on the past as this is the first time they have been there: "it's like we are all thinking we might have lived all our lives and never seen Canterbury Cathedral, it's something Jack's put right" (Swift 1996:193). The symbol of the glorious English past, the Canterbury Cathedral seems to be treating them as unimportant. It stands for the eternal time treating the temporary time of the living human beings as unimportant: "Like it's looking down at you, saying, I'm Canterbury Cathedral, who the hell are you?" (Swift 1996:194). The characters' moments of silence and their understanding of the importance of "looking not telling" (Swift 1996:128) show their respect and admiration for the past represented by the *Naval Memorial* with the obelisk, by the Canterbury Cathedral and Jack's ashes. By drawing our attention to the necessity of "looking not telling" (Swift 1996:128), they also suggest that the power of words to express the truth of the past and the complexity of human feelings is limited.

The living protagonists' lack of words, especially in the chapters containing either two words as in one of Vince's chapters (Swift 1996:130) or a couple of sentences as in one of Lenny's chapters (Swift 1996:195), reinforces the idea that the past is open to our analysis which can offer multiple interpretations. Moreover, such blanks in the narrative are conducive to what Brian McHale (1987) calls "the physical discontinuity and spaciness of postmodernist texts"

(McHale 1987:182) which favour various interpretations. At this point, we witness a metafictional game with the conventional structure of the novel. According to Patricia Waugh (1984), a novel “is metafictional only to the extent that it foregrounds the arbitrary relationship between words and things and lays bare the construction of meaning through metaphorical substitution” (Waugh 1984:43). We are invited to infer the meaning of the symbols in Graham Swift’s novel, filling in the blanks of its narrative. The frequency of the verb *look* suggests the characters’ interest in making sense of the world and of the past through their inner vision and interpretation.

He stands there looking, not telling (Swift 1996:128).

I see him stop on the edge of the hill and look at the view like Vic looking at the names (Swift 1996:140).

I look at him like I’m looking down at a view (Swift 1996:189).

I’m gazing, I’m staring, I’m peering hard, but I can’t see it, I can’t make it out. The next world (Swift 1996:207).

The moments of silence seem to be part of a ritual of holding the *box* containing the jar with Jack’s ashes and of passing this *box* to each other, addressing it as if it were a living human being. Holding this *box* symbolizes the living characters’ great sense of responsibility towards the past as well as their pride in their past:

He’s holding the box like it might be his lunch (Swift 1996:21).

Vic’s still holding the box. He shouldn’t keep hogging it (Swift 1996:46).

I’m holding the box now, Jack’s on my knees (Swift 1996:48).

I’m holding Jack again, in his bag, in his jar, and I hold on to him tighter, like I already need the extra ballast (Swift 1996:262-263).

The *box*, which all characters want to hold, symbolizes the power of the past they can inherit. The fight between Vince and Lenny for the *box* is the fight for the supremacy over the heritage of the past. Lenny seems to be more protective towards the past than Vince, who looks defiant and ignorant of it. By his gestures and attitude, Vince expresses his hatred for Jack. For instance, he unscrews the lid of the jar and throws part of the ashes away with his hand, being irritated by Lenny’s determination to take hold of the jar with Jack’s ashes. At this point, we can notice that the past, associated with Jack, is subject to Vince and Lenny’s different interpretation according to their vision and education. Vince’s actions and lack of words evince his hidden frustration and dissatisfaction with Jack’s decisions and past.

The symbols of the past are explored throughout the novel by the various voices which finally come to an agreement regarding their duty and responsibility towards the past. The living characters – Ray, Vince, Vic, Lenny, Amy, Mandy – who are also the narrators of the novel, try to decipher these symbols during their journey to Margate. At the same time, they make brief references to their past, to their inner concerns, to their dissatisfaction with certain aspects of their life, sharing their thoughts. We are not introduced to any spectacular events in their lives or to any important historical events. We are just briefly presented some ordinary aspects of their lives regarding their work and family. Ray, Vince, Lenny and Vic meet in a pub – the symbol of the present life – where they share the latest information and exchange opinions in a pleasant atmosphere. In Ray’s first chapter, we are introduced to their meeting with Jack alive, all showing their familiarity with the metaphor of the *Coach and Horses* – the symbol of the inevitable death which takes all of us out of this world. Jack particularly outlines his vision on this metaphor wondering where exactly they will be taken by death: “Where d’you think we’ve all got to get to that the bleeding coach should be taking us?” (Swift 1996:9). They celebrate

Vince's birthday showing that they are "coming up to last orders" (Swift 1996:9). Besides suggesting that Jack has the last opportunity to enjoy life and to drink with his old friends, this phrase also makes reference to Jack's *orders*, which are nothing but his strong desires and requests to be carried out by his family and friends.

The characters' dialogues evince their interpretation of the past. For instance, Ray's vision of the present world reinforces the idea that it is bound to repeat the patterns of the past world. He frequently uses the verbs *think* and *see* to reflect his understanding of the past. He points out that he involuntarily repeats Jack's actions, which are associated with the world of the past. Understanding the interconnection between the present and the past, between his family and his ancestors, Ray claims that "we're all part of each other" (Swift 1996:51), viewing his ancestors as if they were alive in front of him. His life events generate his growing interest in understanding the past, associated with Jack, whose condition he compares with everyone's human condition: "I'm seeing the man himself, his own man, private Jack, who's assumed command" (Swift 1996:183). This idea anticipates the conclusion of the novel that Jack's ashes are part of our human essence as they are spread across the world by the wind – the symbol of Life that we all physically live up to a certain point: "the ash [...], which was Jack who once walked around, is carried away by the wind, is whirled away by the wind till the ash becomes wind and the wind becomes Jack what we're made of" (Swift 1996:294-295). Therefore, Ray Johnson takes the past for the essence of our present. Unlike him, who preserves and respects the tradition of the past, doing his duty towards his family and friends, Vince or Vincent Ian Pritchett, who is Jack and Amy's adoptive son, as his real parents died at war, is the nonconformist who hates the past tradition and Jack, being determined to take revenge against him. Vince is dissatisfied with the way he was brought up and treated as a child when he always had to sit at the back of the car when travelling, feeling that he was not the beloved son of his adoptive family. To keep away from Jack and Amy, he signs up for five years and enters the Foreign Legion, rejecting the idea of becoming a butcher at *Dodds and Son*. He lives in a butcher's van with Mandy whom he gets married to, having a daughter, Kath, who is unable to work. When Jack dies, Vince does not wear a black tie and wonders whether Jack sees them fulfilling his wish of spreading his ashes in Margate. Moreover, Vince does not seem convinced of the importance of doing his duty to Jack by fulfilling his wishes after his death. He has outbursts of fury on the way to Margate, fighting with Lenny, getting dirty and scattering a part of Jack's ashes on a field before arriving in Margate. Furthermore, his gesture of placing the jar with Jack's ashes in a carrier bag where he also puts some coffee and the fact that he forgets this bag in an inn, being reminded by Lenny to take it when leaving, show his total lack of respect for Jack. Nevertheless, he meets Jack's final request and reaches Margate with his friends, throwing Jack's ashes in the wind to spread across the world and turn into our own essence. Despite the fact that he accomplishes his duty to Jack, who is the symbol of the past, Vince's disrespectful vision and negative interpretation of the past are fairly noticeable.

Graham Swift's narrators in *Last Orders* invite the readers to complete their chapters, to fill in their appropriate words. The narrators' linguistic ability to demonstrate the complexity of language in order to accurately represent the past and its influence upon the present is limited. As compared to their language, which has lost its power to accurately represent the world, their actions are more suggestive for the importance of the past in their lives. Thus, we can remark that Graham Swift's novel is an instance of what Linda Hutcheon (1988) calls "historiographic metafiction", wherein the narrators fail to present a unique perspective upon the truth of the past. According to Linda Hutcheon (1988), in this type of postmodernist fiction,

All the various critically sanctioned modes of talking about subjectivity (character, narrator, writer, textual voice) fail to offer any stable anchor. They are used, inscribed, entrenched, yes, but they are also abused, subverted, undermined. These novels are perhaps upsetting to many readers for exactly this reason (Hutcheon 1988:189).

Not being given what Linda Hutcheon (1988) calls “any stable anchor” (Hutcheon 1988:189) in terms of an accurate representation of the past, we have to fill in the blanks of Graham Swift’s novel to understand the past. It is shown as a living presence with wishes to be fulfilled as well as an object of analysis which reveals the characters’ unity of vision regarding their obligations towards it and which could arise the readers’ different interpretations. Analysing the living protagonists’ actions and determination to do their duty to Jack, associated with the past and with a set of unwritten rules, requests and wishes, we can notice that they have understood the power and the value of the past in their lives. Even if they lack the linguistic ability to objectively express the true meaning of Jack’s unwritten book they have in their minds and frequently reread, they give us a hint at our great duty to hold the past in great respect.

### 3. Conclusion

Illustrating the past through symbols and associating it with a book, whose analysis can offer different interpretations, Graham Swift’s *Last Orders* shows its condition of a postmodernist and metafictional novel. The past, represented by the figure of Jack Dodds, a dead man perceived as a living presence, is associated with his symbolic book of life the living characters should remember, reread and understand. The past is the characters’ main object of interest and analysis calling for their unity of vision in terms of their obligations towards it. Reviewing Jack’s symbolic book of life, all of them come to appreciate the importance of the past in their lives, carrying out their obligations towards it. Nevertheless, the past is open to the readers’ analysis and different interpretations as they are invited to ponder on it and decipher its symbols in order to make sense of its immortal values, dreams and truth.

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