

Graham Swift and the Ethical Self

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Abstract: Ethical theories study the nature and criteria of right and wrong action, obligation, value and the good life, and the related principles. Peter Singer, in his book, *Ethics* simply states that 'Ethics is about how we ought to live.' (P-3) Graham Swift (born in 1949) is an English novelist whose work is tinged with contemporary ethical issues. He creates situations in which his characters look for better ways to relate to and with each other. These characters try to understand themselves, their place in a world that baffles them, and their relations to others.

In this paper we will try to illustrate and discuss the various methods Swift's characters adopt to wrestle with and at the same time address their contemporary problems. We will trace their problems back to modernity and its adoption of a philosophy or a system of thought that was purely rational and therefore uneven and incomplete. We will consider Swift's work in general as postmodern with subjects and concerns reflecting some of the contemporary ethical and critical debates. We will also perceive and present Swift's work as a response to the inadequacy of modernity and an attempt to come to terms with its shortcomings in the hope of an improved and wiser modernity. We will suggest that in Swift's work there is a visible progressive development from melancholia to mourning, meaning that Swift's latest characters are more prepared to accept their losses and move on towards a healthy mourning. We will see that in the modern epoch, which in the main, is not designed according to human values, Swift's characters endeavour to take charge of defining themselves, of writing their own stories, and their own values in their own ways. In order to sustain their identities, we will show that Swift's characters choose different methods, which, regardless of their consequences, may be considered ethically valuable and in harmony with human dignity. In order to tailor this study to the size of an article, we will be as concise as possible. In so doing, the main focus will be on Swift's major novel, *Waterland* (1983) and his last two novels; *Last Orders* (1996), and *The Light of Day* (2003).

Key words: Graham Swift; History; Modernity; Ethics; Self; Melancholia; Healthy mourning

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One of the central concerns both of the content and the form of all Swift's novels, is history. History is usually presented as personal history which is linked with national and international contexts. In *Waterland*, Price, a student in Tom's history class, interrupts the class and questions the legitimacy of history, 'What matters...is the here and now. Not the past....The only important thing about history, I think, sir, is that it's got to the point where it's probably about to end' (PS 6-7). We also have Ray Johnson, the main character in *Last Order*, who has an interesting phrase, 'It doesn't seem to help a man much, having been at the battle of El Alamein' (P-100) these views underlining the pointlessness of history, reverberate the thoughts of some recent critics who do not consider history as a reliable source for 'truth'. Francis Fukuyama, for one, suggests that we are living at the end of history. In *The End of History*, he defines history as the human struggle to find the most sensible, or the least harmful, political system. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, he believes that capitalist liberal democracy, which according to him has always been the best system, won the fight and history was over. He argues that the only thing that stands before us is a continuous present - in Price's words in *Waterland*, the 'here and now'. In the perplexing intellectual atmosphere occupied by postmodern critics and theorists, the notion of the 'end of history' may appear to have some weight, but among the less confused thinkers, history and the concept of history are still alive. It is alive particularly as a subject and theme for some contemporary fiction writers such as Graham Swift, who tries to point out the importance of history to the understanding of contemporary life. In his work, Swift refutes the notion that history is about to end and utilizes it in a creative way different from what we know as history.

Tom Crick, the narrator in *Waterland* is a history teacher in his fifties who lives in London. He is about to lose his job for two reasons: firstly the school at which he works is 'cutting back on history' and secondly his childless wife, Mary, has been convicted of stealing a baby from a local supermarket. On his final day, instead of teaching his students about the French Revolution, Tom lectures on the bleak, amphibious country of the English Fens – the 'waterland' of the novel's title – and on the two families from which he and Mary are descended. Gradually it becomes clear to the reader that Tom's life is in crisis and his story-telling is an attempt to calm his 'Here and Now' fears, to understand the meaning of his life by thinking about his past for explanation. Tom is not intending to uncover evidence but to recover his past, which seems to hold the key to his present.

In *Waterland*, Tom ignores the 'staples' of traditional history to explain major events – instead, he embraces and investigates his own micro history, thus minimising the intrusion of historians. Tom's micro history is postmodern in the sense that it displays the past as a different, diverse and disconnected individual experience. It seems superficial to distinguish between Tom's story as fictitious and history as actual, since both rely on language and on external reality. History is a story we tell ourselves about the world and stories are histories we make up about our lives. In fact, one of the basic problems in knowing the truth is the

problem of language. On one hand we know that in real life language is what we use to convey ideas, and on the other hand words do not accurately reflect reality, thus the question is how could we ever know reality? In *Waterland* Tom does not use words to reflect reality, but rather to create it. He himself is a creation of his own words. He is what he says; he is a narrative, a history.

In Tom's class, the purpose of history seems to offer a reflection of reality, but we know that our ability to explain things is limited, especially when the tool is language. Then, what is the purpose of history? Graham Swift's narrative proposes:

History is that impossible thing: the attempt to give an account, with incomplete knowledge, of actions themselves undertaken with incomplete knowledge. So that it teaches us no short-cuts to Salvation, no recipe for a New World, only the dogged and patient art of making do. (P- 81)

The 'art of making do' can be construed as the art of reconstruction. Tom's reconstruction of the past via story-telling permits the construction of a future and the reconstruction of his subject position into one that is more bearable. Tom believes that 'life is one tenth Here and Now, nine-tenths a history lesson' (P- 46). The 'Here and Now' appears to most characters of the novel as traumatic events and comes, 'dressed in terror' (P-51) For Tom, events experienced in the here and now act as a slap in the face and deliver, 'surprise attacks' (P-61) Through story-telling, Tom manages to put the here and now into a historical perspective through which its traumatic essence pales away. Wheeler writes, 'The here and now in Tom's tale is pure event – a reality of such immediacy as to be, strictly speaking, intolerable – and a thing which, unless tamed by narratives, drives people mad.' Tom's story-telling provides a shield, however temporary, against the impact of those moments of emotional disturbance that he calls the here and now. In *Out of this World*, the psychiatrist Dr. Klein suggests that narrative can offer reconciliation and healing, 'It is telling that reconciles memory and forgetting' (P-74) Dr. Klein's therapeutic suggestion sits comfortably with Tom Crick's theory of coping with reality:

What do you do when reality is an empty vessel? You can make things happen – and conjure up, with all the risks, a little token urgency; you can drink and be merry and forget what your sober mind tells you. Or, like the Cricks who out of their watery toils could always dredge up a tale or two, you can tell stories. (P-61)

Modernity breaks down the protective framework of the small community and of tradition. Tom feels bereft and alone in a world in which he lacks the psychological supports and the sense of security provided by more traditional settings. His narrative therapy is a secular version of the confession which helps him to unload his unconscious. By touching the facticity of ordinary life, which is more tangible and intimate to the reader, Tom's story advocates that humane individual experiences and principles are as legitimate as universal values.

Trudy Mercer in "On Graham Swift's *Waterland*" discusses that story is able to assist history towards reality, while colouring it with mystery. He writes, 'Histories and stories question each other about the nature of "reality"; together they may provide a framework for its construction and relief from its weight, while, it is hoped, leaving room for mystery.' Does Swift leave any room for mystery? On one level, Tom is performing the work of a historian: he gathers information from a variety of sources, and creates a consistent description of past events. On another level Tom is creating a myth which includes elements of migration, flood, fire, dynastic rise and fall, incest, temptation, betrayal, murder, abortion, suicide, war, revelation, marriage, religious obsession, kidnapping and madness. It is important that Tom's myth has a theme: the circular nature of experience which is symbolized in the reclamation of the silt - the constituent of the Fens.

Setting is a major factor in Swift's novels. It works closely with complex psychological characters and helps to clarify his themes. In *Waterland*, The Fens reflects some of the characteristics of its inhabitants. The Fens could be construed as a metaphor for post-colonial England, or as English contemporary society, or even on a larger scale, as the postmodern condition, 'To live in the Fens is to receive strong doses of reality' (P-17) In order to work out the quality of the Fens, or in this case, history, we can either trace back the river and try to make a detailed study of different terrains which the river has passed through, or we can take a sample of it and examine its ingredients. The first option emphasises epistemology or modes of knowing, which is adopted by historians and the traditional historical novels, and in *Waterland*, it is

articulated in the school's curriculum. This approach only gives intellectual and not psychical understanding of events. The second option is the examination of the characters, which emphasises ontology, or modes of being, which is embraced by Swift, and in the novel is articulated in Tom's story-telling or using of the past to the benefit of the here and now'. Tom tells his students what he wanted from history:

So I began to demand of history an Explanation. Only to uncover more fantasticalities, more wonders and grounds for astonishment than I started with; only to conclude forty years later...that history is a yarn. And can I deny that what I wanted all along was not some golden nugget that history would at last yield up, but History itself: the Grand Narrative, the filler of vacuums, the dispeller of fears in the dark. (P-62)

Swift's subsequent novels make obvious his persistent fascination with history as a means of knowing and a method of attempting to deal with one's position in the world.

Let us leave history to history. *Waterland* is the story of technology and capitalism overtaking the life and land of the Fens inhabitants. The Atkinsons stand for progress, technology, rationality and modernity on the whole. The fact that the Atkinsons attempt to establish themselves through their ale business implies that progress in a modern sense was only a form of hallucination and phantasm, so that modernity in general started off on the wrong foot. The cause of Atkinsons' progress (they were 'thinking things' used their brains and came up with the idea of ale business) encapsulated in a bottle of the ale of 1911, bestowed by Dick's father/grandfather to him, becomes a killing weapon in Dick's hand to murder Freddie Parr, which suggests that progress could be destructive. To some critics such as Steven Connor, the destructive aspect of modernity is due to a universal naïve acceptance of Enlightenment rationalism by the modernists, and the way it is applied to sophisticated twentieth century life. He examines the modern 'self' as a product of modernity. He sees the disadvantages of modernity as the 'unmaking of the self'. In his essay "The Modern Auditory I" Connor tries to show that modernity is identified with the construction or the 'making' and the deconstruction or the 'unmaking' of the self. The making side of modernity deals with the apprehension of the self's autonomy as well as the positive act of ejecting all inaccuracy and error from the self. But the absence of God, a church, a king, a tradition, and the utter lack of organic communication, according to him, are what force the modern subject apart as the unmaking of the self.

In *Waterland*, progress and history are in the same boat; they do not develop forward, Tom says, 'There's this thing called progress. But it doesn't progress, it doesn't go anywhere. Because as progress progresses the world can slip away. It's progress if you can stop the world slipping away.' (P-336) History and progress, as portrayed in *Waterland*, do not progress to the next higher stage of synthesis, and subsequently, do not realise absolute knowledge. It is this same realization of the revolving nature of history that Tom seeks to inspire in his students with his stories.

In *Waterland*, modern society is shown as purely materialistic and spiritually infertile. Dick, the 'waterman', constantly immerses himself in water like an embryo swimming in the womb of the Fens. He is a symbol of 'natural' life trapped in the loveless incarceration of modernity. The novel implies that modern life takes no notice of our 'animal urges'. Dick, as a symbol of this animal urge, is infertile due to his over-sized penis, which could be read as an unbalanced progress. He is depicted as a non-complete, semi-human who can identify with his motor-bike much easier than with his playmates:

[...] Which is why he talks, for solace, to his motor-bike, more than he talks to any living thing. And why it has even been said (and Freddie Parr was one of the chief rumour-mongers) that Dick is so fond of his motor bike that he sometimes rides it to secluded spots, gets down with it on the grass and ... (P-38).

Freddie Parr's rumour about Dick having sex with his bike, half a century after the story, has become the reality of our lives today. Mobile phone, Online sex, electronic sex devices, computer distance teaching, ordering your books, cloths and foods online, etc. are some of the many examples of the lack of organic communication between human beings in our complex contemporary milieu. Dick who is supposed to be the 'saviour of the world' becomes a murderer. Dick, as the manifestation of his parents' sin, takes a self-cleansing action and escapes to the waters to purify himself. It seems that Dick desires to go back to the waters of the womb, to the origin of his birth, before he was born into modern life. Likewise, *Waterland*

craves for a different condition of modernity where life is more 'natural' and endurable. Tom states 'My ancestors were water people' implying that they were not as rigid as land people - the Atkinsons who stand for rationality and progress. The title of the novel, *Waterland* suggests that not only are we rational but also emotional, sensual and spiritual. Dick, the waterman, ends in water and the Biblical, 'from dust to dust' changes into Swift's concept, 'from water to water'. Under the far-flung kingdom of modernity, Dick commits suicide which suggests that modernity has never had a complete project for our lives.

Western ideas of progress are limited to the wings of scientific achievements stretched under the shadow of rational thoughts. These ideas are notably avoid of ontological assumptions and values - the very things which, according to Wendy Wheeler, should be the prerequisite of any progressive practice. Therefore, scientific progress alone is not the ultimate value; it is only one value among many universal values that need to be investigated further. Swift's narrator in *Waterland* believes in a never-ending need to revise progress:

My humble model for progress is the reclamation of land. Which is repeatedly, never-endingly retrieving what is lost. A dogged and vigilant business. A dull yet valuable business. A hard, inglorious business. But you shouldn't go mistaking the reclamation of land for the building of empires.' (P-291)

Progress must relentlessly continue to rectify itself to the point where it behaves like a flower, sending its fragrance evenly everywhere around it. *Waterland* demands a second look at our understanding of progress. It represents Swift's concern that since we produce technology, therefore it is our responsibility to direct it in a way that it suits our nature. Since we are the ones who are influenced and affected by technology, it is our responsibility to take one step back after any 'progress' or 'achievement' and examine its resultant effects. In *Waterland*, story-telling, creativity and imagination – the ignored elements of modern rationalism - are like a river running parallel to progress in its modern sense.

The First and Second World Wars, as the consequence of modernity, usually have a significant place in Swift's work, especially in the memory of his characters.

The white English community in Swift's work is the community of loners. They are both the products and the victims of modernity. They do not want, or do not know how to, engage with post-war life: Willy Chapman dies alone in a lamentable status with nobody to lament for him; Tom Crick is prematurely pensioned off and therefore cut off from his students, the last community with whom he had been attached; Bill Unwin's story ends with a possible death; the husband in *The Light of Day* seems to provoke his wife murder him; and the whole community in *Last Orders* seems to have difficulty coming to terms with post-war era. After the war the challenges are altered and these people are not ready for big changes, therefore the tone of the new life pushes them into a corner of pessimism and conservatism. The community in *Last Orders*, as a microcosm of the post-war generation, is on its last legs, and is trying to negotiate with its lost identity, or somehow find a way of 'mourning' it.

Tom's story-telling and the stories we receive via the memories of Swift's characters, in various ways, raise the question of how to represent the self. Self, as one of the most fundamental issues, has been endlessly pondered by philosophers, poets, psychologists and most thinkers. The Greeks believed that they were the playthings of fate; Christians thought they were miserable sinners; Descartes saw human beings as thinking things; Romantics stressed self-expression, while Freud focused on the unconscious. '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. The person or the self in Swift's work is depicted through memories. Relying on the attitude currently overtaking the Western world known as postmodernism, there is no real 'you' which remains constant throughout all of life's changes. The identity of Swift's characters is not a coherently unified or fixed phenomenon, neither is it a simultaneous operation of class, race, gender, etc. It is an always-in-process phenomenon, with its ups and downs, with its contradictions and ambiguities. In his work change is fundamental and flux seems to be normal and part and parcel of the life, but the characters, mostly ordinary people, seem to have difficulty keeping pace with the speed of these changes. In all these changes these ordinary characters seem to lose their sense of identity.

In *Last Orders*, for example, the characters are ordinary people who live in Bermondsey, a small working-class section of London. The entire action of the novel takes place on a single day, when a small group of men carry out the orders of the late Jack Dodds for his ashes to be, 'chucked off the end of Margate pier'. The story is mainly told through the alternating points of view of these four men; Vince, Ray, Lenny and Vic. The story moves between their experiences of the journey, memories of their lives and of Jack's. Similar to *Waterland*, the novel relies on history to examine the relationship between individual human life and the common life of English nation.

As with ancient myths, in *Last Orders*, parallels may be drawn between the physical journey of the characters and their inner searching. Cooper writes, 'Swift's characters tend to be searchers: they look for truth and understanding in a world that baffles them.' (P-23) Almost all the characters in the novel become aware of the problems in their lives. These realisations help them to review and set their priorities straight again, and makes them determined to resolve the conflicts which have blemished their lives.

The circularity of time is prominent in *Last Orders*. Cooper states that, 'the fear of the world ending is a springboard for spiritual exploration.' (Ps- 13, 14) She also highlights how fine the borderline is between life and death, 'In *Last Orders*, the apparent finality of death spurs a questioning of the logic of human life – a logic which proves as ambiguous as death itself, for Jack endures despite his departure, and the unaware June is effectively dead despite her living on in an institution.' (P-29) In *Last Orders*, the sea emerges as an image of unknown eternity and obscures the concept of ending. The men scatter Jack Dodds' ashes into the sea, but, 'It doesn't look like journey's end.' (P-269)

If we accept Craps' assumption that there is a line of development in Swift's works, its highest point, should be seen in his latest novel *The Light of Day*. The story covers just a single day in the life of an ex-policeman called George Webb. In reminiscing, George repeatedly flies forward and backward and covers a much wider scale. The reader is informed that, after years of service, he was suddenly discharged for an unusual burst of temper which resulted in the assault of a suspect. To complete his misfortune, his wife of twenty-some years, left him because she could not tolerate his scandalous behaviour. Following his dismissal, George takes on a second career as a private detective. In his new job the first rule, of course, is not to get involved, but George breaks the rule with one of his clients, Sarah Nash. Two years ago Sarah had come to his office for assistance. Her husband, Bob, had been having an affair with Kristina Lazic, a Croatian refugee they had taken in. Although Bob had agreed to break off the affair and send Kristina home, his wife, Sarah, wanted someone to make sure that the girl actually did get on the plane and leave. That simply was George's mission.

However, on that fatal evening Sarah had taken a kitchen knife and stabbed her betraying husband. George goes to prison every fortnightly to see Sarah, the woman who is a murderess, his client, and his love. Only days after she was imprisoned, George expressed his feelings for her and has continued to reaffirm this deep affection on the ritualistic prison visits on alternate Thursday since the murder. George and Sarah try to provide each other with comfort and companionship as the story focuses on the consequences of their prior actions.

In accordance with the demands of his job, George is a keen judge of others' behaviour. To know his own behaviour is a different matter and takes time. 'You take a step, you cross a line,' he repeats throughout the novel to remind himself of the lesson. In contrast with other characters in Swift's novels, who usually do not progress beyond their crisis and face an uncertain future, George learns from his past experiences and manages to put his life, 'back together again' (P-127) Indeed, *The Light of Day* has been recognized by different reviewers as an optimistic work. Sven Birkerts, for instance, calls the novel 'unexpectedly redemptive', and Soumya Bhattacharya also writes that the book is, 'touched with the hope of redemption'. What makes George different from Swift's previous characters is that he proves that losses can be restored.

George is apt to change his life, 'Choice? It's in the blood. It's what I do, I am.' (P-105) When he chooses not to give up and to suck the marrow of life instead, the 'strangest thing' - nothing short of a miracle - happens to him. His daughter, Helen, forgives her father and in his relationship with Sarah, George sees himself as a saviour figure and 'forgive[s] her', 'Thousands wouldn't, but I have. A thousand times' (P-153) By introducing the concept of forgiveness, Swift gives the novel a religious overtone. Stef Craps draws our attention to the Christian symbolism in which the divine light dispels the darkness, thus symbolising God's salvation of His people. *The Light of Day* brings light to Swift's oeuvre and, as in his other novels, suggests resurrection and the possibility of renewal, rebirth and new beginnings.

Religious themes are also apparent in Swift's other novels. In *Last Orders*, faith is suggested, according to Pamela Cooper, in Ray's luck, which makes him, 'a figure, not just of hope, but of the possibility of miracles. With his extraordinary good fortune, Ray embodies the chance that resurrection and new beginnings might manifest themselves on this side of the grave, not only for the dead but for the living' (P-47) In her reading of *Waterland*, Pamela Cooper discerns a messianic overtone in the death of Dick. In Dick's plunge into the water, Stef Craps does not see any fatality. He writes, 'given Dick's extraordinary swimming skills, it is conceivable that he has not drowned and will simply reappear much later.' (P-281) In the religious imagery and symbolism which appear throughout Swift's work, Craps remarks an implicit bitter irony which suggests that, 'religion is part of the problem rather than the solution.' (P-282) He argues that Swift's work rejects the metanarrative substance of institutionalized religion, but it is overwhelmingly, 'marked by an allegiance to a certain religious spirit.' (P-284) Thus, to him, Swift's oeuvre does not renounce the idea of salvation altogether, 'Rather than warranting a simple return to metaphysics, Swift's work elaborates a post-metaphysical religiousness conducive to the production of a new Enlightenment, one that would be enlightened about the limits of the old one.' (P-286) This new Enlightenment has also been suggested by Marshall Berman and Wendy Wheeler in the name of a 'New Modernity'.

The concept of a 'new modernity' is an attempt to amend the shortfalls of modernity, which first were spotted by the romantics. Wheeler argues that Enlightenment modernity can be understood as melancholia or a failed mourning (our reaction to the occasions when we lose things of vital importance such as meaning, identity, God, etc.) She believes that postmodernism tries to work through that failure in order to create a more healthy form of mourning, i.e. a 'new modernity'. It is in these terms that Wheeler understands Swift's work as postmodern. Swift's work, as Wheeler views it, presents the possibilities, and at the same time, the difficulties involved in mourning the various losses in modernity, for example, the loss of God, tradition, community, family, etc. Wheeler believes that over his entire oeuvre, Swift has tried to imagine ways in which the melancholia of modernity might be turned into a healthy mourning in postmodernity.

Now we will try to examine how a progressive movement from the melancholia to a healthy mourning may be realised within Swift's entire work. Swift's first novel, *The Sweet Shop Owner*, depicts the narrow, circumscribed life of Willy Chapman who is trapped in a small business which was set up by his wife, Irene, from whom he is alienated. Irene is an intelligent shrew who has married Willy in order to avoid the various larger problems which her family presents. Shortly after the marriage she retreats into an increasingly worsening illness, and eventually becomes a worthless partner in the marriage. It is only out of an unexpected sense of duty that she bears Willy a child called Dorothy. Realising that her mother resents her, and that her father is unable to understand her emotions and intelligence, Dorothy abandons her father and leaves home. In the end, Willy commits suicide and frees himself from his desolation and abandonment in a vague hope that his death might achieve a change or some new understanding in Dorothy. Willy has denied any acceptance of the losses in his life. Thus, this denial has hampered him from moving on, and consequently blocks the possibility for a healthy mourning.

In *Ever After*, however, the outcome is somewhat different. Here Swift allows the characters to move on and the story is submerged in the associated ideas of death and rebirth. The central protagonist of *Ever After* is Bill Unwin, an ordinary, middle-aged academic in the English department of a university who is trying to come to terms with his own failed attempt at suicide and the 'successful' ones of his father and wife. The novel ranges back over key moments in Unwin's life, but also, goes further back in time – in this case to the Victorian era – through the notebooks which Unwin had discovered, of his ancestor, Matthew Pearce. The notebooks are about the story of a good and simple man whose happiness is destroyed by his obsessive search for truth. In reading these notebooks, Bill is drawn, as was Matthew, to the painful contemplation of life itself. In re-creating his own life and reconstructing that of Matthew Pearce, Unwin becomes conscious of gaps and enigmas, which suggest the unreliability of past knowledge for finding the truth. The central themes of the novel are the relationship between the present and the past, and the nature of historical enquiry and its relation to domestic life. Unwin seems to have realised the importance of the ability to change and compromising with losses, but he is not able to put them into practice. Bill does not find absolute truth and his story ends in a dubious closure with the possibility of death, nevertheless there is a hope, the possibility of life and a healthy mourning.

In his latest novel, *The Light of Day* Swift depicts how George Webb, the main character of the novel, discerns the problems of his life and manages to tackle them. As with other characters in Swift's novels, George is jobless and left alone by his immediate family at one stage in his life. In comparison to other

characters, first George manages to find a job which keeps him busy and gives him self-worth, and then he finds love which gives him hope and optimism. George realises his losses, mourns over them and manages to psychologically free himself from his terrible past.

It seems that most of the characters in Swift's novel have a broad understanding of 'good' as that which makes their lives worth living and 'evil' as that which detracts from the overall value of their lives. These characters are suffering from an 'evil', which has not been caused by the consequence of their own actions, but is due to the naive adoption of a rational system of thought propounded by modernists. George's success in overcoming his losses is not due to any extraordinary aptitude. According to Marshall Berman, as 'modern men and women', we have the capacity to create new values. But different people have different ethical values, and will make different ethical judgments under the same circumstances.

In his essay "The Truth in Ethical Relativism", Hugh Lafollette suggests that ethical principles are relative in the sense that they are 'situation-sensitive', meaning that they are not absolute guidelines and prescriptions which must be rigorously applied. Lafollette suggests that individuals under apparently similar circumstances may legitimately determine alternative courses of action. The characters in Swift's novels continuously monitor the circumstances of their activities as a characteristic of doing what they do. They are able, if asked, to provide different interpretations of the nature of, and the reasons for, the behaviour in which they engage. Therefore any attempt to endorse George's ethical position against the ethical status of other characters is very limited.

What may be observed is that in somewhat similar situations most of the characters in Swift's novel fail to come to terms with their losses and end up, somehow or another, broken down, suicidal or dead. George, however, manages to go beyond his losses, and lives for the day when Sarah will walk out with him, towards a new life together. As noted earlier, Swiftian characters live daily with the fragmentation, indeterminacy, and distrust of all modern claims to ultimate truth and universal moral standards. As a result, most of the characters become defensive and increasingly preoccupied with their self protection, identities, and memories – all in order to recover control. If they are to empower themselves, these characters must take charge of defining themselves, of writing their own stories, in their own ways, by not letting others, including modernity, write it for them. In so doing, different characters adopt different approaches, and George's approach is to embrace and welcome changes.

In greeting the changes George manages to create what could be described as a pastiche personality or self which helps him to attune himself to the fluxes and changes which surround him. This pastiche personality is elastic and adaptable; it constantly adopts aspects of the identities from the available sources – his daughter, Helen, and his love, Sarah - and uses them according to the requirements of his situation.

George's quarrel with the modern world ends only with a fragile hope. Although George's self remains present via the pastiche self, its existence depends on others and situations: its 'real identity' has given way to a self which bases its identity on its relationships with others. George's pastiche self, similar to Tom Crick's story-telling, seems not to be a remedy, but rather a make-shift solution good enough to temporarily cope with the problems of his immediate situations and his 'here and now'. This self, compromises with the fluxes in order to reduce the perplexities and bewilderments of his life. The true self, however, is not subject to unstable outside criteria. Nader Angha, a Sufi master, talks about this true self in his *Theory "I"*. He introduces a theory that goes above and beyond the physical dimension of human beings into the unchangeable and eternal dimension and the inherent value hidden within each individual. He writes, 'The self is a tender and expansive essence that encompasses all things.' Suggesting that the true self is not limited to its response to the changes that happen outside us. George's pastiche self, according to these criteria, is not by any means, the true self. George's pastiche self acts only as a makeshift, and not as the final solution to George's problems; it is only a window to possibilities.

All the characters portrayed by Swift have their own special approaches which they use to deal with the outside world or a modernity which radically alters the nature of their day-to-day social and personal lives. They are not passive creatures; they fight, they try to discover the reasons for their losses, and, possibly, a cure for them. The outstanding feature during the whole process is, that in their various ways, although the situation pilots them to utilize predominately their mental abilities, their tendencies and behaviours suggest that the capacity to act ethically rests on more than one foundation. As a mental capacity it depends on emotional experiences too. It also depends on the availability of an environment in which acting ethically

makes sense. Modernity does not provide the types of conditions in which one can easily exercise his or her ethical values. In George's case, it is love that comes to rescue him - the very thing that is not of any significance in the framework of modern thought. What makes the characters in Swift's novels especial is that, regardless of their experiences and their achievements, they are real fighters. The moral status of an action is not determined only by its consequences. There is no moral obligation on the part of the characters to align themselves with a particular system of thoughts, or to seek the best overall outcome through their actions. They challenge themselves continually to improve, while trying to perform actions which accord with their ethical choices. As individuals, they try to treat themselves in a manner which is consistent with human dignity and worth. Often the time and situation they are living in – modernity - does not endorse all their values, and they have to pay a high price to achieve that dignity - their lives.

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