

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS OF THEMES OF HEROISM AND INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN "*LAST ORDERS*"

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4.1 INTRODUCTION

The fourth chapter discusses about the disturbed relationship between fathers and daughters in *Last Orders*. Awarded the Booker Prize in 1996 for *Last Orders*, his sixth novel, Graham Swift is now regarded in the judgment of Irish author John Banville, as

“One of England’s finest living novelists”.¹

Last Orders chronicles the journey of four residents of Bermondsey, a working class district of South London, who travel to Margate on the Southeast Coast on 2 April 1990 in order to fulfill the “Last Orders” of their friend Jack Dodds, master butcher, who has recently died and been cremated: to deposit his ashes in the sea. Philadelphia Inquirer describes it as

“Endearing... A moving portrait of one man, one set of friends, one generation as they pass from the toil of the human city to the oblivion of sea or soil”.²

A subtle psychological probing novel reminiscent in particular of Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* and Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Last Orders* muses on death and dying, on complex familial relationship and memory and on the potent and uncanny impact of the dead on the living. As Salman Rushdie puts it, *Last Orders* is

“about the ritual of death, this last rite of passage”³

The novel’s title refers to the “last Order” or last wish of Jack Dodds who wants to deposit his ashes in the Margate Pier. It also refers to the location from which the journey to Margate starts: to The Coach and

Horses, a local pub in Bermondsey, South London, where Jack's friends orders their "last" drink before embarking on their trip. Although *Last Orders* represents a contribution of Swift's earlier novelistic agendas, it also

"represents the most formally complicated experiment so far, with its multiple tellers all talking to themselves but also in some magical way to each other".⁴

As Swift himself comments, *Last Orders* is

"a novel in which six or seven characters collaboratively tell the story".⁵

The entire novel is narrated in the first person by seven different people in 75 unnumbered sections. The four men who accompany Jack's ashes – Vic, Vince, Lenny and Ray – narrate the vast majority of the novel. Ray "Lucky" Johnson, who had met Jack in the British army in Africa in World War – II, is an insurance clerk and inveterate gambler on horse – racing; Vic Tucker, whose funeral home is situated across the street from Jack's butcher shop, is an undertaker,

"and canny observer of human beings in their living and dead states".⁶

Vince Dodds, who owns a used car dealership and supplies the Mercedes Benz for the days outing, is Jack's adopted son and Lenny Tate is a greengrocer and former prize boxer whose daughter was seduced and left pregnant by Vince year earlier and who to this day nurses a grudge against him. In the present of the novel Vince is in his mid-forties; the other three major characters are in their late sixties. While these four narrators dominate the novel, three other characters-the deceased Jack himself, Amy, Jack's wife; and Mandy, Vince's wife – also narrate a few sections of the novel. Conspicuously absent is the voice of Amy's and Jack's retarded daughter June.

4.2 ANALYSIS OF THEMES OF HEROISM AND INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN LAST ORDERS.

Graham Swift has discussed several themes in this novel. Heroism, intergenerational conflict, dead haunts the living and husband wife conflicts are discussed in this novel. In *Shuttlecock*, there is an international conflict between fathers and sons. However in *Last Orders* there is an intergenerational conflict between fathers and sons and also between fathers and daughters.

4.2.1 Intergenerational Conflict between Jack Dodds and His Father.

The First example of intergenerational conflict in *Last Orders* is of the Jack, the master butcher and his father. Jack Dodds's monologue contains the words of his father, not of his own words. This makes it an elliptical monologue because we learn nothing about Jack's psychic terrain, how his mind works. Through this monologue we come to know about the conflict between them.

"His Father keeps on leaving his mark on him repressing his son's subjectivity".⁷

This part of the novel can be compared to Shakespeare's famous play *Hamlet*. Like Jack speaks from the grave, the same is true for Hamlet's father, whose ghost wanders around the castle to warn his son. The ghost tells Hamlet that his mother was adulterous with his uncle and that it was that same uncle who also murdered his father. He wants Hamlet to revenge his death.

"his foul and most unnatural murder".⁸

In his monologue, Jack recalls the words of his father who warned him that the trade of a butcher is not easy. Large supermarkets are rising everywhere in the landscapes which make it harder for small butcher shops to survive in the competition. It is a tough profession since you

cannot profit from everything you buy, so you have to keep a constant eye on your wastage. You have to know what will cost you and what will pay you. However as far as money is concerned Jack admits that he never was great with sums. This implies that he has neglected the advice of his father because of the generation gap. Consequently he has to beg his son Vince for money and asks Ray to put a bet so that the money will increase spectacularly. Being glorious and rich is also essential for being a Hero, but Jack is poor. Vince does not respect him. He suffers at the hands of his son and also at the hands of society.

Through this monologue we come to know that he did not want to be a butcher at all; it was his father's decision. The fact is that his father obliged him to take over the business. It may be the reason of Jack's failure in business. If Jack had been allowed to make his own choice, he probably would have become a doctor. His reason for this was:

“cure sick, chase after nurses, that sort of thing. I'd say live meat's better than dead meat any day”.⁹

Jack cannot become an ideal, heroic father because he has selected the profession in which he is not interested. Jack's father has done injustice to him. His father's supremacy has spoiled his professional life. Jack wants to do the same with his son. Children are always forced to take education according to their parent's choice. They are forced to start a business against their will which results in failure.

4.2.2 Intergenerational Conflict between Jack and His Son Vince.

The connection between fathers and sons is very powerful in *Last Orders*, at both the literal and symbolic levels. Vince born as a Vince Pritchett, and joins the Dodds Family as a newborn in 1944 after

“A doodlebug”.¹⁰

A German flying bomb lands on the Pritchett home in London and kills Vince's parents but sparing him. Amy-because of having a child of her

own, who is retarded, adopts Vince while Jack is off fighting in the war. She does this in part as a strategy to bring Jack, who is alienated from his wife on account of June's condition, back into the fold. Vince reflects on how his introduction into the Dodds family must have originally struck Jack:

"All he did was come home from winning the war and there I was his welcome-home present-lying-in that cot that was meant for June".¹¹

Because of his origins and upbringing, Vince remains haunted by questions of identity, at one point thinking.

"Vince wavers between identifying as a Dodds and as an outsider. At one point he imagines not really being Jack's "next of kin".¹²

At all; all another he thinks of Amy,

"she aint my mum".¹³

Quest is the heart of heroism and Vince, like Karna in *Mahabharata* is haunted by his quest of identity. These feelings of being an imposter date from his childhood before he even knew where he come from. When Sally, Lenny's daughter accompanies Vince and the Dodds to the seaside on weekends, while Sally rides, in the front of Jack's meat Van, on Amy's lap, Vince rides in the back of the van, because in his imagining.

"they preferred Sally to me".¹⁴

Here, Jack prefers Vince as a son but Vince is an adopted son, he thinks himself as an outsider which causes conflict between them.

A hero should have good origin, and then he will get respect. As a hero Vince lacks this. His family line is disturbed. This is one of the reasons of intergenerational conflict between Jack and Vince.

The most pronounced tension between Vince and Jack springs from their conflict over the question of whether he will join his father in the

family butcher business. On this account Amy sums up the relationship between the two as tense as typically

“at daggers drawn, cleavers drawn”.¹⁵

Vince does not want to join his father’s business. Vince successfully dodges the family business by joining up for military service for five years, traveling to the Yemeni port city of Aden,

“just to keep out of Jack’s reach “.¹⁶

His departure is also convenient because it allows him to flee Sally’s pregnancy.

A Dictionary of Literary Terms defines hero as:

“traditionally a character who has such admirable traits as courage idealism and fortitude; and states, the hero embodied the cultural values of his time and functioned as defender of his society”.¹⁷

Like a true hero, Vince shows courage at rejecting his father’s offer. He doesn’t like to follow the boring business of butcher. He wants to do something on his own. Even though he has no money and no place, he starts his business with the help of Ray Johnson.

Vince disrupts the family line of inheritance by refusing to enter the butcher’s trade, while Vic’s sons dutifully assume their traditional role. So the relation between Vic and his sons is healthy, without any conflict. In this regard, Vince represents a younger generation of English men, who miss the primal bonding experience of World War II, and have no sense of the sacrifice that Jack’s generation made for its country. A hero should sacrifice his life for the sake of country or for the sake of family that Jack’s generation expects from Vince’s generation and as it is unfulfilled, it causes conflict.

Swift's works present the tragedy of human life. In this, it reveals its involvement with Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a tragedy about age and death, intergenerational conflict, family attachments, inheritance, and the fate of England. Vince, Jack's adopted son is rather like unscrupulous Edmund Gloucester's bastard son, in *King Lear*. Both men redefine filial duty as self-interest, each desire to exploit his father, while holding the older more credulous man at an emotional distance. Vince seeks a kind of genealogical distance from Jack as well for he is reluctant to see himself as a Dodds, rejecting the name of the father as well as his profession:

"I wasn't going to be no Vince Dodds", he tells Amy, "I wasn't going to be no butcher's boy".¹⁸

In addition Vince's choice of cars instead of meat as a career expresses Swift's sense of England's younger generation as mobile unlike their immovably anchored parents. This difference causes the conflict between the two. Vince hates Jack. His speech reflects his disgust for Jack. In their journey to Margate he says, "Old buggers".

"With just these two words, Vince", "Sums up the disillusion of his generation and the failure of empathy between England's father and son".¹⁹

Since Vince is the youngest male on the journey, the word "old" clearly refers to his Dad Jack, Lenny, Ray and Vic. This is not the first time he refers to his companions as being older. Another example can be found when he is ordering food for everyone.

"Three old Codgers to look after, and one extra who aint eating".²⁰

It shows a negative attitude coming from the utterance which implies that it is first and foremost directed towards his "father" Jack. Vince cannot forgive and forget the trouble and feelings of hatred that standing between him and Jack while Jack was still alive. He keeps on

thinking about the fact that Jack wanted to force him to be a butcher, about his refusal to acknowledge June as his daughter. He deeply despises Jack as a person and he does not seem to care much that he is dead now. According to Daniel Lea, the quarrel about the butcher shop shows

“fundamental breach between the war-generations that which succeeded it”.²¹

Here Vince represents younger generations. Younger generations develop their own concepts of heroism. Jack’s generation gives importance to patriotism, sacrifice, valor, bravery, prowess, brilliance, wisdom, morality, prudence, physical fitness, beauty. Vince’s generation gives more importance to personal relations, freedom, and sacrifice not only for nation but for the person near and dear to them. So Jack’s rejection of June hurts Vince. The conflicts occur between the two generations because each generation has developed their own concept of heroism and they want to stick it.

4.2.3 Intergenerational Conflict between Jack and June.

In *Last Orders* Graham Swift has widely discussed intergenerational conflict between fathers and daughters compare to *Shuttlecock* and *Waterland*. In this novel, the female characters are very clearly in the minority. Swift suggests that –

“masculinity is a matter of signification by highlighting the performativity of gender”.²²

Graham Swift represents his women in traditional roles, subject to sexual and economic exploitation. Manhood is presented as being destructive and restrictive. This becomes especially clear in the relationship that Jack, Vince, Lenny and Ray have with their daughters. Most men in *Last Orders* tend to act as some kind of God in that they abuse their role of father to force their children to do things against their will.

The first example of intergenerational conflict between father and daughter is that of Jack and June. June is Jack and Amy's mentally handicapped daughter. Jakob Winnberg describes June as ...

"one of the stock characters of melodrama : the mute".²³

She has not produced a single word or deliberate gesture in fifty years, and this makes Amy desperate. Amy hopes her daughter would become able to utter at least the word "mum", but her hope was in vain. Jack rejects his daughter, never once visiting her in the decades in the hospital in which she is institutionalized. He says to Amy,

"Best thing we can do Ame, is forget all about her".²⁴

Jack rejects her because she is not normal like Vince, Sally, and Mandy. He prefers the heroic qualities like beauty, cleverness, swiftness, morality, charm of a girl, but his daughter lacks this. As Alexander Welsh defines heroism;

"Hero stands committed to prudence and the superiority of Civil Society".²⁵

Here, heroism requires both wisdom and knowledge which June lacks. Even she is not equal to other children. Jack expects her to be healthy, heroic, and strong like him. Ray describes him.

"It was Jack who underwrote me. It wasn't that I was small so the bullets would miss me, it was that he was big, like a wall, like a boulder. And the bullets missed me, except that once".²⁶

Thus Ray traces his wartime friendship with Jack to the discrepancy in their physical size and the solidity of Jack, which confronted Ray. It means that he has a heroic physical stature. As he has an ideal physical stature, his abnormal daughter is unbearable for him. Mandy, the wife of Vince also accepts Jack as a parent figure as soon as she meets him in the Cafeteria at Smithfield Market. She describes him.

“By a big, round-armed, round-edged, big-voiced man”²⁷

It means that she is also impressed by Jack’s personality.

Amy recalls how, at Wick’s Farm, she was first drawn to Jack’s large physiques, and how his body spoke to hers in “universals language of flesh”. Really he is a war hero.

However he doesn’t like his own daughter. He calls her mental institution as ...

“Fools errand”.²⁸

But he loves his adopted son Vince. He accepts him as his own son and labels him as a Vince Dodds. But only because of June, Amy and Jack are together. Amy imagines that their married life might have been like desert without June. Amy imagines apologizing to June for taking in a series of surrogate children.

“second – strangers, VinceySallyMandy”.²⁹

So, lack of heroism is the cause of intergenerational conflict between Jack and June.

4.2.4 Intergenerational Conflict between Vince and His Daughter Kath.

Abandonment seems to be relevant to Mandy’s and Vince’s daughter, Kath who in the novel’s present is of marrying age and who is described by her mother as –

“a daughter on the hustle”.³⁰

Just as Jack used Mandy to lure Vince, so Vince uses Kath to entice.

“male buyers of his used cars”.³¹

Vince remembers Hussein looking at him –

“as though to say, Throw in the girl and I’ll buy, and I look at him as though to say. Throw in an extra half-grand and she’s yours”.³²

Vince offers his own daughter to Mr. Hussein, a wealthy Arab businessman, so that he will buy a car. He prostitutes his own daughter to the customers and especially Hussein, so that they will sooner be persuaded to buy a car. So, later Kath leaves Vince and goes with Hussein. Kath, younger generation does not like the materialistic attitude of her father.

“There goes Vince Dodds who sold his daughter to an Arab”.³³

He becomes the pimp for his own daughter. Here woman is suppressed by man. Physically man is represented as more powerful than woman. As Kath is not brave, bold and courageous to deny her father, she gets suppressed. Here heroically the father is stronger than the daughter.

4.2.5 Intergenerational Conflict between Lenny and His Daughter Sally.

As tense as things are between Vince and Kath, they are still tenser between Lenny and Sally. Lenny expects moral and humble behavior from her daughter but the situation is different. This tension dates from the 1960s when Vince got Lenny’s daughter Sally pregnant and abandoned her to an abortion when he joined the military, just in time to be among –

“the last troops to clear out of Aden”.³⁴

Vince having left Sally, “a little leaving present” Lenny imagines Vince’s motto to be –

“out of sight, out of mind”.³⁵

Lenny does not like this immoral behavior. He advises Sally to get rid of it and finds a doctor to do the job. And Ray, with his penchant for

picking just the right horse at the racetrack, is asked by Lenny to pick a winner; this enables Lenny to fund his daughter's expensive operation because abortion was illegal in Britain at that time.

From this incident he starts hating Sally because she is not truly heroic. A hero or a heroine should perform legal and ethical act. He or she should follow the norms of society and religion. Morality is the true beauty of a woman. Sally lacks this heroic quality. So Lenny hates her. Similar to the way Vince treats Kath is the way Sally is viewed by her father, as something of a prostitute. Lenny describes his daughter's situation; in the 1960s,

"Sally married Tommy Tyson a nutter"³⁶

Tommy is a thief and now he is in Pentonville prison. Sally later started –

"taking on all – comers".³⁷

Lenny, in an echo of the Jack – June relationship, then washes his hands altogether of his daughter. Immorality of Sally is the cause of intergenerational conflict between her and Lenny.

4.2.6 Intergenerational Conflict between Ray and Susan.

Ray is the protagonist of the novel.

"For Swift this is "almost always a sad, self-scrutinizing man, middle aged or older, delving into his unhappy past in order to try and work out how he got to the rather dispiriting situation in which he finds himself".³⁸

When he was middle-aged man, Ray had a nice and easy life, possessing everything he could wish for. He had a stable job as an insurance clerk, he was married to Carol and they had a daughter, Susan whom he loved very much. But now he is a man in his late sixties and all of this has disappeared. He is retired, he and Carol are divorced and Susan

went abroad to live in Sydney with her boy friend. Now that his best friend, Jack also has died, he looks back at his life and wonders how it could have come to this. He decides to go abroad to visit and re-establish the contact with his estranged daughter. Ray thinks –

“First my daughter buggers off to Sydney and stops writing, now my wife goes and bunks it. And they call me lucky”.³⁹

Ray is lucky with horses. He wins thirty – thousand pounds on the horse “Miracle Workers”. However he is an unlucky in love. The one bright spot in his lackluster love life is his brief affairs with Amy, two decades earlier. Only Vic knows it. It starts in the mid -1960s when Amy was in her mid forties. It ends just before Vince’s return from military services. The affair begins with Ray’s offer to join Amy during her visits to June at the “home”, an obligation that Jack did not accept. While Amy seems to prize Ray’s kindness above his sex – appeal.

Superficially Ray remains outside of the intergenerational conflict yet on a deeper level is thoroughly enmeshed in them. Ray fancies his own daughter Susie whom he believes to be more beautiful than his wife has ever been. Ray says –

“I think, I can’t deny it, she’s better-looking than Carol ever was, even Carol at her age”.⁴⁰

He praises his daughter Susie. It is actually a kind of disrespect and unfairness to Carol to think it. But Ray thinks that it doesn’t matter because she is a part of Carol. Beauty is one of the traits of heroic person. Ray likes the beauty of his own daughter. Her departure is unbearable for him because he thinks that they are all part of each other.

This intergenerational conflict between fathers and daughters ends at the end of fathers’ journey. Last Orders shows the dead as affecting the living as much as the livings do themselves. Jack’s death and the journey taken by Vince, Lenny and Ray provide them with the opportunity to mend

their ways with their daughters. From whom they are estranged except Vic who has sons. Early in the trip Ray imagines that all four of them appreciate what –

“Jack has done for us (in organizing this journey), so as to make us feel special so as give us a treat. Like we’re off on a jaunt, a spree, and the world looks good, it looks like it’s there just for us”.⁴¹

Here they are free from the conflicts. Their worries are solved. They want to develop good relationship with their daughters. Later, at Canterbury Cathedral, each of the four muses on the fact that it is Jack who has led them there – and not for him but for them. Lenny thinks,

“It was for us, to put us back on our best behavior, to clean up our acts”.⁴²

At end everyone cleans their mind. They want to meet their daughter and to establish a healthy relationship with them.

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