

What is Past is Prologue

The Motifs of Time and Memory in Postmodernist Literature

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This essay explores the different ways in which postmodernist writers focus on the motifs of time and memory in their work. The idea that time is fragmented, and cyclical rather than regulated and linear is a central preoccupation, as is the concept of identity and perspective. As we move through our lives we constantly question and rewrite, thereby challenging the idea that history is a static concept and an accepted narrative. I will consider *The Child in Time*¹ by Ian McEwan and *White Teeth*² by Zadie Smith as I think these texts foreground this preoccupation with time and memory; both writers constantly move between past and present and their narratives manipulate the time frame in order to underline this complex relationship, deftly captured at the opening of T.S. Eliot's poem, *Burnt Norton*,

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.³

This cyclical concept of time enables writers to explore the impact that memory and past events have on present lives, and to challenge and disrupt the status quo, allowing for other truths and thought processes to come to the fore. Linda Hutcheon notes that postmodern fiction suggests that the past is a constructed narrative, open to interpretation and question, that 'it focuses attention on the art of imposing order on that past, of encoding strategies of meaning-making through representation'⁴ Thus postmodern fiction challenges the idea of closure, conversely introducing a contradiction between past and present. It is this contradiction, this challenge to the idea of the grand narrative, that writers such as McEwan and Smith explore in their work which in turn allows the reader to question and reassess. Furthermore, how we understand the past informs both our present and future, and that the

¹ McEwan, Ian, *The Child in Time* (London: Vintage, 1992).

² Smith, Zadie, *White Teeth* (London: BCA, 2000).

³ T. S. Eliot, 'Burnt Norton' in *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1974), p. 189, 1-3.

⁴ Hutcheon, Linda, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, (London: Routledge, 1989), p.67.

weight of the past on the present can be interpreted variously as a negative or positive force, thus affording writers scope to explore how we negotiate the past in order to move forward.

Arguably the theorist who has most relevance for this essay is Henri Bergson with his theory of time that he outlined in *Time and Free Will*⁵ and later developed in *Creative Evolution*⁶.

Bergson distinguished between regulated 'clock time', which is linear and implies that life progresses along a measured continuum, and 'duration', an inner, psychological and, more truthful, understanding of time, thus highlighting an important theme, the fluidity of time.

Bergson was developing his theory at the turn of the twentieth century, when there was anxiety regarding the dehumansising impact of industrialisation, after a massive shift towards a more industrial focused or governed existence, a move away from a natural, seasonal one and his theory of an inner clock was his way of ensuring that we must remain aware of this sense of time.⁷ What it affords us is useful in that it opens up a space in which we can experiment and explore a different way of thinking, allowing for an innovative and radical revaluation of the human condition, one which postmodernist writers such as McEwan and Smith focus on throughout their work.

Key to understanding the importance of Bergson's theory of time is the central place that memory occupies. Bergson sees the self as a creative, evolving process and that memory, the past, informs and influences this process; we cannot escape our past, we can only build upon it and it is elemental to the growth of the self,

even though we may have no distinct idea of it, we vaguely feel that our past remains present to us. What are we, in fact, what is our *character*, if not the condensation of the history that we have lived from our birth – nay, even before our birth, since we bring with us prenatal dispositions? Doubtless we think with only a small part of our past, but it is with our entire past ... that we desire, will and act.⁸

⁵ Bergson, Henri, *Time and Free Will* (London: Routledge, 2014).

⁶ Bergson, Henri, *Creative Evolution*, (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1960).

⁷ Stevenson, Randall, *Modernist Fiction*, (Essex: Prentice Hall, 1998).

⁸ Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, pp. 5-6.

Another theme that both McEwan and Smith focus on, and which interconnects with and underlines the fluidity of time, is that of science; more specifically, how the theories of physics and genetics that were being developed in the postwar era examined the role that time plays in our understanding of human existence, as well as pointing to its complexity. For example, in *The Child in Time*, although Thelma Darke is a theoretical physicist whose focus is the nature of time itself, she is unable to offer Stephen a definitive, rational explanation and can only point to competing theories, claiming that physics is a divided subject, 'The prospect was always so tantalizing; a lucid account of what some of the best minds of the day were thinking about the elusive, everyday matter of time ... what betrayed the promise was sheer difficulty, the indignity of coming up against the limitations of one's intellectual reach.'⁹ Thus, the concept of time is slippery and inexact; perhaps, for this very quality, it affords the writer scope to explore the uncertainties of human existence itself.

Throughout *The Child in Time* McEwan interweaves the predominant themes of time and childhood and does so through the prism of the public and personal perspective. On one level, we follow the protagonist, Stephen Lewis, as he sits on a sub-committee of the Official Commission on Childcare as they work towards producing a governmental publication, 'The Authorised Childcare Handbook'. McEwan uses excerpts from this document as epigraphs for each chapter which allows him to interconnect the public and personal strands, introducing a tension and sense of contradiction. For example, the epigraph used for chapter two which concerns the discipline of the child, satisfyingly tied to the concept of regulated time, 'Make it clear to him that clock time cannot be argued with'¹⁰, is undermined throughout the chapter by various allusions to 'the vandalizing erasures of time.'¹¹ On a more personal level, we learn that Stephen is, in effect, a prisoner of time as he is trying to process the loss of his young daughter, Kate, who had been abducted during a Saturday morning visit to a supermarket two years previously. He can only deal with her loss through thoughts of her continuing existence, her ongoing life, which he looks for in other children, 'Kate's growing up had become the

⁹ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 129.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.24.

¹¹ Ibid., p.49.

essence of time itself ... Without the fantasy of her continued existence he was lost, time would stop. He was the father of an invisible child.'¹² McEwan is clearly interested in the impact that time has on our lives and the framework of the novel hinges on the interplay between time and memory; Stephen constantly moves between the past and present, trying to save his lost child by manipulating time.

Although much of *The Child in Time* centres on episodes of tragedy in Stephen's life, namely the loss of his daughter and the death of his friend, Charles Darke,¹³ there is also the suggestion of hope and renewal; thus, time is variously depicted as both destructive and redemptive. It is important to understand the part that memory plays here, not just that memory has an impact but the way in which we process memory, and the past. There are key episodes in the novel in regard to this preoccupation with the fluidity of time, which underline the idea that the past, present and future are interconnected.

The pivotal episode in the novel is when Stephen is on his way to visit his estranged wife, Julie, and experiences a timeslip, he stands outside time, 'outside his own existence.'¹⁴ McEwan manages to capture the idea that he is both of and not of the place, that he is simultaneously there and not there. Glimpsing his parents, effectively their younger selves, through a pub window, The Bell, he witnesses an event that happened before he was born. We later learn that his mother has told his father that she is pregnant with the future Stephen and that they are discussing whether they should seek an abortion or keep the baby. Although beyond his understanding, Stephen is aware that this is a significant moment for him, he feels an affinity with the woman who he instinctively knows to be his mother but, although they look at each other, she shows no sense of recognition. Stephen enters a dreamlike state, loses consciousness, and later wakes up in the marital bed in Julie's cottage.

Although they make love the thought of their lost child interrupts any chance of reconciliation, and

¹² Ibid., p.2.

¹³ At this point I feel that it is only necessary to reference Charles' death, I will explore more fully how his character intersects with Stephen later in the essay.

¹⁴ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p. 59.

they resume their separate lives. The significance of this magical realist interlude plays out at the end of the novel when it is revealed that this was when their second child was conceived. This episode underpins the idea that the past is constantly influencing the present and future; it is evident that Stephen decides to make love with Julie directly because of his moment of déjà vu, it was the sight of his parents from before he was born, and the connection he felt he had made with his mother, that informed his decision and thus changed his future, 'he did not doubt that what was happening now, and what would happen as a consequence of now, was not separate from what he had experienced earlier that day.'¹⁵

This episode is echoed later on in the novel when Stephen is visiting his mother, Claire, and she is recalling the beginning of her relationship with his father. She describes the same visit to The Bell that Stephen had experienced, claiming that she had seen the boy at the window who she believed to be her future son. Furthermore, she explains that it was the sight of Stephen's pleading face at the window that changed her mind, convincing her to carry on with the pregnancy rather than aborting the fetus, giving her the strength to take charge of the situation. As Paul Edwards notes, this pivotal episode has two consequences, one rooted in the past and one influencing the future and it reinforces the idea that time is fluid and cyclical.¹⁶

The scene in which Stephen is involved in an accident with a lorry and subsequently rescues the driver is another example of how McEwan illustrates the shifting nature of time, noting that it can slow down or even stand still, thus manipulating our sense of reality and perspective. Although the whole incident lasts no longer than five seconds, Stephen has an awareness of being able to formulate his thoughts to an uncanny degree, the inference being that 'the rapidity of events was accommodated by the slowing of time.'¹⁷ Of further significance is that this scene clearly shows a Bergsonian influence; regretting that no one had witnessed his feat in rescuing the driver, his

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁶ Paul Edwards, 'Time, Romanticism, Modernism and Moderation in Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time*', *English: The Journal of the English Association*, 44(178) (Spring 1995), 41-55, (p.46).

¹⁷ McEwan, *The Child in Time*, p.100.

thoughts focus on his wife, 'Julie would have appreciated what had happened to time, how duration shaped itself round the intensity of the event.'¹⁸

The character of Charles Darke acts as a contrast to Stephen in terms of the search for, and meaningful integration with, the inner child. Early on in the novel we are told that Charles is Thelma's 'difficult child'¹⁹ and, even before they relocate to Suffolk, he begins to display childlike behaviour. He fully regresses into a second childhood, 'he wanted the security of childhood ... he wanted to escape from time, from appointments, schedules, deadlines. Childhood to him was timelessness, he talked about it as though it were a mystical state.'²⁰ Charles is divorced from reality, from meaningful existence and wants to inhabit a utopian childhood that he felt he had been denied, one of Just William, catapults and treehouses; this is unsustainable and thus his death is inevitable. McEwan contrasts this with Stephen's successful integration of the child within, his reconnection with his inner child when he realizes his childhood ambition of riding in the cab of a train. Both the railway and the train journey connect Stephen at various points in the novel to his childhood and to the journey from the past to the present, they are emblematic of the journey he makes from the trauma of losing Kate at the beginning of the novel to the birth of his second child at the end.

In the final chapter, Stephen travels to Kent, responding to an urgent call from Julie, McEwan teasing the reader with what is to come through the train driver's insinuation, namely the imminent birth of their child. Realisation only dawns for Stephen when he reaches The Bell; thus, things have come full circle, and McEwan stresses that the past, present and future are interconnected, 'It was then that he understood that his experience there had not been only reciprocal with his parents', it had been a continuation, a kind of repetition ... all the sorrow, all the empty waiting had been enclosed within meaningful time.'²¹ This serves as a sharp contrast with Charles, Stephen was able to move forward

¹⁸ Ibid., p.102.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.40.

²⁰ Ibid., p.222.

²¹ Ibid., p. 235.

precisely because he had navigated his past, he had found his inner child and was able to rejoin the world.

As both a postmodern and postcolonial novelist, Zadie Smith's writing is inevitably rooted in the notion of identity and belonging, and she uses the motifs of time and memory through which to explore it. In her debut novel, *White Teeth*, she presents the reader with a myriad of characters whose lives interconnect through the unlikely friendship of Samad Iqbal and Archie Jones, who first meet towards the end of the second world war and then reconnect in the 1970s when Samad migrates to Britain. The way in which the novel is structured allows Smith to intersect the personal and public themes with a temporal dimension, shifting the focus of the narrative between the past and the present, reinforcing the idea that the past has a direct emphasis both on the present and the future. As Philip Tew notes, teeth, with their connotations of roots and origins, serve as a metaphor throughout the novel; by exploring the 'root canals of history'²², Smith not only focuses on the search for identity and belonging, but also the darker underside of racial purity and genetic engineering.

It is clear that Smith's writing is heavily influenced by the concept of hybridity that has been highlighted by the postcolonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha, namely, the idea that interaction between cultures, resulting from colonialism and migration, has engendered new practices and ways of thinking; furthermore, hybridity is seen as a disruptive force, challenging the authority of the status quo, throwing all into question by its very existence. Equally important is the notion of liminality,²³ the sense that between clear, defined boundaries there exists a more fluid space, and it is this concept that allows postcolonial writers to explore the meaning of and the search for identity and belonging.²⁴ However, Smith moves beyond the implication that multiculturalism is an ideal, utopian vision that has been realized, that 'despite all the mixing up, despite the fact that

²² Tew, Philip, *Zadie Smith* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p.53.

²³ For a more in-depth understanding of hybridity and liminality see Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁴ Cuddon, J. A., *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Theory* (London: Penguin, 2014).

we have finally slipped into each other's lives with reasonable comfort'²⁵, she establishes that a sense of identity is problematic and multifaceted, as depicted by the polyvocal element of her writing. O'Connell's Pool House is the ultimate hybrid space, run by Abdul-Mickey whose very name is suggestive of this cultural mash up, and it is initially disorientating as 'the place is neither Irish or a pool house' but one in which 'you could be without family ... without possessions or status, without past glory or future hope – you could walk through that door with nothing and be exactly the same as everybody else in there.'²⁶ Thus, Smith reinforces the idea that identity can be fragmented and in flux.

This complex response to the notion of hybridity is illustrated by the way in which Smith interconnects the theme of the fluid and cyclical nature of time with that of the search for identity and origins. The novel frequently references the New Year and the upcoming Millenium to suggest both the end of the world and the dawn of a new age, the connection between the old and the new, the past and the present, reinforcing that one leads to the other. Thus, several key episodes take place around New Year; for example, having been thwarted in his attempted suicide, Archie Jones has an epiphany in which he feels the hand of Fate, as though he had '*just been handed a great big wad of Time*',²⁷ his life sets off on a different path and he meets Clara who affirms the idea of renewal and second chances, 'Marnin' de the world new, every time.'²⁸ At the end of the novel, the FutureMouse project is due to go live on New Year's Eve and will run until the eve of the Millenium; once again, Smith uses these temporal reference points to highlight a significant moment in the narrative. Through genetic experimentation, Marcus Chalfen and Dr Perret believe they can eradicate biological defects and hybridity; however, their misguided belief that they can control human destiny is thwarted by the mouse's escape.

²⁵ Smith, *White Teeth*, p.282.

²⁶ Ibid., p.211.

²⁷ Ibid., p.16.

²⁸ Ibid., p.22.

Irie's story arc is pivotal to how Smith anchors the past into the present and intersects it with the search for identity. As the daughter of Archie and Clara, Irie is of mixed-race heritage and as she reaches puberty, she struggles to fuse the disparate parts of her self. She rejects her own family for that of the Chalfens who seemingly represent a model of purity and racial wholeness. However, this is immediately undermined when we learn that they are third generation immigrants themselves, having anglicized their name to fit in with a model of Englishness. Having discovered that her mother has false teeth, Irie comes to believe that her life is based on a series of lies and is propelled to search for a more meaningful foundation, thus she goes to stay with her grandmother, and embarks on a journey towards self-knowledge. She is able to piece together her history and comes to see Jamaica as a blank space, almost existing outside of time; it is truth and purity, untainted, 'no fictions, no myths, no lies, no tangled webs ... like the first morning of Eden and the day after apocalypse'.²⁹ Thus, it holds promise for her and is symbolic of the new beginnings that run throughout the novel. However, this optimism is immediately undercut by a visit from Joshua Chalfen and Irie's reconstruction of her world is shown to be as much of a fabrication as those of the other characters. Smith's message is clear, that no matter how much we try, we cannot escape our past.

As Philip Tew notes, through the shifting timeframe that structures the novel, we are frequently reminded that the past affects the present.³⁰ For example, the school that Millat, Magid and Irie attend is outwardly depicted as a progressive comprehensive, with a diverse and inclusive cohort, having been founded by Edmund Glenard, a Victorian benefactor interested in social improvement. However, we learn that Glenard was a colonialist, making his fortune from tobacco farming in Jamaica and his philanthropic experiment was essentially a misguided disaster, resulting in death and destitution for many of the Jamaicans he forcibly resettled in England.

Throughout the novel, Smith explores the tension that arises from the search for biological purity and the desire to control human destiny that has often been played out throughout history. Dr

²⁹ Ibid., p.345.

³⁰ Tew, Philip, *The Contemporary British Novel*, (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004).

Perret, whose life Archie and Samad inadvertently saved at the end of the war, is aligned with Marcus in the search for purity and order, as opposed to fragmentation and multiplicity (hybridity). Their mantra, 'you eliminate the random, you rule the world'³¹ smacks of eugenics and nazi world-building. However, Smith illustrates the complexity of this issue by threading different perspectives throughout the novel which she subtly undermines and exposes as flawed. For example, as a Jehovah's Witness, Hortense Bowden expresses her fear of racial mixing but is willing to make an exception for Irie and, although he has joined the Islamic fundamentalist group KEVIN, Millat struggles to forego Western culture.

This toxicity is countered by the stance taken by Alsana Iqbal after her husband sends their son, Magid, to Bangladesh in an attempt to reconnect him with his roots, thereby seeking redemption for his own sense of degeneration, believing himself to be tainted by Western influences. Alsana opposes Samad's attempt to control their sons' destiny, imploring her husband to allow them to lead their own lives and decide their own futures; by reminding Samad that, as second generation, they will inevitably have a different perspective and he should embrace their hybridity. Smith uses Alsana's reaction towards Samad to criticize the need for stability and order; thus, until her son returns from Bangladesh, Alsana avoids giving Samad a straight answer to any question, frustratingly neither agreeing nor disagreeing with him, thereby subverting his sense of authority.

Archie is another character who embodies the hybrid space; he is often indecisive and shifts between viewpoints which places him in opposition to the purity seekers. For example, the novel opens with Archie deciding his own destiny on the toss of a coin, and even after he acknowledges that he has been given a second chance he still lets Fate decide, 'He is in a *maybe this, maybe that* kind of mood. Approaching a forked road, he ... quite indiscriminately chooses a route he's never taken before.'³² He occupies the space between Clara and Irie in times of familial conflict and, in being depicted as a conscientious objector, he embodies the positivity of the ambivalent viewpoint, of the

³¹ Smith, *White Teeth*, p.294.

³² Ibid., p.16.

in-between and marginal figure. Thus, it seems that Smith is exploring the danger of too fixed a stance, the idea that inflexibility is dangerous, with no space for understanding and tolerance.

Smith ends the novel with the idea that we cannot escape the trajectory of time, that history must be played out, the endgames must be played, but, at the same time, reminding us that any sense of conclusiveness is a fallacy, rather that, 'the end is simply the beginning of an even longer story'.³³

Thus, the overriding message that Smith leaves us with is to expose 'the myth, the wicked lie, that the past is always tense and the future, perfect'.³⁴ The novel also illustrates that life is problematic, neither a simple choice between Archie's utopian wishful thinking or Samad's insistence on determinism and control, the implication being that we should inhabit the in between space, one that allows for tolerant understanding and growth.

Through a shifting narrative timeframe, constantly moving between the past and present, both *The Child in Time* and *White Teeth* focus on the fluid and cyclical nature of time, establishing that time is not a linear onward process, and that sometimes we have to go backwards in order to move forwards. Furthermore, as postmodernist writers, both McEwan and Smith explore the concept of fragmentation and instability that surrounds our understanding of the human condition, establishing that the search for identity is a complex and problematic process.

³³ Ibid., p.461.

³⁴ Ibid., p.462.