

PLACES PERSONIFIED FOR FORGIVENESS AND COLLECTIVENESS IN GRAHAM SWIFT'S LAST ORDERS

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Abstract

Graham Swift is one of the most successful and highly regarded contemporary novelists in the literary world. Since 1980 he has published nine novels, a collection of short stories, and a nonfiction book. His work has garnered critical acclaim and literary prizes, and he has won a large and appreciative audience throughout the English-speaking world and beyond. His most celebrated books are *Waterland*, from 1983, which is widely considered a modern classic, and *Last Orders*, which was awarded the prestigious Booker Prize in 1996. *Last Orders* is more a connective relationship with four different voices. It's a simple story where four friends take a day trip to Margate Pier to spread the ashes of their mate, Jack, to the sea. Multiple narrators carry the story through flashbacks to the past and commentary on present events, gradually revealing a complex network of relationships, misunderstandings and betrayals, a fragile web held together by grudging affection and respect. As Ray, Vince, Lenny and Vic begin their journey to Margate, the atmosphere is contentious because of the characters and their complicated, collective histories. The characters journey to Margate creates an impermanent space outside of the demands of their day-to-day lives. Furthermore, the place play an important in bringing in relations between all the four friends like the Wick's Farm, Canterbury Cathedral and Margate – on their way to dispose of Jack's ashes.

Keywords – relationship, misunderstandings, flashbacks, journey

In *Last Orders* the voices melt and separate, just as the personalities of the characters unfold discretely and collectively. It is Jack's boxed ashes which bring his family and friends together in their favourite Bermondsy pub; and it is this heavy box and its contents which prompt their reminiscences on the car ride to the South Coast town of Margate. Shared memories overlap as the trip to Margate progresses, and in the forced intimacy of the car, old grudges re-surface

and cause unexpected diversions. For instance, Lenny has taken issue with Vince because, years earlier, Vince impregnated his daughter and then abandoned her to join the military. Ray, on the other hand, feels a tremendous amount of guilt because he has kept money that Vince lent Jack and that Jack in turn lent Ray. Ray not only feels guilt for his betrayal of Vince, but also for deceiving Jack by having an affair with Amy. In spite of the contention and the disruption that the characters histories create, they are ultimately able to reconcile their differences, while also fulfilling Jack's last orders by disposing his ashes in Margate.

The first location that the characters visit on their way to Margate is Wick's Farm. Although Wick's Farm is a fictional place Hop-picking is significant in *Last Orders* because Wick's Farm, the first meeting place where Amy and Jack originally met before the Second World War. Amy discusses how she began a relationship with Jack in spite of her better judgment -

“I thought, What are you doing Amy Mitchell, what are you doing? You don't even know this boy. You don't even fancy him, not that much, not so much. But the air was soft and ripe and still. And there was that feeling inside of me, between me, like a bowl” (p.237).

Unlike Amy, Ray, Lenny, Vic and Vince visit Wick's Farm after it ceases to be a hop farm; At Wick's Farm, Lenny physically attacks Vince, which starts a fight: Vince gets up, all fired up now, all hunched and snorting and puffing, and Lenny holds out the jar in front of him in both hands, teasing and sort of skipping on the spot.

“ I've never seen Lenny so neat on his pins. Vince moves forward and Lenny moves back, dodging, like he could chuck the jar to Vic or me if that was the idea and we were ready to catch it, but he does a sort of rugby leap with it, low and quick to one side, so it lands on the grass away from any of us, then he steps around so he's between it and Vince, and puts out his fists and starts ducking and weaving”(p.148).

By fighting, Lenny and Vince are degrading the dignity of the journey, and this is further emphasized when Lenny throws Jack's urn like a football. After the debacle at Wick's Farm, Ray expresses that he and the other characters feel ashamed of themselves for fighting over Jack's ashes: “It's all our fault. Fighting over a man's ashes. And the jar's sitting there in Vince's hands like its shaking its head at us all, with a bit of him left behind in the field for the sheep to trample on. He didn't expect this, he didn't expect this at all” (p.180). Ray lament over the fight at Wick's Farm shows that the journey has turned bitter with indifference among the characters, as Ray adopts a tone of disgust over his and the other characters' behaviour.

At Wick's Farm, Ray recalls how his affair with Amy began - “In spite of her and Jack getting stuck in their ways as if they'd been put in a mould long ago and come out and gone solid. But I suppose we all do that. We all need something to stir us up” (p.170-71).

Although Ray is presently on a journey to dispose of Jack's ashes, he is preoccupied with thoughts of Amy. Just as the characters escape the mundanity of day-to-day life by journeying to Margate, Amy and Ray create excitement in their otherwise stable lives by beginning an affair-

“I suppose two people know when something's going to happen, even when they're not so sure it ought to and they don't know how they're going to bring it about and they're afraid of it as wanting it. But they know if it's ever going to happen, now's the time.... I thought Amy chose June, she didn't choose Jack, now I've chosen Amy. They weren't so faded....

And afterwards that became out regular spot, Epsom Downs, every Thursday, for fourteen weeks, racing or no racing”(p.175).

Although Ray mentioned that Amy and Jack’s relation was in trouble, Ray has helped to shake things up, outside of the ordinary situation on married life, through an affair with his friend’s wife. As the characters first arrive in Canterbury, Vince goes out of his way to act as a tour guide in an effort to apologize for his behaviour earlier in the journey, as Lenny observes-

“I reckon he’s sorry, that’s what he is. I reckon he’s trying to make amends. We’ve all got a bit of that to do if you look back over the years. Excluding Vic maybe. Clean hands, as always” (p.203).

Lenny recognizes Vince’s behaviour as conciliatory, and he also realizes that the entire group, except for Vic, have done things over the years that require some level of recompense. By the end of their stopover in Canterbury, the characters achieve a sense for forgiveness and of collectivity that is clear as Ray exits the cathedral:

“I sit there, keeping an eye out, but I don’t see them anywhere, so I get up and find the way out, and then I spot them, standing on the paved area, looking out for me. I think, Friends. The sky’s dark and threatening and the wind’s cold but they don’t look like they’re getting peeved. They look like they’re glad to be here together, like all’s forgiven”(p.225).

The dark and threatening sky juxtaposes with the forgiveness that results as the four friends reunite. Ray and the other characters have reconciled and are leaving the locale with the sense that they are, once again, friends.

Despite her absence from the characters journey to Margate, Amy experiences release from her obligation to her daughter June. As Amy is visiting June at the nursing home, she is able to free herself from the responsibility of visiting June- “What I’m trying to say is Goodbye June. Goodbye Jack. They seem like one and the same thing. We’ve got to make our own lives now without each other , we’ve got to go our different ways. I’ve got to think of my own future.”(p.278). Amy experiences a release since, after Jack’s death; she is liberated from her oppressive routine of visiting June at the nursing home. Amy’s emancipation from June is permanent, as she is looking to escape her solitary responsibility of parenting June, since Jack had refused to take part in June’s life.

The characters dispose of Jack’s ashes, as the scattering process becomes grotesque. As the characters are about to throw Jack’s ashes off of the pier, they realize that the rain makes the ashes stick to their hands: and Vic says, “Keep your hands as dry as you can,” wiping his own hands on a handkerchief, and I realize what he means. It’s so Jack don’t stick to us, it’s so we don’t get Jack stuck to our hands” (p.293). While ashes can be associated with death and decay, in this instance, they are also associated with life, as Ray compares scattering Jack’s ashes to sprinkling seeds: “And I know I’ve got to do it quick, like scattering seed” (p.294). Ray compares Jack’s ashes to seeds and, as a result, the ashes become associated with life, as opposed to death. In fact, the ashes serve as sort of restoration for the characters, as the disposing of Jack’s ashes creates a sense of collectivity and of resolution, since Margate brings the characters together in spite of their issues with each other. This is made clear when Ray says,

“Then I throw the last handful and the seagulls come back on a second chance and I hold up the jar, shaking it, like I should chuck it out to sea too, a message in a bottle, Jack Arthur Dodds, save our souls, and the ash that I carried in my hands, which was the 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". (p.294-295)

Margate becomes the spiritual end to the characters pilgrimage in both the metaphorical and physical sense because the characters are able to achieve a sense of reconciliation and they come together. At each location, the narrators are not meant to be trusted. Ray, for example, isn't always honest with himself, and neither is Amy. She uses visiting June in the home as an excuse for her affair with Ray to stop, when the real reason is partly that Vince is coming back from military service in Aden and partly that she's realised that she really does love Jack. Swift not only creates doubt about his characters in this way but also shows that each of them sees the world through their own perspective and they don't always have all the facts. Vic, for example, sees Ray and Amy together - he never says anything about this to anyone and jumps to the conclusion that the affair has been going on for years. These are the moments when the ordinary surface of things suddenly changes its meaning, when a novel shows that it can convert appearance into significance. So revelations can be either satisfying or irritating - narrative fulfilment or narrative trickery.

In *Last Orders* one discovers hidden facts, matters of history of the place that shape their relationship. There something needling, for instance, in Lenny's habit of calling Vince "Big Boy"(p.163). In one of Lenny's interior monologues we find that Vince got his daughter pregnant and then dumped her. Twenty years of resentment lie behind his each little talking. Swift manages the revelations of his novel by making his reader feel like an outsider who is allowed to glimpse knowledge that his characters share. Revelations are necessary to explain its emotional voltage. Ray's friends prod him for his feelings about his daughter, who has immigrated to Australia. Late in the novel one discover that in 25 years he has not told her of his separation from her mother. "I'm a small man but I've got my pride"(p.142) Even confessing to the reader seems to go against his thoughts.

The most important fact withheld from the reader is that Ray, the central character, has had an affair with Amy, Jack's wife. At the beginning of the book one see's Ray and Amy alone together, in Ray's narration, with no mention of this history. He tells us he gave her arm "a little squeeze", but only much later would this intimacy take on a special meaning. More than halfway through the novel, he recalls how, over 20 years earlier, he and Amy had weekly trysts in his camper van, when she was supposed to be visiting her brain-damaged daughter in her "home". Now the duty that he is performing for his dead friend, scattering his ashes, suddenly changes its meaning. One has to adjust to what Ray knew all the time. It turns out that others have known, too. Later one discover that Vic, the undertaker, another in the party to Margate, found out about Ray's affair with Amy. He saw them together once on one of his outings to collect a body. "You shouldn't judge. What you learn in this business is to keep a secret," he says, to no one except us. Lenny, the "stirrer", keeps hinting that he suspects something "Seems I'm the only one here who ain't in the know"(p.127-28).

By the end of the novel, Ray has become convinced that Jack himself has long lived with the knowledge. On his deathbed he revealed to Ray his debts, hidden from his wife, and asked him to pay them off. It is like a blessing on the relationship between Ray and Amy. But he knew all along. That's the long and short of it. It seems that Jack, a man who kept everything to himself, was the person who knew everything. The dead man, living in each character's recollections, prompts each revelation.

Last Orders is structured like one of these "to the moment" narratives - journal entries on the route to Margate - everything that is to be revealed has already happened. The different

places and Margate personifies in different ways in these characters life, even due to differences throughout the journey, the resting place of Jack's ashes makes their friendship stronger and a sense of contention.

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