

## GRAHAM SWIFT'S FICTION: A STUDY

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**Abstract:**

*Graham Swift is a fine contemporary writer. He is a novelist, mainly with a book of short stories. Graham Swift was born in 1949 in London. He had his education in Cambridge. Graham Swift has, so far, produced three books of short stories, Learning to Swim (1982), Chemistry (2008) and England and Other Stories (2014). Making an Elephant (2009) is his non-fictional prose. Some of Swift's books have been filmed, including Waterland (1992), Shuttlecock (1993) and Last Orders (1996). His novel Last Orders was joint-winner of the 1996 James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction and a mildly controversial winner of the 1996 Booker Prize, owing to the superficial similarities in plot to William Faulkner's As I Lay Dying. The following is a critical analysis of his major novels. The present research paper attempts to study Graham Swift's novels.*

**Key Words:** *Controversial winner, memoir.*

Graham Swift was one of the most important British novelists. His novels include The Sweet-Shop Owner (1980), Shuttlecock (1981), Waterland (1983), Out of this World (1988), Ever After (1992), Last Orders (1996), The Light of Day (2003), Tomorrow (2007), Wish you were here (2011) and Mothering Sunday (2016)

**The Sweet-Shop Owner (1980):**

The book is set on a sunny Friday in June 1974 and describes the routine of what turns out to be the last day in the life of Willy Chapman, the eponymous owner of a South London sweet shop. Central to the book is his relationship with his beautiful and yet distant wife Irene who bore him a daughter on the unspoken agreement that no love would be expressed between them. Interspersed with flashbacks to his earlier life, Willy attempts to justify himself to his estranged unforgiving daughter Dorry via an internal monologue.

**Shuttlecock (1981):**

Prentis, junior assistant in the 'dead crimes' department of the police archives in London, starts writing a personal memoir almost inadvertently. It is in response to his growing alienation from his wife and children; to regular visits to his estranged father, who has recently become catatonic and is in hospital; and to the confusing situation at work where he suspects his boss, Quinn, of suppressing crucial files in a case he is asked to investigate. Eventually it emerges that the files concern a friend that his father has betrayed and a blackmailer who claimed to have evidence that his father was not the World War II war-hero he claimed to be. Quinn is approaching retirement and has been grooming Prentis to see if he would make a suitably humane successor. Now he gives Prentis the choice of whether Quinn should destroy the files in question. When he agrees, he is guaranteed promotion. At the same time he loses his sense of inferiority to his father and manages to rescue his family situation at home. He has come to the conclusion that the impressions we make are fictitious. His father's story of his work as a spy in Nazi-occupied France, passages from which are interspersed with Prentis' own narrative, was created to hide the real truth about himself. Prentis, in his turn, is now creating a new version of himself in order to conceal his own weakness and uncertainties.

**Waterland (1983):**

The title of the novel refers to its setting in The Fens in East Anglia or Eastern England. *Waterland* is concerned with the nature and importance of history as the primary source of meaning in a narrative. For this reason, it is associated with new historicism. *Waterland* can also be said to fall under the category of postmodern writing. This is because it contains characteristics associated with postmodern literature, such as a fragmented narrative style, where events are not told in chronological order. An unreliable narrator is also present. Major themes include storytelling and history, exploring how the past leads to future consequences. Andrew Sanders remarks: "Swift's perspective in his subtle, thoughtful novel *Waterland* is less drawn out but quite as decidedly historical." (Sanders, 657)

The plot of the novel revolves around loosely interwoven themes and narrative, including the jealousy of his brother for the narrator's girlfriend/wife, a resulting murder, the abortion the girl undergoes, her subsequent inability to conceive, resulting in depression and the kidnap of a baby. This personal narrative is set in the context of a wider history, of the narrator's family, the Fens in general and the eel.

**Out of this World (1988):**

*Out Of This World* is about the author's highly intelligent attempts to write a private and intimate novel which also takes account of history. Conveniently for this purpose, the hero, Harry Beech, is a former war photographer, and his father, besides being a veteran of the First World War, runs an arms factory. So most of the major 20<sup>th</sup> century conflicts get a look-in, and, for good measure, a pivotal scene of father-son confession takes place while they are watching the moon landing on television. Meanwhile Harry's estranged daughter Sophie lies on a couch in Brooklyn, venting her hostility towards her father and complaining about the short-comings of her own marriage to her attentive analyst, Dr Klein. Snippets of a family saga emerge in flashback - infidelities, unspoken feelings, perverse loyalties, and so on. Many of the motifs are familiar from Swift's earlier work. There are Greek backgrounds, a father figure physically and psychologically scarred by war, and power relations underlying the family structure, here as before teased out with descriptive subtlety and shrewd timing.

**Ever After (1992):**

One novel, *Ever After*, published in 1992, deserves a particular attention. Like its predecessors, it is concerned with complex and repeating family patterns, the sins of one generation visited on the next, dubious paternity, marital infidelity and buried secrets. However, the interest of this study lies in the fact that in *Ever After* those themes have matured to a significant extent. It is particularly striking in the way the narrator commits himself to exploring around perspectives, to undermining his own assertions, squeezing the reader between the pincers of past and present, being ironic at the expense of what somebody did not know, but somebody now does. Thus, one becomes progressively aware of the fact that the main interest in *Ever After* results in utterance. The effect it creates is rather like that of a multiple-stage theatre in which the audience has to visualize at one and the same time various plots which only prove to be interrelated at the end.

The central character in *Ever After* is a middle-aged man called Bill Unwin, the widower of an actress, who himself survived a recent brush with death. He has two remarkable tales to tell. One, ranging from post-war Paris and the Soho of the 1950s to contemporary entanglements, sexual and scholarly, in the far from other-worldly groves of academe, is the vivid account of his own life. The other, pieced together from the private notebooks of a Victorian ancestor, Matthew Pearce, is the story of a good and simple man whose happiness is destroyed by his compulsive search for truth. Through these notebooks, Bill is drawn, as Matthew was drawn before, to the painful contemplation of life itself.

It would have been too easy for Graham Swift to elaborate the most simple three-tier novel: 'to be born, to love and to die.' *Ever After* finds its originality in reshaping this most commonly accepted process: "to die, to be born, then to love". It gives the novel a completely different viewpoint and a new rhythm, which overturns the vision of the whole structure. Swift considers the structure and shape of a novel "in

terms of rhythm, movement, pace and tension. And it isn't a very intellectual process. It's very much a sort of musical thing. The adjective musical is particularly significant in *Ever After* since the rhythm is built upon a movement in three time very much like the waltz. However, Swift innovatively beats an inverted time. "To die" appears to be the first beat of the musical cadence played irrevocably backwards.

**Last Orders (1996):**

The story makes much use of flashbacks to tell the convoluted story of the relationships between a group of war veterans who live in the same corner of London, the backbone of the story being the journey of the group from Bermondsey to Margate to scatter the ashes of Jack Dodds into the sea, in accord with his last wishes. The narrative is split into short sections told by the main characters as well as updates along the journey at Old Kent Road, New Cross, Blackheath, Dartford, Gravesend, Rochester, Chatham Naval Memorial and Canterbury Cathedral. The title 'Last Orders' not only refers to these instructions as stipulated in Jack Dodd's will, but also alludes to the 'last orders (of the day)' - the last round of drinks to be ordered before a pub closes, as drinking was a favourite pastime of Jack and the other characters.

**The Light of Day (2003):**

The book is set in 1997 in Wimbledon, the narrator George preparing to visit the grave of Bob Nash in Putney Vale Cemetery on the two year anniversary of his death, and then to visit Sarah who was convicted of his murder and with whom George has fallen in love. George recounts his involvement in the crime, employed in Sarah as a private investigator to ensure that Bob's affair with Kristina, a Croatian refugee, had come to an end.

**References:**

1. Sanders, Andrew. *English Literature*. Oxford: OUP, 2005. Print.