Adolescence in 1970s Britain: Examining the effects of conflict in contemporary culture in *The Rotters' Club* by Jonathan Coe

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Abstract

Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club* primarily focuses on the lives of three young schoolboys growing up in 1970s Birmingham during emerging youth culture and civil unrest. Utilising the contextual factors of the backdrop, Coe presents the subtle implications this conflict has in the development of the main characters in the narrative as the characters move toward adolescence. The consequences of political unrest and extremist ideology emerging in Britain play a clear role in the irreversible shaping of each character's disposition and social status within society, as their community echoes the conflict in the greater macrocosm of culture across the country. The aim of this article is to present Coe's use of contextual factors to portray the impact of both explicit conflict and underlying issues in the maturation of characters in the novel. To this end, issues centred on racism, xenophobia and social progressivism are to be discussed and analysed throughout the argument to determine the true extent of how conflict shapes the lives of the youth as they come of age.

Conflict is defined not only by struggle between opposing forces, both physical and ideological, but the fallout of this clash. The narrative of the book *The Rotters' Club* written by Jonathon Coe is largely based on the violent contextual events and ideologies of the setting of the novel in 1970s Birmingham. This focus clearly outlines the importance of conflict's role in the emerging contemporary youth culture and the lives of the main characters that find themselves part of it as they grow into adolescence. It is this conflict that shapes the development and maturation of each of the main characters featured in the novella as they find their identity and their place in society. This article constitutes an argument to which Jonathan Coe's uses contextual factors to portray the significant impact that conflict has in the Coming of Age of the main characters in the novel.

Early on in the novel we are presented with the setting of the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974, eluding to the terrorism the violence that marked the decade. Immediately we are shown the effects of multiple bomb attacks, both at heavily crowded pubs. The attacks on The Mulberry Bush and The Tavern in the Town left 21 people dead and another 181 injured. This story is narrated from the perspective of Ben Trotter and his sister Lois, with the account mainly focusing on the characters of the "chick and the hairy guy"[1] who were present at the attack at The Tavern in the Town. The use of nicknames to describe the two provides a degree of generality to anyone in their age bracket and represents how severely the general youth population are affected by forces out of their control, as is a theme throughout the novel. The account describes how the bomb detonated just as the "hairy guy"[2] was about to propose to the "chick"[3]. Dumitraşcu observes that in this episode "Coe simply "suspends" the plotline at that stage, the same way as the lives of the characters get "suspended", never to be recovered to the same extent, again."[4] It is clear that these events have deeply affected Lois and Ben in turn, shaping their emotional maturity to great effect without the two being completely aware of it at the time. "Unlike the characters' lives, the reader can "recover" the events of that evening and their horrible consequences, throughout the novel, and in the sequel, The Closed Circle."[5] Dumitraşcu continues presenting how deep rooted these feelings are as the effects of the tragedy continue into the next novel as it has permanently shaped their identity. This episode presents how violent events such as this have such an influential role in the Coming of Age of the characters as it ultimately shapes their future as they are forced to mature emotionally. Gutleben adds "From a novelistic point of view, this abrupt change of tonality and modality, this unpredictable shift from comedy to tragedy, this brutal breach in the pact of reading, is orchestrated so as to generate an emphatic effect of unexpectedness"[6] suggesting that the reader is allowed to experience the shock the characters feel as an insight into the deep psychological effect the event had in their lives. This is corroborated by Coe's description of his

[1] Coe, Jonathan, The Rotters' Club, (London: Penguin, 2008)

[2] Coe, Jonathan, 2008

[3] Coe, Jonathan, 2008

[4] Dumitraşcu, Denisa, Terrorism and Violence in Jonathan Coe's 'The Rotters' Club' Romanian-American University p. 33-40

[5] Dumitraşcu, Denisa,

[6] Christian Gutleben, Bleak Humour: Jonathan Coe's Politeness of Despair in The Rotters' Club, (Études britanniques contemporaines 2016)

novel What a Carve Up! "as a response to the seismic changes in British political culture during the 1980s and, just in case nobody spotted what I was up to, I even had a fictional reviewer insert a little manifesto into the text: We stand badly in need of novels, which show an understanding of the ideological hijack which has taken place so recently in this country"[7] outlining how historical events of great conflict naturally shape the lives touched by them.

The backdrop of 1970s Birmingham lends itself to a presentation of the effects of socio economic conflict, as Margaret Thatcher was elected the leader of the Conservative party in 1975, supported by the emerging "Super-Class"[8], consisting of wealthy business owners who called for tax cuts, she based her political ideology on the introduction of enterprise culture. Ultimately removing the consensus and welfare system, reducing the benefits that many of the country had relied upon for years. The influence of this political conflict is made evident as the first time Ben has sex with his girlfriend Cicely is under the poster of Margaret Thatcher, this acts as a metaphor for the drastic change Britain faces, which runs parallel to the radical change in Ben's life as he loses his virginity. The subtle overshadowing of Ben's first sexual encounter with the looming threat of drastic political change and widespread civil unrest and class conflict exhibits the subconscious effects that socio- economic conflict has in the maturation of young adults. Social status in relation to political influence is a key factor in the development of the main character's perception of society as they come of age. The character of Mr Nutall is a prime example of a socialist intellectual and as the director of King William's College; he plays a key role in the lives of the adolescent main characters and what they are influenced by through their education. Coe uses the brief appearance of the character to present the true extent to which their main protagonists' lives are guided and shaped indirectly by different mediums exposing the vast spectrum of socio- economic factors.

During the 1970s British society faced a variety issues in relation to social and institutional racism and xenophobia, the novel examines how these underlying issues in British society subtly affect the development of the main characters as they come of age in their adolescence. Dumitraşcu outlines how "Coe decides to start from the most severe forms of social manifestation of Racism, which in extreme forms can lead to murder (as in the case of the young Irish worker, after the pub bombings) and goes decreasingly, to the least intense ones."[9] The most severe social manifestation of racism being the emergence of extremist British nationalism as a reaction not only Irish nationalism but Irish immigrants. The influence of this xenophobia against the Irish following the terrorist attacks is evident throughout novel, however it is most notable in the follow up novel as the characters still find trouble coming to terms with events, allowing the ideology to sway their judgement, outlining the key role it had in their childhood. The Rotters' Club also presents the strife of ethnic minorities as they attempt to integrate into British society. The character Steve Richards he represents a

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[7] Coe, Jonathan 'Why are we so obsessed with the state-of-the-nation novel?' (New Statesman 2012)

[8] Di Bernado, Francesco, Politics, History and Personal Tragedies: The novels of Jonathan Coe in the British historical, political and literary context from the seventies to recent years, (University of Sussex, 2014)

[9] Dumitraşcu, Denisa,

microcosm of Afro-Caribbean youth in Britain, as he is the only black student that attends King William's school. His character acts as an embodiment of discrimination against individuals due to their ethnicity, portraying the low amount of black students in high education, as well as his labelling as "Rastus"[10] presenting the derogatory slurs many black teenagers suffered as abuse. In addition, the relentless bullying Steve receives from his classmate Culpepper acts as a metaphor for the xenophobic acts of many racists within British society that have the intention to hinder his educational progression and social status due to their ethnicity and background. The protagonist Ben later contemplates the treatment of Steve recalling that "We all made fun of him and called him Rastus, God, we're a fucked-up country"[11] demonstrating the long lasting effects of their racists actions as adolescents. The least intense form of racism Coe chooses to incorporate into his novel only serves to show how deep- rooted this xenophobic nature is in our culture, as the character Doug tells his classmate that "surely he must have noticed that Tolkien's villainous Orcs were made to appear unmistakably negroid. And did it not strike him as significant that the reinforcements who come to the aid of Sauron, the Dark Lord are themselves dark skinned, hail from unspecified tropical islands from the south, and are often mounted on elephants?"[12]

One key aspect of conflict in the novel that affects the coming of age of the characters is the formation of extremist ideologies; this is a common thread through each other aspect of conflict that comes to shape each character's identity. Each, the political, racial and civil unrest that is explored throughout the course of the novel is perpetuated and largely observed through extremist ideology. Robert Leech states that "Crucially, there is the question of the relationship of political ideas to material interests and questions of power and domination on the one hand and science and truth on the other."[13] The relationship between these extremist ideologies and how they interact and bisect based on an individuals race, class and social status can vastly alter their coming of age experience and how it shapes them. An example of this is how the character Bill "realises that dismembering the working class according to ethnical differences is extremely easy, while uniting the working force and making them aware of their common interest is an extremely painstaking, difficult enterprise"[14] Extremist ideology is also used to educate the protagonists, on the surface, the episode of the Trotters' in Denmark provides an anecdote centred on Ben's dad being saved by a German. However, Marie's family story of the true tragedy of anti Semitism and racism during the Second World War, as the Nazi regime became state ideology, runs parallel to the state of emerging extremist and xenophobic culture discussed subtly throughout the novel and the interaction between each of these issues. Ben's consideration of this story told by Marie outlines the character's understanding of the current political state of Britain and how he chooses to fit into it.

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[10] Coe, Jonathan, 2008
[11] Coe, Jonathan, 2008
[12] Coe, Jonathan, 2008
[13] Leach, Robert, Political Ideology in Britain, (Basingstoke: Palgrave 2002) p. 15-36

[14] Rearick, Anderson. "Why is the Only Good Orc a Dead Orc? The Dark Face of Racism Examined in Tolkien's World." MFS Modern Fiction Studies, vol. 5o no. 4, 2004, p. 861- 874

Considering all elements put forward in this article, it follows a clear and present conclusion of conflict playing a main role in the Coming of Age of the adolescent characters the novel focuses on. Coe presents that much of the influence of societal conflict is internalised by the characters as they come of age subconsciously through covert forms of civil unrest and violence. As a main driving point of the plot, it is clear that the IRA bombings play a key role in the lives of the characters in the novel as they mature into young adults, yet the subtle implications of political unrest and extremist ideology emerging in Britain at the time play a larger role in the irreversible shaping of each character's disposition and social status within society. These influences play an instrumental role in the development of key characters; determining their self-perception, place in the social hierarchy and relationships with other peers and adults as they grow up.

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