

# The Royal Family as a Cultural Metaphor in Contemporary Literature

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**Abstract:** The present article investigates the British Royal Family as a cultural metaphor in modern literature, with particular reference to Julian Barnes's *England, England* and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*. Understanding society values and identities depends on cultural metaphors, as theorists such as George Lakoff and Martin Gannon have argued. For the United Kingdom, the Royal Family represents historical continuity, social cohesion, and the harmony between modernism and tradition. Presenting the Royal Family as bought-in characters in a hyperreal amusement park, Barnes's *England, England* questions the commercialization of national symbols. By contrast, Coe's *Middle England* set during the Brexit period, shows the Royal Family as a rather superficial, yet stabilizing agent for the British society. The paper invites readers to evaluate the Royal Family's changing cultural relevance in modern Britain, therefore stressing their complex role in reflecting and forming British identity.

**Keywords:** *cultural metaphor, Royal Family; British national identity.*

## Defining and Exemplifying Cultural Metaphors

Cultural metaphors are representative concepts, symbols or images, reflecting the generally embraced values or beliefs in a particular culture. Such metaphors are recurrent in everyday conversations and in scholarly literature and they may provide valuable support in understanding the dynamics of the culture they stem from. The present article will attempt to offer a deeper understanding of the significance of cultural metaphors and to illustrate their functioning through the example of the British Royal Family and the way it is depicted in three contemporary novels: Julian Barnes's *England, England* and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*.

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson propose their conceptual metaphor theory highlighting the importance of metaphors, which goes beyond mere linguistic expression; the researchers argue that "the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another" (Lakoff & Johnson 2003: 5). Lakoff and Johnson emphasize that metaphors are actually building blocks to human thought processes.

One type of conceptual metaphors, particularly significant when attempting to understand national identities, is represented by what Martin Gannon termed *cultural metaphor*. Gannon defines cultural metaphors as

[...] any distinctive or unique activity, phenomenon, or institution with which all or most members of a given culture emotionally and/or cognitively identify. As such, the metaphor represents the underlying values expressive of the culture itself. (Gannon 2011: 4).

Since he started his research on cultural metaphors in 1987, Martin Gannon was aware of the negative reaction this concept would likely provoke, because of its connection to stereotypes, which have often been dismissed as biased to the point of being useless. However, humans have “the general psychological tendencies to analogize and generalize [...] an aspect of social behaviour” (Sadock 1993: 43). In other words, human thinking is based on such generalizations used automatically, often unconsciously in everyday interactions, as it had been shown by linguists as Lakoff:

The generalizations governing poetic metaphorical expressions are not in language, but in thought: they are general mappings across conceptual domains. Moreover, these general principles which take the form of conceptual mappings, apply not just to novel poetic expressions, but to much of ordinary everyday language. (Lakoff 1993: 203).

Some stereotypes can be considered illegitimate in the sense that they are “generalization[s] which allow no exceptions” (Gannon & Pillai 2015: xxiii). Nevertheless, cultural metaphors do not fall into this category of unreliable stereotypes, but they are probabilistic, symbolizing values statistically identified as embraced by a large proportion of the members of a certain culture if not unanimously.

In their elaborate work *Understanding Global Cultures* Gannon and Pillai studied in depth different cultural metaphors, considering that such a close analysis should lead to a better understanding of the core values and beliefs of different societies and of the unwritten rules guiding interactions among members of a certain culture. Being acknowledged as shared symbols which individuals belonging to a particular cultural group can resonate with and rally around, they contribute to building and reinforcing a sense of identity and unity within a given society. Recognizing the significance of such metaphors implicitly leads to bridging gaps between cultures by providing common points of reference, or by highlighting differences, thus facilitating communication within and across cultures. Cultural metaphors can be used as valuable tools for academics applicable in the study of cultures across the globe.

One example of cultural metaphor is the widely-used American Melting Pot. This metaphor suggests that America, the United States in particular, is a place where people come from different cultures and ethnicities and where through blending and assimilation the distinctive cultural features gradually fade while a single, cohesive new society emerges. (Gannon & Pillai 2015: 214) Frequently perceived as an ideal of unity and inclusiveness, the Melting Pot metaphor has also been criticized because it overlooks the extremely complex realities of multiculturalism and it downplays the persistence of culturally distinctive elements, often leading to inequalities within the newly formed society.

The Japanese Garden is another example of powerful cultural metaphor which encapsulates the ethos of Japanese aesthetics and social philosophy (Gannon & Pillai 2015: 36-58). It is illustrative for the harmony and

communion with nature. Methodically designed to provide a feeling of peacefulness within a beautiful natural landscape, the Japanese garden extends its meaning to wider, culturally significant values and attitude: being aware of the importance of harmony in social relations; being thankful and appreciative of simple, subtle beauty; keeping a deep connection with nature. The Japanese garden, as a cultural metaphor.

A third example provided by Gannon and Pillai is the cultural metaphor of the French Wine. (Gannon & Pillai 2015: 183-200). In French culture, wine symbolizes not only the art of wine making but also a way of life, distinguishable through the appreciation of life's pleasures, of tradition and of quality. The meticulous activities involved in producing wine suggest that the French generally hold in high esteem craftsmanship, attention to detail, and the pursuit of excellence. Moreover, wine is also associated with community, social bonds and shared experiences in French culture, since it is often enjoyed in friendly settings with family and friends.

What about the United Kingdom? Do the British perceive themselves as a community? If yes, how do they view themselves and how are they perceived by other cultures? If the answers to such questions are by no means simple, a significant cultural metaphor seems to indicate that there actually is some consensus in the perception of a unified, imagined British cultural community. This metaphor is represented by the Royal Family, often associated with historical continuity, enduring values, and social unity of the United Kingdom. Through their personal narratives, public roles, and ceremonies, the Royal Family seem to rise above their mundane political function, transcending to the status of symbol of British national identity and tradition.

The existence of the British monarchy dates back over a millennium. Therefore, the Royal Family embodies centuries of British history, and this historical continuity provides a sense of stability and permanence in a rapidly changing world, qualities highly valued in British culture. Through its rituals, ceremonies, and traditions steeped in historical significance, such as the royal weddings, State Opening of Parliament, Trooping the Colour, the Royal Family reiterates and consolidates a continuous lineage that connects present, past and future. Such rituals and events reinforce the perception of the monarchy as the protector of British legacy.

In times of historical crisis or national celebration, the Royal Family has often acted as a unifying symbol for the entire British nation. For instance, the Prime Minister Winston Churchill's speech during the Second World War, or King George VI's speech at the end of the War, provided a powerful message of solidarity and resilience. The Royal marriages have been celebrated as national events, often broadcast on national television, thus bringing people together from all the corners of the nation. All these events strengthen the monarchy's role in nurturing a feeling of national pride and community. Besides participating in national events, members of the Royal Family often engage in extensive charitable activities, supporting of various causes, and participating in community events, thus enacting such values as responsibility, commitment, endurance, which reflect broader principles valued by the British people in

general. The Royal Family's adherence to these values serves as a model for the nation, reinforcing the importance of these principles in British society.

One of the puzzling aspects of the Royal Family as a cultural metaphor is their ability to symbolise both tradition and modernity. This balance between upholding tradition and embracing modernity reflects the broader British cultural experience of navigating the tensions between historical legacy and contemporary change. The changing social and cultural environment has constantly challenged the British monarchy to adapt, navigating the pressures of modern media, public scrutiny, and evolving social values. The younger generation of royals, such as Prince William and Prince Harry, have brought a modern touch to the monarchy, engaging with contemporary issues such as mental health, environmental conservation, and social justice, just as their mother, Lady Diana had done several decades before them.

There is also an international dimension of the Royal Family, which emphasises their importance as a cultural metaphor not only within Britain but also in representing British identity globally. Through state visits and international engagements, they function as ambassadors of British culture and values, promoting a positive image of Britain, and strengthening diplomatic relations. People all over the world have displayed a keen global interest in the Royal Family, from the fascination with royal weddings to the media coverage of their public appearances, therefore the Royal family have an important contribution in building the narratives related to the British culture worldwide.

### **The Royal Family in Julian Barnes's *England, England* and Jonathan Coe's *Middle England***

As it has been shown in the paragraphs above, the British Royal Family is a powerful cultural metaphor, which embodies the societal values, national identity, and historical continuity of the United Kingdom. This metaphor has been explored and critiqued in literary works of such notable contemporary British writers as Julian Barnes and Jonathan Coe. Both authors resort to the cultural metaphor of the Royal Family to reflect upon British culture, politics, and the tension between tradition and modernity.

In *England, England* Barnes questions how national symbols have been trivialized and commercialized, suggesting that capitalism has taken over such public metaphors as the Royal Family, itself depicted as a simulacrum, or copy without an original, which illustrates the postmodern, Baudrillardian concept according to which reality can no longer be distinguished from its own representations. Sir Jack Pitman asks his team of researchers to draw a list of fifty "Quintessences of Englishness" based on which he intends to build his simulacrum theme park, and the Royal Family is placed at the very top of this list (Barnes 2012: 84-85).

In this satirical novel Julian Barnes explores the themes of nationalism and commercialism through the commodification of culture. In the novel a dystopian world is imagined, where a businessman called Sir Jack Pitman builds a theme park on the Isle of Wight, where all kinds of symbols or cultural metaphors deemed quintessentially English, including a caricatured royal family, are replicated and commodified for the satisfaction of international

tourists. In this theme park, everything pertains to a hyperreal world, and the royals have been turned into mere actors within a fictional history. The success of what appeared an insane, grand project, but which eventually grows into an independent, miniature country called England, England, is actually an illustration of the way in which Hyperreality replaces reality, as Baudrillard showed in his theory on simulacra and simulation (Baudrillard 2008: 1-43). Julian Barnes actually introduces in the novel a character – the French intellectual (Barnes 2012: 52), by means of whom the writer mockingly hints at Baudrillard's philosophy; however, unlike the real Baudrillard, Barnes's French philosopher values imitation and the simulacrum above reality.

Sir Jack himself is an admirer and promoter of the replica instead of the authenticity. However, when it comes to the Royal Family, he maintains that they must employ the original despite the fact that the project has a highly effective "Royal Family" in training: "It's just not the same." (Barnes 2012: 148). After luring the real king with promises of large sums of money, a way out of tedious representative duties, and favourable press coverage (which would be easy to ensure since Sir Jack has acquired and moved the *Times* magazine on Isle of Wight of London, making it number 16 on the Project's list of quintessences), the monarch and his wife, Queen Denise, are finally persuaded to get installed in a scaled-down version of Buckingham Palace.

Descendant of George I, the 'real' king hired by Pitman to play his own role in England, England, was nicknamed "Kingy-Thingy" by his own wife (Barnes 2012:143). He is described in the novel as "dull as ditchwater" (Barnes 2012: 223); lacking authenticity and creativity, he is completely dependent on script writers to furnish him with his punchlines; he meticulously rehearses his demeanour, and spends his whole life imitating behaviour of previous royalty, acting out the actions of his forebears in order to fulfil his role. This 'real' King of England, England, who has been promised that "very good replicas will shoulder most of the burden" (Barnes 2012: 171) of tedious daily rituals for him, soon begins to copy the habits of his illustrious predecessor, King Charles II, as Nell Gwynn, the unfortunate object of King-Thingy's unflagging sexual attentions, complains. His predecessor, King Charles II, was a renowned monarch. As the 'real' King imitates royal manners by giving in to his own sexual cravings, it becomes impossible to differentiate him from an actor impersonating an English king. This is especially true given that King Thingy imitates royal manners. On the other hand, there is one aspect of monarchy that the real king does not plan to imitate, and that is the concern expressed by Martha Cochrane, the Project's appointed cynic: "What if the King decided that he really wanted to reign?" (Barnes 2012: 225).

Barnes' description of the members of the monarchy reveals the tension between authentic historical continuity and commercialized nostalgia for history represented by the theme park. This satirical portrayal raises doubts about the authenticity and importance of such national symbols or cultural metaphors considering how they can be manipulated, bought and sold as commodities by an opportunistic Tycoon to achieve economic and political advantages. *England, England* can be read as a criticism of the Royal Family cultural metaphor in relation to the more general issues of commercialization,

authenticity, and nostalgia. When discussing the royal family, the author uses irony and close observation, painting a picture of them as a mirror reflecting modern attitudes about monarchy while also making a point about how its historical cultural emblems have been commercialised.

Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* provides a different perspective, using the Royal Family to comment on the social and political divisions in modern Britain. Set against the backdrop of Brexit and the cultural shifts of the early twenty-first century, *Middle England* examines the lives of ordinary Britons in a country increasingly polarized by issues of identity, nationalism, and progress.

*Middle England* displays many of the features of the state of the nation novel, as it was described by Mark Piggott in an article published in *The Independent*, in which he defines this genre as novels tackling "themes of the modern age, such as terrorism, race, and the inherent illogicality of capitalism." (Piggott 2010). This type of writing is not a new trend; it is actually part of literary realism and it focuses mainly on contemporary social and political issues. Such socially engaged novels were very popular in Britain during the Victorian age. *Middle England* is in most respects a state-of-the-nation novel, except for the Londoncentricity, since the focus is less on the English capital city and more on Birmingham area. The events in *Middle England* are set during the ages before and after the Brexit referendum held in 2016, mainly in and around Birmingham and London. The book is structured in three parts titled "Merrie England", "Deep England" and "Old England", each covering different time-spans set in chronological order. The titles do not refer to specific geographical areas, but rather to symbolic concepts. In an interview with *The Guardian* Jonathan Coe explains that "Middle England is really an attitude and a political philosophy. Middle England is like the Shire in Lord of the Rings". In the same interview the author also talks about Deep England as a term evoking "those rural or village pockets of England which still exist [...] remote [...] cut off from the metropolis and the life of the capital and where folklorists have an important sense of English tradition." (Coe 2019).

Perhaps the only episode in *Middle England* where there is peaceful communion among the characters in the novel and of the nation as a whole is the description of the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, held in London in July 2012. Coe offers a sweeping view of most of the key characters, even though isolated in front of their own television sets, who feel connected in a rare feeling of national pride and unity while watching the ceremony, which seems to have successfully captured the essence of Englishness. Even Benjamin Trotter, otherwise absorbed into his work as a writer and quite detached from the outside political and social events, is completely absorbed by the television show which gives him a warm, nostalgic feeling of national communion: "England felt like a calm and settled place tonight: a country at ease with itself. The thought that so many millions of disparate people had been united, drawn together by a television broadcast, made him think of his childhood again and made him smile." (Coe 2018: 139). It is however only a temporary calm before the dividing storm culminating in the Brexit referendum sweeps the country.

Events like the Queen's Diamond Jubilee or the opening of the London Olympics ceremony serve as moments of national reflection and unity,

contrasting sharply with the fragmentation and discord evident in other areas of British life. In *Middle England*, Coe uses the Royal Family not as central characters but as a backdrop to explore the complexities of national identity. Coe's depiction of the Royal Family underscores their role as a stabilizing force, a constant in times of uncertainty. However, it also critiques the superficiality of this stability, suggesting that while the Royal Family provides a comforting image of continuity, they cannot bridge the deeper societal divides that characterize modern Britain. The Royal Family in *Middle England* symbolizes both the nostalgic longing for a cohesive national identity and the reality of an increasingly fractured society.

The present article focused on the particular case of the Royal Family as a metaphor of British identity, which continues to be an integral part of the cultural story of the United Kingdom, both at home and abroad. The British Monarchy symbolizes, through their public responsibilities, ceremonial duties, and personal stories, cultural ideals and values viewed as fundamentally British, as well as the historical continuity, social unity and the juxtaposition of modernity and tradition in the United Kingdom. The novels written by Julian Barnes and Jonathan Coe discussed in the present article offer a rich, multifaceted examination of the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, unity and division, authenticity and commodification in contemporary Britain, inviting readers to reflect on the evolving significance of the British Royal Family as a cultural metaphor on the broader cultural narratives that it represents in the constantly unfolding story of the nation.

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