

## Nostalgia or Transgression: Elizabeth Jane Howard's Mr. Wrong

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### ABSTRACT

*The aim of this article is to depict the elements of nostalgia and cultural memory in Elizabeth Jane Howard's collection of short stories entitled Mr. Wrong. The two stories, "Summer Picnic" and "The Devoted" is analyzed in terms of nostalgia, since the grandmother figures in each story express the gradual change in social relationships by stating that the 'mystery' has been lost today. Individuals become "the other" and they are placed in solitude in the commercialized dominant modern society. Even their way of living, human relationship and food is degenerated. Howard emphasizes the outcast individuals who try to find a way out by evasion of the past rather than living in a degenerated technological world. The grandmother loses the sense of belonging, which draws her to exclusion. The fragmented self tries to find more meaning and happiness in the past life, which puts individuals in nostalgia. Thus, nostalgia, as Davis states, "always occurs in the context of the present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties" (420). That is why the grandmothers in both stories put themselves apart from the center rejecting the future that seems dark, since the past looks more reliable, safer and give reassurance.*

**Key Words:** Nostalgia, Transgression, Degeneration.

## Özlem veya İhlal Etme: Elizabeth Jane Howard'ın Mr. Wrong adlı Eseri

### ÖZET

*Bu makalenin amacı Elizabeth Jane Howard'ın kısa hikayeler koleksiyonu olan Mr Wrong adlı koleksiyonunda nostaljik ve kültürel bellek unsurlarını ortaya koymaktır. "Summer Picnic" and "The Devoted" adlı iki hikaye, nostaljik açıdan analiz edildi, çünkü her iki hikayedeki büyükanne şahsiyetinin sosyal ilişkilerdeki kademeli değişimi, günümüzdeki 'gizem'in kaybolduğunu vurgular. Bireyler 'öteki' olur ve ticarileştirilmiş baskın modern toplumda tek başlarına yerleştirilmişlerdir. Yaşam şekilleri, insan ilişkileri ve hatta yedikleri yiyecekler bile dejenere olmuştur. Howard, dejenere olmuş teknolojik dünyada yaşamak yerine geçmişe firar etme yolu ile çıkış noktası arayan dışlanmış bireyleri vurgular. Büyükanne, kendisini her yönden yoksun bırakan bir aidiyet hissini tamamen kaybeder. Parçalanmış nefis, geçmiş hayatta anlam ve mutluluk bulmaya çalışır, böyle bir durum bireyleri nostaljiye yönlendirir. Böylece, nostalji, Davis'in de belirttiği gibi, "her zaman şimdiki korkular, memnuniyetsizlikler, veya belirsizlikler bağlamında oluşur" (420). Bu yüzden her iki hikayedeki büyük anneler, kendilerine karanlık*

görünen geleceği reddederek merkezin dışında kalmayı yeğler, çünkü geçmiş daha güvenilir, emniyetli, ve garanti verici görünür.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Nostalji, İhlal Etmek, Dejenerasyon

## Introduction

Elizabeth Jane Howard, the British writer of novels and shorter fictions, is mostly praised for her deft characterisations of alienated people and the relationship between the individuals, family, and couples. Howard was born in London in 1923. After her education privately at several schools, she worked as an actress in repertory theatre in Devon and Stratford-upon Avon. During the World War II, Howard was a broadcaster and after the war, she worked as an editor.

Howard drew scenes of “delineating tensions and secrets between parents and children and between spouses”<sup>\*</sup> in her writing. Among her novels were *The Beautiful Visit* (1950), which was a portrait of family tensions and *We are for the Dark* (1951), a collection of six ghost stories all of which were imaginatively conceived with heart-quickenning suspense. In *Odd Girl Out*, Howard portrayed the web of love and passion among the three characters. We may easily perceive the reflections of her initial novels in *Mr. Wrong* (1975) as she raised tension that beguiled the reader’s nerves. Howard believed that short story ought to have the depth and impact of a novel that may possibly take place in a restricted space. Her main concern was the nuances of individual relationships in social life. Hence, she divulged thriller/ghost story fashion with humorous social observations.

*Mr. Wrong*, a collection of short stories, picked up the subtle tensions of relationships starting from flat sharing, adultery, and family Christmas drawing us to a picnic, a house party in France, and a cruise through the canal. There are nine stories in the collection including “Mr. Wrong”, “Summer Picnic”, “Pont du Gard”, “Whip Hand”, “The Proposition”, “The Devoted”, “Child’s Play”, “Toutes Directions”, and “Three Miles Up” each of which tilts our sense of reality as the mystery thickens. Therefore, *Mr. Wrong* is the most difficult of her recent books to track down.<sup>†</sup> Howard continues her career as a reviewer and eventually becomes the chief literary critic for “Queen” magazine. Her latest novel *Getting It Right* was published in 1982 that won the “Yorkshire Post” novel of the year award.

The aim of this paper will be to discuss the elements of nostalgia and cultural memory in Elizabeth Jane Howard’s collection of short stories entitled *Mr. Wrong*. We picked up the two stories in the collection, namely “Summer

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\*\* This is a revised version of the paper presented at 4<sup>th</sup> International IDEA Conference in Manisa in 2009.

\* “Encyclopedia Britannica” <http://www.britannica.com/Howard,Elizabeth,Jane.html>.

† For more information about the short stories, see “Elizabeth Jane Howard.”

Picnic” and “The Devoted” to analyze them in terms of nostalgia. The grandmother figure in both stories plays a significant role to express the gradual change in social relationships by stating that the ‘mystery’ has been lost today. In this perspective, we shall try to depict the answers to the questions as is there a yearning for and consequently an escape to the past because of the undesirable modernized world or is there a transgressive desire to the upbringings of the modernized life-style.

### **The Concept of Nostalgia**

Before examining on the stories “Summer Picnic” and “The Devoted”, perhaps we shall deal with the concepts of nostalgia and cultural memory, which plays an important role in the analysis of both stories. Nostalgia is generally defined as a yearning or longing for the idealized past that no longer exists (Davis, 1979: 35). It also constructs an alternative historical reality, which is created by the images of the golden past. The image of “golden past” emerges especially when there is discontent with the present socio-economic situation in any culture. Thus, nostalgia creates a more desirable time in the past, rewriting history through forged memories about the good old days when services were more satisfactory and modern life was easier to handle with the recent developments in technology. In this perspective, nostalgia of the grandmothers in the stories can be analyzed as an escape from what was brought by modernity and the modern life.

We shall also mention Maurice Halbwachs whose writings on collective memory, first appeared in *The Social Frameworks of Memory* (1925; partially translated in the 1992 collection *On Collective Memory*) and then later in *The Collective Memory* (1950/1980), because he formed the foundation of contemporary theories of collective memory. Halbwachs proposes that individual memories are always dependent on social groups for their existence, and in that sense, all individual memory is collective. “The individual memory, in order to corroborate and make precise and even to cover the gaps in its remembrances, relies upon, relocates itself within, momentarily merges with, the collective memory” (Halbwachs, 1950/1980: 50). Even in the case of solitary reminiscing, Halbwachs argues that one is always recalling an event from a social perspective, and usually for social purposes.

The second story “Summer Picnic” in the collection of *Mr. Wrong* will be analyzed in order to depict the elements of nostalgia and to analyze the existence of individuals in modern society. This story draws us into a scene where a family gathers in a picnic in the summer time. It is significant to note that Howard was very successful in observing every single nuance of family relationships in a picnic scene using every detail that she observed.

### **“The Summer Picnic”**

Howard portrayed a scene that was so life-like: she not only observed the games of children but also the preparation of the parents for the picnic. The story especially focussed on two characters: the granddaughter Lalage, and the

grandmother. As for Lalage, she was a young girl, one of the daughters of the family. Lalage was described as person, “who had not had to prepare either children or food, who was not responsible for the weather or for the motor-cars, who had, in fact, arrived at the perfect age of seventeen . . .” (Howard, 1975: 46). What she did was to brush her hair and to take care of herself in order to be pretty. In other words, she was not interested in the ceremony of preparation for the picnic as the others did. While the family was in the picnic, Lalage disappeared with a young man who held Lalage’s hand and together they explored the wood. This might probably be the first time that Lalage explored a young man. They secretly disappeared in the woods but Lalage’s grandmother was aware of everything, since she was awake as the others slept. All of a sudden, Lalage’s grandmother with a flashback remembered her own young days and the old darling whom she met at picnic. She had nostalgia and criticized the present situation, since the social conditions in the past had gradually changed and finally the “mystery” had been lost today.

This idea probably linked with the negative outcome of modernity, since technological development made individuals alien even to them. The grandmother lost the sense of belonging, which drew her to an exclusion from the dominant values of the present society. In fact, urbanization and industrialization broke down the traditional ways of living with their ideas and moral values about what was right and what was wrong. Thus, moral values of the past gradually disappeared because of the economical prosperity, which was the outcome of the industrialization. Thus, living according to the codes of a materialistic world brought corruption, because the individual was in conflict and there was a lack of certain moral values. Everything gradually became corrupted and degenerated in the norms of the modern society. In contrast, the atmosphere of the story in the past was described as follows:

In her young days – sixty-odd years ago – one had really eaten luncheon in the open air. Picnic food had been properly exotic; had by no means degenerated to the mere sandwich. She remembered very young broad beans cooked and frozen in their butler; little tailor-made cold roast birds; delicious claret cup; elaborate galantine; cold soufflés; an entire Stilton; trifle such as those poor children in the tent had never seen; and quantities of fruit the perfection of which seemed mysteriously to have vanished today . . . It was better now to be very old, or the age of that granddaughter escaping into the woods to discover whether she liked being kissed. (Howard, 1975: 49)

The grandmother felt lonely; she even emphasized the large quantity of food that she had in the past. It was now “degenerated” to the sandwich. She chose to be either old or at the age of Lalage so the grandmother might ignore the changing conditions of the society. She would act like Lalage who did not

care for anything before she went to the picnic. In this way the grand mother attained her freedom. This ambiguity can be explained by Bryan Turner's statement who argued the essential features of the ambiguity of modernity: "Modernization brings with it the erosion of meaning, the endless conflict of polytheistic values, and the threat of the iron cage of bureaucracy. Rationalism makes the world orderly and reliable, but it cannot make the world meaningful." (Turner, 1979: 6) In this sense, the fragmented self tries to find more meaning and happiness in the past life, which places individuals in nostalgia. Thus, nostalgia, as Davis states, "always occurs in the context of the present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties" (Davis, 1979: 420).

The grandmother symbolically gave the diamond ring to Lalage so that she was in relief with altering her present situation. In a way, the grandmother desired to replace her social relationship that she experienced in her young days by the use of diamond ring image that stood as an economical power. It is significant that she preferred social conditions of her own era to the wealth of the economic power. Actually, she wished to get rid of the burden of her present life by giving her ring to the granddaughter. After she gave the ring to Lalage, she pretended to be asleep; "reflecting sadly on the sad and lonely thought that there was nobody left alive to stare at the ringless finger . . ." (Howard, 1975: 51). In this case, the grandmother put herself apart from the center (the dominant social values) rejecting the future that seemed dark, since the past looked more reliable, safer and gave reassurance. In other words, the grandmother found a way out by fragmenting herself from her present situation to find much more happiness in the past life, because the past seemed more meaningful and valuable.

#### **"The Devoted"**

The other story in the collection "The Devoted" drew us into a family Christmas. There was a large family living together in a house. James, his sister Vanessa and Marie-Laura a French girl who looked after them, their grandmother, uncle, aunt, and cousins lived in the same house since the children's father was sick and stayed at the hospital. Their mother looked after her husband that was why the children had to spend Christmas together with their relatives. The relationship among the members of the family was strong and intimate in this story. The sorrow of Donald's mother (one of the characters in the story) was expressed in the following lines:

In this elaborately encrusted shell she spent much of her time – and here time seemed to move for her, although perhaps only as a gentle, rhythmical backwash: the wake of her own ship slowly coming home. Outside, even anywhere else in the house that had been hers for forty-years, she felt like a stopped clock – not broken, but stopped for ever in 1936 when darling Alec had died. (Howard, 1975: 114)

The readers may witness that the time stopped for the grandmother in 1936 with the death of her husband, so she kept living in the past. This situation was similar when the grandmother in the story “Summer Picnic” gave away the ring to Lalage as she had nostalgia and refused to live neither in the present and nor in the future. As in the previous story, the grandmother remembered the past events, then all of a sudden, she returned to the present. The shift between the past and the present is represented by the clock in the story: “Her clock strike three one after another; she admired their split-second, independence. It was time for the presents . . .” (Howard, 1975: 116). In these lines, Howard drew our attention to the anaphoric and cataphoric relationship. The grandmother travelled in time when she saw the clock, unconsciously remembering her beloved in the past and again in her conscious state, which is the present time, the clock stood as a sign for the presents. The individual was unable to find a suitable place for her and that is why there was an ebb and flow in the conscious of the character. It simply created a tension between the past and the present, and central and the marginal, which best explained the situation of the grandmother. It is most likely that the grandmother is not in the centre, but she kept living in the margins. On the other hand, the relationship between Vanessa and her grandmother attracts our attention, because they share the same sorrow: One’s son dies, the others’ father. She identified the family relationship with her necklace of crystals. She explained every small detail of this relation to Vanessa in the following lines:

Perhaps people are put next to one another like beads. Look’. She unclasped her necklace of crystals and laid it on Vanessa’s lap. ‘That’s you: and next to you, because you love her, your mother. And next to your mother because she loved him, your father. You see? Everybody needs one person and is also needed by someone else. Now your father dying means that the string has broken just there next to your mother and she will be very sad, so you must be very thoughtful about your love.’ (Howard, 1975: 123)

The grandmother comforts Vanessa, but it is the most difficult thing to comfort oneself. The grandmother states that Vanessa should stick to James so that their sorrow would be easier to settle down. The grandmother functions as a preserver of cultural memories through oral tradition. J. Assmann (1995) draws our attention to the distinction between communicative and cultural memories. As the name indicates, communicative memories are transmitted between people through communication; for instance, a joke told by one person to another, or an experience transmitted by a member of one generation to a member of the next. Communicative memories have something of the character of “everyday memories” that individuals, not collectivities, hold.

## Conclusion

For Richard Terdiman, the French revolution is the breaking point: the change of a political system, together with the emergence of industrialization and urbanization, made life more complex than ever before. This not only resulted in an increasing difficulty for people to understand the new society in which they were living, but also, as this break was so radical, people had trouble relating to the past *before* the revolution. In this situation, people no longer had an implicit understanding of their past. In order to understand the past, it had to be represented through history. As people realized that history was only one version of the past, they became more and more concerned with their own cultural heritage, which helped them shape a collective and national identity.

Every memory we try to reproduce becomes – as Terdiman states – a 'present past'. It is this impractical desire for recalling what is gone forever that brings to surface a feeling of nostalgia, noticeable in many aspects of daily life but most specifically in cultural products. In this perspective, Hegel draws our attention to the dialectical development in the social realm, which is a process characterized by conflict. If development means that each phase is a step forward or “higher” than the preceding phase, then progressive developments are conflictive. This also explains the consequences of modernity and its impact on the social ground. The positive technological developments alienated individuals, especially the older generation in the society as it appeared in both stories. Individuals in the society want to be a part of the cultural heritage and feel the sense of belonging. The younger generation may easily cope with the modernized life, whereas the grandmothers who are representatives of the older generation may not easily cope with the changing world and its values. There was an inevitable need for a new life but it brought confusion and a complex culture. This describes the situation of the grandmothers in both stories who were trying to communicate through the collective memory. The transgression of the present time loaded the grandmothers of both stories with a feeling of both psychologically and socially exclusion. Consequently, they were unable to find a secure place in the modern society, which led them transgress the boundaries with a sense of nostalgia to find a more meaningful and secure world.

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