

# SUFFERING AND FORGIVENESS IN JONATHAN COE'S *THE ROTTERS' CLUB*

SILUE Ténéna Mamadou

*Assistant lecturer*

*English Department*

*British Literature and Civilisation*

*Université Alassane Ouattara, Bouaké (Côte d'Ivoire)*

*silue\_tenena@yahoo.com*

## ABSTRACT

The present paper analyses the issues of suffering, forgiveness and reconciliation in the contemporary British novelist, Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club*. Through a psychoanalytical perspective, it discusses the reconciliation process involving Marie, an old woman, who appeals on her two grandsons and a German boy to forgive each other. Marie's call for the writing of the Jew wartime memory may help reconcile her two grandsons and Rolf Beuman, the German boy. In this regard, the analysis shows how recounting past historical grievance can help the victim to deal with post war trauma in order to forgive others. In addition to the episodes about the main character Marie, it emphasises. Inger's suicide and the conflict among the three boys as a psychological dilemma of unforgiveness in the fiction.

## KEYWORDS:

Forgiveness, Friendship, Happiness, Pain, Patience, Reconciliation

## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article analyse les questions de souffrance, pardon et réconciliation dans *The Rotters' Club* du romancier Britannique contemporain Jonathan Coe. S'appuyant sur une perspective psychanalytique, il aborde le processus de réconciliation impliquant Marie, une vieille femme, qui appelle ses deux petits-fils et un garçon allemand à se pardonner mutuellement. L'appel de Marie pour l'écriture de la mémoire juive de la période de guerre peut aider à réconcilier ses deux petits-fils et Rolf Beuman, le garçon allemand. À cet égard, cet article cherche à démontrer comment le fait de raconter des griefs historiques passés peut aider la victime à faire face au traumatisme de l'après-guerre afin de pardonner aux autres. En plus des épisodes sur le personnage principal Marie, nous mettons l'accent sur le suicide d'Inger et le conflit entre les trois garçons comme un dilemme psychologique émanant du manque de pardon dans la fiction.

# MOTS CLÉS

Amitié, Bonheur, Douleur, Pardon, Patience, Réconciliation

## INTRODUCTION

The subject of forgiveness is regularly discussed in literature and religion. Jill Scott explores a model of “poetic forgiveness<sup>1</sup>” and argues that the way to liberation of both victims and perpetrator lies in sincere apology and expression of remorse by the perpetrator (J. Scott, 2007, p. 67). He also claims that “forgiveness itself can emerge in acts of creativity such as photographs, letters and novels” (J. Scott, 2007, p.103). This means that forgiveness is not granted through Sovereign authority. It emerges through the personal narrative of every individual. Likewise, in *Forgiveness and Narrative*, Charles Griswold emphasises the importance of forgiveness through the necessity to allow victim and offender’s account for their experience. Both writers conclude that forgiveness is a never-ending impossible “gift” that should be continuously enjoined.

Nevertheless, this basic rule of forgiveness has been ruled out in today’s society. There seems to be a paradox in people’s attitude to peace and forgiveness. Although, they long for forgiveness and reconciliation, they still find pleasure in reprisal actions. Both victims and perpetrators are likely to retaliate when each of them is given the opportunities to act that way. People are at war everywhere in the world. Violence is viewed as a way to achieve one’s goal. Warlords are portrayed as examples to emulate and victims are abandoned in despair. The urge to retaliate causes peace to be unachievable. From the observations of that reality, some eighteenth century philosophers such as Voltaire and Montesquieu made a plea for tolerance and peace. They preached peace and freedom for their time people. But, they did not succeed in suppressing wars that were going on during their life time.

Modern society has been marked by the Two World Wars which have affected people’s psychology and have raised the necessity of forgiveness for modern citizen. That is why, many writers have called for the writing of wartime memory that aims to help achieve reconciliation. Among these writers, Jonathan Coe stands as an outstanding one. As one of the foremost British contemporary novelists, his literary work *The Rotter’s Club* dramatises Britain’s ongoing racial and social tensions from Thatcher to Blair. Threatened with his fictional characters’ exposure to vengeance and

---

<sup>1</sup> “Poetic Forgiveness” is a concept used by Jill Scott in his book “*A Poetics of Forgiveness: Creative Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing*” to refer to a continuous practice that takes place both consciously and unconsciously – and not only for victims of wrong. It is not granted through a sovereign authority or a given individual’s standing, but rather emerges in and through the creative act, making it a ‘gift’ of meaning for both the creator and the audience. The gift of poetic forgiveness is not limited to contexts of wrongdoing, either, but is also at home in practices of mourning, resolution, and other ways of responding to loss and finitude

unforgiveness, the novel insists on the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation through Marie's appeals for the writing of the Jew wartime memory. The story helps to raise the following question: In what way can recounting wartime events help both victims and culprits forgive each other? This question implies two more others to which it is connected: First, how can emotional mood, hurtful speech and verbal abuses impede people from making peace and forgiving each other? Secondly, in which way could mildness, patience and friendship be satisfactory solutions to violence and suffering in the world today?

Based on the analysis of the story in Coe's *The Rotter's Club*, the paper seeks to discuss from a psychoanalytical perspective the ways Marie's appeal for the writing of the Jew wartime memory may help reconcile her two grandsons and Rolf Beauman, the German boy. Consequently, the first part rests on the holocaust memory and the second articulation explores characters' psychological dilemma

## **1. THE HOLOCAUST MEMORY AND MARIE'S PLEA FOR LENIENCY**

The plot of *The Rotters' Club*(RC) explores the holocaust issue from the old Jewish woman, Marie's perspective. She introduces the reader to an episode of her family predicament during the war, as she speaks to her two grandsons, Jorgen, Stephan and the German boy, Rolf Beauman in these terms:

There were eight thousand Jews in Denmark in the summer of 1943,' Marie told us. 'Nearly all of them escaped to safety, thanks to the courage and the high principles of the Danish people. Just a few hundred were left behind. Emil was one of them. 'the captured Jews were taken back to Germany and then to concentration camps in Czechoslovakia. Some of them committed suicide on the way (J. Coe, 2001, p.122)

As a narrator, Marie's account of the Holocaust memory is that of the victims' narratives. She sees the Jew and her family in the role of innocents who were unjustly targeted. She invites the reader to sympathise with the victims of the war. Although Coe deploys Marie to depict the Holocaust memory; he subsequently develops a philosophy of forgiveness from it. The novelist's choice of the old Jewish woman with her two grandsons and the German boy to evoke this historical past deserves to be viewed as suggesting forgiveness. The attitude of Marie in the storytelling act nicely reflects a protagonist seeking to communicate her past chaos so as to forgive the German boy and his community. She has been victimized by circumstances beyond her control. She projects her inner chaos and pleads for the teaching of the Jew wartime history to schoolchildren. This is meant to prevent herself from seeking vengeance and make a room for forgiveness. The words she chooses are expressive of this idea:

I don't know what they teach you in your history lesson these days, but every Danish

schoolchild knows that Germans invaded Denmark in April 1940 and from that time until the end of the war, this was an occupied country. I will not say that it was a terrible time to be a Jew – the really terrible time came later – but it was very difficult. There was no real persecution at first, but it was always in the air, as a threat. There were Gestapo men on every street. Many households had German officers billeted on them. Some Jewish families changed their names. Nobody fled, at first, because there was nowhere to flee to. Germany to the south, occupied Norway to the north. You could not get to Britain, because the Germans were patrolling the seas.( J. Coe,2001, p.16)

Actually, Marie singles out the teaching of past historical grievance to school children as obligatory through this indirect interrogative sentence: “I don’t know what they teach you in your history lesson these days”(J. Coe,2001, p.16). The old woman somehow champions this fact as what is right. She is regretful of the fact they are not taught what happened to the Jew during the war. There is an implicit call to return to historical facts teaching as prerequisite to forgiveness. Marie’s emphasis on the teaching of the Holocaust memory at school is akin to an idealist philosophy of history. In his book *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur pens the task of this doctrine as follow:

The idealist philosophy of history was able to rise above simple causal analyses, integrate multiple temporalities, open itself to future, or better, open a new future, and in this way reinterpret the ancient topos of history, teacher of life (Ricoeur, 2004, p. 301).

What the French theoretician labored here is the epistemological function of history, which consists of shaping people’s attitude toward forgiveness. The definitive effacement of the traces of grievances is possible when there is a return to the past. The victim can bury the footprint of memory and history. This opens the empire of forgetting. The teaching of history in that sense enables victim to forget past grievance. Education about past grievance is therefore instrumental in forgiveness process. In the same token Bourdieu argues that “our tastes in everything from home decorating to opera are defined not by economic capital, but by such factors as family and education”(Pierre Bourdieu, 1996, p. xx). Indeed, by calling for the teaching of Jew wartime memory at school, Marie is strategically willing to develop her grandsons and the German boy’s taste for forgiveness.

When Marie’s two grandsons, Jorgen and Stephan quarrel with a German Boy, Rolf, she decides to tell Rolf their story in order to change his behaviour in a peaceful manner towards her grandsons. With a view to improving the three boys’ relationship, she thinks that telling Rolf their past grievance is prior to his endurance of their abuse. This is why she starts by admonishing Rolf as the narrator accounts the story of the Gestapo :

It is not because you are German that they have been nasty to you. Said Marie, looking at Rolf now. You may think this is the case when I tell you their story, but I don’t believe so. Any way, it is for you to judge. I must simply warn you that this story is very long and I hope you will be patient with me when I presume to tell you things about my family that

happened many years ago, before you were ever born (J.Coe, 2001, p. 116)

From this passage it can be said that the fact of narrating the Holocaust memory to young people, represented by Marie's sons, is a way for them to endure suffering. That is to say, she teaches her boys, in particular, and all young people in general, how to forgive individuals who wrong them. In her statements above, Marie attempts to improve the relationships among the three boys by relating historical grievance.

As the novel unfolds Marie learns that her two grandsons have also attacked Rolf at school. She acknowledges Rolf's innocence and asks him to endure the sins her two grandsons have inflicted on him. The old woman advises Rolf to respond to the unjust suffering of this shocking violence by offering forgiveness and friendship to the perpetrators, her grandsons. She insistently recommends forgiveness when she says:

Marie cleared her throat. I wanted to talk to you, she said, about my grandsons, Jorgen and Stefan. I gather there was an unfortunate happening yesterday afternoon. ( Rolf touched his black eye) I know they have apologized, so I won't say anything more about it. But I have been watching you playing together over the last week and I must say it has given me great pleasure. I know there have been quarrels but I don't suppose you realize how unusual it is for them to play with other children at all. I want very much, very much indeed, for you all to be friends for the rest of your stay here and perhaps even for longer and that is why I should like to tell you something about who they are and why they behave as they sometimes do (J. Coe, 2003, p. 115)

From this episode Marie expresses sadness for Rolf and urges him to give the benevolent response of friendship to his pain. She emphasizes this call through the use of the emphasizing adverbs: "very much, very much indeed, for you all to be friends (J. Coe, 2001, p.115)". Indeed, friendship involves more than just keeping in touch. In Marie's terms, it is nourished by love, empathy, patience and forgiveness. For the woman, these qualities ultimately make friendship rewarding in such a way that it can result in forgiveness. As one of the survivors of the Second World War, Marie's story is about forgiveness since it teaches Rolf and the other children to give a benevolent response of friendship to offenders.

In Marie's opinion forgiveness is offered much more by victims than offenders. This understanding of forgiveness as the victim's task is championed by some scholars. Following Jarger Marietta, forgiveness can be defined as "a gift freely given at the time of a moral wrong, without denying the wrong itself" (J. Marietta, 1948, p. 42)

This definition is exemplified by Marie who finds it appropriate to speak to Rolf rather than her grandsons. It means that only Rolf can offer forgiveness. She indicates this through the statement: "Any way, it is for you to judge" (J. Coe, 2001, p. 116). Marie is aware that she can tell her story, but it is only Rolf who can forgive. Forgiveness is a choice that belongs to him.

Had it been a choice of her two grandsons, Marie would have started by talking to

them. She wants him to do the same thing as the Jewish people did after the World War. This past story is shown as an inspiring model of forgiveness for Rolf. It is in that sense, she urges Rolf to forgive and be friend to them in these terms “I want very much, very much indeed, for you all to be friends for the rest of your stay here and perhaps even for longer” (J. Coe, 2001, p. 116)

Likewise Marie’s narrative one can find in the Gospel another narrative that provides an inspiring model of forgiveness. The story of Joseph in Genesis 37-50 is also full of forgiveness teaching. It is an ancient story of a favored son, Joseph, whose jealous brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt. Joseph served faithfully as an Egyptian household slave for a powerful man named Potiphar. But Potiphar’s wife, after failing to seduce Joseph, becomes <sup>2</sup>angry and has Joseph thrown into prison. <sup>3</sup> On his release from prison, Joseph proves himself to be a wise and capable civil servant in Egypt. Years later, during a famine, both the Egyptians and Joseph’s brothers come to him for help. Joseph helps the Egyptians manage their food supplies and offers his own brothers precious grain as well. He extends forgiveness and mercy to his brothers, his entire extended family, and to the Egyptians. Joseph pursued a lifelong forgiveness journey and this was his expression of the outcome. “God has made me fruitful in the land of my affliction.” Genesis 41:52. The foregoing narrative also teaches forgiveness through endurance, kindness and real friendship.

Verily teaching past story may help young generation foresee the benefit of forgiveness through real friendship. That will enable them to be self-sacrificing for each other. In that sense they may develop an attitude of unselfish giving. However, most often people fail to forgive because of some psychological and verbal motives.

## 2. INGER AND THE PSYCHOLOGICAL DILEMMA OF UNFORGIVENESS

*The Rotters’ Club* also foregrounds Inger’s failure to forgive the German soldier, Berhard, who killed her beloved husband, Emil, during the Second World War. Her incapacity to forgive the murderer of her husband puts her into a serious mental trouble. The narrator, Marie, informs the reader about her never-ending psychological disturbances in the following words:

There were problems continual problems. She was often in hospital her behavior was erratic, her moods were very strange, very changeable. She showed a violent temper, when as a child she had been always gentle and good natured. It was very hard for the two boys. They had much to endure... and then one evening, in the autumn of 1970, Carl telephoned me to say that Inger had died. She had taken the ferry to Malmo, alone, that afternoon, and

---

2 [www.forgiveness-insitute.org](http://www.forgiveness-insitute.org) or [www.forgivenessrecovery.com](http://www.forgivenessrecovery.com)

3 Michael, Hidalgo. *The Pain of Forgiveness*: Washington Dc: APA Books, 04/03/2014.

she had climbed on to the railing, and jumped. She had taken her own life. Just as I had known, in my heart, that she always would. (J. Coe, 2001, p. 123)

Here, it comes out that emotional ill feelings impede Inger from forgiving. She is sick because of erratic and strange mood. These unusual feelings cause her suicide as Marie confirms: “just as I had known, in my heart that, she always would (J.Coe,2001, p. 123). What comes out here is that the character has lingered over her dead. This is what Freud called prolonged mourning. In *The Five Lectures*, Freud describes prolonged mourning as “an abnormal attachment” ( Freud, 13: p 13). Freud’s insistence on prolonged mourning as abnormal poses an ethical concern regarding forgiveness. Failed mourning pushes the victim to withhold forgiveness. When the victim cannot detach himself to the deceased memories and hopes, forgiveness becomes impossible.

Something inside of us believes that withholding forgiveness would allow us to control the situation, but it does not. It slowly kills us. It is like drinking poison and expecting it to kill someone else. It does not work. We only imprison ourselves. This has been the case with Inger in the sense that she finally commits suicide. She chooses suicide instead of forgiving the German soldier, Berhard, who killed her husband. By prolonging mourning, individual finally commits suicide, as the narrator explains:

After all she had been through, we knew, Julius and I, that our daughter would never be able to lead a completely normal life. The loss she had suffered was very great. To be young, and so very deeply in love, and then to have that love... uprooted, in a word, swept away by forces over which you can have no possible control, historical forces... you can never recover from something like that, never reconcile yourself to it (J.Coe, 2001, p.123)

Her refusal to reconcile herself with the pain shows her inclination to vengeance. This unforgiveness means to let people’s sorrow and resentment govern their lives. These two ill feelings produce negative thing such as, suicide. In that connection, it can be stressed that unforgiveness damages people’s psychological and physical life. Resentment and anger are not beneficial to people’s physical, moral and spiritual life. Inger is overwhelmed by anger and resentment. These negative emotions cause her to lose sight of making peace. When we harbor anger and resentment, we hurt ourselves. Such negative emotions can rob people of happiness, restrict their life, and make them miserable. They can pose a serious health risk. A report in *the Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, by Dr. Yoichi Chida and Professor of Psychology Andrew Steptoe, concluded: “The current findings suggest a harmful association between anger and CHD( coronary heart disease)” ( Y. Chida, 2007,p.20). The statement confirms Marie’s stance about Inger’s health status: “she was often in hospital her behavior was erratic” (J.Coe, 2001, p.123). Clearly Inger might have been suffering from heart attack too. This sickness causes her constant visit to hospital. Anger and resentment are the roots of her sickness. Inger’s mind failed to deem the benefit of forgiveness. She is firmly bent on her envy to retaliate, hence

vengeance.

People most often refuse to forgive on account of psychological motives. In fact, most of us talk about forgiveness and always speak of how wonderful it is, but there is a reason why so many people cannot seem to forgive. It is not because we are not aware of the importance of forgiveness, but it is often simply due to the fact that our psyche holds some issues as fundamental truth. Human psyche views forgiveness as a form of suffering and weakness. Our mind naturally sees vengeance as the right response to an offence. When people commit an evil doing against us, our natural inclination is to do them something wrong. Not just any wrongdoing, but a misdeed that is bigger, worse and one that hurts far more.

The perception of vengeance as the best response to an offence is a fundamental reality embedded in the inner psyche. We tell ourselves that justice can only be served with vengeance. We believe this because deep inside of our being, it really feels good to get even and retaliate when hurt. We may be given relevant argument to wipe out the idea of vengeance but we cannot. In fact, our mind may reject any argument that does not comply with the idea of vengeance which it holds as undeniable truth. In *The Righteous Mind*, Jonathan Haidt reinforces this psychological aspect of human mind as he argues that “our rejection of other people’s opinion can be explained by the fact that our psyche is bent on some convictions as unquestionable” (J. Haidt, 2012, p.448). According to him, these convictions are rooted in our deepest emotional being. These unquestionable convictions have led Inger to nurse grudge. She withholds forgiveness. And her willingness to forever punish the German causes her suicide.

Furthermore, verbal abuses also hamper forgiveness and reconciliation process among Inger’s two sons and the German boy, Rolf Beaman. Hurtful accusations may push the three boys to spiral into a verbal slugging match. The following lines illustrate that as Inger’s sons, Jorgen, Stephan and Rolf verbally abuse one another:

There was something untamed and out of control about the Danish boys, it was clear; some kind of instability which made them unpredictable and prone (in Jorgen’s case) to sudden acts of aggression but every time we tried to play with Jorgen and Stefan, some sort of violence or injury was the outcome, and usually the victim was Rolf when they weren’t attacking him with their fists or their feet, they would attack him with words. Hey . German, I heard Jorgen say to him once on the beach. What did your father do in the war? Was he a Nazi? Don’t be stupid, Rolf replied. My father was only a child during the War (J. Coe, 2001, p. 113)

Such phrases as: “attack him with words, Hey German, Stupid, aggression, violence and Nazi” amount to hurtful speeches. They translate how Rolf and the two boys fail to quell anger and make peace. In spite of Marie’s forgiveness story, they do not reconcile. Rolf does not resist the urge to retaliate when provoked. The word: “stupid” shows that he fails to maintain a self-control. He did not remember Marie’s



story. He seeks to win argument. That is to say, he wants to contradict all that the two boys have said about his father. The use of this pejorative term: “hey German” also amounts to hurtful speech, since it has a provocative tone. Then, it points out the difference between the three boys. Jorgen and Stefan have purposefully uttered it as an abuse. They might be willing to tell Rolf that they are not alike. The term “hey German” can also mean that they do not want to be compatible with Rolf because of his German origin. It connotes a negative image. The use of “hey” and “German” are meant to associate Rolf and all the German with the Nazis. The Jewish boys, Jorgen and Stephan seem to view this allusion more important than we think. They utter the term “hey German” as a malicious word. The foregoing term translates racial tensions that exist between British different living communities. The Jew community and the Germans were living in conflicting environment.

On top of that, the qualification of Rolf’s father as a “Nazi” can also encapsulate the Jewish boys’ traumatic response to the wartime violent. Given that war is a traumatic event, it destabilizes the survivors’ psyche. Caruth focuses on the violent events overwhelming the victims and creating personality disorders. In *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, he argues that “trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flash-backs, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, p. 91). From this quote, Cauth suggests that traumatic events remain embedded in victims’ psyche as well as body. The Jew’s physical abuse and dehumanization under the Nazi cause them to remain violent vis à vis the Germans. The novel, therefore, exhibits the psychological dilemma of individual along with the haunting of world war memory during Margaret Thatcher’s era. The period in which Coe wrote the novel shows the great ambivalence of the British public towards Thatcherism .Such ambivalence has been focused on the portrayal of post war trauma and the struggle for individualism and wealth.

## CONCLUSION

Jonathan Coe is among the contemporary British novelists who have described the despair of the twenties and Margaret Thatcher’s era. *The Rotters’ Club* embraces forgiveness while acknowledging the ongoing lure of resentment and revenge. Coe deftly explores the issues of forgiveness and suffering through the narrative perspectives of the old Jewish woman, Marie and the three boys. These characters are “post-tragic<sup>4</sup>” because they bypass revenge and work their way through forgiveness.

---

4 My use of “Post tragic characters” refers to characters who not only survive the tragic event of the Second World War and but also do not let the feeling of vengeance and resentment cause their death. In the context of *The Rotters’ Club*,

As for Inger, her grief at the loss of her husband locks her into resentment and finally causes her tragic fall in suicide.

Actually, Coe does not attend to challenge standard account of forgiveness that gives primacy to creative communication between the victims and the perpetrators. The writer stresses the reciprocity that characterizes forgiveness and the transformational possibilities that forgiveness can unleash. Coe insists on interpersonal forgiveness, which for him grows out of a dialogue between the wrongdoers and their victims. And through victims and offenders' complex relationships, he might be claiming that ordinary people's account of forgiveness is about overcoming resentment.

## **WORKS CITED**

-Bourdieu, Pierre. (1996). *A social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, USA: Havard University Press.

- Caruth, Cathy. (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP.

-Charles L. Griswold. (2007) *Forgiveness and Narrative* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp 67-268.

-Chida Yoichi, Andrew Steptoe. (2007) "Anger and Hostility Harmful to the Heart, Especially Among Men" in *the Journal of the American College of Cardiology*, N 2, vol 113.

-Coe, Jonathan (2001). *The Rotters' Club*, London: Penguin Books.

- Haidt, Jonathan. (2012) *The Righteous Mind*, New York: Pantheon Books.

-Hidalgo, Michael.(2014)*The Pain of Forgiveness*, Washington Dc: APA Book.

--Freedman, S.R. & Enright, R.D (1996). "Forgiveness as an intervention goal with incest survivors", in *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, N 64, vol (5).

Freud, Sigmund.( 1978) *The Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, London: Hogarth, the Second edition

-Jaeger, Marietta.( 1998) *The power and reality of forgiveness: Forgiving the murderer of one's child. In Exploring Forgiveness*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press

---

they are Marie, Stephen, Jorgen and Rolf Beaman

- Scott, Jill.(2010) *A Poetic of Forgiveness: Creative Responses to Loss and Wrongdoing*, New York: Palgrave. Macmillan.
- Ricoeur, Paul. (2004). *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
- [www.forgiveness-insitute.org](http://www.forgiveness-insitute.org) or [ww.forgivenessrecovery.com](http://ww.forgivenessrecovery.com)