

The Problematic Fatherhood in Raymond Williams's Fiction

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Many articles and monographs have been produced to explore Raymond Williams's cultural theories, Marxist thoughts and literary criticism. This paper is to look at another important aspect of Williams, that is, Williams's fictional writings. Particularly, it is to sort out a recurrent theme throughout Williams's seven published novels, the illegitimacy problem and the problematic fatherhood. It can be inferred that the ambiguity of fatherhood has not only become a personal complex for Williams, but also has served as a trope for the delivery of his ideas about the individual and the society, Welshness and nationalism. The multi-layered connotations of this motif may well be analyzed according to the following aspects: Williams's personal experiences, the historical actualities, the individual psychology in social relationships, and lastly the national discrepancy between England and Wales.

Keywords: illegitimacy, fatherhood, gendering, Welshness, nationalism

Introduction

Raymond Williams, broadly known as the precursor of cultural studies, authored many a widely-read books, such as *Culture and Society* (1958), *The Country and the City* (1973), and *Marxism and Literature* (1977). Besides, Williams is also renowned as a drama and literary critic, and *Drama from Ibsen to Eliot* (1952), *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (1961), *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970) are the books he wrote in this field. Despite of his fame as an international cultural critic and European Marxist, Williams is primarily a regional novelist who produced more than ten novels and published seven of them. A glimpse of his fiction will impress the reader with Williams's strong attachment to his Welsh parentage and working-class background from which the inspiration of his theoretical writings draw. The seven published novels—*Border Country* (1960) (*BC* in abbreviation hereafter), *Second Generation* (1964) (*SG* in abbreviation hereafter), *The Fight for Manod* (1979) (*FM* in abbreviation hereafter), *The Volunteers* (1978) (*TV* in abbreviation hereafter), *Loyalties* (1985) (*LS* in abbreviation hereafter), *People of the Black Mountains: The beginning* (1989) (*PBM-1* in abbreviation hereafter) and *People of the Black Mountains: The eggs of the eagle* (1990) (*PBM-2* in abbreviation hereafter)—all have a unanimous Welsh theme, focusing on the the community life of the ordinary Welsh people, exploring the locality of the Wales-England border and the dislocated identity of the protagonist.

However, a much closer reading of Williams's fiction reveals another recurrent engagement, with the theme of sexuality and gendering. There is many a case reflecting the same problem, that is, the illegitimacy of the child and the problematic fatherhood. Referring to his critical writing, Williams in *Toward 2000* attacks the patriarchal discourse on the grounds of “not only [neglecting] the internally subordinate position of employed women, but

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the radically different and more general subordination of women (including above all the 'non-employed') within wider social relations" (Williams, 1983, p. 170). Yet, Williams's novels, published earlier, reveal a quite different stance towards women's situation within their social relations. Hence, this paper sets out to examine the gendering problems in Williams's fiction, and analyze how these problems relate to his own personal experiences, the wider social context and, on a more symbolic level, the subordinated state of Wales to the broader British imperial power in the context of English hegemony.

"The Hidden, Hiding Father" (Williams, 1985, p. 355)

All through Williams's novels, there is a surprisingly recurrent theme of illegitimacy, the problematic identity of the son/daughter, and the ambiguous relationship between son/daughter and father/step-father. Beth in *SG*, Gwyn in *LS*, Gan, Tami, Hilda and Olen in *PBM* are all illegitimate children as a result of premarital pregnancy.

In *SG*, Beth's mother Myra has a romance with a neighboring boy named Jack, who gets her pregnant before marriage; then, within a year after a prompted marriage Jack is killed in a motorbike accident, and Peter's uncle Gwyn later marries Myra and becomes the step-father of Beth. Because of the scandal of premarital sex and subsequent pregnancy, Myra becomes overly protective of and strict with Beth, preventing every possibility of her engaging in premarital intercourse with Peter.

In *LS*, a romance also fails to end up in marriage. Norman Braose, a young middle-class intellectual from London, seduces a Welsh working-class girl Nesta, which results in pregnancy. Afterwards, Norman is appointed by the Communist Party to carry out an espionage task and thus sent abroad. Without a proper farewell he leaves Nesta and never comes back into her life again for the rest of his life. It is Emma, Norman's sister, that arranges a suitable venue for Nesta's delivery of the illegitimate son Gwyn. In despair, Nesta later marries Bert Lewis, a neighboring friend of her brother, who legally adopts Gwyn.

In *PBM*, more cases of illegitimacy are evident, ranging from the Stone Age settings to the later warring days in the Black Mountains. In the episode of "The summer lake and the new blood", which takes place in a small tribe, Gan is a son of Rano, "the dark-skinned quiet woman who had been exchanged", by "a people hunting north whom they had never met again" (Williams, 1989, p. 42). And, Gan, half-blood to the tribe, retains a good relationship with his stepfather Sarn. Similarly, in the story "Tami in Telim and Grain Valley", Tami is born by Calina who lives on her own off her native community Telim. Since Calina sleeps with any man (even from other tribes) who finds his way to her hut, there is no way to tell who is the father of Tami. When Tami grows up to be impressively strong, Nemat, the most respected man of Telim, gradually gets close to him, cares for him and takes him in to their settlement after Calina dies. Hilda in the tale of "The Gift of Acha" is the daughter of a Saxon woman Acha who is sold to the British (Welsh) tribes as a slave while still pregnant with the baby of her English husband. Hilda is born among the British and thus inclined to identify herself with the British, yet Acha never ceases to teach her their own language—English, and inculcates Hilda with the idea of a different life in freedom. One day Acha accidentally saves the life of an English soldier named Hicel and makes him promise to escort Hilda back to England and legalize her citizenship as a free person. Despite her great reluctance to leave the familiar land and the known community life, Hilda follows Hicel to a land native to her parents yet foreign to herself and lives the rest of her life in freedom.

Among all the cases represented in the stories of *PBM*, the most curious one is probably that of Olen in the episode of "Widows of the Welshry". Olen is the product of a rape crime committed against Nest by a soldier named Henry Bailey; consequently, Nest never treats Olen as her son but as a crime, a shame and a replicate of the criminal, and would not hesitate to desert him but for the protection of Idris who she marries after the birth of Olen. Hence, for Olen, Idris is "that real father, that man better than a father" (Williams, 1990, p. 273), but with Idris's death in a lethal accident Olen is immediately denied any kinship of the family and sent away by Nest. In the same story, Ieuan, who died in the same accident with Idris, has a pregnant wife who is about to go into labor, and his death again results in one more case of the absence of the biological father.

As a supplement to the above examples, Glyn, the linking protagonist of all the stories in *PBM*, also loses his father when he is still small, owing to the divorce of his parents and his father's later death in an air crash.

Moreover, Lewis Redfern in *TV* is raised up by a widowed mother whose husband is killed as a soldier in Kenya in the service of the Imperial Britain; and interestingly, Mark Evans and John Davies are half brothers, who are devoted to the same volunteers cause, with the implication of the loss of the father. Again, in *LS*, Jon Merrit, the son of Gwyn's half sister, also experiences the loss of the company of his birth father since boyhood following the divorce of his parents.

With so many cases of illegitimacy of a child and the absence of the natural father, it is pertinently justified that an academic exploration can be formed into the latent incentive and possible underlying meanings behind them.

Analysis of the Problematic Fatherhood

It can be inferred that the ambiguity of fatherhood has not only become a personal complex for Williams, but also has served as a trope for the delivery of his ideas about the individual and the society, Welshness and nationalism. The multi-layered connotations of this motif may well be analyzed according to the following aspects: Williams's personal experience, the historical actualities, the individual psychology in social relationships, and lastly the national discrepancy between England and Wales.

It is revealed in Dai Smith's biographical study *Raymond Williams: A Warrior's Tale* that Williams's own mother Gwendoline Bird, before she married Harry Williams, was seduced by a married groom and later in 1908 became the mother of an illegitimate son, Herbert, who was "presented to the world as her younger brother and registered as the son of James Bird" without any "formal acknowledgment of the child by the father" (Smith, 2008, p. 18). Then in 1927, after the death of Williams's grandfather, Herbert moved to Pandy and shared a bed with Williams who was actually his half-brother. The half brothers were on good terms with each other for their whole life without any explicit discussion about their blood relationship; for that matter, though Herbert remained a countryman, Williams "would seek [him] out for long fireside chats whenever he returned home" (2008, p. 50). Yet, the plentiful cases we have marked in his novels gives evidence to Dai Smith's keen observation of Williams's "knowledge of and, perhaps, obsession with the facts" (2008, p. 50). The absence of the natural father owing to either untimely death (as in the cases of Beth and Lewis) or no official or communal acknowledgment (as in the cases of Gwyn, Tami, Olen and Hilda) and the presence of a surrogate father are the motifs explored to reflect on the dubious situation faced by Herbert; furthermore, the intimate affinity between Williams himself and Herbert is also revealed in his depiction of the harmonious relationship between the half-brothers Mark Evans

and John Davies in *TV* and half brother and sister Gwyn Bert and Alex Braose in *LS*. In most of these cases, Williams attributes fault invariably to the biological father and represents the mother figure as deserted or exploited, which testifies to his unconscious intent to defend his own mother Gwendoline's moral integrity and his reluctance to recognize her coquettish nature in her early years as Dai Smith observes (2008, p. 51).

The premarital pregnancy and the illegitimacy of children so repetitive in Williams's fiction also reflect the historical reality in the working-class communities in Britain. According to the survey, the amazing rise of illegitimacy began in the 1960s and had increased rapidly again from the late 1970s; and another fact is revealed that the "sexual and marital behavior changed with a dramatic increase not only in the number of divorces and abortions, but also in illegitimacy" (Lewis, 1992, p. 5). This may very much be owing to a lack of rudimentary knowledge from parents and proper sex education in school, and thus the working-class young people tended to be ignorant and ill informed, rather than sophisticated and worldly about sexual matters. Though the after-war period witnessed a substantial wave of feminism across Europe and the US and the transformation of the traditional passive role of women, the less educated working-class people in Britain were slow in receiving those radical ideas and thus also gradual in changing their mores and behavior. This is not only because of the comparatively lower level of education they received, but also as a result of parental interference in an adult child's sex life which is also mirrored in the case of Myra who strictly prevents Beth from having premarital sex with Peter. There seemed to be still a high value placed on a bride's virginity: promiscuous girls would be treated as second-hand goods and thus in danger of being unable to find a suitable husband. Despite all these facts, Klein suggests in his study, "one in eight babies were conceived out of wedlock in the decade 1950-60, with 60 per cent being made legitimate by the subsequent marriage of the parents" (Roberts, 1995, p. 67). The still-prevailing traditional mores and reserved attitudes towards sex had been brought into an apparent discrepancy with the rising figure of premarital pregnancy and illegitimacy either in reality or as featured in Williams's fiction. This manifest conflict is adeptly negotiated and processed in all these novels through the modality of *realism* which Williams valued as an effective novel form to achieve in a communicable way the living tensions of everyday living:

The realist tradition in fiction...creates and judges the quality of a whole way of life in terms of the qualities of persons. ...The society is not a background against which the personal relationships are studied, nor are the individuals merely illustrations of aspects of the way of life. Every aspect of personal life is radically affected by the quality of the general life yet the general life is seen at its most important in completely personal terms. (Williams, 1961, p. 278)

There was a consistent attempt on the part of Williams in both his creative and his critical writings, that is, to deconstruct the binary opposition between the individual and the society; yet, it should not be understood that he was endeavoring to conflate the two in order to view them as inseparable or mutually dependent; but rather, he means to posit the personal and the social in a dialectical relation with each constituted by the other in an ongoing process of becoming. Therefore, the social history of the illegitimacy data is personally experienced in Williams's stories and their characters who are in turn voicing the changing mores of the time, as he contends

through Mr. Dearman's view that "a lapse of individual morality would of course lead to a lapse of social morality"¹.

Apart from being a personal obsession and a dynamic reflection of social realities, the motif of the natural father's absence also embodies symbolic connotations. In most of the cases listed above, the biological father is invariably of a different kind either in race or in class from the concerned community, while the illegitimate child is raised up by the step-father who represents the spirits and values of the community. It is noticeable that the child identifies himself/herself more with the step-father or the society he/she grows up into and rejects the natural father as foreign and culpable. Gwyn declares Bert to be "both actually and legally" (Williams, 1985, p. 264) his father and criticizes Norman for having deserted his mother and the working-class people for his own good. Olen in *PBM-2* considers Idris as his real father who has always been protective of him, having experienced only, apathy from his birth mother because of his natural father's crime. Beth in *SG* even grows to resemble Gwyn both in appearance and in personality, as indicated by the description:

Beth and Gwyn stood close. It was strange how alike they were: the same hazel-green eyes and coppery hair, the same frankness of expression, the familiar ease of this house. They might have been physically, and not only from habit, father and daughter. (Williams, 1964, p. 24),

In the meantime, Beth is sexually over-protected by her mother Myra owing to her own her birth father's social impropriety. Hilda in *PBM-2* is born and subsequently has already grows up into the British (Welsh) society as a slave, while the idea of an English freeman father is remote and foreign to her.

In *BC*, Harry is portrayed as a dedicated loving father and man of few words, yet, as Matthew wins the scholarship to Cambridge and afterwards settles down in London as a college teacher, the division between father and son becomes clear. Matthew himself despondently remarks that:

A father is more than a person, he's in fact a society, the thing you grow up into. ...We've been moved and grown into a different society. We keep the relationship, but we don't take over the work. We have, you might say, a personal father but no social father. What they offer us, where we go, we reject. (Williams, 1960, p. 351)

This also accords with Bertrand Russell's view when he "deplores in power of the father, seeing the paternalist state and the caring professions as having usurped the father's authority over his children" (Lewis, 1992, p. 20). For Russell, the social father seeks to replace the biological father. In *BC*, this semi-autobiographical novel, Matthew's experience applies to a great extent to Williams himself, the scholarship boy who, in his adolescence, is critical of the local culture. A good example of this is the passage in which Matthew feels discomforted at the Eisteddfod and where Williams anatomizes the narrowness of the non-conformist community. Yet, as Matthew moves into a different society, to receive education in Cambridge and then to settle for good in the academic and intellectual world, the rejection of the native social father seems to be complete and thorough, as Morgan Rosser points out that Matthew is "getting more like them" (Williams, 1960, p. 352) and Matthew himself feels pressured and uneasy when coming back to his native village. Matthew has already accommodated to a wholly different society, one in which he finds another social father with whom he feels at ease with. The discrepancy and non-conformity between a personal father and a social father is

¹ Quotation from Williams's short story "Mr. Dearman Goes Home" which is stored in the Richard Burton Archive, Swansea University under the serial number: WWE/2/1/2/23.

represented as the division between the biological father and the step-father in the examples above. The absence of the biological father signifies the primordial identity given by the native community, while the presence of the step-father or the social father suggests the new culture that a relocated self identifies with.

The step-father figure, as has been observed, is protective in Olen's case, faithful in Gwyn's, loving and affectionate in Beth's, instructive in Tami's and Gan's; the new social father for Matthew plays a similar role, as he feels that

I am quite protected from ambition. Protected, really, by a different pride. I sit absorbed in these patterns, that are a substitute for my world and I know it. But at least they stop me crawling about in the world, looking for dead men's shoes. (Williams, 1960, p. 354)

Matthew's job in the academic world offers him a necessary living, yet "the patterns", "dead paper" and "solid figures" deny an emotional pattern and a living and ongoing history, for the figures are not supposed to "get up and walk" (1960, p. 353), even they do, they are "not people but ghosts" and his colleagues do not "deal in ghosts" (1960, p. 353). The urge to delve into the actual living experiences of the people is self-evident in Matthew and the return to his boyhood village Glynmawr gradually but positively draws him back to the whole concrete social relationships of an organic community. The social father, though protective and caring in its certain way, can be a normalizing system that eliminates other possibilities of living that may exuberate into a full free and creative live experience.

Nonetheless, the break away from a safe protective social father is not so accessible if not for a dying father as in Matthew's case, the death of the step-father as in Olen's and Gwyn's or the rescue of a man of her ilk as in Hilda's. In Hilda's story, despite the harmonious affinity she finds in the British community with other slave girls, her reluctant return to her birth father's land bestows on her a citizenship as a free woman; Beth in *SG* is perpetually warned against premarital sex by her mother, Myra, as well as being influenced by the reserved and reticent temperaments of her step-father Gwyn. Nevertheless, Beth follows her natural father's example, and sleeps with Peter before marriage which proves to be an icebreaking step in their love relationship. In Olen's case, after his bondman step-father Idris dies, he is amazed to learn that he is of free blood from his father but has never been told this either by his mother or by Idris. Gwyn admires and sides with Bert and the Welsh working-class people his whole life, and holds grudges towards Norman, not only for deserting Nesta, but also for breaching the solidity he once exhibited with the working-class and violating the true ideal of socialism, which is why he only feels right to meet Norman for the first time after Bert's death. As is revealed in the quarrels between father and son, Norman provides Gwyn with a quite distinctive perspective concerning socialism and ecology, the kind of broad vision that could never come from his adopted father Bert.

The problem of fatherhood at once points out the division in a dislocated self between the character's simple, native origin and the developed, sophisticated and normalized social system into which s/he is assimilated. As we note, Williams registers the individual and society in an interfused, inextricable and constitutive process of becoming, hence the division is rather a starting point of negotiating between the two and in constant adjustment and attempted conciliation a state in which the character has to "live out the tension" (Williams, 2003, p. 4).

The dichotomy of two fathers, whether it be personal father and social father or biological father and step-father, may also allude more figuratively to the liminal experience of scholarship boys from the

working-class as well as the Welsh people, or indeed, both. Wales has a long complicated ethnic history with different conquerors invading and claiming the land which has been subjected to the various sovereignties of the Roman Empire, the Normans, the Anglo-Normans, and the English state, metamorphosing into the British state. Each of these sovereign powers imposed their own overriding legal system and ideology. The “radically dislocated as well as subordinated people” (Williams, 2003, p. 22), with their specificities and diversities trampled on by a superimposed and enforced ideology of nation-state, indeed have personal fathers but no social father or mentor, in conformity with their concrete true identities. Likewise, for the scholarship boys (embodied in characters like Matthew, Peter, Gwyn and Glyn) in the early half of the last century who later became intellectuals active in advocating Left-Wing politics as well as the labor movement, they received education in the renowned and traditional English universities and were imbued with an English version of the nation’s history and English classics in literature which served as a surrogate “father” or mentor. So when Williams rejected this imposed and monolithic pseudo identity, and looked for concrete and diverse specificities in lived experiences of Welsh people, he is denounced by the circle of intellectuals in England, including F.R. Leavis and his ilk, as “a prime example of the boy educated at state expense who had turned to bite the hand that had fed him” (Williams, 1989 *What I Came to Say*, p. 17). The academic circle representing the upper-middle class treated Williams as typical of the scholarship boys who rose to rebel against the ruling class system and turned their back on their acquired identity to speak for their native community and the underprivileged people among whom they spent their formative years. The incongruence between what Williams had received and what he believed, between his intellectual education and his personal lived experiences, is a compelling factor in his exploration into the recurrent theme of double fathers in his fiction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the illegitimate children in William’s fiction are like Hamlet haunted by their biological fathers, a scenario that instigates the tension between and the detachment of the child and the step-father. The absence of the biological father actually becomes reified as a positive existence, a signifier, which guides the child to step out of the known and normalized milieu so as to gain a double identity and an elevated perspective, in order to negotiate and reconcile the both sides and both of these distinct worlds.

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