What constituted 'Englishness' in the late 19th century, and what are the most fundamental differences with 'Englishness' today?

Debates over what it means to be English have taken place throughout English history. Being English today differs from being English in the late 19th century because "the ideas that informed the dominant conceptions of what was involved in 'being English' changed over the period" (Giles and Middleton 1995: 6). This essay aims to isolate the most significant differences between 19th and 20th century notions of 'Englishness'. Since 'Englishness' has to be seen in close relation with class and gender, I will focus on the impact of the changes within these two areas in the first part of the essay. In the second part of the argument I will specifically analyse the ways in which 'Englishness' is rooted in 19th century Imperialism and will draw attention to the effects of the collapse of the Empire on today's notions of 'Englishness'. My argument will be supported by several cultural examples from 19th and 20th century literature. Literature can be seen as a "signifier of national identity and heritage" (During 2006: 138) and as such the used literary examples provide evidence that cultural representations of 'Englishness' draw from a generally constant stock of adapted and reworked images, ideas and beliefs.

Before I focus on notions of class and gender it is of importance to provide a working definition of 'Englishness'. 'Englishness' is a specific set of mind that is based on a set of values, beliefs and attitudes, which are represented as "unique to England and to those who identify as, or wish to identify as, English" (Giles and Middleton 1995: 5). It is the belief in a national identity that depends upon a "unity of identity and purpose" (Brooker and Widdowson 1987: 141). The signifying terms 'English' or 'England' are repeatedly brought into play in order to invoke specific notions of national belonging, which rely to a large extent on a nexus of common

values and images. In order to illustrate this definition I would like to give a literary example; in 1947 Sir Barker states in his essay 'Some Constants of the English Character' "it is impossible to think of the character of England without thinking also of the character of the gentleman" (59). The essence of the gentleman is "a code of conduct – good form: the not doing of things which are not done: reverse: a habit of understatement" (59).

Yet, this drawing on 'common' values and behaviour has also resulted in various negative connotations of the term 'Englishness'. According to Diawara (1990: 830) 'Englishness' is "the privileging of a certain use of language, literature, ideology, and history of one group over populations that it subordinates to itself". Thus the concept of 'Englishness' sustains a strong connection with notions of inclusion and exclusion, as it clearly defines who has enough gentleman-like manners to legitimately belong to the national community (Gikandi 1996: 8). In doing so it "advances reasons for the segregation or banishment of those whose 'origin, sentiment or citizenship' assigns them elsewhere" (Gilroy 1995: 45).

Considering the issues of gender, notions of inclusion and exclusion are explicitly evident. In the 19th century, 'Englishness' was associated with "masculinity, activity and concrete statement, and personal poise and self-mastery" (Doyle 1989: 22). Within this identification of 'Englishness' with the masculine, women's role was primarily confined to their responsibility for the future health of the race and nation. As Rutherford (1997:7) states

> Motherhood was the ideological centre of the Victorian bourgeois ideal of the family. Mothers were endowed with a sacred mission to raise their children and provide a haven for their husbands away from the corrupting world of money and business.

Women had to make sure that their children and in particular their sons developed a genuine sense of what it meant to be 'English'. The Victorian middle-class youngsters were educated to perceive themselves "as exemplars of a civilized society – perhaps the only civilized society" (West 1998: 8). This included a sense of patriotic, moral responsibility to the English crown but also Puritan and Protestant values, such as hardworking and God fearing.

Yet, where did this version of 'Englishness' leave women? Although the domestic sphere itself became an important marker of 'Englishness', women merely symbolized the idea of 'home'. Women as such did not take part in this version of 'Englishness'. In addition, the explicit absence of 'coloured' women constructs the English home as exclusively white (Webster 2001: 561). This leaves 'coloured' women excluded in two respects. One cultural representation of this is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* written in 1847. Rochester's first wife, the racially 'other' Bertha[1], is not only imprisoned in the attic but is also de-humanized – "that it was, either beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: […], it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal" (Brontë 1966: 321). Whereas the governess Jane Eyre symbolizes at least the notions of English domesticity, stability and attachment as well as the idea of establishing a new English family, Bertha is represented as the personified threat to this version of 'Englishness'.

However, in contrast to the 19th century construction of 'Englishness' where women were almost exclusively associated with the domestic sphere, today's modern version of 'Englishness' does include strong, single, professional women. One literary example for this is *Bridget Jones' Diary: A Novel* by Helen Fielding. The text focuses on the life of 'singleton' Bridget Jones and highlights in an amusing way her various difficulties within her professional and private life in today's urban setting. Yet, if

[1] Bertha is a Creole woman from the West Indies.

Bridget is seen as representative of what it means to be 'English' today, then drinking wine, counting calories in order to lose weight and relying on self-help books have also to be seen as representative characteristics.

Yet, despite the fact that in the 20th century the role of women changed, their place in the notion of 'Englishness' did not alter in the same proportion. 'Englishness' is still often associated with the image of the white English woman confined to the domestic space. Even today, 'coloured' women are not connected to notions of 'Englishness'. When disregarding the fact that *Desperate Housewives* is an American production, it is possible to argue that the character of Bree is a good representation of today's ideal of female 'Englishness'.

However, another point to consider when comparing the differences between 19th and 20th century notions of 'Englishness' is the issue of class. As Kumar (2001: 53) states

> Englishness embodied the aspiration and self-images of a particular section of society – for much of the time, those of the dominant upper and upper-middle classes. It was their politics, their church, their sports, their manners and ways of speaking, […], their view of history, that provided much of the content of the 'national character'.

Thus perceptions of 'Englishness' differ within specific classes. It can be argued that class elements within 'Englishness' involve the different accents of the South and the North of England, the different understanding of a 'national history' but also the association of England with the rural rather than the urban environment. Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*, for instance, is based on upper class notions of what it means to be 'English'. Her descriptions of the English landscape as being of "noble hills, whose beautiful verdure and hanging coppice render it so striking an object"

(Austen 2004: 72) might serve as a signifying example. In this text, 'Englishness' is linked to traditional rural images; an "idealized rural landscape in which England is figured as a pastoral Eden" (Giles and Middleton 1995: 34).

In the 20th century this particular rural experience became increasingly restricted to a white elitist minority living in country houses, something almost inaccessible for the lower classes. As a consequence, "these images, rural and southern, are, by definition, outside the direct daily experience of the vast majority of Britain's population" (Howkins 1987: 62). Neither the life experiences of lower and middle classes nor the ones of Britain's non-white population conform to an understanding of 'Englishness' associated with lodging in country houses in the English countryside (McCrone 2002: 313).

This is reflected in the cultural production of the 20th century. Whereas much of Jane Austen's work draws on an elitist understanding of what it means to be 'English', several 20th century texts question this representation of 'Englishness'. Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*, for instance, undermines upper class notions of 'Englishness'. The narrator and butler of Lord Darlington, Mr. Stevens acknowledges that "a good accent and command of language, general knowledge on wide-ranging topics such as falconing or newt-mating" (Ishiguro 2005: 35) are essential characteristics of a distinguished English person only to undermine these attitudes as superficial in the next paragraph.

Another text that questions the upper-class perception of 'Englishness' is D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers.* This text represents what it means to be an English miner in the 20th century and as such focuses on 'Englishness' from a lower-class perspective. Morel occasionally treats his family badly and wastes his wages in the pub while his wife scrimps and saves to feed his children. Morel's entirely different

perspective of what it means to be 'English' is as important as the upper-class understanding, but it had been marginalized in the discourse.

In *Sons and Lovers* 'Englishness' is not associated with drinking cream tea and strolling through Britain's countryside but constitutes a strong notion of national belonging, national history, masculinity and pride to be English. According to Chambers (1990: 21), this pride to be 'English' is partly linked to the social hegemony that was strengthened by the national superiority abroad; the 'lower classes' were "allied to that native hegemony in its presumed superiority over the disdainfully nicknamed populations of the Empire and the rest of the world" (ibid).

This leads us into an analysis of the impact of the Empire on notions of 'Englishness'. During the high imperial period[2], through its decline in the first half of the 20th century, but also today in the era known as post-colonialism, the Empire has had a deep impact on notions of 'Englishness'. Referring to Said's work *Orientalism*, many of the constitutive elements of 'Englishness' draw on the concept of the 'Other', in particular the colonized people and the imperial spaces. The 'Other' is essential for the construction of the self (Hall 2003: 236) or as Gikandi (1996: 70) puts it "you cannot conceive of an English identity without its opposite".

With the notions of the empirical 'Other', 'Englishness' was formulated more specifically and as such "imperialism was a central element in the making of modern Englishness" (Rutherford 1997: 8). Looking at *Jane Eyre* again, the dehumanization of Bertha suggests that the western self "defines itself though terms of race, by constructing a racial other which then stands in opposition to the humanity of the racially homogenous" (Bennett and Royle 2004: 210). Jane Eyre's whiteness and 'Englishness' become more specific when seen next to the contrasting image of

[2] 1840-1880

Bertha. In the 19th century the term 'English' was reserved primarily for 'white natives' whilst the non-white populations of the colonies were excluded (McCrone 2002: 305).

Nevertheless, in the 19th century with the Empire growing there was also a sense of imperial identity – civis Birtannicus sum – "which covered at least white members of the Empire and latterly the Commonwealth as 'subjects' of the Crown" (McCrone 2002: 302). Even though empires are "in principal opposed to claims of nationality" a "certain kind of national identity that gives the dominant groups a special sense of themselves and their destiny" is evident (Kumar 2001: 579). The English associated themselves with the larger mission to 'civilize the savages', to bring law, order and culture to their colonies[3]. They attempted to establish the notion that they have a "political, cultural, or religious mission to which they have been called" (Kumar 2001: 579-580).

Hence in the 19th century, this accepted understanding helped to construct a basis for a unified national identity. The introduction of Shakespeare to other cultures, for instance, can be seen from two perspectives; firstly as asserting the cultural superiority of England over its colonies and secondly as a form to link the cultures and politics of the various nations of the Empire (Diawara 1990: 838). Thus, a cultural projection of 'Englishness' or what it means to be 'English' was established at home and abroad in the colonies. Always bearing in mind that "the native [English] manner of looking at and understanding the world was the unique way" (Chamber 1990: 23).

This is represented culturally in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness.* In this text the colonizer attempts to hold up his 'Englishness' in teaching a native woman how to mend his uniform; "in the great demoralization of the land he kept up his appearance

[3] This was linked to the Enlightenment and its view "that all societies would pass through stages of development and that Europe would play the central role, setting universal human standards because it stood at the apex of civilization" (Hall 2000: 11).

[…] his stretched collars and go-up shirt-fronts were achievements of character" (Conrad 1994: 26). The understanding of Britain as a great nation with great power and a particular way of life was the essence of 19th century 'Englishness', which needed to be introduced to the colonies (Maslen 2004: 45).

Yet, this concept of one English identity was influenced by "a greater cultural exchange between nations - fed by emigration, immigration, exploration and colonization" (West 1998: 9). The clear boundaries of 'us' and the 'other', 'white and black', 'primitive and civilized' began to blur which was perceived as a threat. Conrad represents this in *Heart of Darkness* with the character of Kurtz. Kurtz gets "the tribe to follow him" (Conrad 1994: 80) in order to increase the procurement of ivory, and is also willing to preside "certain midnight dances ending with unspeakable rites" (71) designed to "offer up to him […] to Mr Kurtz himself" (ibid). In this text the clear and strict boundaries between 'English' and 'not-English' intertwine; Kurtz lives among the tribe as their leader and willingly adopts some of the tribe's customs. Yet, in picturing Kurtz as being half-English only and declaring him mad in the end, the text also re-establishes the traditional boundaries once again.

However, with the fall of the Empire in the mid 20th century it became evident that these boundaries were imaginary only. As Gikandi (1996: 24) argues, with the dissolution of the Empire the English identity became destabilized; "for if a modern British nation cannot be imagined outside the realm of Empire – then imperialism becomes the raison d'etre of Britishness itself" (Gikandi 1996: 31). As a consequence, in the wake of the Empire, the English were once again forced to define what it means to be English (Kumar 2000: 578). This resulted in a reaffirming and upholding of various 19th century notions of 'Englishness', partly because with the collapse of the Empire, notions of timeless 'Englishness' "provided a source of reassuring images" (Chamber 1990: 18).

Therefore "the cultivation of a distinct English historiography, the clarification and codification of the English language, the elaboration and canonization of the 'great tradition' of English literature, the celebration of a particular type of landscape as quintessentially English" (Kumar 2001: 592), were at the heart of 'Englishness' in the 19th century but also constituted 20th century notions of 'Englishness'. Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, for instance, draws on these traditional values that are seemingly untouched by the passing of time. In this text, Waugh revisits the white English aristocracy and discovers in antique country houses, English hills and the elite universities Oxbridge the true source of 'Englishness'. In addition Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts* celebrates this traditional notions of 'Englishness' by expressing in a pageant the love for England, its cultural tradition and its national history (Zwerdling 1989: 312).

Yet, despite today's cultural upholding of 19th century perceptions of 'Englishness', several 20th century representations encourage a more open discourse. In this context the role of non-English writers on today's notions of 'Englishness' is of importance. Authors, such as Salmon Rushdie, Zadie Smith and Toni Morrison, attempt to situate the marginalised 'Others' into the centre of the text and as such provide an alternative perception of what it means to be 'English'. In their writing they modify and reconstruct but also oppose traditional notions of 'Englishness' in order to "allow a place for that which had been previously excluded" (Giles and Middleton 1995: 23). Joan Riley's *Waiting in the Twilight*, for instance, gives voice to Adella, a black woman migrated to England from Jamaica. Her story is characterized by the struggle against discrimination and as such shows the 'closure' of 'Englishness' against foreigners or 'coloured people' respectively. In doing so the text exposes the problem of 'Englishness' as a totalizing discourse and attempts to highlight the people in its shadow.

Texts that deal with the notions of ‘Englishness’ from a marginal perspective show that ‘England’ as apparently insular, self contained within its Empire and racially pure is nothing more than a historically rooted illusion. Although even in contemporary Britain “statements about nation are invariably also statements about ‘race’” (Gilroy 1995: 57), texts that show the multiple layers of what it means to be ‘English’ undermine the notion that ‘Englishness’ equals ‘being of the Island Race’. In this sense, literary texts as well as other cultural forms of representation play a significant role in the wider debate around ‘Englishness’ and have therefore the ability to change its meaning.

In conclusion, the concept of ‘Englishness’ is an open discourse, never to be completed, that is rooted in the 19th century; or as the author Ian McEwan puts it “we ask ourselves who we are, and what our position in the world is. We have an image of ourselves that was formed in another time” (1990: 210). As this analysis has shown, in the 19th century, ‘Englishness’ was very much based on upper-class perceptions and was associated with masculinity, white racial purity and the understanding that being English equalled superiority. Thus, notions of ‘Englishness’ come hand in hand with “a complex set of cultural and racial associations” (Vaughan 1990: 11) and as such draw on forms of exclusion and inclusion.

I have been in England since three years, which implies that this argument has been shaped by my ‘outsider’ perspective, which also influenced the particular choice of literary examples. In my point of view today’s notions of ‘Englishness’ are still very much rooted in traditional Victorian values. The fall of the Empire and the wish to hold on to the reassuring images of the 19th century contributed to the upholding of this traditional view of ‘Englishness’. Thus ‘Englishness’ in the 20th century is still founded on notions of exclusion and inclusion, as was the case in the 19th century.

‘Englishness’ today still excludes coloured people and draws on class images such as Gentleman behaviour, Oxbridge and a particular way of speaking English.

Yet, since the English “only know what it is to be ‘English’ because of the way ‘Englishness’ has come to be represented, as a set of meanings, by English national culture” (Hall 1992: 292) the concept is still in “the process of being made” (Parker 1996: 200). With some of today’s culture taking ‘Englishness’ into a wider context the discourse “must necessarily run freer in order to accommodate other worlds, other vocabularies, other memories” (Chamber 1990: 50). Thus ‘Englishness’ is not something that’s definition is already achieved but is “an open framework, continually in the making” (ibid: 47).

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