

Thatcherite heroes. The fictional representation of the new emerging class of the nineteen eighties

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ABSTRACT

The well-known figure of the yuppie, so closely associated with the nineteen eighties and the greed for money, is given a singular representation in the fiction of the decade. Novelists who took note of social trends scrutinized this specimen and recreated his moves, statements and behaviour in all spheres of life. The result was the portrait of despicable characters, people who acted individually and collectively with scant respect for others and who took the ideals of free enterprise as a justification for their illegal activities or for the ill-treatment of those around them. The particular use that these characters made of Thatcherite values is examined in this paper. How the portrayal of the newly rich was intended as a wider social criticism of the economic and political system of the time is also considered.

Thatcherism was a political project which boosted the tenets of economic liberalism to an extent unknown in the United Kingdom in the second half of the twentieth century. The ideology in power had as a frame of reference the twin principles of letting market forces act with the greatest freedom and of limiting the role of the State to that of a mere guarantor of such forces. With these guiding lights, the new hegemonic discourse promoted the idea of competitive individualism as the correct course of action in the sphere of professional activities, and it also sanctioned the cult of money, both of these trends favouring the rise of a new social class, the newly rich. These were people who had benefited from the government's policies of encouraging the "enterprise culture" and soon they took on an exemplary status. They became

the officially-approved models of the new times, as they adopted in their way of life and in their manifest opinions everything that was central to the commercial mentality of the administration.

This new emerging class is represented constantly and exhaustively in the fiction of the eighties, and it finds its most characteristic incarnation in the figure of the yuppie or Thatcherite hero, a prototype who begins to appear in fiction at around the middle of the decade, according to D.J. Taylor (1993: 271). This literary critic (*Ibid.*, 272-278) has pointed out the main peculiarities of this fictional hero, which are summarized below and which will constitute our starting point:

- Thatcherite heroes share a common social origin, a no man's land or blurred lower middle class which, on the one hand, sets them apart from the working class and, on the other hand, places them at a considerable distance from the upper class to which they aspire to belong. According to Taylor this fact will make them extremely insecure because, although they despise those who pertain to the lower strata of society, they also have doubts about their own merits as potential members of the club of the privileged class, who are in turn hated by the yuppies because of their supercilious manners.
- Probably because of their isolation in the class system, Thatcherite heroes are not sociable persons but solitary and contemptuous individuals. Nevertheless, they may display a bogus personal charm to ingratiate themselves with those in power, and they can be found acting courteously and deferentially.
- In sexual matters these characters are distinguished by their thirst for command and their voracity. They are also inclined towards all kinds of perversions, and most of them have had a precocious start in all sorts of intimate relationships.
- Thatcherite heroes are chary, envious and mistrustful, although they are certain of their own uprightness. For Taylor these characteristics make them perfect candidates for entrepreneurial activities, particularly for those professions which have risen in the wake of the latest innovations: computer experts, business consultants, managers, etc.
- All of them keenly welcome the ascent to power of Margaret Thatcher, for whose ideas they profess a special fervour. The values that the new administration support, such as the extension of the enterprise culture to all spheres of public life, or the emphasis on self-reliance, make them believe that their time has come; at last the road is free of obstacles for their progress upwards on the social ladder.
- The parvenus of the novels of the eighties appreciate and pursue material acquisition, although they are not aware that money cannot buy good taste or style.

- Finally, the darkest side of Thatcherite heroes is revealed in their personal life. The translation of the mercantile mentality to private affairs has as a consequence a high degree of numbness towards other people's feelings. Cruelty, violence and even murder are not infrequent in their relationships with those around them. The emerging class values wealth above all else, and they turn to such catch-phrases as "self-help" to justify reprehensible behaviour towards others.

Bearing in mind the particularities of the hero of the eighties as defined above, the aim of this paper is to complete and expand the portrayal sketched by Taylor. For this purpose a selection of novels has been chosen, all of them having certain characteristics in common: they were all written during the period of Thatcherite predominance in the United Kingdom (the latest is from 1991) and in each of them the yuppie is depicted as a central figure of the times, the modern man. It is important to mention that, apart from the leader herself, there are no Thatcherite heroines in the fiction of the decade. As Sarah Benton (1989: 10), among others, has pointed out, Margaret Thatcher's vision of the spirit of Britain is masculine.

The yuppies who populate the novels of the eighties transmit their credo by means of their statements, particularly through overwhelming truths which are exposed with utter conviction: "Money makes money, Jamie ... That's the name of the game" (Stacey 1991: 142) a broker says to the protagonist of *Decline*, who is uncertain about his future. But above all it is by physical appearance that the characters indicate their membership of the new religion. This is how, for instance, the narrator in *Nice Work* introduces the female protagonist's brother, a banker: "Everything about him and his girlfriend signified money..." (Lodge 1989: 180), and the narrator refers not only to the recently-fixed sparkling teeth of the man, but also to his girlfriend's fur coat, his cashmere jacket and his Rolex wristwatch. Thatcherite heroes are drawn to expensive items, a kind of sartorial preference that must find an outlet, as with the main character in *Look at it this Way*: "And Miles, aged thirty-one, had started affecting hand-made shoes at £300 a pair, shirts at £120 each, worn with braces that cost £75 a pair" (Cartwright 1991: 31).

Furthermore, the luxurious car plays the role of showing others that the protagonist is one of the chosen few. The aforementioned banker from *Nice Work* drives a flashy BMW, and the corresponding character in *Bloody Margaret* drives a Porsche. The protagonist of *Dirty Tricks* boasts of owning a stunning BMW which puts him at a distance from the rest of mortals: "From time to time a harassed mother might rap angrily on the window to complain that she couldn't get her push-chair past the car, which I had parked blocking the pavement. I didn't reply. There was no need. The car spoke for me" (Dibdin 1991: 117). Likewise, the main character in *Goodness*, George

Crawley, is upset with his brother-in-law because the latter has not made any comment on the new Audi 80 he is driving. Finally the row of double-parked Volvos is another defining feature of the residential areas that are visited in *Mother London*.

If the expensive attire or the flamboyant car are for Thatcherite heroes essential complements of their social position, that very display distinguishes them from the truly rich, from those who are by tradition a part of the establishment. This gap is made obvious in a particular episode in *Nasty, Very*, when the ambitious Charlie Bosham turns up at an exclusive club where he is going to be interviewed by officials from the Conservative Party. For this occasion he rejects the classic suit and his school tie which his wife has prepared for him, and chooses instead a flashy suit and a silk tie. When he arrives at the meeting point he observes how everybody wears the kind of clothes he had turned down in the first place: "Everyone wore a pinstripe suit, a tie that said 'I belong' rather than 'I cost a lot'..." (Rathbone 1986: 287).

Together with the ostentation of money, the emerging class is characterized, according to the novels of the eighties, by a list of uncivil attitudes which has its maximum exponent in the bad manners they are prone to exhibit. Thus in *Money* John Self and his friends sit at a restaurant and, counting on the assurance provided by their money, they start behaving like vulgar yobs. The customers at the next table look away while Self states: "No, the rest of the meal isn't going to be much fun for those two, I'm afraid. I suppose it must have been cool for people like them in places like this before people like us started coming here also. But we're here to stay. *You* try getting us out..." (Amis 1985: 82).

If John Self and his mates behave badly in places where not long ago they could not enter, the same overpowering thrust is seen in the way the new emerging class has invaded whole neighbourhoods, reforming dwellings and pushing the former inhabitants of these areas to far-away ghettos. This is a process perfectly described in *Mother London*: First, the new neighbours work in professions related to the world of money: "It's not just the Sloanes and Yuppies. It's stockbrokers, estate agents, investment counsellors ... TV producers" (Moorcock 1989: 379). Secondly, the houses are reformed following a similar pattern, to make them appear like old mansions. It is as if the owners wanted to endow with lineage and tradition their recently-acquired wealth. It is not casual, then, that the meaning of the Prime Minister's surname is connected with the cosmetic surgery made on the houses: "Those scoundrels from the Thatcher belt, Dandy! Thatching this and Thatching that. It's rural blight, old lad. Arcadian spread. It's hideous!" (Ibid., 378). The modifications undergone in the areas where the emerging class settles down do not only consist of the imitation of an imagined rustic style, but also in another kind of uniformity, as evidenced by the commercial establishments patronized by this

new class. The traditional local-based shops disappear and the department stores rule the place: “And wherever they go the bland standardising merchants follow. W.H. Smith and Marks and Spencer, Wimpey and Rymans ... Safeway and MacDonald’s and the Abbey National, Boots and Our Price...” (Ibid., 380). Trends like this one led a progressive intellectual like Margaret Drabble to consider that the lack of commercial saturation in her home town, Sheffield, was something to be proud of: “It’s not a Laura Ashley city”, she wrote in an article (Drabble 1994: 296).

Finally, the cost of living rises so much in the emerging neighbourhoods that the original settlers are forced to move house: “The rates go up and the rents go up and the prices go up until the indigenous population is forced to trek to our city’s outskirts...” (Moorcock 1989: 380). However, in the novels under study it is made clear that the forced move is not only caused by economic reasons, but by the aggressiveness of the invaders, who do not look too favourably on the presence of an inferior class in their new surroundings, as a woman short on economic resources says in *Two Women of London*: “I kept the kids clean and I cooked for them. They played in the communal garden, but as the posh people moved in, their children threw stones at mine. Soon they were too frightened to go out there and we were all cooped up together in the flat” (Tennant 1989: 111). The new emerging class, then, behaves as a whole in the same disrespectful manner as its members show individually.

Considering the features already discussed, it is not surprising that the Thatcherite hero feels a deep contempt for all kinds of culture, as John Self confirms in *Money*: “As a rule, I hate people who are the beneficiaries of a university education. I hate people with degrees, O-levels, eleven-pluses, Iowa Tests...” (Amis 1985: 57-58). This is a response common to other characters, like Jonatan Fixx, protagonist of the novel of the same name, who is unable to read anything that does not resemble a list of figures or a business dossier: “As for the so-called ‘creative’, the ‘fictional’, you can forget it. I’m a busy man” (Blacker 1989: 96).

Bad manners and the rejection of culture add to other traits, like racism or hypocrisy, which make of the yuppie of the eighties a summary of anti-social values; but it is cruelty towards others that is one of the most recurrent features. As a student, George Crawley does not return home when his presence is needed, and shows himself distant at the funerals of a close relative. George feels anxious about his own future when his wife seems to be ill and he even gives his grandfather a hiding to vent his anger caused by his daughter’s illness. Some time afterwards he will attempt to kill the child by provoking a fire in the house. The protagonist of *Dirty Tricks* manages to marry a wealthy woman, silencing the fact that he had a vasectomy and cannot, therefore, have children. This man has not prevented the death of his wife’s first husband, and

later on she will be suffocated to death when the protagonist carries her in his car boot. Jonathan Fixx, for his part, plays jokes on his mentally unstable father or makes his mother get involved in a drug scandal. Resembling his colleagues in other narratives, Charlie Bosham in *Nasty*, *Very* is insensitive to human suffering and, for instance, he refuses to visit his moribund aunt when she asks to see him.

The unethical behaviour of Thatcherite heroes becomes a crime when it is transferred to their professional activities. Most of them show a clear tendency to fraud and foul play. Charlie Bosham gets help for his political campaign by covering up the shady business of important men, and he conspires to taint the reputation of the other candidate. The entrepreneur in *The Heart of the Country* flees Britain taking with him his employees' salaries, leaving behind sixteen workers in a precarious financial situation. Clive Phillips, the director of the school where the protagonist of *Dirty Tricks* works, is a convinced Thatcherite who exploits his employees and fires those who prove to be good teachers, as they would eventually ask for a pay rise. The list is endless. But of all Thatcherite heroes it is Jonathan Fixx, again, who stands out as regards corruption. His course towards success is full of bribes, swindles and fraudulent enterprises, like his campaign 'Save-a-Saigon-Child Appeal' through which, taking advantage of social awareness towards refugees and other humanitarian causes, he collects funds that will never reach the charities they were destined for. Fixx blames his business associate for the fiasco and continues his career of illegal operations, setting up a firm which produces contraceptives which are dangerous for the public's health.

In most cases the protagonists' support for enterprise values provides them with a justification for their illegal activities because, as they repeat when asked about the matter, they have acted in accordance with the behaviour approved by the official mentality: "Show me ... just one part of my overall vision which is out of line with the dominant social philosophy in England today" (Parks 1991: 163), George Crawley says to an imagined court which would judge him for his crimes. A direct consequence of this way of thinking is to believe that the law must not interfere with professional ethics, as specified in *Dirty Tricks*:

In a free democratic society, law and morality can have nothing whatever to do with each other. The selfish instincts we all harbour in our breasts, and without which a market economy would instantly collapse, are of no concern to the law, which is purely conventional and utilitarian in nature, a highway code designed to minimize the possibility of accidents. (Dibdin, 1991: 236)

The idea that all activities devoted to furthering private enterprise must be above the law is shared by other yuppies from the novels of the eighties, like

Jack in *Sexing the Cherry*, who becomes indignant when ecologists protest about industrial dumping in a river. For him these cries of anger are obstacles to progress, industry and the free market. This is inevitably the opinion of the most representative Thatcherite hero, Jonathan Fixx. At the end of his story he has formed a clique of ruthless entrepreneurs who, acting illegally, dispose of those subversive individuals like trade unionists or intellectuals who hinder the course of the country towards becoming 'Great Britain Ltd.': "I see our little band of low-profile public servant entrepreneurs as vigilantes, stalking the land under cover of night, working boldly on behalf of the greatest cause known to man, that of freedom and enterprise" (Blacker 1989: 251).

Considering the adoption of the ideas of free enterprise by the archetypal men of the new times, it is important to point out that the authors of these novels make their protagonists assimilate the shallowest aspects of this economic philosophy: its slogans and clichés. This is done deliberately, as a way of showing how Thatcherite heroes turn to this system of beliefs because it is useful for them in their social progress and it will contribute to their personal enrichment, not out of a deep conviction of its benefits for the prosperity of the nation. Take, for instance, the opposite case with the declaration of principles of a banker of the old school, Francis Morton, in *A Season in the West*:

Like most bankers, Francis Morton was a Conservative, but while most of his friends only looked to that party to further their material interests, Francis had inherited from his parents a zealous belief in Conservative ideals. Free enterprise, to him, was an extension of the free will given to man by his Creator; and the ideologies which opposed it, whether socialist or communist, were simply schemes by the envious for legalized theft. (Read 1988: 17)

The system of economic liberalism in which Morton believes is revealed in this text as a set of ideas with a long cultural tradition which stems from the theories of Adam Smith, and which has formed the basis for one of the two historical trends inside the Conservative Party in Great Britain (Kavanagh 1990: 189). The Thatcherite regime did indeed update this liberal trend within conservatism, and it was particularly zealous in using it as the foundation behind its economic policy. Here lies the difference between a true conservative like Francis Morton and the upstarts who are mentioned in the quotation from the book by Piers Paul Read. The banker firmly believes in the original mercantile ideals, including the privileged relationship with God common in protestant individualism, while his friends, out of personal interest, support the party which has put those ideals into practice. The protagonists of the novels discussed above are included in this group, as their adherence to Thatcherism will remain as long as it favours their advance in the world of business. Nothing, then, indicates that they are truly convinced of the virtues of liberal ideology: "Like all free enterprise propagandists, he hated competition

in any form...” (Dibdin 1991: 141) the narrator reveals about Clive Phillips in *Dirty Tricks*. Phillips has publicly defended consumers’ freedom of choice, but he conspires in private to ruin a rival school so that it poses no threat to his own business. This is further evidence that confirms that Thatcherite heroes are not truly believers in the free market or in liberal ideals either; they simply support a government which gives them a free hand to get rich and which provides them with a handy set of values when they need to justify their activities.

The most obvious evidence that the new emerging class is more Thatcherite than liberal is shown in the characters’ statements, when they repeat sentences already pronounced by their leader. These ‘used’ words do not sound odd in the yuppies of the eighties and, in my opinion, their repetition of clichés does not mean an incomplete knowledge of Thatcherism by the authors of these novels, as D.J. Taylor (1993: 280-281, 286) affirms in his otherwise perceptive analysis. It means that the new emerging class, which is represented in these fictions, took the most superficial aspects of Margaret Thatcher’s political project, the striking and grandiloquent sentences, which are even modified to suit the heroes’ convenience. The main character in *Dirty Tricks* repeats the notorious statement by the Prime Minister: “There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (Hoggart 1995: 1). The fictitious character says instead: “There is no such thing as society, only individuals engaged in a constant unremitting struggle for personal advantage” (Dibdin 1991: 237). The transformation of the original sentence made by the protagonist of the novel seems to indicate what for him is the meaning of Thatcher’s words, a moral shield for his criminal deeds. Equally, a statement by Victor Wilcox, managing director of an engineering firm in *Nice Work* sounds unequivocally thatcherite when he exclaims: “There’s no such thing as a free lunch” (Lodge 1989: 218). Finally, a fervent supporter of the government like Carter in *Sugar and Rum*, who is an “(...) admirer of Thatcherism and the free market economy and the Spirit of the Falklands” (Unsworth 1990: 49), uses variations on the premier’s repeated discourse of putting the “Great” back into “Great Britain” in defence of the Prime Minister: “Margaret Thatcher is a woman of character ... She’s got guts. She is making this country great again” (Ibid., 47).

Charlie Bosham in *Nasty, Very* is one of the few Thatcherite heroes who is in politics, and he manages to get elected as an MP at the end of the novel. It is him, of all his peers, who most frequently will look for assistance in the Prime Minister’s repertoire to show everyone that he is perfectly in tune with the official discourse. In a public meeting he inserts into his speech the message that Thatcher’s minister for Employment Norman Tebbit sent to the unemployed, the famous “get on your bike” comment (Morgan 1992: 469). Needless to say, the protagonist follows the official line on unemployment, the opinion that this situation is caused by the carelessness of those affected.

Bosham says: “These men and lads should not be enticed by free handouts to waste precious hours when they should be on their bikes combing the hills and lanes to find again the opportunities they have allowed to slip through their fingers” (Rathbone 1986: 253). In the same way, when a party official asks him what the victory in the Falklands means for him, Bosham produces a feeble version of the speech Margaret Thatcher gave on 3 July 1982 on the triumph in the South Atlantic. She said then:

We have ceased to be a nation in retreat. We have instead a newfound confidence - born in the economic battles at home and tested and found true 8000 miles away ... We rejoice that Britain has rekindled that spirit which has fired her for generations past and which today has begun to burn as brightly as before. (Thatcher 1993: 235)

Compare the Prime Minister’s speech with Bosham’s words: “I can confidently assert there’s a new self-respect abroad. A new self-confidence. A new sense of pride in ourselves has been born. A sort of rebirth” (Rathbone 1986: 289). Even in his private conversations Bosham shows his unmistakable connection with the new emerging class, repeating for instance the notorious headline that *The Sun* devoted to the sinking of the Argentinian cruiser *General Belgrano*: “You have done a good job. George. We’ve got him. Like the old *Belgrano*, it’s a case of *Gotcha!*” (Ibid., 284).

The characterization of Thatcherite heroes is another way of showing how these individuals participate in the new mentality boosted by the authorities. The vigorous virtues encouraged by the hegemonic ideology (Letwin 1992: 33), a set of personal features which were attributes of the Prime Minister herself according to the official propaganda, are virtues shared by these bold, energetic and courageous men. Jack, the yuppie in *Sexing the Cherry*, holds that the world is divided in two kinds of people, “those who do and those who won’t do” (Winterson 1990: 137), and that is precisely what Jonathan Fixx thinks of himself, as “a doer” (Blacker 1989: 73), and George Crawley also says he is “a doer” and “the winner” (Parks 1991: 102, 36). Both men, like the leader they admire so much, are not afraid of difficulties and display an unblenching spirit when facing trouble ahead. They are tenacious men like Charlie Bosham, who becomes more adamant to get elected after his first failed incursion into politics, or like the protagonist in *Dirty Tricks*, who is proud of the energy and perseverance with which he has transformed his life.

According to the new set of values, the best compliment that Thatcherite heroes may obtain is either that their vigorous virtues be recognised and applauded by a representative figure of authority, or to be duly connected with the spirit of the times: “The Leader would like that” (Rathbone 1986: 288-289) says the party official to Charlie Bosham when the latter confirms that he has

started his business from scratch. The head of Department in *Cuts* offers the protagonist of this novel the same kind of praise: “You are a great model of Thatcherite enterprise, and I congratulate you” (Bradbury 1988: 57).

With the building up of the thatcherite hero the novelists of the eighties managed to produce the sharpest criticism on the prevailing political and economic system in Britain. It was a much more effective form of censure than other themes common in the narrative of the period, like the description of urban squalor or the state of social conflict in the nation at large, because these characters show that the translation of enterprise culture to the sphere of private life creates citizens insensitive to other people’s problems. Yuppies are depicted in fiction as people who lack civic attitudes, manners and scruples; they are seen in this light as contributors to the break up of the social fabric, a similar effect that the government’s policies were thought to be causing. The denunciation of Thatcherism, then, has its most pointed end in the description of the new emerging class. When adopting the predominant attitudes of the decade for their heroes, the novelists of the eighties could vividly indicate the consequences of this way of thinking: corruption in business, indifference in social matters and the absence of any affective life. The boundless ambition and arrogance of the converts to the free market may often give way to a humorous treatment, but the satire implicit in their fictional depiction stresses their characterization as undesirable individuals, a feature which is present without exception in all Thatcherite heroes.

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