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Narratives of Separation. Literary Depictions of Brexit Through the Divorce Metaphor

Abstract: Throughout English history, major political and social ruptures have been framed through the metaphor of divorce. This metaphor has gained renewed prominence in representations of Brexit, circulating in journalistic and bureaucratic discourse (Buckledee 2018; Koller et al, 2019) as well as in fiction and television. Literary narratives often portray Brexit as a marital breakdown marked by loss, betrayal, and identity renegotiation, foregrounding its psychological and cultural dimensions beyond political or economic analysis (Milizia and Spinzi 2020). By examining texts such as Jonathan Coe's *Middle England* (2019) and Nick Hornby's *State of the Union: A Marriage in Ten Parts* (2019), this research explores how the divorce metaphor conveys the emotional and social consequences of the UK's separation from the EU. It argues that these works participate in a broader literary tradition that uses intimate relationships to articulate national crises and historical turning points (Eaglestone 2018; Shaw 2021).

Keywords: *Brexit*, *divorce metaphor*, *Brexlit*, *Middle England*, *Jonathan Coe*

1. The Rhetoric of Brexit

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union – or more precisely, the discourse surrounding this event – has served as fertile ground for linguistic innovation and rhetorical strategy. Notably, the term that has come to universally define this event, "Brexit", is itself a neologism coined specifically for the occasion. Formed through a blend of 'Britain' and 'Exit', this single word encapsulates one of the most politically, economically, and socially intricate processes in international history over the past century. Such linguistic condensation inevitably risks oversimplification but it simultaneously possesses significant communicative power.

At least until the outcome of the June 2016 referendum, discourse on Brexit was primarily framed as a debate between its proponents and opponents. As a result, lexical choices and rhetorical strategies functioned not merely as descriptive and informative tools but also as performative instruments. Within this context, metaphor emerged as a pervasive rhetorical device in the public debate on Brexit, owing to its well-documented communicative and persuasive efficacy. Jonathan Charteris-Black, who has devoted a monograph to the subject, explicitly underscores this point: "Metaphors have dominated thought about 'Brexit' in the deliberations of politicians and media discussions, and they have influenced the private reflections of individuals".[1]

Moreover, as Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and Blending Theory have long demonstrated, certain forms of metaphorical language possess the ability to shape public perception of events. In particular, CMT, developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson,[2] posits that metaphors are not merely rhetorical embellishments but structures that change the way we understand and reason about experience. This phenomenon becomes especially evident in contexts such as the Brexit referendum

[1] Jonathan Charteris-Black, *Metaphors of Brexit: No Cherries on the Cake?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1.

[2] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

where a binary choice must be framed, narrated, and ultimately swayed. It is thus likely no coincidence that the referendum campaign witnessed a shift in political language – especially among pro-Brexit politicians – from a predominantly institutional register to one increasingly hybridized with the lexicon and syntax of media and social media.

This change in political language could also be seen in the metaphors employed. A notable example was the growing focus on the idea of control. Supporters of the Leave campaign argued that the United Kingdom had ceded excessive sovereignty to Brussels and that leaving the European Union would allow the country to 'take back control'. This loss of control was frequently conveyed through the metaphor of a car driven by an external entity, relegating the UK to the backseat. Similarly, the EU's free movement policies were often criticised through expressions like 'flocking' and 'swarming' thus evoking natural disasters such as floodgates and animal invasions which of course carry negative connotations.

These examples clearly demonstrate how metaphor functioned as a strategic tool in shaping the Brexit discourse, enhancing its expressiveness and, consequently, its persuasive impact. This was achieved by rendering complex and abstract concepts – such as treaties, national sovereignty, and international jurisdictions – into simple, concrete images suited for brief and immediate communication, capable of eliciting strong reactions. Notably, this use of metaphor redefines its traditional role as conceived in classical rhetoric. In fact, in ancient rhetorical theory, metaphor was a device that could embellish the message and even introduce an element of surprise by offering an unexpected perspective on something familiar. In the Brexit discourse, as seen, metaphor has a very different function. It does not embellish or estrange the message but makes it more comprehensible and accessible for pragmatic ends: to persuade, and ultimately to mobilize people.

This also explains why so many war metaphors appeared in the Brexit debate. Framing an issue in terms of war inherently serves as a call to action against a perceived common adversary. Moreover, within the specific cultural and historical context of the United Kingdom, the use of war-related imagery evokes a collective memory deeply shaped by the major conflicts of the twentieth century. As Robert Eaglestone, who has examined Brexit discourse through the lens of affect theory, observes:

> The War is a kind of signifier for a rooted Britishness or even Englishness: interwoven with Empire and race, certainly, and different perhaps in the four nations of the UK, but also a marker of nationality. It stands also for bearing up to hard times, keeping calm and crying on and as a way of overcoming ('Britain can take it!'). … This affective-memory of the War, then, is a geological layer running under British cultural life: mostly unseen, it emerges in outcrops and shapes the surface of the land above it.[3]

The primary historical reference, as expected, is to the World Wars – particularly the Second World War – during which the British people's highest virtues – unity, resilience, sacrifice, and pride – were believed to have played a decisive role in securing the final victory. From this perspective, framing Brexit in terms of war allowed, according to Eaglestone, for an appeal to a historical period marked by "a sense of national unity, deep comradeship across classes and, within the UK, national identities, when 'none was for a party' and 'all were for the state'" (97). More broadly, however, it is not solely the war metaphor itself that fulfils an emotional function, but rather the entire semantic field of warfare, which provides a vast reservoir of metaphorical imagery accessible to both sides of the debate. As Charteris-Black observes: "Supporters of Leave found evidence of 'collaborators,'

[3] Robert Eaglestone, "Cruel Nostalgia and the Memory of the Second World War", in Robert Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (London: Routledge, 2018), 97.

'saboteurs,' or 'traitors' who were committing 'treason,' while the Remain 'side' referred to their opponents as 'wolves in sheep's clothing'".[4]

However, the use of metaphors in the Brexit discourse – and, consequently, the selection of specific metaphorical frameworks – was not confined exclusively to the political debate in its strictest sense, namely, the speeches delivered by political figures and their supporters during the referendum campaign. As a matter of fact metaphorical language related to Brexit extends beyond the political sphere. It can be found in the broader public debate – particularly in media discourse – and, perhaps even more significantly, in institutional communication and narrative. As expected, the tone, complexity, and function of metaphors vary considerably across these different contexts, as do their intended purposes. Beyond political rallies, interviews, and online propaganda, metaphor assumes a less polarizing and mobilizing role, instead shifting toward an explanatory or reflective function. In such cases, the objective is no longer to emotionally charge the discourse to influence outcomes but rather to interpret the event through an alternative linguistic framework whether to foster discussion or even to satirize its nature. In the specific case of Brexit, one metaphor has been particularly instrumental in fulfilling this role, to the extent that its ubiquity renders it a defining feature of the discourse. As a cognitive mechanism, it facilitates both internal coherence within individual texts (intratextual coherence) and continuity across multiple texts (intertextual coherence).[5] This metaphor, as may already be apparent, is that of divorce.

2. Metaphors of Separation

The divorce metaphor is, unsurprisingly, intrinsically linked to the marriage metaphor, to the extent that it is appropriate to speak of a "marriage and divorce frame".[6] This framing of Brexit extends beyond the immediate context of the 2016 referendum, both temporally and conceptually. Indeed, the very structure of the European Union lends itself to metaphorical discourse centred on the image of a family, one that nations can join through marriage and leave through divorce. Sanja Berberović and Mersina Mujagić identify family as one of the most prominent conceptual metaphors employed in EU discourse to frame "the unity of the EU, as well as the complicated relationships between the member states, and their relationship with the EU institutions".[7] Theoretically, then, the marriage and divorce frame could be applied to any EU member state. However, even beyond the specific case of Brexit, it is difficult to deny that this frame is particularly well-suited to describing the UK-EU relationship, a relationship historically characterized by cycles of rapprochement and withdrawal, periods of strong alignment, and moments of tension and divergence. In this sense, the divorce metaphor serves, as Denise Milizia and Cinzia Giacinta Spinzi suggest, as "a mini-narrative or metaphor scenario that encapsulates the complex dynamics of nearly 45 years of fraught relations between the EU and the UK".[8] Expanding this perspective both chronologically and thematically, one might argue that the divorce metaphor functions as a broader narrative framework, capable of capturing not only Brexit but also other pivotal moments in British history. A particularly striking example of this is found in a sketch by the Irish comedy trio Foil Arms and Hog, which, in just a few lines, demonstrates the enduring efficacy of the divorce metaphor when viewed from a wider historical and geographical lens.

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[4] Charteris-Black, *Metaphors*, 1.

[5] Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2005).

[6] Charteris-Black, *Metaphors*, 233.

[7] Sanja Berberović and Mersina Mujagić, "A Marriage of Convenience or an Amicable Divorce: Metaphorical Blends in the Debates on Brexit", *ExELL,* 5.1 (October 2017), 9.

[8] Denise Milizia and Cinzia Giacinta Spinzi, "When a Relationship Ends There Can Be No Turning Back: The Divorce Metaphor in the Brexit Discourse", *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 34 (2020), 158.

"Please baby you have to give me a second chance."
"I've already said no. It's over."
"You've never even given me a proper reason."
"You're too controlling."
"I ask your opinion before I do anything."
"You don't respect my boundaries."
"We both agreed on an open relationship."
"Look, I feel like I'm losing my identity."
"Now you're just blaming me for your personal problems."
"All I know is that I'm unhappy and I need to be on my own for a while."
"So are you off the market?"
"Well I might start a new relationship."
"Oh, just like this huh?"
"Yes, why not?"
"Well maybe you're just not as hot as you think you are, eh?"
"Well, there's that American guy."
"Ah! He is not interested, he is only into himself."
"Well! Then there's India!"
"Your ex-boyfriend seriously? That was a toxic relationship! All you did was take, take take…and you call ME controlling?"
"I'm leaving! I've put your stuff in boxes on the table".[9]

As one can easily guess, the two voices in the sketch stand for the European Union and the United Kingdom, with the former questioning the latter about its decision to leave. However, the conversation between the two ex-spouses extends beyond Europe, introducing other nations – such as the United States and India – depicted as former partners whose relationships with the UK were similarly severed. The sketch then continues with a quarrel about the custody of Northern Ireland and the emergence of Scotland, eager to assert its long-sought independence.

In this context, the divorce metaphor functions as a narrative mechanism that reflects patterns that can be seen both in personal and international relations: the attribution of blame, the search for justification, the planning of an exit strategy that works for everyone, the reconstruction of an identity that appears destabilized through its interaction with the other. These dynamics, as is clear, have recurred throughout the complex history of the United Kingdom, a history that, in many respects, has been shaped by and subsequently narrated through actual divorces.[10]

The United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, formalized following the June 2016 referendum, thus represents merely the latest – and, for now, the most significant – turning point in this long and intricate historical trajectory to have been framed through the divorce metaphor. But how has this event been narrated? And by whom?

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[9] Foil Arms and Hog, "Brexit: The Divorce" (2018), *www.youtube.com*.

[10] One might consider the divorce of Henry VIII from Catherine of Aragon, which marked a rupture in Western Christianity and led to the establishment of the Anglican Church, or that of Edward VIII, which altered the line of succession to the British throne, or even the divorce between Charles and Diana, which marked the entry of the media into the history of the British monarchy. Historically, marriages, particularly in earlier periods, have served as strategic political instruments designed to unite noble houses, increase wealth, establish political balances between nations, and strengthen ruling parties or states. It is not coincidental, therefore, that the two most prominent monarchs named Elizabeth in English history – Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II – are both associated with significant matrimonial considerations. Elizabeth I's decision to remain unmarried, thereby avoiding political entanglements with foreign powers, contributed to the consolidation of a distinct British identity. In contrast, Elizabeth II, throughout her prolonged reign, endeavoured to associate the stability of the monarchy with the stability of the royal family, a relationship that was tested by a series of divorces within the family itself.

First and foremost, it is essential to clarify a temporal aspect: the presence and frequency of the divorce metaphor in Brexit discourse are predominantly concentrated in the period following the referendum outcome. The reason for this is readily apparent: framing Brexit in terms of divorce becomes both more meaningful and more effective once the separation has been formally set in motion. Although divorce is undoubtedly a process that unfolds over time, it only truly begins once a definitive decision has been made.

Thus, in most cases, the divorce metaphor in Brexit discourse is employed not to shape or influence the debate preceding the vote but rather to describe the decision *post factum* and the challenges that arise from that point onward. Its primary function is to narrate and analyse the choice ratified by the referendum – its motivations and its consequences – rather than to intervene in the discourse that preceded it. It is no coincidence that quantitative studies have identified the divorce metaphor primarily within traditional media, with its prevalence increasing in the weeks and months following June 23, 2016. Between 2016 and 2018, it is estimated that more than 3,000 newspaper articles incorporated the divorce metaphor in their headlines.[11] This trend is unsurprising, given that, as is well known, newspaper headlines must serve both as a concise summary of the underlying text and, more importantly, as a device to capture the reader's attention. In this regard, the divorce metaphor immediately activates a set of emotional associations linked to familiar personal dynamics: "Nowhere are our intuitions aroused more than when we are commenting on close friends who are getting divorced, and usually sides are taken, and moral judgments made as to the guilty party".[12]

Analysing the use of the divorce metaphor in traditional media reveals a landscape that is, as one might expect, far from uniform in meaning or intent. Milizia and Spinzi, who examined the metaphor's deployment across a corpus of newspapers and magazines with differing political orientations, conclude that "the DIVORCE metaphor has turned out to be malleable and moldable, according to the different perspectives and contexts: going through a separation can be a disaster and a tragedy, a humiliation, yet ending a marriage and taking a different path can be emotionally therapeutic".[13] Nevertheless, despite this apparent flexibility, their study identifies a prevailing tendency toward a negative connotation. In many cases, the divorce metaphor has been employed to highlight the more challenging and undesirable consequences of separation – both in practical and emotional terms – and has consequently appeared more frequently in pro-European newspapers. Within this framing, Brexit is often portrayed as an economically precarious divorce, given the disparity between the partners, or as a divorce characterized by tension and resentment, described as "stressful" and "riven by bad feelings on both sides".[14]

This predominantly negative interpretation is of course based on editorial choices but it is also, in some ways, inherent to the metaphor itself: divorce can be framed as a form of liberation or a reclamation of autonomy but it is more commonly associated with the breakdown of a relationship, an image that evokes emotions often far from positive. This may also explain why the metaphor appears significantly less frequently in the speeches of politicians directly involved in Brexit. Given its problematic and potentially painful undertones, the divorce metaphor is ill-suited to political rhetoric, which tends to maintain an optimistic and forward-looking tone. This is why then-Prime Minister Theresa May explicitly rejected it in an address to Parliament: "I prefer not to use the term of divorce

[11] Charteris-Black, *Metaphors*, 251.
[12] Ibid., 234.
[13] Milizia and Spinzi, "When a Relationship Ends There Can Be No Turning Back", 160.
[14] Ibid., 154.

from the European Union because very often when people get divorced they don't have a very good relationship afterwards".[15]

This rejection is particularly revealing of the metaphor's pervasiveness, an influence further confirmed by media discussions that, after having contributed significantly to its widespread adoption, later called for its abandonment due to overuse. As one BBC commentary observed, the metaphor had been "stretched to unsustainable lengths, with discussion about who gets to divide the music collection and keep the children and so on".[16] This trajectory is not uncommon; indeed, many metaphors lose their rhetorical force in direct proportion to their repetition, ultimately becoming what George Orwell termed "dying metaphors" that is "worn-out metaphors which have lost all evocative power and are merely used because they save people the trouble of inventing phrases for themselves".[17]

However, there is one domain in which the Brexit-divorce metaphor has retained a certain vitality despite the passage of time: fiction writing. Its continued relevance within the literary field is exemplified by the emergence of a specific literary genre dedicated to Brexit, commonly referred to as "Brexlit". As defined by Kristian Shaw, Brexlit encompasses "fictions that either directly respond or imaginatively allude to Britain's exit from the EU, or engage with the subsequent socio-cultural, economic, racial or cosmopolitical consequences of Britain's withdrawal".[18]

Almost ten years after the referendum, this body of work includes numerous narratives in which the divorce metaphor continues to resurface, underscoring its enduring capacity to frame and interpret the complexities of Brexit.

However, an essential distinction must be drawn at this juncture. Up to this point, the divorce metaphor has primarily functioned as a figure of speech, adhering to the somewhat reductive yet effective definition of a compressed simile*:* Brexit is like a divorce. In literary fiction, however, its role has changed and its meaning has grown. From a convenient analogy, the divorce metaphor has become an interpretative framework. Many novels and stories that fall under the label "Brexlit" depict relational tensions between characters – often culminating in actual divorce – whose underlying dynamics and motivations can be read as reflective of the broader sociopolitical forces that shaped Brexit itself.

In this context, the divorce metaphor becomes richer and more layered, moving beyond a simple comparison to take on an almost allegorical quality. It is no longer just a single image but a framework that gathers different narrative elements, turning the whole story into a kind of parallel interpretative space. A particularly illustrative example of this is *State of the Union: A Marriage in Ten Parts* (2019), a miniseries written by Nick Hornby and directed by Stephen Frears. As its title suggests, the work intertwines the political and social dimensions (*State of the Union*) with the emotional and personal (*A Marriage*), effectively using the intimate struggles of a couple as a lens through which to explore the complexities of Brexit. The story follows Tom and Louise, a married couple trying to save their relationship through therapy. But instead of showing the therapy sessions themselves, the series focuses on the brief moments before them, as they meet in a pub to talk about what went wrong and whether they can still repair what's left. Although Brexit is not the central theme of the story, it serves as an ever-present subtext. At times, it is explicitly invoked as a point of comparison: "When you think about it [therapy], it's like Brexit. There are going to be two years of talks before we even agree on

[15] Steven Pool, "Don't Say Divorce, Say Special Relationship: The Thorny Language of Brexit", *The Guardian* (7 April 2017), *www.theguardian.com*.
[16] James Landale, "Brexit Means What? Time for The Metaphors to Stop", BBC (2017), *www.bbc.com*.
[17] George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language", in G. Orwell, *Essays* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2002), 957.
[18] Kristian Shaw, "Brexlit", in Eaglestone, ed., *Brexit and Literature*, 15.

what the issues are".[19] More often, however, Brexit operates as a conceptual framework, subtly shaping the ways in which the couple's interactions can be interpreted.

During their pre-therapy encounters, Tom and Louise move back and forth between argument and reconciliation – between blame, regret, and brief flashes of connection. They keep asking themselves whether separation is inevitable or if there is still something left to save. At the heart of their crisis is a failure to communicate: neither of them can truly understand what the other wants or needs. This communicative impasse culminates in a moment of both comedic and symbolic significance: the discovery that they voted differently in the 2016 referendum. Louise, who supported Remain, sips a glass of Chardonnay – a drink evocative of a European sensibility – while Tom, who voted Leave, clings to his traditional English beer. In this charged juxtaposition, the couple's dynamic emerges as a microcosm of Brexit itself, offering a narrative vehicle through which its underlying tensions and contradictions can be explored.

It is thus impossible to draw a clear line between the personal and the political: the couple's intimate conversations in the foreground are inseparably linked to the broader socio-political landscape in the background. In its own way – each episode lasting a mere ten minutes – *State of the Union* exemplifies how fiction has adopted and materialized the Brexit-divorce metaphor, transforming it from a rhetorical device into a fully realized narrative structure. This, however, is not an isolated case. A closer examination of contemporary novels reveals even more intricate and problematic manifestations of this metaphor.

3. A Narrative of Separation: Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*

If in *State of the Union* the story unfolds around a pub table, where husband and wife discuss an impending divorce – while the one between the EU and the United Kingdom has already taken place – in Jonathan Coe's novel *Middle England*, the setting both expands and narrows at the same time. On one hand, *Middle England* weaves together multiple stories of multiple characters that take place before, during, and after Brexit, thus broadening and complicating the overall discourse. On the other hand, Coe focuses specifically on England – or perhaps more precisely, on a part of England – reducing Brexit to a more English than British issue. The title, in this regard, is emblematic on multiple levels. Middle England is a term that can have various meanings: geographical (the central region of England, where much of the novel is set), socio-economic (the middle class living in non-heavily urbanized areas), and electoral (a group of voters who are not firmly affiliated with a specific political party, whose vote can fluctuate significantly from one election to another, sometimes proving decisive). From the very title, then, Middle England seems to declare a specific interest in a particular part of England and to hint at an intention that is not only narrative but also, in some way, sociological. This is further confirmed by the structure of the text.

The novel is structured into three distinct sections – *Merrie England*, *Deep England*, and *Old England* – which together span nearly a decade, from April 2010 to September 2018. This period is characterized by profound shifts in English identity, explored through the experiences of the Trotter family – already the protagonists of Coe's earlier novels, *The Rotters' Club* (2001) and *The Closed Circle* (2004) – alongside their extended social and professional circles. By adopting a broad chronological framework and following a wide range of characters – varying in socio-economic status, political affiliations, and generational perspectives – Coe paints a vivid picture of English society in the second decade of the twenty-first century. In doing so, *Middle England* situates itself within the

[19] Nick Hornby, *State of the Union: A Marriage in Ten Parts* (London: Penguin Books, 2019), 23.

tradition of the state-of-the-nation novel, a genre that explores the socio-political and cultural dynamics of its time.

At this juncture, it hardly needs to be stated that the most defining historical event within the novel's temporal scope – the one that most starkly exposes the ideological and cultural fractures of contemporary Britain – is Brexit. Through its multifaceted structure, *Middle England* enables Coe to depict how individuals of different backgrounds, ages, and social positions both contributed to and were shaped by the radical political transformations of recent years, of which Brexit emerges as both a symptom and a catalyst. A significant example of this dynamic appears in the scene set during the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics. That moment of national celebration, designed to showcase unity and pride, becomes, in Coe's hands, a sort of prism through which the characters reveal their divergent perceptions of British identity. Coe builds the scene thorough a series of shifting perspectives, offering a fragmented, almost cinematic portrayal of how individuals interpret the same event through the lens of their cultural backgrounds, political orientations, and social positions.

The novel's characters are watching the ceremony on television and each is deriving from it emotions and impressions that frequently stand in contrast to one another. Doug Anderton, a left-wing journalist with little affinity for nationalist sentiment, for instance, perceives "an emotion he hadn't experienced for years – had never really experienced at all, perhaps, having grown up in a household where all expressions of patriotism had been considered suspect: national pride. Yes, why not come straight out and admit it, at this moment he felt proud, proud to be British".[20]

Doug's unexpected sense of national pride is, in a way, shared by Sophie Potter, a young university researcher and advocate of multiculturalism, who initially watches the event with scepticism but gradually becomes enthralled by its grandeur and spectacle, capable of winning over even the Queen:

> the Queen of fucking England, to take part in a film for the Olympic opening ceremony, and in fact it was even better than that, because the next thing that happened was that she was following Bond out of the palace and they were getting into a helicopter together, and then the helicopter took off and it was filmed rising high above Buckingham Palace and high above London, and soon afterwards it was approaching the Olympic stadium and then you had the greatest joke of all, the greatest stroke of genius, because they made it look as though the Queen and James Bond were jumping out of the helicopter together and parachuting into the stadium. (133)

However, two characters don't share these positive reactions. Helena Coleman and Colin Trotter – both, notably, belonging to an older generation – express appreciation for the segments of the ceremony that celebrate rural and industrial England but react with unease and indignation to the inclusion of elements they perceive as incongruous with the nation's cultural identity. Helena Coleman, the mother-in-law of Sophie Potter, is initially enthralled by "scenes of rural life being acted out in the arena"; however, upon seeing Black actors portraying Victorian industrialists, she becomes exasperated: "Why did they have to do that? Why? Did people have no respect for history anymore?" (131). Similarly, Colin Trotter is irritated by references "to the arrival of HMS Windrush, and Britain's first Jamaican immigrants", prompting him to mutter about "the bloody political correctness brigade" (132). In doing so, Coleman and Trotter clearly embody the discontent of a segment of the country toward cosmopolitanism. The final perspective in this series of mental snapshots is entrusted to Benjamin Trotter, a writer who, in apparent contrast to the diverse reactions preceding his own, perceives in the spectacle an image of England as "a country at ease with itself". This impression arises from a convergence of collective unity and personal nostalgia:

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[20] Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), 132. Further quotations from the novel will henceforth be included in parentheses in the text.

> the thought that so many millions of disparate people had been united, drawn together by a television broadcast, made him think of his childhood again, and made him smile. All was well. And the river seemed to agree with him: the river that was the only thing still to disturb the silence, proceeding on its timeless course, bubbling and rippling tonight, merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily. (139)

The final words of this scene also serve as the closing lines of the novel's second section. They are drawn from the well-known mid-nineteenth-century English nursery rhyme *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, whose naïve optimism momentarily misleads the reader into imagining that, along the Thames, the lives of the novel's protagonists might indeed flow "merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily". However, in the subsequent section, the narrative tone shifts markedly, particularly as the Brexit referendum approaches. The emotional bonds between various characters are tested, strained by ruptures and separations that underscore the deep metaphorical parallel between the dynamics of Brexit and those of a romantic relationship.

The most striking example of this parallel is the deterioration of the relationship between Sophie and Ian, Helena's son, a couple whose trajectory forms the central thread of the novel. The second section of the novel begins with a conversation between Sophie and her closest friend, Shoan, who, with a hint of mischief, expresses envy toward what he perceives as Sophie's stable and fulfilling relationship. Upon learning that she and Ian are about to embark on a cruise, Shoan cannot resist a sarcastic remark: "That's so romantic... just picturing the two of you together in your cabin, streaming across the Baltic. Like Kate Winslet and Leonardo Di Caprio... let's hope there are no icebergs" (147). The Titanic reference is a jest but it also carries a deeper meaning. The metaphor of the Titanic as a sinking ship has often been used in Brexit commentary,[21] to evoke images of national crisis and irreversible disaster. It is no coincidence, then, that the metaphor of the iceberg soon appears within Sophie and Ian's relationship, with Brexit itself serving as the impending collision. While on the cruise, Ian learns that he has been passed over for a promotion: the job he wanted has gone to his colleague, Naheed. The passengers around them react by expressing sympathy for Ian, their remarks echoing familiar grievances about fairness and belonging that sharply conflict with Sophie's own values and worldview:

> "We all know what it's like nowadays," said Mr Wilcox... This country. We all know the score. How it works. People like Ian don't get a fair crack of the whip any more."
> Sophie turned to look at Ian. Now, surely, he would intervene, protest, say something? But he didn't. And so, once again, she was the one who had to pursue the point.
> "When you say 'people like Ian', I suppose you mean white people?"
> Mr Wilcox, looking slightly embarrassed for the first time, glanced around at the other listeners, seeking support in their faces...
> "We don't look after our own any more, do we?" he said. "If you're from a minority – fine. Go to the front of the queue. Blacks, Asians, Muslims, gays: we can't do enough for them. But take a talented bloke like Ian here and it's another story".
> "Or maybe," said Sophie, "they just gave the job to the better candidate".
> She regretted saying it immediately. Ian was still silent, but she could tell he was smarting; and Mr Wilcox had pounced upon her misstep in no time.
> "I think you'd better decide," he said, "which is more important to you: supporting your husband, or being politically correct". (166)

[21] Charteris-Black, *Metaphors*, 8.

Ian remains silent, neither contesting nor confirming Mr. Wilcox's assumptions, and thus refrains from taking a clear stance whether in defence of or opposition to his wife. Over time, however, his dissatisfaction over the missed promotion intensifies. Gradually, and under the influence of his mother, he begins to perceive himself as a victim of discrimination within his own country, adopting Helena's nationalist and implicitly racialized worldview. It becomes evident, then, that Sophie and Ian will experience the socio-political climate of the Brexit referendum campaign in profoundly different ways, and that this deep ideological rift will inevitably take a toll on their relationship. Yet, it is particularly significant that the novel never depicts a direct confrontation between the spouses regarding the referendum. The probable friction on the issue runs subtly beneath the surface, in parallel with the couple's difficulties, like an ever-present but silent motif.

It is only in the final section of the novel, "Old England", that the parallel between Ian and Sophie's separation and the rupture between the UK and the EU is fully revealed. Sophie discloses that she and her husband had attempted "a very specific form of counselling, in fact. Post-Brexit counselling" (325). During one of these sessions, the couple is confronted with a question that exposes what had already been implicitly suggested: "Sophie, why are you so angry that Ian voted Leave? And Ian, why are you so angry that Sophie voted Remain?" (327). Sophie and Ian thus voted differently, and each of them resents the other for the political choice made. The explanations they provide for their feelings are particularly telling, illustrating the intersection between personal grievances and broader socio-political tensions. Sophie articulates her frustration as stemming from an unsettling realization about her husband's character: "I suppose because it made me think that, as a person, he's not as open as I thought he was. That his basic model for relationships comes down to antagonism and competition, not cooperation" (Ibid.). Ian, in turn, counters by criticizing Sophie's perceived lack of awareness: "It makes me think that she's very naive, that she lives in a bubble and can't see how other people around her might have a different opinion to hers. And this gives her a certain attitude. An attitude of moral superiority" (Ibid.).

The therapist, upon hearing their responses, expresses surprise that neither of them explicitly referenced politics, remarking, "as if the referendum wasn't about Europe at all" (Ibid.). Yet, the novel suggests that this omission is not accidental. Rather, it reflects the extent to which Brexit, beyond being a political event, was deeply entangled with personal and cultural identities. In Sophie and Ian's justifications, one can discern political sentiments that resonate far beyond their individual relationship echoing the emotions and divisions experienced by thousands of people across the country:

> Sophie's forthcoming divorce is presented as a metaphor of the national one, the divorce of the middle class from the educated élite caused by the politics of Brexit. The heterosexual couple, Sophie and Ian, embody British people who are having difficulty living together. This heterosexual couple appear to symbolise the difficult cohabitation of different social classes and evoke the disuniting of the country. Coe actually writes the story of two Englands that are no longer able to live together. Sophie and Ian represent these two different nations.[22]

Although Sophie and Ian's relationship serves as the central narrative thread in the novel and most explicitly embodies the metaphor of Brexit, theirs is not the only couple profoundly affected by the social and political upheaval surrounding the UK's departure from the EU. Indeed, every relationship depicted in the novel is, in some way, marked by discord, disillusionment, or separation. The prevalence of divorce is no coincidence; rather, it underscores the pervasive sense of rupture – both personal and national – brought about by Brexit. Benjamin, for instance, experiences a brief

[22] Imad Zrari, "*Middle England* by Jonathan Coe: a Brexit Novel or the Politics of Emotions", *L'Observatoire de la société britannique,* 25 (2020), 214.

resurgence of success following the publication of his novel and rekindles a romance with an old flame. However, the relationship never fully materializes, ultimately dissolving as Benjamin decides to leave England and move to France with his sister Lois, Sophie's mother, who too has finally decided to divorce: "Is now a good time to be moving to Europe?" she asked. "With Brexit and everything?" – "We've looked into that", said Benjamin. "As long as you move before 29 March next year, nothing changes" (402).

March 29, 2017, is the date when the UK, invoking Article 50, officially begins the process of leaving the European Union and it serves as a symbolic endpoint for Coe's novel. This date marks both a political and personal turning point since Sophie decides to seek out Ian, despite the pain of their separation and her growing disillusionment with academia. In a final attempt to reconcile, she chooses to reconnect with him, suggesting a lingering hope for renewal amidst fragmentation.

The novel's closing lines reveal that Sophie is expecting a child with Ian, with the due date set for March 29, 2018, exactly one year after Brexit's formal initiation. The child to come, referred to as "their beautiful Brexit baby" (421), becomes a potent symbol of an England still in the process of redefining itself. The paradox of its conception – born from division yet embodying a future yet to be written – mirrors the uncertainties of the nation's post-Brexit trajectory: a country, whose future is shaped by contradictory choices and conflicting hearts, that must find the best way to rebuild and redefine itself.

In both its structure and its language, Coe's novel – like Hornby's text – demonstrates how narrative discourse can transform the political sphere into the personal one, and consequently, how political language can be transfigured into emotional language. A separation between nations thus becomes both the cause and the mirror of a separation between individuals. A metaphor turns into a metaphorical story. This once again shows that cultural discourse does not merely replicate political reality but actively participates in its construction: the words of Coe, Hornby, and many others stand as a way of reimagining what it means to be together – or apart – in post-Brexit Britain.