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Britain Rewritten: Postcolonial Short Stories

Zadie Smith's *Hanwell in Hell*
a postcolonial story?

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1. Introduction

A newspaper announcement, two strangers, a fox, a dark red room and a separated family.

Reading these words their connection does not seem apparent. However, they all find their meaning in Zadie Smith's novella *Hanwell in Hell*. Trying to make sense out of this raises interest of taking a critical look on this piece of literature.

Families are one or two parents who live together with their children (Oxford Dictionary). But what happens if a family loses a member and in addition to that does not live together anymore? This and other questions arise in Zadie Smith's novella *Hanwell in Hell*. Also dealing with a mixed family and its raises interest to read the story in a Postcolonial context.

Multiculturality, the search for identity, racism, and the remnants from a postcolonial time are only a few issues of the postcolonial time we live in. Reading contemporary literature one comes across some of the named topics. As one example the novella *Hanwell in Hell* and its meaning in a postcolonial context will be discussed in this paper. However, the interpretation of the novella in this paper is only on of many possible interpretations.

Before analysing the novella, the famous author Zadie Smith will be introduced. However, her personal details are not the main subject of this introduction, but her popularity and success as an author of the present time.

After the introduction of Zadie Smith some narrative information about the novella *Hanwell in Hell* will be given. This narrative analysis shall help to focus on those parts of the novella that will be discussed in the next chapter from a literary view.

In the fourth chapter some of the main topics of the novella, such as multicultural families, personal loss and colour-blindness will be interpreted. Most of the arguments given are of my own personal interpretation. Other views will be shown as well, as the novella creates the possibility of different interpretations of one night in the life of the main character Hanwell.

This paper will be closed with the conclusion which will answer some questions that arise by reading the novella, e.g. Why is Hanwell in 'Hell'? and why is the novella an interesting and suitable example of postcolonial literature and what makes it interesting to read in that context?

2. Who is Zadie Smith?

The author Zadie Smith was born in London 1975 as Sadie Smith. She grew up in a multicultural home together with two brothers as daughter of a Jamaican mother and a British father (cf. Walters 2008, 1).

During her studies at Cambridge University she got in contact with different writers who's stile she partly adapted to show her sympathy with them. In these writings Smith already indicated themes like multiculturalism, hybridity and identity. Still at Cambridge Smith was offered a deal to write two books. The first one was the novel *White Teeth* that made her famous internationally. Critics were impressed that she covered so many present themes in the novel. It is said that the combination of postcolonialism, multiculturalism, religious fundamentalism, hybridity aesthetics, and humour was something new and very catching (cf. Walters 2008, 2). *White Teeth* was published in 2000. In retrospect Smith introduced a new style of writing into the new millennium. Her first novel marks a significant step for Black British writing and also for female writing (cf. Thompson 2005, 122). In the book *British Black and Asian Literature* Smith's *White Teeth* is mentioned in the timeline of important events of the time, next to many other important literature, which proves the importance of this novel for its time (cf. Osborne 2016, xx).

As daughter of a parent with a migrant history she is part of a big multicultural community in Britain. The conflict of defining where 'home' is or to which group of society one belongs to connects her with many people of her generation. This feeling often appears in her texts which was one point in her writing that struck the time (cf. Thompson 2005, 122).

Not only her interesting stile of writing but also Smith as a person became interesting for the media which helped her gain international attention. A young black woman who was writing a profound novel that contains themes of the time was something to look at. *White Teeth* was so successful that in 2002 BBC produced mini-series for British television. However, Smith was very negatively critical about her first novel (cf. Walters 2008,2).

It is to say that Smith quickly became a successful writer, and still is. Already in 2002 she was elected to the *Royal Society of Literature*. Two times Smith was honoured *Best Young British Novelist*, 2003 and 2013. Many other prices show Smith's achievement. Currently, she is a tenured professor of fiction at New York University (cf. Zadie Smith). Before Smith taught in New York she was professor at Harvard and Columbia universities (cf. NYU).

3. Narratological analysis of *Hanwell in Hell*

In the following chapter *Hanwell in Hell* will be discussed through Gérard Genette's terminology. The module of interpretation of narrative texts that is used here can be found in the publication of Nünning and Nünning *An Introduction to the Study of English and American Literature*.

The novella *Hanwell in Hell* was published in 2004. It starts with a short newspaper advertisement posted by one of the three daughters of the main character Hanwell. The daughter who wrote the advertisement wants to find out what had happened to her father in the time between 1970 to 1973.

The story of Hanwell is narrated in the year 2004 by Clive Black who functions as narrator of the novella. In his response to the newspaper advertisement Clive Black begins to tell the story of his encounter with Hanwell in 1970 from his point of view. In the letter Clive Black reports the past events and sometimes comments on them. E.g. Black reflects on the situation where he felt at the lowest point of his life. (cf. p. 10) The storyline moves linearly from the first situation at the restaurant to the walk to Hanwell's flat where in the end the two men watch the sunrise. Both the letter and story end back in present time, in 2004. Black addresses the daughter directly in three sentences. He gives his opinion to the situation between the family members.

The story time goes from the late evening until sunrise on the next morning of one night. Clive Black is a stranger to Hanwell. But nevertheless Black describes the night in great detail. This character narrates the story as homodiegetic narrator through the writing of the letter to one of the main characters daughters. He also is the focalizer with an internal view to actions that are described over thirty years after the actual happenings. Through the internal focalization the reader gets the chance to find out what the character Black thinks and feels in the night, as far as he tells about it. This brings both men closer to the reader, because the detailed descriptions and feelings either outspoken or in thought give more opportunity for interpretation. The reader can feel the sorrow of Hanwell missing his daughters and also the change in Black realising that Hanwell's situation is actually worse than his own. The reader can make up their individual opinion about the situation, however, through the internal focalization the reader is led to follow Black's way of thinking.

As the reader gets the information that the described happenings took place many years before the letter was written indicates a flashback for the narrator. Black remembers what happened in

the described night. Based on this fact the reader can't be sure if all the actions really took place as described by Black. Yet, this doesn't make the narrator unreliable. Through the details with which Hanwell is presented and the shared thoughts about his situation shows the narrator as reliable, he doesn't want to mislead. Why should he? There is no reason why the narrator should help Hanwell to stand in a better light, because they only met once.

By reading about Hanwells suffering the feeling of hope could appear. Hope that Hanwell and his daughters will live together again. As Black starts to feel for his pickup this could be reflected on the reader as well. In the story it is recognisable that Hanwell influences Black without meaning to. Even though Hanwell is colour-blind colours play an important role in the novella, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

(cf. Nünning & Nünning 2014, 101-130)

4. A critical interpretation of *Hanwell in Hell*

After the theoretical based analysis of the narration now the focus is laid on the interpretation of the text.

The settings of the novella are places in Bristol, the Italian restaurant 'Franks', a Park and Hanwell's flat. Part of the action of the novella are the two main male characters Hanwell and Clive Black. Some side characters appear as well. It is interesting that the first name of Hanwell is not mentioned but Black's is. It could be an indication of the importance of family for Hanwell. Without it he is an incomplete man who tries to hold on to the last thing of his family that is left to him, the family name.

Black and Hanwell only met one night. Nevertheless it sounds like Black got to know Hanwell extremely well for that very short time. In the letter the actions of this one night are described in great detail. This creates the feeling of closeness between the characters. Remembering smallest details after over thirty years let the feelings of extraordinariness appear for the narrator that gets transferred to the reader. Extraordinariness in that way that the described night influenced Black many years.

The place where Black and Hanwell met does not seem to be the nicest Italian restaurant. 'Franks' was not known for good dishes but for a good atmosphere. Black went there with a girl. After meeting Hanwell who cleans the dishes he is no longer interested in the her. After all these years Black can't remember her name, only her appearance, an indication of

superficiality to the women. Meeting Hanwell changes Black's priority of conversation and outcome of the evening.

Due to the bad conditions of the restaurant's owner, an alcoholic, it is possible that Hanwell and Black meet. So there is a third man who struggles with his life. In this text men do appear as creatures who pretend to be strong and in no need of somebody else. But mentally they realise that nobody can be without help, at some points in the story the two main characters realise that they need women because no man is able to react in an appropriate way when talking about feelings. The reader gets to know Hanwell's situation and the pain that comes with it. Additionally, some information is given that Frank, the owner of the restaurant is an alcoholic and not able to make money out of his restaurant because he needs it for his drinks (cf. p. 26-27). Information about Black is not clearly described. He only thinks about his downfall but does not tell Hanwell about it. The two things he mentions are that his wife is in Timbuktu (cf. p. 36) and he has a daughter (cf. p. 48). Losing his business and his house Black wants everybody else to know that he is miserable with the situation, but he doesn't talk openly about it. Maybe he is ashamed of his situation but can't help it at the moment (cf. p. 37).

Telling that his wife is in Timbuktu could be a metaphor that they split up and that she is just somewhere but dead for Black in a way. At least she is far away from him in the middle of Africa. So their connection does not seem close at all (cf. p. 36). He does not feel too sad about this situation when meeting with other young women and hoping to get sexual contact with them (cf. p. 28). Hanwell instead thinks differently about women. For him women are a beautiful "signal that the world is good" (Smith 2004, 7). The suicide of Hanwell's wife doesn't seem to change this. Maybe thinking of his pretty daughters helps him to overcome his pain of losing his wife that way. Interestingly Black sees that men can't do everything without women. Throwing up after Hanwell killed the fox makes him feel uncomfortable. The problem is that as a man he is not able to talk about his feelings. Black also gets the impression that Hanwell tries to comfort him but is also unable to find suitable words for the situation. Black comes to the conclusion that men like Hanwell and himself "don't know how to comfort each other. [They] need women for that" (Smith 2004, 10).

After the two men in the restaurant found out that they both were in France during the Second World War a topic is found that they can talk about. Often war brings people together who experienced it in similar ways like it appears to be with the two men. This connection and the

influence of alcohol brings Black to the idea to finish the night with Hanwell (cf. p. 32/33, 36). Hanwell has something different in mind but at this point he does not tell the stranger about it.

In the way the two men live they are both similar and different. It is not recognisable out of which social class they are from. But in 1970 they both were in bad financial conditions. Cleaning dishes does not show a high position in society as well as going to 'Franks'. It is described as popular for people who can't afford expensive places. Black writes about a small filthy flat in which he lived at the time (cf. p. 25). Hanwells flat is small too, but welcoming, clean and nicely decorated (cf. p. 42).

Another big difference is the way Hanwell and Black see their situation. In the streets on the way to Hanwells flat Black sees himself on the lowest point of his life (cf. p.41). Hanwell instead claims himself as optimist (cf. p. 35) which seems to be true by the way he is described by the narrator. After the sad death of his wife he is still hoping that his girls will come and stay with him in Bristol, even though they don't respond to his letters and he thinks that they blame him for the suicide of their mother (cf. p. 46). The way Hanwell talks about his daughters and the explanation why he chose the colour of the paint presents him as a loving and caring father. The girls should wake up in a room where the morning sun shines. Hanwell thought that he bought yellow paint. But because of his colour-blindness he took a red colour that was named Deepest Sun.

Red colour plays an important role in the storyline. It appears in each of the three settings and strengthens its amount and intensity as the sorrow of Hanwell is shown more and more. At 'Franks' Black drinks a bottle of Chianti. The bottle is likely green and in a basket but the wine inside is red. At the restaurant it is recognisable that Hanwell doesn't have the nicest life but his problems stay, at that point of the story, behind the green glass of the bottle (cf. p. 26, 35). Out in the park Hanwell hears the cry of a fox. Fox fur is coloured in a special shade of orange. This colour contains red and yellow. Red colour is already recognisable but not in a pure form (cf. p. 38-39). It seems that the fox's injuries are inside. Neither Black or Hanwell can see any wounds. Because the fox gets a good part of attention in the storyline it must be important. There are two ways of reading this. First the fox is a symbol for Hanwells family. Father and daughters are hurt through the suicide of the mother. Each individual in his or her own way. From the outside nothing is recognisable, wounds are inside. By ending the fox's misery Hanwell symbolically also kills his family (cf. Stuckey 2008, 163). Secondly, the fox symbolises Hanwell himself. By not being together with his daughters he is in pain. Inside he

is hoping that somebody ends his sorrow as well. He hopes for a happy end and not the death of his soul (cf. p. 48). Either way Hanwell is part of the fox's symbol and it is recognisable for the reader that the story will not end with a happy family that finds together again. The deepest red is found in Hanwells flat. Because of his colour-blindness he bought a dark red paint instead of yellow for the room of his girls (cf. p. 46-47). His hope is as strong as the paint of the room but following the symbol of the fox Hanwell could know somewhere deep inside him that his daughters won't come even though he does not admit this to himself. The unanswered letters may indicate that the girls resist to live with their father. Another possibility could be that the letters never reach the daughters because their aunt and uncle hide them to protect the children from more pain. The title of the novella sees Hanwell in hell. Often hell is shown as a place where only fire exists, lots of varieties of red and the worst end for any human being. Hanwell is in his personal hell of loss and loneliness. There is nothing left that could make his situation worse.

Following Stuckey Hanwells colour-blindness is not only about paint but also the colours of his family. The father in the story is described as sandy-haired (cf. p. 29), bull nosed (cf. p. 33), and too bald for his age of early 40's (cf. p. 31). In the conversation with Black they both identify each other as East Anglicans (cf. p. 31). All in all it is recognisable that Hanwell is white. Having a look at the photograph of the daughters the presented dark hair is a hint of the mother as a black woman. The Hanwells are a multicultural family. This makes it harder to come together for father and daughters after the death of the mother. Multicultural in this case means family members of three different skin colours and cultural backgrounds coming together (Stuckey 2008, 161).

“[...] Most families, personalities differ, and in their case, the most basic shared physical and cultural characteristics are tenuous or contradictory” (Stuckey 2008, 161-162).

This also is a point that makes it harder for the Hanwells to come together again. The father is colour-blind to the fact that his daughters differ from him which makes it even harder for the family. Two of the three colours of the family are left. As a white father it appears hard to imagine how teenage girls, which are neither white nor black might feel. Stuckey calls the situation of the girls “cultural no-man's land” (Stuckey 2008, 164). It could feel like a loss of identity which is a theme Smith also plays with in other works of hers. This lack of identity could be one reason why, after thirty years, the daughter wants to find out what happened to her father. According to Stuckey Hanwell is shown as a contradictory character. In one way he

hopes on the other he defeats his situation. Pretending to be sure his girls will live with him but also thinking that they blame him for the death of the mother and not responding to his letters. Hanwell is presented blind in many different ways (cf. Stuckey 2008, 160-164).

At the end of the story the narrator addresses the letter to the daughter who posted the announcement in the newspaper. Again Hanwell is described extremely hopeful. It is said that the daughter blames her father too hard. A man who is so hopeful that he hopes red into yellow shouldn't be treated like that, in the opinion of Black (cf. p. 49).

The described time of the action in the 70's does not seem random. The daughter searches for her father in an announcement in a newspaper. It does not say when she did it but through the letter of Black the reader gets the information that Black met Hanwell in 1970. Thirty-four years added to the year of 1970, when the two characters met, the reader finds out that Hanwell's daughter is looking for him in 2004, the year of the publication of the novella. This could have brought a reader in 2004 much closer to the actions, because it felt more realistic. Daughter and father get also a closer connection because it appears that in 2004, when she is looking for her father, she is about the same age that Hanwell was in 1970. They live in different times but maybe have similar experiences at this point of life.

Neither through the announcement nor the letter it is possible to find out if Hanwell is still alive or not. It is possible that he is, but it is not clarified. For the novella it is not important even though it is imaginable that readers lack for this information to find out if Hanwell got to a happy end which doesn't appear to happen through the progression of the story.

5. Conclusion: The importance of *Hanwell in Hell*/ Why does Smith put Hanwell in hell?

Questions stay unanswered. Why is Hanwell in hell? Who put him there? Is Hanwell really in hell? The first question is the easiest to answer as it was slightly mentioned earlier. The father of three daughters is in hell because he obviously misses them. Distance is between them because of the suicide of the mother. For the girls it must feel like they lost both parents staying with relatives instead of the father. Through the story there are no information why Hanwell left his children in London to work in Bristol. To find a job as a dishwasher in a restaurant seems not to be a hard job to find. Losing somebody beloved, especially through suicide is hard for people. Often they blame themselves that as a close person they were not able to stop the loved one to commit suicide. Nevertheless as father one is responsible to care for the

children. Hanwell obviously was not there for his daughters even though he seems to love them. However this is a view from a person growing up in the longest period of peace in Europe. War changes people and does not only wound flesh. Worse are the mental damages. Hanwell was very young when he had to go to war. It is possible that he never recovered from his mental injuries.

This leads to the second question. Who put him in hell? In the end it looks like Hanwell himself did it in different ways. By leaving his children behind he destroyed the family. It is easy for the teenage girls to blame their father for the mother's death, because he is not there for them either. Financially Hanwell is not in the best position. Maybe he has no money to go to London to take his children with him or at least talk with them to clarify the situation and his feelings. In the novella it is mentioned by the narrator that men like Black and Hanwell are not able to comfort themselves or each other, they need women for it. Hanwell's girls could possibly help him to express his feelings. What the reader is not able to find out is if Hanwells daughters really put him in hell or not. Because of the distance between the family members it is not possible to find it out. It is likely that the girls already found closure with their father when he left them. It is also possible that Hanwell himself and his daughters put him into hell. The question if Hanwell really is in hell appears obvious looking at his financial and private situation. But claiming himself as an optimist it is possible that Hanwell looks over his sorrow and tries to put all his energy in hoping for better times that possibly will come. Observing from the outside it looks like Hanwell is in hell but through the report of the narrator Black it is possible that Hanwell doesn't see himself in hell or at least hoping not to be there.

Topics of the present, postcolonial, time are shown in the novella. The Hanwell family contains three different cultural backgrounds. It is more common now to be part of a different form of family that what is called a 'classical family' with heterosexual parents who are married and their biological children. Many people of present time could identify with on side of the Hanwell family and are able to connect their own experiences of a multicultural family with the Hanwells. Through new family models and globalisation it can happen that children grow up with only one biological parent. Today it is easier to stay in contact but nevertheless it can be hard to stay in contact. Once it is lost it can be difficult to get it back. Through digital media this possibility luckily becomes smaller. Thinking of TV shows like *Long Lost Family*, which aims to reunite family members who have lost contact for many years, represent a great number of people who still hope to find lost relatives. The show is on since 2011 which indicates the

interest of viewers as well as the possible need in families. Hanwell's daughter also tries to find out what happened to her father.

One other topic of postcolonialism is identity. Both men lost their old identity and are trying to get it back. Black misses his wealth that he just recently lost. Hanwell lost his role as father by leaving his children behind. These are some points that make Smith's novella important and interesting to read in a postcolonial context.

Through the detailed description and conversations about his family Hanwell's story is touching. Combined with themes that concern many people of different age groups makes *Hanwell in Hell* an interesting and worth reading story especially in a postcolonial context.

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