

A SENSE OF LOSS IN HILARY MANTEL'S *A CHANGE OF CLIMATE*

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ABSTRACT

In *A Change of Climate*, Hilary Mantel portrays the life of the Eldred family both in England and Africa. In this novel, as in many others, Mantel deals with some of the topics she is more concerned with: religion, faith, displacement and identity; however, there is another protagonist in this novel apart from Anna and Ralph Eldred: loss. In this paper, it is shown how the Eldreds move from one loss to another and how, in a very autobiographical manner, Mantel deals with the loss of dreams, faith, children, or roots. Following different interpretations of psychoanalytic theory, this article explores the way the Eldreds deal with loss, the different processes of mourning they go through and their attempts to overcome the grief produced by the most important loss in their lives: their son.

KEYWORDS: loss of children, loss of faith, displacement, mourning, Hilary Mantel.

RESUMEN

En *A Change of Climate*, Hilary Mantel nos muestra la vida de la familia Eldred, tanto en Inglaterra como en África. En esta novela, como en muchas otras, Mantel trata algunos de los temas en los que más suele interesarse en su producción literaria: la religión, la fe, el desplazamiento y la identidad. Sin embargo, en la novela hay otra protagonista además de Anna y Ralph Eldred: la pérdida. En este artículo se muestra cómo la vida de los Eldred les lleva de una pérdida a otra y cómo, de manera muy autobiográfica, Mantel retrata la pérdida de los sueños, la fe, los hijos o las raíces. A través de distintas interpretaciones de la teoría del psicoanálisis, se muestra también el modo en que los Eldred se enfrentan al sentimiento de pérdida, los distintos procesos de duelo por los que pasan y sus intentos por sobreponerse al dolor que se produce por la pérdida más importante de sus vidas: su hijo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: pérdida de los hijos, pérdida de la fe, desplazamiento, duelo, Hilary Mantel.



1. INTRODUCTION

In 1985, Hilary Mantel published her first novel, *Every Day is Mother's Day*. Since then, all her novels have received praise from both critics and readers, and have been awarded a number of literary prizes, being Mantel the first woman to receive the Booker Prize for Fiction twice, once for *Wolf Hall* (2009), and another for its sequel *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012). Mantel has been described as one of the authors that contributed to the emergence of a new generation of writers in the late '80s and early '90s and considered as a writer who was part of the reinvigoration of women's fiction during those years (Bradbury 445-446). In the same line, other critics such as Garan Holcombe have defined Mantel as one of the most interesting novelists writing in English today; and even other peer writers like Maggie Gee, Fay Weldon or Margaret Atwood have praised her work.

Hilary Mantel is a rich and versatile writer indeed: she has written social novels, historical novels, she has dealt with postcolonial and feminist issues; she has done travel writing, has written short stories and collaborates with specialised publications with reviews and articles. That is the reason why it seems impossible to classify her in a main literary trend or genre. Her own life has been complex and has no doubt contributed to this variety in her writing and as a source for numerous ideas for her books. Actually, *A Change of Climate*, published in 1994, can be considered as a novel which includes several autobiographical elements and a great variety of topics Mantel is more concerned with in her writings. When this novel was released, it was defined in a review in the *Daily Telegraph* as a "complex and highly intelligent portrayal of injustice, bereavement and the loss of faith" (Blake 7); these and other complex topics as the nature of good and evil are discussed in this novel, and it is probably because of the way in which Mantel deals with these difficult themes that the novel was very well received and praised by critics.

A Change of Climate tells the story of the Eldred family in two different moments: their life in South Africa and Botswana as missionaries and their life in Norfolk, England, twenty years later, during the 1980s, where they still do charity work for the community. When Ralph has to renounce to a career as a geologist due to his father's opposition—he considered it against God and religion—he escapes from his town to South Africa with his wife, Anna, soon after their marriage. When they get to South Africa, they discover, little by little, the horrors and injustices of the apartheid system and they work hard to help as much as they can; however, it is impossible for them not to get involved with the situation that the black South Africans were living, and when they denounce it, they get jailed and then deported to another mission in Botswana. It is in this new placement where they suffer the most horrific event of their lives: the loss of one of their children. After this tragic experience, they go back to England, never to talk about it anymore, to escape the pain of the past. However, with the passing of time and the new events taking place in their lives in England twenty years later, such as Ralph's infidelity, we discover what really happened in Botswana and how it marked their lives forever.

As for the autobiographical elements, apart from the possible influences that Hilary Mantel may have had from other writers, or the links she or the crit-



ics can find with them, it is probably her own life that has exerted a most relevant influence on her writings. Her novels are not totally autobiographical, but she undoubtedly writes from personal experience. In the case of *A Change of Climate*, many autobiographical details are to be found: in the late 1970s, when she was in her twenties, Mantel lived during five years in Botswana, because of her husband's job as a geologist, which is what Ralph wanted to be. As she has acknowledged, her stay in Africa was very influential in her life, since, as she explains, "what I did do was changing quite a lot as a person, changed the way I thought about things, and therefore by an indirect route it made me into a different kind of a writer from the one I would have been" (Arias 286). Moreover, after the first three years, she had to go back to England because of her illness, endometriosis, which resulted in her impossibility to have children. This is something that marked her life and was very influential in her writings, and *A Change of Climate* is indeed a clear example of her obsession with lost children.

At the same time and also related with autobiographical details, in this novel Mantel deals with religious concerns, as well as with displacement and identity questions, which are two topics that are key components not only in this novel, but also in Mantel's literary production. Albeit considered a mainstream writer, and despite the fact that she was born and raised in England, Mantel comes from an Irish Catholic family, which is why she has acknowledged to feel out of the definition of what being "English" means, both because of her Catholic background, which has been very influential for her as a writer, and because of the feeling of non-belonging that she felt both as a child in England and during the time she spent abroad.

A Change of Climate deals in fact with some of the main topics Mantel is concerned with in her literary production. Interestingly enough, the key components in this novel —religion and faith, displacement and identity questions, and the disappearance of a child— are all autobiographical elements, which are also interconnected by a feeling of loss. The experience of loss has been largely discussed in literature, and narratives of loss appear very frequently in contemporary writing: loss of one's childhood in memoirs, loss of identity and freedom in postcolonial literature, loss of loved ones in literature of the wars, etc.

At the same time, the concept of loss is a key element for the theory of psychoanalysis, and has been widely explored from Freud to more contemporary interpretations of Freud's ideas by a number of experts such as Watkin, LaCapra, Lacan, Derrida, Kristeva or Butler¹. Loss, the responses to it and the working through to get over it were firstly defined by Sigmund Freud, who, throughout his career, tried to develop a theory on how loss was an essential part in the development of the subject. In his most influential study about loss, *Mourning and Melancholia*, he established a distinction between two different responses to loss. On the one hand,

¹ For a more complete study and a deeper analysis of the concept of loss, see David L. Eng and David Kazanjian's *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* and Amy Prodrromou's *Navigating Loss in Women's Contemporary Memoir*.



he defined mourning as the reaction to the loss of something or somebody so that, once it has been got over, the past is declared resolved and the person suffering from that loss can move on. On the other hand is melancholia, which could be defined as a persistent struggle with lost objects and a consequent inability to resolve the grief caused by loss as well as refusal and failure to accept it.

However, despite this clear distinction, in a revision of his own subsequent studies of the concept of loss, he acknowledged at the end of his career that melancholia is not a pathological disorder suffered by those who do not know how to get over the phase of mourning; as Tammy Clewell explains, Freud redefined both concepts: “mourning assumes the status of ‘an interminable labor’, constantly engaged in working through the subject’s past attachments” whereas “melancholia, in turn, becomes recuperated as ‘normal’ condition which, instead of threatening to dissolve the ego, plays an important part in its constitution” (Clewell 13).

Despite this last redefinition of both concepts, in more recent studies of loss other psychoanalysts and researchers such as Watkin or LaCapra agree on their criticism of Freud and claim that there is no good or bad mourner but varieties of the same response, since, to them, there are more nuanced responses to loss than those offered by Freud. With poststructuralism, Derrida offered a new way of dealing with the process of mourning, whereby the best way of overcoming loss is by applying the notion of “semimourning”. In the words of Derrida, “I cannot complete my mourning for everything I lose, because I want to keep it, and at the same time, what I do best is to mourn, is to lose it, because by mourning, I keep it inside me” (Weber 151-2). Together with these, there have been many other interpretations of loss in the construction of the self and in the way it can be overcome, exploring the concepts of grief, loss, mourning or melancholia from different perspectives.

After these brief theoretical considerations, it can be acknowledged how *A Change of Climate* is clearly a narrative about loss. In this case, loss appears in different aspects of life, both symbolic and real ones, and all of them based on autobiographical losses for Mantel. Along their lives, the Eldreds will suffer from loss, moving from one loss to another and being some elements lost because of a previous loss. A disparity of elements such as the dreams of a young man, family, place and identity, a child, or faith, are lost in this novel. The aim of this paper is to study how most of these losses are linked with Mantel’s life in some way, as well as to explore how loss affects the protagonists, how each loss changes their lives and the way they respond and try to overcome them.

2. ESCAPING FROM ENGLAND: THE LOSS OF A DREAM

A Change of Climate begins in England, in the 1980s, with the funeral of Felix, the lover of Ralph’s sister, Emma, although we are immediately taken to the description of the Eldreds’ house and family. Anna and Ralph Eldred have been married for 25 years and have four children: Katherine, Julian, Robin and Rebecca. Ralph works for a religious charitable trust and Anna takes care of the house and the



children and, sometimes, she is also in charge of some youngsters that Ralph brings home from the trust when the social services cannot do anything else for them.

From the different scenes in the funeral and the narrator's comments on what others think and say, we learn how Ralph and Anna Eldred were seen by the people around them. Hence, the first impression we get about Ralph is that he is "a man who thought only of work, God and family" (*A Change of Climate* 9), and that his life had always been under his parents' influence and control, so much that "he had never freed himself from his parents" (20). In the case of Anna, she is seen as a wife who "was worn to a shadow slaving for his [Ralph's] concerns" (9).

In this first part of the book, and very often through the main characters' dreams, we know about the reasons that took Ralph to leave England to work as a missionary in Africa. Ralph's dream of his father and grandfather when he was only three years old takes us to the description of his family, and later, to a town on the Yorkshire coast, where he spent some summers as a child, to a landscape and a setting which reminds of those in John Fowles' *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, and where his interest in geology began from the discovery of a fossil in the coast. In secret he keeps his discoveries, and he is encouraged by a school teacher to go on studying. The moment he decides to study geology at university and tells his father, there is a large dispute: Ralph's father, Matthew, had other plans for his son. Matthew was a very conservative and religious man, and when he learns about Ralph's ideas, he begins to behave, in Ralph's words, "like a caricature of a Victorian patriarch" (49). Matthew defends Creationism, and consequently rejects any Darwinist theory of evolution categorically; that is why he tells Ralph, when he knows about his son's decision, that if he decides to go on with his ideas, there will be no money to support him. At the same time, his mother also reminds him that appearances are highly important to her; she was very worried about what other people could say about him and the family if he was to study geology, even blackmailing him saying that Emma, Ralph's sister, would not be allowed to get to medical school if he went on with his plans. When Ralph finally decides not to go on with his dream, the feeling of sadness and disappointment he begins to have will not disappear in the rest of the novel. This is also the first time that the feeling of loss appears in the novel: the loss of a dream that brings Ralph's frustration and the subsequent decision of going away.

From his choice of escaping his father's imposed norms comes the second feeling of loss: the loss of family and identity. It is because of this dispute with his family that he decides to go away from England after his National Service and his wedding with Anna, since he thinks that the best way to do that is to follow his uncle James's experience as a missionary in Africa. James offers them a job in Dar-es-Salaam, as teachers of English, and Ralph immediately accepts it, thinking that, by doing this, he would be in charge of his own life: "from now on I shall take control, I shall order my own life, just as I like. I am going to Africa because I want to go, because Anna wants it. When I return I shall be my own man" (58). But with this decision he was just trying to convince himself, as the only reason why he wanted to leave was because he did not fit in the environment of his family, and because he wanted to go away from his father to show him that he was able to lead his own



life, to take his own decisions. However, as Ralph's uncle puts it, when you go to Africa "out of your own need, not out of the need of the people you were supposed to serve" (95), things usually do not go as one expected, and after a period living in Africa, the Eldreds realise that they were not ready to go there.

Anyway, after a process of mourning in which Ralph feels sadness and rage, it seems that the only way to overcome this lost dream and go on with his life, is going away from what makes him suffer —family— and trying to show that he is able to run his own life by moving to Africa. Ralph loses his dream and his family, but, by moving, he would also lose his roots. From now on, he would feel out of place and the feeling of loss will only increase and never abandon him.

3. LIFE IN AFRICA: LOSS OF IDENTITY, LOSS OF A CHILD, LOSS OF FAITH

After Ralph and Anna get married, they travel to Africa, but not to the place they were supposed to go. Apparently, they were needed in another place, in Elim, a town in South Africa near Johannesburg. Anna accepted this change of placement, although before abandoning England she was not very sure about what she would find in Africa, and her ideas about how it would be were totally illusory and unreal. When they arrive in Africa and have to face the situation that people are living, they realise that life there is not as they saw it from England. The part of the novel that takes place in South Africa is set in the fifties —the Eldreds leave for Africa in 1956— when the apartheid main laws were imposed. As Ralph and Anna went to South Africa to participate in the mission as teachers of English, their lives and jobs were mainly affected by the passing of the Bantu Education Act in 1953, which was implemented from 1955 to 1966. This law segregated even further the already racially separated system of South Africa, where black people had already been deprived of citizenship, they had no political representation and segregation had been established in education, medical care, beaches and public services in general. Throughout this part of the story we are told about continuous raids that were taking place in the cities, and it is at this point that their feeling of displacement is more clearly perceived. During this period in Africa, they realise they have lost their identities: they are out of place since they are not in their country of origin, and they do not belong to any group in the host country. They are seen as suspicious by both black and white people; they are considered as dangerous.

Despite the fact that they belonged to the mission and they had gone to Elim to help, the apartheid laws and the consequent segregation had led black people to distrust them because of the white colour of their skin, up to the point that "Ralph no longer allowed Anna to go out alone. Where people knew them, they were safe enough. Where they were unknown, a white face had become a provocation" (108). However, neither were they defended or even respected by other white citizens or by the representatives of the authorities, because with Ralph's denounce of the situation that people in Elim were living, they were considered as a menace for the apartheid system. Because of that, the police came back to their house one night, looking for



a person they thought the Eldreds could be hiding, and warned Ralph not to go on speaking about what the police were doing in town: “You wrote a letter to the Pretoria news, Mr Eldred. Don’t do that again” (110). Some days after this warning, they are imprisoned and then they are invited to leave voluntarily from the mission, better than being deported. They agree and are sent to Botswana.

Very soon after having arrived in Botswana, they realise that their presence will not be of much help. This is the moment when, apart from feeling displaced, they begin to lose their faith and to question the nature of their mission. We can clearly see it in a conversation between Anna and Ralph, when they are commenting on a talk they had previously had with one of the servants, in which, apparently, the servant was defending the advantages of polygamy:

- I think we have denatured these people, Anna said. Everything old is condemned, everything of their own. Everything new and imported is held up to them as better.
- Soap and civilisation, Ralph said. That was the idea. Oh, and God.
- Oh, and God, Anna said. I begin to wonder what Christianity has to offer to women. Besides a series of insults, that is. (214-215)

However, this loss of faith will very much grow later on in the novel. It is also in Botswana where the event that will mark their lives takes place. Anna finds that she is pregnant with twins. During the first months, everything went fine, their lives were calm and they found a nanny for the kids, Felicia. However, one of the servants, Enock, who was in charge of the garden, began to create problems and he was fired by Anna.

Despite this, and far from bringing peace to their lives, sacking Enock brings awful consequences for the Eldreds. Firstly, their dog is poisoned by the gardener, but it is that night when things would change forever in Ralph and Anna’s lives. It is a very stormy night when Ralph hears a woman’s voice asking him to let them in. He doubted whether he should open the door. On the one hand, he thought, “it is our visitors, the poor people in their shacks; they are panic-stricken, their houses are carried off, they want shelter” (237); but, on the other hand, the opposite thought crossed his mind: “your dog has been poisoned today, there is a man with a grudge against you, you are not entirely safe” (237). But when he hears the voice again, he decides to open. Behind the door was Enock, with a small hatchet in his hand. He hit Ralph, who began to bleed, then fainted, and Enock went to Anna’s room. The gardener took all the money he could find and went out. Then Anna went to the kitchen and saw her husband bleeding, but it is when she goes to the children’s room that she receives “her own deathblow; the one that will leave no mark on her skin, but will peel and scalp her, part the flesh of joy from the bone of grief” (239-240). Then she saw the room was empty and that her son and daughter were not there. Their nanny, Felicia, had packed all her things and had escaped with the children during the fight. The morning after, Anna found her daughter, but her son would never appear.



After this event, their lives will never be the same again: both Anna and Ralph, as most of Mantel's characters, will totally lose their faith. We had already seen Anna questioning God, but not Ralph; however, in this letter, Ralph tells his uncle James:

I wish we had never left England. I do not believe that any good we have done here can compensate for a hundredth part of what we have suffered, and for what we will suffer as our lives go on (...) Don't advise me to pray, because I don't feel that prayers meet the case. I wonder about the nature of what I have been praying to. (244-245)

In the same way, after they decide to go back to England, for there was nothing else they could do for their missing child, Anna talks to James and she tells him she does not believe in God anymore, as God had not done anything when she needed him: "I asked God for comfort when I came home to Elim every night, and saw these beaten people (...) but God kept very quiet, James. God did nothing" (247). Anna was very angry, even to James, for he had been the one who got them a job in Africa. Yet, she told James not to worry:

You leave me alone, James, and I'll leave you alone. You don't come at me with your theology, and I won't stop Ralph doing his job (...) It doesn't matter what I think, inside myself. Nobody could imagine or know what I think, inside myself. But I promise you I won't stand up in church and bawl out that it's all a sham. We're professional Christians. (248)

Therefore, even though the loss of faith had started some time earlier when they realised the situation that people in Africa were suffering from, it will increase after their boy's disappearance, and the loss of their child is subsequently followed by a total loss of faith.

In connection with autobiographical details, Mantel also "lost" her children at the time she was in Africa. She had already lost her faith, but three years after her arrival in Africa, at the age of 27, she had to go back to England to have surgery because of her illness, endometriosis, with which she lost the possibility of having children. This was one of the reasons why she decided to become a writer, and, actually, the issue of childlessness is something that she explores in her books, mainly in her autobiography, *Giving up the Ghost* (2003), although we can also see in her narratives her obsession with lost children (*A Change of Climate*, 1994), dead babies (*Every Day is Mother's Day*, 1985), or children who cannot recognise their mothers ("Lippy Kid", 1995). As she has explained in "Clinical Waste", childlessness is "something I explored gradually, and am exploring still, as I reach an age when (in nature) my chances of conception would be slight. The impact of childlessness, for me, has been subtle and long-delayed" (21). This was, for Mantel, a traumatic experience, as well as it was for Anna to have her child kidnapped. For Anna, it was more than a mere loss: her child had been abducted and she never knew if he was dead or alive, and therefore the process of mourning was impossible to overcome. Sunk forever in a state of melancholia, Anna is unable to resolve the grief caused by this dreadful event.



In her article “On Grief”, Mantel herself has reflected on the process of loss, mourning and overcoming the grief caused by the loss of a loved one and, as she did in this novel, has connected it with loss of faith. To her, “[mourning] undermines rationality. It frequently undermines any religious faith we may have”. In her words, “the pain of loss is often intensified for a believer, because he feels angry with his god and feels shame and guilt about that anger; this being so, you wonder how the idea began, that religion is a consolation”. This connection between loss of a family member and loss of faith had been previously made by psychoanalysts like Sigmund Freud, who also linked trauma derived from loss with the rupture with religion. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud, as Kajsa K. Henry explains, expounds how a person suffering with trauma may have physical symptoms as well as losing emotional stability, for one can “experience any number of external and internal disruptions, such as depression, illness, changes in self-perception, or breaks from home, culture and religious beliefs” (Henry 4-5). All these symptoms can be perceived in Anna throughout the novel. Apart from losing her faith, she suffers from depression, anxiety attacks and even a heart complaint. Furthermore, at a point in the novel we learn that Anna does not want to live for the children she has, since, in Ralph’s words, “it’s the one we don’t have that dominates our life, it’s what’s missing that shapes everything we do” (*A Change of Climate* 257).

As Mantel herself explains, when losing a loved one, in this case a son, “the process creates panic and guilt” since one asks oneself if they are remembering properly or enough; and they may even feel that recovery “can seem like a betrayal” (“On Grief”) and this is also what she portrays in Anna. Actually, according to new interpretations of the process of mourning, it is not anymore seen as a finite process which can be gradually overcome, but, as Christopher Craft affirms, “the work of mourning is more accurately a work of remembering” (quoted in Prodromou 16), and this is also true for Anna: when she loses her child, “she fought to keep her hold on the past, on every detail of it. She had been afraid to forget anything; to forget seemed a betrayal” (*A Change of Climate* 254). What is more, we can see how there were times when Anna “had wished to erase her husband and children, her whole biography” (305), but “there had not been a day, in twenty years, when she had not thought about her lost child” (305). Here we can see it is only through remembering that she had overcome those ideas of “erasing” her and her family from this world and how, in remembering, she had found a way to go on with her life. This coincides with William Watkin’s idea that “to remember means to give a permanent materiality to someone or something that has been lost. The purpose of this is not only to preserve that lost, beloved thing, but also to lay ground for our own survival” (Watkin 9)

Therefore, after this time in Africa where their lives have changed forever, Anna and Ralph have lost their child and therefore their faith, and one month after the children’s abduction, they decide to go back to England, to go back home for comfort. However, they will find that people “at home” in England will not welcome them as they expected.



4. BACK IN ENGLAND. BACK HOME?: LOSS OF ROOTS

Many of Mantel's characters suffer from a sense of displacement, as the author herself did at certain stages in her life, and it is for this reason that many of the autobiographical elements that she includes in her novels make reference to it. Mantel has defined herself as an in-between. She has felt that she does not belong to any place, as well as many of her characters. Her Irish roots and her Catholic upbringing have made her feel not identified with what being English means and, as she has explained in several interviews, she has always felt "socially marginalized", which meant that she had to invent a new identity for herself (Galván 31).

It is for this reason that Mantel, together with other writers who have very little or no direct connection with the postcolonial experience, has explored concepts such as displacement or non-belonging, which have been usually related with postcolonial literature. In the case of *A Change of Climate*, the action takes place in England and Africa (Botswana and South Africa), and the protagonists will suffer from this aforementioned displacement.

Going back to the place where once one belonged is something that very often happens in postcolonial writings. As Tobias Wachinger puts it, in postcolonial literature "the migration to the metropolis thus finds inevitable ending in the place of departure, reconfirming the origin —home— as the space to return" (Wachinger 68). In the case of the Eldreds, it could be said that their experience fits in this definition, even though their situation is reversed, for their journey was from the old metropolis to the former colony. In the same line, Elleke Boehmer also argues that "indeed, the culminating event in the journey narrative is that of homecoming" (Boehmer 192), but she adds that the moment in which the characters go back home may appear "under a range of moods, extending from celebration to disillusionment" (*A Change of Climate* 192). In the case of Anna and Ralph, their going back home is one of total frustration. As happened to the protagonist of David Dabydeen's *Disappearance*, who, as Wachinger points out, "turns back to Guyana in complete disillusionment, looking for a 'space to forget' that seems to be offered in his country of birth Guyana, a country he desperately wished to abandon" (Wachinger 61), Ralph experiences the same feeling. In his case, Ralph flees from his mother country —England— to escape from parental control, in a desperate act of showing his father that he could lead his own life, but in the end he has to go back home in absolute distress both because of the loss of his son and because his father had somehow "defeated" him for he had not taken the right decision nor had been able to find happiness in life while he was away from home.

However, even though with his homecoming Ralph was also looking for that "space to forget," he knew it would be very difficult to forget the horrible event that had taken place in Botswana. Despite this, we see how things in England are completely opposite from what he thought, for they return to a place that had somehow ceased to be "home", since what they found in England was hostility and indifference. Therefore, it is when the Eldreds go back to England that they feel more displaced than ever.



Their return was obviously very difficult: apart from the pain of coming back with only one of their children, they thought how their lives would be in England, and how their neighbours would react to what had happened:

So now, where should they begin? How should they coordinate their slow crawl back from the desert? What should they say? What could they tell people? Who was entitled to the whole story, and who could be kept at a distance with a half-truth? (*A Change of Climate* 250)

Ralph was afraid that if they told people the truth, their prejudices would spread to the entire continent and they would think that all Africans were savages. He was also afraid of the questions they would be asked, but soon he learned that these preoccupations were not necessary, for when they came back it was as if their neighbours and acquaintances did not care about them, as if they had forgotten them, as if Ralph and Anna somehow did not belong there anymore:

Ralph feared intrusive questions, but instead there was an indifference that he felt as an insult. He made a discovery, common to those who expatriate themselves and then return: that when he and Anna went abroad they had ceased to be regarded as real people. Out of sight, out of mind. Nobody, even the most generous donor to mission appeals, wanted to hear anything about Africa. (252)

On the one hand, this could be considered as a positive point, since if people did not want to know about what had happened in Africa, Anna and Ralph would be able to overcome faster their grief for the loss of their son and the way they lost him, as they would not be constantly reminded of it every time someone asked. However, the fact that people were not concerned about how they felt or with the details about the difficult situation they had gone through, made them feel out of place, as if they had not returned home, but to a different place where nobody cared about them. Therefore, they considered this lack of interest or curiosity as a kind of “punishment” for having left the country². In fact, they did not feel they belonged to England completely either: Africa had changed them, and they were not the same persons as when they went out of England. Their past in Africa is what dominates their lives now, and their secret of what happened there is what keeps Anna and Ralph together.

² This experience of coming back to what one believed was home and feeling out of place is also seen in many other postcolonial narratives, as well as in the other novel Mantel wrote about an experience abroad. Apart from living in Africa, she also spent some years in Saudi Arabia, and she wrote a novel in which she reflects her own experience there and analyses the concepts of home and abroad: *Eight Months of Ghazzah Street* (1985). Here, one can also find that the protagonists feel that England is not “home” anymore, and this is yet another autobiographical detail Mantel reflects in *A Change of Climate*: as she has explained, when she went back to England, she was “struck by how nullified your experience was by the people at home” and she asked herself “what was the point in trying to share with them something they couldn’t and had no desire to try to understand” (Garner 10).



The only ones who commented on what took place in Africa were Ralph's father and Anna's mother. The former had a conversation with Ralph just the day before he died. Matthew asked Ralph why he had to go to Africa, and they had another argument, like a continuation of the one that began years ago: "The missions must be staffed, but you needn't have one, you shouldn't have gone, there were plenty more experienced people to go. Pride made you do it, I think — pride, and being above yourself, knowing better than other people. That's always been your fault, boy" (251); but Ralph, instead of hiding from the truth, admitted in front of his father for the first time in his life in a very straightforward way: "You want to know why I went to Africa? I'll tell you. I went to get away from you" (249). As for Anna's mother, she also finds Ralph guilty: "But although I don't say so, of course, I blame him for taking her there in the first place. He could have had a nice job with his father, there was no need to trail half-way across the globe" (251). Therefore, despite his attempt, Ralph could never show his father that he was in charge of his own life and that he was able to take decisions on his own, since his idea of going to Africa had had terrible consequences.

Little by little they went back to routine. When Anna came back from Africa, she was already pregnant again, and a few months after, she gives birth to a boy, Julian. They had decided never to tell Katherine or any of their children about what had happened in Africa and made their families promise they would not do it either, so that "the secret was sequestered and locked away" (252). But Ralph felt that, confined as it was, the secret became more potent, so he tried to keep himself busy, "burying the past under a weight of daily preoccupation" (253). Ralph and Anna had to start again in England, but they were not the persons they used to be before they went to Africa. It is interesting how now it is the protagonists who define each other, and their descriptions are similar to the ones offered at the beginning of the novel. Plus, after we know the events that took place in Africa, we can understand the reasons for these changes.

Ralph became, according to Anna, "an exacting, demanding man, who gave her only glimpses of the gentleness of those early years" (253). Indeed, he became someone who, in order to keep his mind busy and so as not to think in what had happened in Africa, was married to his job. Ralph worked for the charitable Trust. He tried to help young people who were lost in life, who had, as he had done in Africa, taken the wrong decisions. He even took home people from the Trust or from the Social Services for some time. The summer the events take place they have a girl with them, Melanie, who eventually escapes from their house and who will be key in the ending of the novel.

Actually, Ralph's job and new identity also marked the relationship with his own children. He was so concentrated in his job and in helping others that his children complained that he was more worried about the kids who went to the Trust than about themselves. Emma, Ralph's sister, tried to spend as much time as she could with her nieces and nephews since, according to her, "it was not easy being Ralph's children" (124). In fact, in a passage of the novel Robin and Julian's complaints about his father are presented: to Robin, "Dad's supposed to be good with young people, but it's other young people he's good with. Not us" (124). Similarly,



when Julian leaves university, he thinks that his father “has not bothered about me (...) He’s only worried about those spotty kids with carrier bags” (147). However, if Ralph acted like this with his children was not because he did not care about them, but because he wanted them to make their own choices and take their own decisions about their futures as they considered best, so as not to destroy their lives like his father had done with his; as he says: “I will never be party to bullying and hectoring my children as my father bullied and hectored me” (148). Contrary to Ralph, Anna becomes overprotective with her children and, for instance, we are told how she kept Julian sleeping in their bedroom for one year and a half, till Robin was born, or that she woke to check if he was in his room many times during the night.

The relationship between Ralph and Anna also changes because of the losses they have experienced. Even though their marriage could not be considered, in Anna’s words, as a “romance” after all they had gone through, to her, “when you have suffered together as they had (...) you are not partners, but the survivors of a disaster. You see each other and remember, every day. So how can you live together? But how can you not?” (305). In the same way, when Ralph is asked if he loves Anna, he says that “it is not the right question. It goes far beyond that. You see, when we met, we were children. We made an alliance against the world” (332) and what held them together was the loss of their child. Moreover, their children see their relationship as “the exception to the rule”, since, as a couple, they never had an argument: “We think, me and Robin, that they must have had a big row about something, but we can’t work it out, because they never have a row, never” (167). Actually, it is because of their parents’ secrecy that there are many things that the children “can’t work out”. Throughout the novel we come across a few passages in which they talk about their parents’ past lives; but probably the most significant one is a conversation between Kit and Robin about Anna and Ralph’s time in Africa. Even though they had been told stories about their parents’ lives in Africa, including their imprisonment, Anna and Ralph were never totally open with their children, and they never told them about the reasons why they were imprisoned or about the events that took place when they were attacked and the twins were abducted.

But despite all their efforts to keep the secret, once Ralph reveals it, the past comes back to haunt them all and they are forced to deal with it in the present. That summer, Ralph has an affair with Mrs Glasse, the mother of his son’s girlfriend, and he tells her about what happened in Africa. When Anna learns about Ralph’s affair, she feels the past has come to change the present and to destroy their lives as they had been destroyed in the past, so Anna, as she did in Africa with the people who robbed her child, sees herself unable to forget nor to forgive Ralph. This is the last loss in the novel: Anna loses Ralph’s fidelity. She feels betrayed and reflects on “the nature of betrayal”, which, to her, “not only changes the present, but that it reaches back with its dirty hands and changes the past” (304). And it does. For the first time in her life, she feels that she has made her own decision and she tells Ralph to take his things and go away. At the same time, it is also the first time that Anna confronts with her past and voices that she has never forgotten Ralph for having taken her to Africa and, more than that, for opening the door that night; as she tells Ralph, “I am no good at forgiving (...) don’t you know that? It doesn’t matter



if the action is to be deferred. I can't do it. The years pass and they don't make a difference. I know, you see. Because I've been betrayed before" (324). When Ralph says he was also betrayed, we know that Anna is not referring to the people who robbed her child, but to Ralph himself, since, as she tells him, "after all, you opened the door to them" (325).

After all the events have taken place in the novel, it seems that the Eldred's life together has finished forever: Anna ends up blaming Ralph for everything that happened in Africa, and feeling that there is no place for forgiveness after all the things she has lost because of him. However, there is still a chance: even though Anna says that "I've never forgiven anybody. I've had no practice. I don't know how to do it." (335), she also admits that "I have always thought (...) that before there is forgiveness there must be restitution" (335), and it is in these words that there could be a possibility for forgiveness, since, somehow, there is that restitution that Anna was talking about.

That summer, Ralph had brought home a girl from the Trust, Melanie, and she had gone away from their house and disappeared; they were worried, as they did not know where she was or what could have happened to her. But the moment Ralph takes his things and is abandoning the house as Anna had asked him, they see something moving in the garden: "A creature moved into their view, at a distance. It came slowly over the rough ground, crawling. It was a human being" (340). When they realise it is Melanie, they run to help her, because they see her fall, like a dying animal. When they reach her, she begins to breathe again, and they get her inside the house. This could be, somehow, the restitution Anna was asking for, since, after all, and although she is not their lost son, they find Melanie alive and take her home, as they did with Katherine years ago, so that, in the end, there is restitution, since a child is given back to them, and the secret is still unknown by their other children.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, *A Change of Climate* is a story of loss, displacement, and disillusionment with life. In a very autobiographical manner, Mantel talks about different aspects she is very much concerned with, all of them connected to loss: loss of children, because of her own impossibility to conceive; loss of faith, as religion has been very influential in her life and writings because of the Catholic education she received, which she later rejected; and loss of place and identity both when moving abroad and when coming back.

In this novel, Mantel takes her protagonists, the Eldreds, to the limit after a series of dreadful events related with loss and betrayal in their lives. They abandon their home country because of the lack of understanding and narrow-mindedness of Ralph's family. In Africa, they are doubly displaced both by the African inhabitants who thought they came to impose their rules and by the authorities, who considered them a menace for their socio-political system based on separateness and racial control. When the darkest and more tragic event takes place with the abduction of their children and the loss of one of them, they go back to England only to find



themselves displaced again, since as they had spent a long time in another country, they were not considered as “real English citizens” anymore.

The way Anna and Ralph deal with their most important loss, their son, is different. Even though they both suffer from it, Anna blames Ralph for what happened, and she suffers from a profound state of grief which seems impossible to overcome. Meanwhile, Ralph tries to overcome his sorrow by looking for other children that he can “save” by working with them in the Trust and even taking them home. It is only when they actually find one of these girls Ralph was helping and who had escaped from home that a possible turning point is found in the Eldred’s lives to help them deal with their lost son.

In relation with both characters’ responses to loss, they could be linked with the concepts of mourning and melancholia as Freud first defined them. Ralph would be the example for mourning, as he seems able to overcome his grief when he encounters loss and go on with his life after a period of mourning. On the other hand, Anna might have been sunk in a pathological state of melancholia in which she was unable to accept and resolve her loss. However, as Freud himself, as well as some other experts (Derrida, Lacan or Watkin) pointed out, both mourning and melancholia work together. Anna and Ralph remained together after their most significant loss, and it is only through remembering and being in a constant process of mourning, as Watkin suggests, that they are able to deal with their loss.

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