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EXISTENTIAL SPACES AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN ESTHER FREUD'S *I COULDN'T LOVE YOU MORE*

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Abstract

This article aims to explain how the categories of space and time, notions that emphasize the major role played by perception in shaping contemporary fiction, have been given a new dimension in British writer Esther Freud's novel *I Couldn't Love You More* (2021). In our approach, we start from the premise that literature and art reshape cultural identities and portray the way they might have been impacted by various historical events. By discussing representations of cultural identity in Esther Freud's novel, we try to detect possible correspondences between external spatial-temporal configurations and the inner world of the perceiving subject in order to offer an interpretation of what this correlation implies at the level of the literary text and the interdisciplinary dialogues it generates. From our point of view, one of the ideas explored in the novel is the spiritual anxiety of individuals who find themselves trapped in an ambiguous reality, trying to discern the fundamental aspects of human existence in an atmosphere which enhances emotional tension. Identity is a prominent theme of reflection in Esther Freud's novel as well, recognizable at the level of the complex relationships the novelist creates between characters, which reflect the diversity and unpredictability of human nature itself.

Keywords: identity, space, time, contemporary fiction

Introduction

Without attempting to investigate all the aspects concerning the poetics of space and the analytical possibilities it offers for literary works, this article gives an account of the importance of understanding how novel writing shapes identities, with particular emphasis on Esther Freud's *I Couldn't Love You More* (2021). Most importantly, it aims to address Esther Freud's novel from a multicultural perspective so as to observe how it resorts to literary geographies as instruments of re-defining the boundaries of aesthetic form in the contemporary cultural context. Arguing that contemporary fiction has imposed a new existential dimension to space and time as categories that emphasize the role played by perception and by the visual elements in novel writing, we aim to distinguish possible correspondences between outer/other space-time configurations and the inner world of the perceiving subject so as to give an account of what this correlation implies at the level of character and plot construction in contemporary British fiction.

Esther Freud was born in London but spent the early years of her childhood traveling with her mother and sister through Morocco. Returning to England, she studied drama and worked in television and theatre before she reached public acclaim as a novelist. Her debut novel, *Hideous Kinky* (1992) was shortlisted for the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize and adapted for television. After the publication of her second novel, *Peerless Flats* (1993), she was chosen as one of *Granta's* Best Young British Novelists. Among her books, mention should be made of *The Sea House* (2005), *Lucky Break* (2011), *Mr Mac and Me* (2015), which received 'Best Novel' in the East Anglian Book Awards, and *I Couldn't Love You More* (2021). Her play *Stitchers* was produced at the Jermyn St Theatre in 2018 and, as of 2019,

she is a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. The novels circumscribe Esther Freud's own life experiences through the voice of "vernacular cosmopolitans" moving in-between cultures, who are the protagonists of her books. Children play a central role in Esther Freud's fiction, as the author enjoys seeing and interpreting the world through the eyes of innocence.

Love and its passionate intensity, childhood insecurities and the enduring connections between people over time; all these elements contribute to the wide appeal of her books. Underlying these are the psychological insights that one might expect from a member of the distinguished Freud dynasty; indeed, she draws to some extent upon her German-Jewish family's enforced migration to England. She mixes her light and dark emotional colours well. Alongside some solidly well-to-do characters there are also bohemians, frequently actors or artists, who appear in her stories to offer contrasting views of what constitutes success or failure in human lives. (Smith, 2013, para. 2).

We might inquire whether Esther Freud's novel emphasizes the idea of existential space as a lives sense of time and space that points to different modalities of being-in-the-world. We might also ponder upon the characters' relation to temporality and spatiality and the way in which their identity is shaped by the spatio-temporal frames. Nevertheless, these are just a few of the preliminary questions that have motivated our endeavor. Being essentially an experiment with alternating histories and lifestyles, with constantly shifting auctorial perspectives that seek to capture the expression of spiritual anguish in the midst of a confusing world, the novel attempts to explore the fundamentals of human nature not only as a hallmark of an era, but also as a defining characteristic of human personality.

1. Time-space representations

Esther Freud experiments with spatial and temporal frames within most of her stories, displaying a unique concern for form and technique in her latest novel, under scrutiny here. It is innovative in the sense that the novelist conveys a specific rhythm to the storyline, increasing suspense through an ambivalent alternation of time-space sequences. Moreover, there is a shift from the general image of a deep historical reality to an individualized response to that reality. The shiftiness of the characters is obtained through a new organization and articulation of the space-time relations. The interconnectivity of space and time, two fundamental concepts for any theoretical approach to literary criticism in the contemporary age, is applicable here and may be considered an analytical tool for observing how Esther Freud constructs identities and represents reality.

The concept of "spacetime" has opened a pathway for new attempts of understanding the literary field in the contemporary age, the chronotope creating a fundamental shift within the act of perceiving literary texts. Space and time fuse together as intersecting axes within literary discourse, an aspect which points to a number of essential distinctions. Mikhail Bakhtin defines the literary artistic chronotope as the fusion between spatial and temporal indicators into a "concrete whole" where spatialised time and temporalised space reflect their responsiveness to each other's manifestations, either historically or artistically:

In literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh and becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin, 1982, p.84)

Duration defines any fictional text, considered in the natural unfolding of the plot lines. Our approach refers to space as a category which incorporates duration to the extent to which it warps a new poetics of novel writing, recognizable in myriad variations within the field of contemporary British fiction. Apart from the Bakhtinian spatial and temporal

indicators, our endeavor to interpret Esther Freud's novel also includes the notions of perception and experience, which have undergone several changes during the 20th century and have definitely reached new realms of expression during the 21st. As far as the recent studies in literary history and literary theory show us, contemporary fiction may be associated with the widened space age of the 2000s, this context welcoming new reiterations of the notion of human experience through an interpretative paradigm that has become known as literary existentialism.

This theme underpins Esther Freud's new attempt of tackling the vast canvas of human relationships in a new novel that puts the idea of genealogy in the foreground, creating an intricate network of interpersonal exchanges. The mother-daughter relationship is central to Esther Freud's vision of the human condition, reshaping the perspective upon femininity from a contemporary point of view. Thus, each of Esther Freud's "alternating histories" in *I Couldn't Love You More* is expressed in chapters which depict aspects of the lives of her main feminine characters: Aoife, Rosaleen, Kate. Viewed in a global perspective, the existential spaces represented through these frames of identity are meant to develop the idea of juxtaposition between the inner realms of spirituality and the alienating outer spaces of history and social existence.

Esther Freud seems to place great emphasis on the idea that, because the human condition is characterised by history, it cannot turn the clock or decide all at once that it is different or that it may be other than it already is. What we do as beings-in-the-world, nevertheless, says many things about how we view others. Thus, constructing feminine identities through the eyes of the other is an underlying topic in the novel, although it implicitly tackles universal themes such as human nature, the condition of womanhood and the need of self-transcendence, with lived through or recognised inner tensions and idiosyncrasies. The novel is, simply stated, a story about the parental universe, about knowing family secrets, and about understanding how genealogy functions.

2. Framing feminine identities

Here we focus mainly on delineating the author's notion of alternate existential spaces in connection to topics such as motherliness "then-and-now", meaning the 60s to the present day. The spatial-temporal matrix renders depth and complexity to the feminine characters and develops mysterious, captivating, often ethereally tragic existences. Esther Freud creates unforgettable feminine portraits by bringing together the threads of human experience and emotion, which in themselves are ineffable in the sense that they cannot be pinned down, engendering boundless resonances throughout her novel.

The author is at her stylistic maturity with this novel, disclosing certain ways of being on the unimaginable steps of an existence traversed by the anguish and trauma of separation. Rachel Joyce observed that it is essentially a "love letter" depicting the sentimental bond between mothers and daughters and the intricacies of their lives together and apart. The notion of being separated yet in unity is, in fact, present in the first motto of the book, which reveals a thought about time: "Being with you and not being with you is the only way I have to measure time" (as cited in Freud, 2021). The motto invites us to reflect on temporality in connection to the idea of measuring out life in events concerning others or perceiving and understanding time and space through the physical presence of another. The idea of a type of measurement of life seen as an archive of intermittent occurrences of space and time plays a significant role in setting the tone of the novel. It reveals Esther Freud's talent as social observer and subtle analyst of how human behaviour is impacted by taboos and stereotypes in specific cultures. She looks at her characters' inner life with the intent of contrasting its richness to the planeness of their day-to-day existence. Esther Freud's characters are depicted either while being together in "glitteringly romantic" relationships or as the realities of life

threaten to overwhelm them. The description of their lives together and apart conjoined with crucial parts of their story missing ensures the dynamics of the novel, which consists of a kaleidoscopic vision upon human destiny and the practices that have been passed down through generations and are important when discussing aspects of cultural identity.

The mottos Esther Freud chooses confer a prominent spiritual dimension and are eloquent in as far as spatial emptiness (seen as the absence of the loved person and as an intrusion into the natural course of time) is concerned. The presence of the loved one confers duration and meaning to destiny itself; it confers corporeality to human relationships, thus removing them from the danger of annihilation. Being unable to measure time except in the presence of the other, the motto alludes to existential journeys as alternations of volumes and voids, thus illustrating the spiritual journeys of Esther Freud's heroines. This is enhanced to a certain degree by the second motto: "The past is but the beginning of a beginning" (as cited in Freud, 2021). H. G. Wells is quoted here with the theory that time travel is just as possible as travelling across landscapes. This quote sheds new light upon the idea of human imagination and evolution. In this context, it might be interpreted as an invitation to reflect upon the accomplishments of the human mind in a type 'becoming' *ad infinitum*, which might help us define the novelist's apprehension of the human condition.

Love is a keyword here, and so is the second-person pronoun *you*, which occur in the title. This is to say that the novel returns to traditional themes and literary values, thus displaying a derogative tendency from the norms of the novel of the contemporary age.¹

The reader might anticipate the characters' emotional experiences or the intricacies of life using the title of the novel. *I Couldn't Love You More* is an insightful story where Esther Freud creates a network of actions and reflections minutely crafted and strongly symbolic, focusing on distinct aspects of constructing and re-constructing relationships, being and becoming adult mothers, achieving a sense of authority over their innate knowledge of mothering. The novel therefore symbolises a perspective of interconnectivity between

¹ Brian McHale theorises the principles of postmodern poetics and describes the objects of representation of literary texts where there is a clear "symptom of unreality", exploiting the topic of fictional simulacra and the proliferation of a conscience in crisis, but most importantly describing the notion of love, systematically foregrounded within the framework of the contemporary novel. Love is a principle of fiction. It describes on the one hand the relationship between the authors and their characters, and on the other hand, that of the texts in relation to their readers. Texts are meant to "seduce" the reader and love is meant to "circulate" everywhere "*in fiction*" (McHale, 1987, p.237). For Brian McHale love is a "metaleptic relation". The function of a metaleptic relation is that of breaking ontological boundaries. "An author, by definition, occupies an ontological level superior to that of his character; to sustain a relation with a character (if only the sort of "hands-off" relation that Bayley has in mind) means to bridge the gap between ontological levels. Similarly, the text that seduces its reader reaches across an ontological divide to become a force to reckon with in the reader's real world." (McHale, 1987, pp. 222-223). Contemporary fiction, the author argues, changes the function of the metaleptic relation, which is traceable at the level of the "changing fortunes of the second-person pronoun: *you*" (McHale, 1987, p. 238). According to Brian McHale, "The postmodernist second-person functions as an invitation to the reader to project himself or herself into the gap opened in the discourse by the presence of *you*." (McHale, 1987, p. 239). A new poetics of space in late-contemporary novel writing might begin with the attempt of filling in this gap and we find this in the very title of the novel. It contains a metaleptic relation where *you* can be either the reader, or the characters in the book. There is a strategic shiftiness of *you*, where the "equivocation is kept alive and in the foreground to the end of the text, and the reader continues to be able to project himself or herself into the discourse-situation" (McHale, 1987, p. 240). *You* has ambivalent functions and it generates ambivalent contexts. Being able to refer simultaneously to the reader and to a specific character in the fictional world by using the second-pronoun *you* means to explore the shifting grounds of fiction through the ambiguity of you and its metaleptic potential, continuously soliciting the reader to fill in the gaps of the title and the text. Metalepsis, or the blurring of ontological boundaries, is "a mirror of love" (McHale, 1987, p. 241), a type of "unreality" in which the readers or the characters might live. The first-pronoun *I* in *I Couldn't Love You More* represents the consciousness of the author or of one of the characters in the novel, it has an aura of uncanniness and it initiates a game of metaleptic transgressions that are representative of contemporary fiction.

mothers and daughters.² In the novel, we perceive these aspects through the lens of time: in the 30s, the early 60s and the 90s. At the crossroads between the social, symbolic and cultural field, Esther Freud pursues the destiny of three women – their loves and choices in life – so as to explain the symbolic value of the relationships based on ties of filiation as opposed to marriage. Aoife lives in modern-day Cork. She tells her dying husband Cashel the story of their long marriage. Rosaleen is pregnant and lives in 1960s London. She is in love with the bohemian sculptor Felix. Kate is an artist in a difficult relationship, with a young daughter, living thirty years later, with a desire to find out her origins. Kate is adopted, and this detail is the key element of the plot. Hence, the novel is written on three timelines, but basically, as Ella Risbridger (2021) rightfully observes, *I Couldn't Love You More* is Kate's story. Nevertheless, one essential question remains: to what extent can we say that our stories are indeed our own? It opens a pathway for understanding how a story engages our emotions and imagination as well as enhances our awareness of the impact the relationships we pursue have in our lives.

Aoife's insight on sufferance, faith and "doing right" for one's family and children has the tone of a confession and Esther Freud's novel may be interpreted in this key. As Cashel, her husband, lies dying, he hears Aoife's voice in an utterance that resonates with the unspoken experiences of his consciousness.

Rosaleen, their daughter, aspires for a career as a professional journalist for a national newspaper in 1959, but is disappointed by an apparently favourable opportunity at the *Daily Express* of putting stories together for the news desk, which turns out to be a lowly mail-sorting position that is only meant to "put her dreams on hold", as Anna Stein points out in her review of the novel *I Couldn't Love You More*. Notwithstanding, her letters to her parents

² Esther Freud's account of her upbringing and family life as well as the difficulties encountered by her young mother given the social constraints of the 60s in England and Ireland have played an essential part in the writing of the novel, as shown in one of her recent articles (2021): "My mum escaped the cruelty of Ireland's mother and baby homes. I might not be alive if she hadn't". It is important to mention it here because it shows just how much of the story of these three generations of women is autobiographical. It also explains some of the mystifying events of Ireland's mother and baby homes. Accompanied by pictures depicting her mother aged seven in 1949, or instances of family life with her mother and sister in 1965, as well as a family portrait dated 1950 with her grandmother, aunt and mother, Esther Freud's article refers to issues such as marriage, childbirth and upbringing in a world which she perceives as obstructing in as far as the women's rights are concerned. Her mother's "uneasy" relationship with her parents, her Irish Catholic education, her being evicted as a child and being sent to a convent boarding school at the age of 7, being pregnant at 18 after having met her future husband, the painter Lucian Freud, form the context of the novel. The uncanny atmosphere of baby-mother institutions seen as places for "fallen women" intensifies the unsettling experiences within the story. As mentioned by Esther Freud (2021), her mother almost became a participant in the sinister existence of such unfortunate women: "What might have happened if her own pregnancy was discovered on that last visit home? Was it possible she'd have ended up at Bessborough, a mother and baby home run by nuns from the order of the Sisters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, a convent on the outskirts of Cork? I didn't know about Bessborough then. I only discovered its existence when I began researching a novel about what might have been if she'd gone to the wrong people for help, starting my work by sheer coincidence just as a commission of investigation was launched into mother and baby homes across Ireland. (...) As I leave Cork city, heading for the airport, I see my mother, aged 18, boarding the ferry, and I imagine her, the bump disguised beneath her coat, standing on the deck. She'd got away with it! And it occurs to me that maybe her mother did know. Maybe she'd waved her daughter off, sent up a prayer – *Please God to keep her safe* – and never said a word." (paras.7-21).

knowingly omit to describe her disappointments and failures as well as the sentimental turn she experiences, falling in love with a Jewish sculptor, Felix Lichtman, becoming pregnant and eventually finding out that he already has a wife and child.

Further on, we encounter Kate, who in 1991, is married to a musician with alcoholic disorders. She has a daughter, Freya, whom she adores and is herself an artist. Adopted when she was a child, Kate seeks to define her role as a motherless child, imagining a mother-figure whom she learned about as a teenager. As Anna Stein (2021) rightly suggests, "Freud delves into the three women's lives" and "the reader is taken on a journey of heartbreak as desperate actions taken to protect loved ones are revealed. This eloquent exploration of the ineffable ties between mothers and daughters delivers the goods" (para.1).

We may interpret the story as the coming of age of three generations of women and we may consider the characters as creations which unveil the importance of the subject of love for the author. As E. M. Forster (1927) indicates, love "bulks" in novels, and it has been transplanted in novels in such generous quantities because it is meant to convey an impression upon the lives of the characters involved in the story, and characters may be interpreted from the point of view of the fundamental human affects, love, fear, hunger, and of the main facts of life, birth and death. The author concedes that:

The main facts in human life are five: birth, food, sleep, love and death. One could increase the number – add breathing for instance – but these five are the most obvious. Let us briefly ask ourselves what part they play in our lives, and what in novels. Does the novelist tend to reproduce them accurately or does he tend to exaggerate, minimize, ignore, and to exhibit his characters going through processes which are not the same through which you and I go, though they bear the same names? To consider the two strangest first: birth and death; strange because they are at the same time experiences and not experiences. We only know of them by report. We were all born, but we cannot remember what it was like. And death is coming even as birth has come, but similarly, we do not know what it is like. Our final experience, like our first, is conjectural. We move between two darknesses. (Forster, 1927, pp.75-76)

In a sense, the prologue in Esther Freud's novel expresses this idea elliptically. The novel opens in the summer of 1991. The feeling of uncertainty explored here through the image of a woman winding her way through the misty outskirts of Cork City, heading towards the Convent of the Sacred Heart to find information about the history of her family, is representative for the experience of motherliness, shown at all stages of the novel. Kate and her daughter Freya find themselves alone and helpless in front of "the home", a building offering accommodation for mothers and their babies. The woman rings the bell, unsuccessfully, and seizes the handle of the door. No answer, no car to turn to as the taxi they arrived with had vanished, nothing left for them to do. As they go towards the gate, they reach

a mulched path leading between pine and rhododendron, and in the distance, the low hum of the road. At the far end is a rectangle of lawn; beyond it the ruins of a tower.

'A castle!'

'Wait!' Around the edges of the lawn there are black encircled crosses. I bend to one, my breath caught high, but the graves are inscribed with the names of nuns. Sister Augustine. Mother Euphrasia. The most recent, Sister Gerarda, buried two years before. I speak the names, and wonder what it was that bought them to their vows. Poverty, chastity, obedience. I saw a face, I'm sure of it, peering out beside the lamp. On the castle wall, there is a plaque: IN REMEMBRANCE OF ALL BABIES WHO DIED HERE BEFORE OR SHORTLY AFTER BIRTH. I GATHER YOU IN YOUR FRESHNESS BEFORE A SINGLE BREEZE HAS DAMAGED YOUR PURITY.

‘Freya!’ But Freya has stepped inside, and is standing with her hood up in a leak of rain. We wait until the sky has cleared and walk back the way we came. A pale sun has broken through the cloud and the house sits huge and solid in the light. (Freud, 2021, p.2)

The scene is suspended when Kate and Freya are left alone, after having had little success when discussing with one of the nuns. Suspicion, solitude and hesitation characterise the opening of the novel pages and the enquiry begins with a decisively daunting tone: “... my mother, she was here...” (Freud, 2021, p. 3). Nevertheless, it is continued towards the end of the novel, where Kate’s story unfolds with further significant details. Understanding the pointlessness of their visit, they find a place for shelter and wait for a new opportunity to begin the inquiry. Here we learn that she was adopted.

There’s one lumpy divan at the bed and breakfast, and a bathroom along the hall. ‘I could have brought in a trestle for the child.’ The woman looks aggrieved.

‘There is no need, we can share’. Freya gives a yelp. ‘And if there’s space we’ll stay in and have our dinner’. She softens then and offers us the choice between a first course of orange juice or soup. While we wait we climb under the covers and I tell Freya the story of my mother, how young she was when she had to give me up, how she came and stayed in that big house, it was the place where I was born. It was where Gran and Grandad collected me from when I was ten days old. ‘They chose me’, I try out the words, and it helps when Freya wriggles. ‘They gave me the name Catherine, although they always called me Kate, or Katie if they were very pleased, and they brought me up and looked after me, but now I want to know what happened to my own mother, I want to let her know I have a girl of my own. (Freud, 2021, pp. 304-305)

The mother-daughter bond in Esther Freud’s novel is unique and it is perhaps due to the voice of the feminine protagonists that the writer achieved worldwide notoriety. With *I Couldn’t Love You More*, it can be said that the author deconstructs the autobiographical element in order to construct the fictional element through this process. For this reason, what belongs to the autobiographical is not negligible in the interpretation of her novel. According to Ella Risbridger (2021):

Kate’s search for her birth mother brings her and her young daughter, Freya, to a convent in Ireland. They find, first, a bleak little memorial to the lost babies born there. These are the stories of thousands of real women, and Freud quietly does them justice. *I Couldn’t Love You More* is apparently inspired, too, by Freud’s own family stories – a what-if at the heart of her history. What if her own ‘much-missed mother ... pregnant and unmarried’, had ‘asked for help from the wrong people?’ It is tempting to map Freud’s real-life family (tempestuous sculptor Lucian, for example) on to the novel’s complex interplay of characters, but to pin this book down as autobiographical does it a great disservice. *I Couldn’t Love You More* is a crafted novel, made with great skill and attention, the way Felix makes his sculptures, the way Kate makes her painted trees. (paras. 3-4).

3. Fictional landscapes and aesthetic form

The discussion concerning the importance of the fictional setting must first and foremost reveal Esther Freud’s network of relationships between the settings and the characters. The role played by the setting has certain consequences upon the characters’ decisions. Several questions could guide us in this sense: Does the setting influence the actions of the characters? Do fictional landscapes shape the emotional engagement of the readers as well? To what extent does space mediate the readers’ involvement with the “texture” of the narrative? “If literary landscapes draw attention to the interplay of

description and embellishment, documentary images and rhetorical flair, might the formal and figurative aspects of fictional space give us an insight into the way novelists today are experiencing with style?" (James, 2008, p.1). Considering that space is not simply scenery, that it is a vibrant figure in its own right, the question is justified by the need to confer a new order to the polymorphic space of the contemporary literary scene, where the formal aspect more than anything indicates the writers' technique and how it reflects their life experiences, the time period, the way they can craft new fictional worlds and can manipulate language in order to do so. Aesthetic form and its indication of how an author developed his or her literary style is a crucial aspect when discussing spatial tropes within the age of the "spatial turn". It is true that the poetics of space in Esther Freud's novel calls attention to the reading process itself.

Our immersion in the novel craft of landscape description puts us imaginatively in touch not only with environmental sounds, colour and scale, but also with a place's intimate rhythms and modes of inhabitation. Novelists succeed in connecting us emotionally with the domains they describe precisely because literary settings convey something more than just physical place, it's the sense of people having their territory." (James, 2008, p.1)

The sense of emotional interconnectivity prevails within the framework of the novel, and it is through this very intimacy, established at the level of the reader and the text, that it achieves "character", symbolic depth, descriptive accuracy and performance of auctorial craft. Furthermore, the notion of place, location or spatiality plays a central role for the fictional edifice of *I Couldn't Love You More*. For David James (2008), "place draws attention to our movement between enthrallment and detachment, absorption and disbelief" (p.2), placing emphasis on the notion of perception and aesthetic variation. For Esther Freud, spatiality and temporality as elements of novel form are at least as important as character development. The novel as such invites us to become the witnesses of an existential periplus that is topographically encoded, retrieving secrets of past events and cumulatively developing into the portrait of enduring family ties.

'Where's Gran?' Freya asks when we push through the barrier, and I tell her that she'll see her soon, just not today. Rosaleen offered to collect us, but in my hurry I need all the time I can get. We take the bus, a double-decker, swaying greenly above hedgerows, and when we step down I breathe in the familiar air, grass and bracken, the open sky. We walk across the common, past the oak the fallen branch of which Freya smooths with her hand, uphill and down again, across the trickle of the Splash and along beside the wall of the estate. There, as directed, is the copse of trees, straight and rustling among the stumps of those struck down in the storm. We push open a gate and walk along a path and there it is, as she described, a red painted door. I knock, and wait, and when there's no answer I answer I turn away; and that's when I see her, standing by the side of the house. Her hair is long. It hangs almost to her waist, and the black is streaked with grey.

'Isabelle.' She says it quiet, and she walks towards us and she takes hold of my spare hand. (Freud, 2021, p. 344)

Conclusion

Interpreting a novel in which the settings are misleading and the characters' destinies evolve through overlapping spatial-temporal lines is not an easy task: being a novel about fate and human will and about the ways in which the conflicting nature of their relationship is revealed, *I Couldn't Love You More* conveys the notion that there is a powerful inner voice that seeks to acknowledge the compelling power of fate. The readers are moved by it because of the fact that they may identify with Aoife, Rosaleen or Kate's fate.

As Kate investigates the identity of her parents and the story of her birth, she discovers the horrors her mum experienced at the convent and grows even more determined to track her down. Throughout *I Couldn't Love You More*, Freud takes readers into the lives and hearts of three generations of women who each have a different perspective on what it means to be a mother. The author also reveals the barbaric practices of Ireland's Magdalene Laundries. There, the Catholic Church provided meager care for pregnant girls and delivered their babies, in return demanding the girls perform backbreaking work, primarily washing nearby townspeople's laundry in huge vats of boiling water — a dangerous and taxing chore. Freud's inspiration for the novel was her own mother, who got pregnant at 18 and was so "terrified she'd be discovered and sent to a Home — a workhouse for 'morally defective' women — she kept the news a secret." Freud wondered what her own story would've been if someone had discovered her mother's pregnancy or if she'd sought help from the wrong people. *I Couldn't Love You More* is her imagination's answer to that question. Although occasionally hard to follow when the narrative changes its point of view or time period, the book is soulful and powerful. Rich with raw emotion, Esther Freud's beautiful story evokes a visceral sadness for the plight of each woman and a feeling of profound relief that Magdalene Laundries no longer exist. (Romo, 2021, paras. 8-11)

Esther Freud uses time and space frames to choreograph a narrative sequence that is meant to render indiscernible the boundaries between that which is actually real and that which is perceived as real in the story. In a sense, the fragmentation of the narrative in short chapters which randomly reconfigure the image of time begins to distort our awareness of reality and logical sequence of events. This occurs up to the point where routine or highly emotional events seem to be placed together so as to point out how the metamorphosis of insignificant facts of life into crucial, existential circumstances takes place.

Each generation of women lives wholly, not merely as shadows of the other but completely themselves. The novel is about the patterns of being a woman; and the patterns of being a person, wherever and whenever we are alive. There are brief references (a song, a sentence) to Ceylon and South Africa, as well as Ireland and England; it spans the best part of a century, but these are patterns that go back far further, and farther afield. 'How do we even know we're not dead?' little Freya asks Kate. This book is how. We know we're alive because of the stories we tell each other, and the things we make, and the people we love, and that's all we ever get. Freud knows that and it is good in this bleak year to be reminded. (Risbridger, 2021, paras. 6-7).

Richard Bradford's analysis of the ideas that have characterized the late twentieth-century women's movement reveals some of the essential aspects pertaining to the notion of creating feminine characters. From the modernist conventions in Virginia Woolf's novels, for instance, where "stream of consciousness transforms narrative from an instrument of control into an impressionistic canvas" (Bradford, 2007, p.116) through the realist conventions of the 1950s and 1960s, an age where "the perspectives -albeit sometimes generously open-minded and liberal" were "pre-eminently masculine and the activating characters male" (Bradford, 2007, p.116) and "women characters were respected, sometimes even portrayed as more complex, prescient figure than their male counterparts" (Bradford, 2007, p.116), to the conventions of the present-day, where formal experimentation sometimes seems to reframe and disguise the same theme through an array of technical devices that seems inexhaustible (Bradford, 2007, p. 127), the roles played by feminine characters have often defied expectations and the submissive female behaviour typically idealized throughout history. In Esther Freud's novels, conscious states of mind alternate with states determined by

inner conflicting components, which create the unique personality of her feminine characters. *I Couldn't Love You More* endeavours to delineate the ineffable side of the relationships between parents and children and remains captivating and quintessentially innovative when depicting cultural identities.

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