

The Father's Image in Julia Kavanagh's *Queen Mab*

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Abstract

Recent research on the Victorian father concentrates on dismantling the "stern father" stereotype, proving that nineteenth-century men were more concerned with their children than formerly thought. The unfavourable modern views on this subject can be traced back to the image of the father as a tyrannical patriarch that was traditional during the first half of the nineteenth century; and that was gradually replaced by another negative stereotype – that of the absent father, as a result of numerous changes which undermined the paternal role. In reality, however, fathering largely depended on context, and therefore it could not be ascribed to any clichéd or prototypical image. In terms of their representations of fatherhood, nineteenth-century novels are varied; while part of them reinforce the stern Victorian father stereotype, others challenge it by providing examples of paternal absenteeism or of other, even positive, images. Of the latter category is Julia Kavanagh's *Queen Mab*, which depicts John Ford primarily as an absent father with regard to his own sons, who still retains some traits characteristic of the authoritarian parent, and, additionally, as a fond father to the adopted child. The aim of this paper is to outline the artistic means and devices employed in the novel to create such a complex and original portrait of the Victorian father. With this purpose in view, special attention is paid to the way the character under study and his relationships with his children are drawn.

Key words: Victorian father, parental absenteeism, fond fatherhood, stereotypes, prototypes

Julia Kavanagh's *Queen Mab* is a triple-decker novel published in 1863 that tells the story of an unfortunate middle-class man, John Ford, who lives in a shabby house in London with his apathetic wife and their three sons. One day, he finds an orphan girl left at the door of his house and adopts her, discovering five hundred pounds attached to her cloak. The money is invested and he becomes rich, but not happy, because of the awareness that he is an accomplice of the men who have faked the girl's death to inherit her property as next heirs. The sense of guilt urges him to find out the truth in order to return Mabel her inheritance, but also to take special care of her. Thus, a close attachment develops between Mr Ford and the orphan child,

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while his own children are disregarded and often treated unfairly by him. The boys grow up and immigrate to Australia for better jobs, and their father travels much to obtain sufficient proof of the foundling girl's fraudulence, but many years pass before he manages to right Mabel and restore her property. There is a great part of the novel dealing with Mabel's romantic love that is omitted in this summary, because it has nothing to do with the topic of parent-child relationships explored in this article.

From all family roles identified in this novel, the greatest focus is placed upon fatherhood, partly because one of the major characters, John Ford, is a father, special attention being paid to his relationships with his children, and partly because the maternal figure is slightly displayed in the novel. Mrs Ford's isolation from her family and her subsequent death automatically place all her responsibilities on her husband, increasing his importance as father. However, he fails to fulfil this role, and the father's image that the novel constructs departs from the Victorian standard of good fathering, representing a complex mixture of paternal prototypes existing among the mid-nineteenth-century middle-class. Among them, the prevailing pattern is that of the absent parent that was stereotypical in the period between 1850 and 1910. However, two other types of fathers suggested by John Tosh can be to some extent identified in John Ford's fathering, as he is an absent, but harsh parent to his three sons, and a fond father to the adopted girl.

John Ford's duality in his attitudes towards the children he is responsible for, even if strange and uncommon, can be explained by means of his paradoxical personality. The image of this character is constructed by the repeated use of various sets of antithetical features. Practically each time when one of his characteristics is mentioned, it is followed by its opposite: "She now saw her husband as he was - good-natured, obstinate, foolish, and intellectual" (QM 30, vol. 1); "though his *kind heart* could win him friends, his *irritable temper* would allow him to keep none" (QM 31, vol. 1, added emphasis); "his old hospitable feeling rising above his new stinginess" (QM 151, vol. 2); "He was selfish in little things, pettish, irritable, and despotic by fits. His kind heart, his sincere love could not soften a woman like Alicia" (QM 32, vol. 1). Antagonism describes every aspect of Mr Ford's identity, being easily noticeable in his physical appearance as well:

He was tall and sharp-featured, with good-natured though obstinate brown eyes, and a weak nether lip, that betrayed temper as well as weakness. His high, broad forehead had intellectual claims, but it was both

feeble and haughty. His look, his smile, offered the same contradictions. There was shrewdness in the one, and kindness in the other; but Mr Ford's look was not always intelligent, and his smile was often sarcastic, when it was not envious. He was, indeed, made up of the contrasts which are found in unsuccessful men, the result of broken aims and ever disappointed hopes, and unsuccessful was written in his whole aspect (QM 13, vol. 1).

This descriptive passage abounds in adjectives and nouns with negative and positive connotations that are embedded in the given text in opposite pairs (e.g. good-natured versus obstinate, shrewdness versus kindness). These combinations of contradictory features can be divided into two categories: those which include a positive trait and a negative one (e.g. good-natured versus obstinate) and those which include only negative traits (e.g. temper versus weakness). As it follows, the bad characteristics are here more numerous than the good ones, and, thus, the negative seems to prevail in John Ford's portrayal. However, the external narrator is sympathetic to him and offers a reasonable explanation for the character's predominance of unfavourable features that lies in Mr Ford's lack of success, which leaves its mark on his personality and outward aspect. On the one hand, his numerous failures have negatively affected his entire life, wrecking all his hopes and stiffening his character, but, on the other hand, it is because of his own controversial, flawed nature that he is such an unsuccessful man.

It is John Ford who is answerable for the miserable living conditions of his family, causal relations being able to be identified between the setting and the character. On account of his incapacity to manage his and his wife's capital, he loses all of it in some bad speculations. Without a job and money, he rapidly sinks into poverty and drags almost the whole family down with him. According to his profession of a lawyer, Mr Ford should be considered a representative of the upper middle class. However, he and his family are more likely to belong to the lower middle class, taking into consideration that he is not able to employ more than a servant, that his boys do not have better job prospects than being low-paid clerks, and that no family member pretends to gentility. Moreover, because the protagonist drinks and evades his responsibilities, their situation is not better than that of the Victorian lower classes. Despite their poverty, the Fords cannot be considered as belonging to the inferior social strata, because their middle-class status is confirmed not only by the employment of servants and by their professions, but also by their manner of speaking which is generally

void of informal or non-standard words and expressions, differing greatly from the working-class colloquial vocabulary and speech patterns used by their servant (e.g. ha'veen, I ain't a-going, la!, lawk). Nevertheless, the social position does not prevent Mr Ford from getting his home into a deplorable state of neglect, which is not simply the result of a complete lack of financial resources, but also of his carelessness about its order and neatness. The shabby parlour, the room in which the character is more frequently captured, is vividly and meticulously depicted:

Captain George's first impression was, that he had never seen so comfortless, so untidy, so dirty a place; his second, that his cousin was even a poorer man than the outward appearance of his house, [...] There was everything to justify both impressions. Tobacco smoke hung in clouds in the air; the paper hangings were dark with dirt and stains, where they were not torn away in strips, leaving the white walls bare [...] The old horse-hair sofa was broken in many places, and recklessly allowed its stuffing to escape. The chairs looked rickety and insecure. The carpet on the floor was full of holes and rents – a trap to unwary feet. The dusty mantel-shelf, above which hung a dull looking-glass with a long crack, was covered with dreary attempts at ornament [...] The untidy hearth, still strewn with the ashes and cinders of a long-extinct fire, crowned this picture of domestic discomfort. Captain George saw it all, whilst he shook his cousin by the hand, [...] (QM 12-13, vol. 1).

Mr Ford's parlour is described from Captain George's focalizing perspective, signalled by such indicators as "Captain George's first impression", "his second [impression]" and "Captain George saw it all". The room is "shot" in the moment when John Ford's cousin, Captain George, enters it after an interval of many years and is appalled by the disgusting view he sees. He observes the terrible state of the objects found inside the room. Each piece of furniture (the paper hangings, the old horse-hair sofa, the chairs, the carpet, the untidy hearth) is brought to the front by functioning as the subject of the sentence that describes it, being followed either by a passive verb (were not torn, was broken, was covered), or by an intensive verb (was, looked). It is the passivization with agent-deletion and the emphasis on the relational processes through the use of intensive verbs that draw the attention to what have happened to all the things from the room and what is their actual state. The latter is characterised by numerous qualifying words that can be clustered around the notion of "dirtiness" (comfortless, dirty, dark, dirt, stains, dusty, dull, untidy, and strewn) and not that of "poverty" (even though it is also perceived through such images

as the broken sofa, the insecure chairs or the ripped carpet), emphasizing that the major reason of this deplorable situation is not the lack of money, but indifference and neglect. Despite the immediate textual silence about the person who is responsible for the awful condition of the house, which is due to Captain George's ignorance about this subject, the larger context provides plentiful evidence about the relation existing between John Ford and his residence. Being the effect of how Mr Ford is and behaves, the setting becomes like him, and the causal relation between them modulates to analogical relation, which consists in a certain similarity between the setting and the character (Toolan 2001: 92).

Although the parlour is squalid as its penniless and neglectful master, it is not valid for the entire house, because two of its rooms belong to Mrs Ford, reflecting her "capricious and exacting" nature (QM 34, vol. 1), but also showing John Ford's deep, unconditional love for his wife. After giving birth to her third boy, Mrs Ford is afflicted by apathy, becoming irritable, querulous, and demanding. Despite her mental illness and her long isolation, Mr Ford's fondness increases and his sole concern is to cater to her every little whim: "Poor fellow, he had but one thought, and that was, how he might best please his Idol" (QM 123, vol. 1). The capitalization of the word "idol" ironically emphasizes that Mrs Ford is her husband's object of admiration, which he worships with affection and self-sacrifice. This statement made by the external narrator is quite significant, because it reveals the characters' roles and the relations between them. According to the actant model suggested by Greimas (1966), John Ford is the subject, being the actor who aspires to "best please" Mrs Ford, the object and the receiver. The power that stimulates the subject to achieve this aim is his unconditional love. Because he dearly loves his wife, the needy John Ford keeps her rooms comfortable and clean, while the rest of the house is disregarded. He allows her to enjoy delicious meals, while the other members of the family have scarcely anything to eat. Just for her sake, he hides their abject poverty and untidiness, leading a dual life. However, all this turns out to be helpless, for his contradictory, weak character acts as a negative power that prevents him from attaining his object, alienating his wife and killing her love for him. It is noteworthy that among the functional actors identified above, one cannot find Mr Ford's three boys. The children are not the object towards which their father aspires, and still they do not perform any of the other actantial roles related to his aim. This important detail is a good indicator of the problematic parent-child relationship, which does not change even after Mrs Ford's death, because

the new object John Ford pursues becomes the orphan girl, whom he wants to right, devoting all his time and effort. Thus, there is no place for his own children yet.

Mr Ford's disinterest in his offspring points to the fact that he is the cause of the failed relationship between them and puts him into the category of the absent father. According to the historian John Tosh, absent fatherhood was less frequent than distant and intimate parenting among the Victorian middle-class men (1999: 93, 97). However, during the second half of the nineteenth century paternity was increasingly "discussed in terms of absence and lack" (Nelson 1995: 40). The father's image that the novel under study constructs also revolves around the characteristics of Victorian absent parenting. One of the most important of them, related to the abdication of parental responsibilities for childcare, which are given up to wife and servants (Tosh 1999: 93), perfectly describes Mr Ford who does not care about his obligations as father, even when he is the sole person who can look after his children. His wife, isolating herself from everybody, has left the raising of their sons to him. And even their only servant, who, because of her master's lack of money, has been helped by another servant only sporadically, is so busy with Mrs Ford's attendance, that she scarcely has time to do any other household chores, much less to take care of the children. Consequently, with no one to mind them, the boys grow up "wild, rude, and undisciplined" (QM 34, vol. 1). These three qualifying adjectives seem to be suggestive of the three aspects neglected in their rearing: physical needs, emotional requirements and discipline.

The children's **physical needs** are not satisfied. They "are often hungry" (QM 22, vol. 1), as their penniless father does not provide enough food for them. They are poor and dirty like the house they live in. Their clothes are ragged and soiled, and because there is no one to repair them "the boys tore and mended their clothes if they pleased" (QM 36, vol. 1). Even when Mr Ford becomes rich, he refuses "the simplest things" (QM 230, vol. 1) to his sons. Money alters him to such a degree that "[t]he once reckless and prodigal man ha[s] become sober, stingy, and mean" (QM 230, vol. 1). Despite these changes, his careless attitude towards his children's needs remains the same.

Besides basic physical requirements, John Ford disregards his sons' **education**. During the Victorian era, discipline was considered one of the major responsibilities ascribed to fathers who "were expected to concern themselves more with the upbringing of older children, primarily boys" (Nelson 2007: 51). Taking this into account, Mr Ford reinforces his status of

an absent parent, by shirking the duty to instruct his sons. John Tosh declares that this position was not a favourable one for a Victorian man, as the absent father “became entirely dependent on his wife for the upbringing of his children, and was placed in an unacceptably passive position” that threatened his masculinity (1999: 95). However, in the novel, such a threat is withdrawn by means of presenting a wife and mother who is absent through her apathy and, later, through death. In these circumstances, the character acts unconstrained and the impact of his absent parenting becomes more visible. The children grow up lawless, as Mr Ford is not interested in the discipline of his boys, neither by imposing rules of behaviour, nor by showing a good example of conduct. The only thing that he does in this sense is that he allows his sister, Miss Lavinia, to take care of their religious instruction: “Since his wife’s death he had surrendered to his sister the religious education of his children” (*QM* 248, vol. 1). But, in addition to upbringing and as a constituent part of it, Victorian middle-class father was responsible for formal education of his sons and their future profession. Being poor, John Ford is not always able to pay the boys’ schooling and, therefore, they stay at home, where the eldest son, Robert, teaches his younger brothers. When their financial situation changes, the children are sent to school, but nevertheless Mr Ford disregards his duty to “see to their job training and placement in some suitable line of endeavour” (Nelson 2007: 88). Consequently, their good career prospects are ruined. Robert is employed as a clerk, job that does not afford a middle-class young man sufficient money to marry and to keep his future family. Understanding that, he decides to immigrate to Australia, accusing his father for his difficult situation: “I cannot stay here to sink down into a clerk, and there is no other prospect before me. I have not been brought up to a profession” (*QM* 220, vol. 2). The other two unemployed boys go to Australia with their older brother in hope of getting good jobs and becoming rich, but without a profession neither of them manages to accomplish his desire.

The third aspect in the children’s rearing that John Ford neglects, proving his paternal absence, is their **emotional requirements**. The Victorian absent father spent little time with his children (Strange 2015: 4), because he enjoyed more to be outside rather than at home, and did not participate in their everyday activities (Tosh 1999: 94). Physical absence is one of the reasons that determine the cold relationship existing between John Ford and his sons. He is always out, and when he is at home, he avoids their company, retiring to his room. Few as his interactions with his

offspring are, they are not pleasant on account of his inability to keep his temper under control. Again, like in the relationship between him and his wife, Mr Ford's flawed character acts as a negative power destroying the natural affection of his children to their father. But, additionally to his shortcomings, the burden of guilt for Mab's fraudulence he carries with him, which helps him to reach the object in his aspiration towards righting the orphan girl, strains the already poor parent-child relationship. And seeing the result of his neglect, that his boys do not love or respect him, nor do they care about him, he becomes more rigid:

With the perversity of a great sorrow, he widened the breach already so deep, by exaggerated coldness and severity. He stung Robert by his injustice, he alienated William and Edward by his harsh temper, and no one suspected that tenderness and jealousy were at the root of his harshness (QM 260, vol. 1).

These two lines offer another facet of John Ford's image as father. Such qualities like coldness, severity, injustice and harsh temper, approach him to the prototype of the tyrannical father, which is the single pattern described by harshness. Nonetheless, this characteristic is not sufficient to accuse Mr Ford of being a Victorian tyrannical parent, because the latter's major concern was to support, through oppressive behaviour and repression, his familial authority, undermined by the "formidable moral prestige of motherhood" (Tosh 1999: 95). By contrast, John Ford does not inflict any kinds of punishment on his children and does not seek to control everything in his house, peculiarities which clearly demonstrate that he cannot embody the stereotyped "Victorian paterfamilias". He is just an unbalanced man, impelled to bolster his paternal authority in the eyes of his sons by his bitterness over their broken rapport and by his jealousy of Robert, his eldest son, who is a father for his younger brothers. By giving the reasons behind John Ford's behaviour, the intrusive external narrator displays a sympathetic attitude towards the character and seems to defend him by disclosing, via the word "tenderness", preceded by the negative phrase "no one suspected" that beyond the father's outward harshness there is a loving paternal heart.

There are several instances in which the external narrator-focalizer states that John Ford loves his children, but not all of them are in agreement with the character's behaviour. Even though one can presume that it is possible for him to have some sort of affection for his children and accept the narrator's statement: "He forgot that if he had loved his children, he had not always shown that love" (QM 259, vol. 1), which still betrays the

exaggerated narratorial compassion (by means of the verb “forget” that is used to make the affirmation less severe and to diminish the character’s error, for nobody can forget such things; moreover, no one can love someone without demonstrating it somehow or other), then the following pathetic assertion cannot be considered reliable, as it is clearly denied by the whole story:

But he loved his children, because they were his children – his flesh and blood, born in sorrow, reared in adversity. William, Edward, and Robert were his boys – images of himself, part of his own being; for them he had sinned and suffered all these years, for them he would have died again and again (QM 303, vol. 1).

Touchy as this description of fatherly love is, it is in contradiction with the paternal image constructed throughout the narrative on the basis of Mr Ford’s actions. If the children grow through adversity, it is his fault, his shortcomings, fact that prevents them from having a typical middle-class childhood. Additionally, he does not rear them, but neglects them and everything else (business and household) through drinking, being incapable of satisfying their basic needs. And it is not for them that he has sinned, because when the situation changes radically and as a result of his “sin” he becomes rich, John Ford does not concern himself with his children’s well-being, preserving the same attitude of indifference to them. His sufferings have nothing to do with the boys; being caused instead by his failure to obtain sufficient evidence that Mabel has been wronged. All these details undermine the credibility of the last words of the passage “for them he would have died again and again” and prove the sympathetic external narrator subjective and unreliable.

All in all, through abdicating from the above mentioned responsibilities, John Ford alienates his children and hinders the development of a warm parent-child relationship with them. As a result, the boys “ha[ve] early learned to think little of [their] father” (QM 89, vol. 1) and their indifferent attitude towards him is painful and bitter to him, especially when distance has to separate them, but he does not recognize his mistake:

As to owning me any debt of gratitude, of course they do not! I have given them what shame, the world, the law itself compel every father to give his children – the shelter of his roof – a place at his table. Besides, of late Robert has paid full board, and Edward and William half. They owe me nothing, Mab, nothing – I keep a lodging-house, and they owe me nothing (QM 307, vol. 1)

This textual passage discloses Mr Ford's inner turmoil produced by his children's coldness. Although he understands that they are independent and the connection between them is similar to that existing between a host and its lodgers, which is based on a simple deal, implying no emotional attachment, he does not realize that it is his fault, his neglect that has produced this separation and has compelled the boys to fend for themselves. The embittered father considers that he has accomplished his duty by providing his sons with things which a father is forced to give to his offspring by "shame, the world, the law". However, the Victorian ideology, which was especially powerful in the middle classes, is against him, because the standards it advocates are higher and more demanding than merely affording children a place in their parents' house. The fact that Mr Ford utterly disregards these standards proves him an absent father, and, since he does nothing to repair his error, even his great sorrow at the broken relationship with his children does not alter his negative image.

The only thing that puts John Ford in a different light is his close rapport with Mabel, the orphan girl he adopts. The novel further complicates the main character's intricate paternal portrayal by revealing him as an intimate father. Even if there is no one-to-one correspondence between the character and the prototypical Victorian fond father, there are points of similarity between the two. John Tosh maintains that the nineteenth-century middle-class intimate father "set more store by the transparency of spontaneous relations than by the disciplines of restraint [...] [and] held to the value of tenderness and familiarity" (1999: 99). Analogously, Mr Ford who does not impose restraint on his own children that are often victims of his harshness and injustice is much less concerned with Mabel's restrictions. Instead, he lavishes tenderness and affection on the girl, calling her by using various terms of endearment, like "my (little) pet", "puss(y)", "my darling", "my little Queen Mab" and caressing her: "drawing her up on his knee [...] and he gave her a kiss" (QM 186, vol. 1), "kissed her fondly" (QM 307, vol. 1), "he kissed her with a smile" (QM 115, vol. 2). This loving treatment specific to the Victorian fond father is remunerated in John Ford's case and the attachment between him and the adoptee is mutual. Mab shows the same fondling: "She sat on Mr Ford's knee, she twined her arms around Mr Ford's neck, and giving him a passionate caress, she exclaimed, in the fullness of her heart: "[...] nothing shall ever divide us - nothing - we shall live and die together, come what will!" (QM 222, vol. 2) It is noticeable from this example that Mabel's caress is demonstrative of her strong emotional connection to Mr Ford. The tender

loving care she receives from him generates in her genuine affection for him, being, thus, the only person in that house who worries about him.

Despite reciprocal friendliness, this relationship deviates from the pattern of nineteenth-century intimate fatherhood, which is characterized by joy and vitality, fathers being their children's playmates, who "praised, [...] laughed, [...] [and] romped" (Tosh 1999: 99). John Ford does not play or laugh with Mabel, nor does he praise her, and for this behaviour two reasons can be suggested. Firstly, cheerfulness is not to be found among the character's personal traits and, consequently, he is scarcely ever in high spirits. Secondly, he is inwardly troubled on account of his remorse at the grave injustice he has done to the orphan child: "The love he bore her was the love of sorrow, repentance, and atonement. It sprang from the feeling that he could never do enough for one whom he had so wronged, and with it blended genuine tenderness and affection" (QM 303, vol. 1). Through this statement the intrusive narrator discloses that Mr Ford's parental love for Mabel does not emerge from his nature and that it is not one of his characteristics, fact proved also by his cold attitude towards his own children. But, it is generated by the strong sense of guilt that haunts him, causing him a lot of suffering and unrest during his whole life. In this context, the nickname he gives the orphan child - little Queen Mab - is suggestive of his wrong through its reference to the fairy Queen Mab, the folkloric Celtic figure used for the first time in literature by William Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). This mischievous fairy makes people dream about their greatest aspirations, which reveal, in fact, their prevailing moral flaws, and then afflicts them with blisters, because they are corrupted by these aspirations. Similar is the orphan child's appearance in Mr Ford's life. This event makes his dream of being rich come true, but it also brings him immense psychological distress over the thought that his desire for money has prevented him from immediately searching the truth about the little girl's story. And this inner torment is not alleviated up to the moment when Mab is "righted, rich and happy" (QM 239, vol. 3).

The fear not to treat Mabel unfairly through his behaviour, and, thus to add to the past wrong makes John Ford be a pushover, like a minority of Victorian fond fathers that differed from the rest who balanced their "easy familiarity [...] by respect for discipline and routine" (Tosh 1999: 99). So, the fictional father is indulgent to the adopted child, refusing her nothing and accomplishing her every wish. Even when he grows stingy, he does not change his position: "to Mab alone he [is] liberal, not extravagantly, but sufficiently" (QM 230, vol. 1). It is worth mentioning that

in this quote the object is “thematized” for special emphasis (Toolan 2001: 34). In other words, it becomes the theme of the sentence instead of the sentential subject “he” (John Ford) with the purpose to highlight who is the privileged person and to make, in this way, the contrast between her and the other children even sharper. Being in the advantageous position of having everything she wants, the girl becomes a mediator between her adoptive father and his boys: “[s]he stood between Mr Ford’s displeasure and his younger sons, and through her flowed his scanty good graces (*QM*, 252-253, vol. 1). Putting aside the metaphorical language of this sentence and considering the textual context, it becomes clear that Mabel is manipulated by the two younger sons in order to get money out of their father or to obtain his consent for the fulfilment of some of their simple, trivial wishes. However, she does not oppose it, but, conversely and additionally, she is ready to defend them against their father or even to bear the blame for them, knowing that she is in his favour.

There is abundant evidence in the novel, found in the characters’ actions and speech and the external narrator-focalizer’s statements, that proves Mabel’s favourable position compared to the boys and her influence on their father. Numerous are the cases when John Ford’s sad mood is lightened by the girl’s kind words or when his temper is softened just by her presence. These instances are consistent with such narratorial assertions as: “*Mab alone* was privileged to disturb him, and intrude on his privacy” (*QM* 252, vol. 1, emphasis added) and “*Mab alone* could venture to address him. [...] Whatever his mood might be, she was *safe from his* anger, *safe from his* sharpest speech (*QM* 200-201, vol. 1, emphasis added). The girl’s prominent status is reinforced by the repeated use of the phrase “*Mab alone*”, which in the first example is foregrounded through passivization. Repetition is also employed in the second example with the purpose to emphasize her “immunity” to Mr Ford’s annoyance.

It is significant that John Ford’s preference for a daughter, albeit adopted, and not for a son, is a reversal of the Victorian parenting conventions, which demanded fathers to be closer to their sons, on account of their duty to bring them up and to educate them for a profession, and mothers to be responsible for their young children and daughters. The latter spent more time with their mothers, because they were primarily taught to carry out domestic chores, being often confined to the private sphere. And, even though the middle-class girls could help their fathers, especially when the mother was dead, they still were viewed as having less in common with them than their brothers (Nelson 2007). In the novel under study, the

subversion of the conventional father-son relationship by a strong father-daughter attachment is made possible due to some noteworthy peculiarities. Firstly, Mrs. Ford dies shortly after the orphan girl is found at the door of their house, thus, favourable conditions for the development of a close connection between the father and the adoptee are created. Secondly, Mr. Ford is not concerned with the rearing of his sons, nor with helping them to enter his profession, similar to many Victorian men who guided and taught their sons to join their occupation, contributing, in this manner, to the establishment of a strong father-son tie (Nelson 2007: 91). Last but not least, the guilt over the wrong committed to Mabel that afflicts John Ford impels him to have a special attitude towards her.

All in all, through the protagonist's strong relationship with Mabel and his indifference and harshness towards his sons, the novel constructs an original paternal image that diverges from the stern Victorian father stereotype, representing instead a collage of prototypical fragments of such nineteenth-century patterns as absent, tyrannical and intimate fatherhood. However, special emphasis is laid on absent fatherhood, as a result of the influence the tendency of viewing fathers in terms of absence displayed during the latter half of the nineteenth century had on the contemporary fiction. The duality of John Ford's attitude towards the children he is responsible for points to his paradoxical nature and to the two essential sides of paternal love (inner feeling and deed) dwelling separately in his identity: fatherly affection without corresponding actions and actions proving parental intimacy, but that do not spring from genuine love. This dissociation highlights the complexity of fatherhood that cannot be enclosed by any patterned or stereotypical image.

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