

## PARODY AND METAFICTION IN JONATHAN COE'S *THE WINSHAW LEGACY*

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The paperback cover of the Vintage International edition of Jonathan Coe's *The Winshaw Legacy* shows the body of a man lying partly concealed under a broad staircase, in a setting associated with the classic murder mystery: a room in a large mansion, in the English countryside, complete with family portraits hanging on dark wood-paneled walls. An excerpt from *The New York Times*' review of the novel, at the foot of the page – “Savagely funny... a big, raucous and exhilarating novel” – contrasts sharply with the somber setting and thwarts any expectations the reader might have of enjoying a bona fide detective story. The novel is, in fact, according to another reviewer, “a spoof of classic mystery stories and silly British comedies”.

The facetious imitation of other genres and styles (spoof) that strikes reviewers as the mainstay of the novel becomes clearer at every turn of page, starting with a first-person narrator's direct address to “(his) friendly readers”, in the convoluted style of the nineteenth-century serial novel he uses to describe the mentally unstable Tabitha Winshaw, “the patron and sponsor of the book which you ... now hold in your hands”:

I have no wish to dwell unnecessarily on the pitiful infirmities which fate has chosen to visit upon a poor and weak-minded woman, but this matter must be explained insofar as it has a material bearing on the subsequent history of the Winshaw family, and it must, therefore, be put into some sort of context. I shall at least endeavour to be brief. (COE, 1996, p. 3)<sup>1</sup>

From the opening sentence in the novel's Prologue, this first-person narrative voice establishes the context of the action with definite authorial omniscience: “Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale” (p. 3). The announcement that “Death visited Winshaw Towers again that night” sums up the exposition of the remote events of November 30<sup>th</sup> 1942, when the news arrived that Godfrey Winshaw's plane had been shot down. This is the origin of further developments that take the reader up to the eventful family gathering in 1961, to celebrate Mortimer Winshaw's fiftieth birthday. At this point, an impersonal third-person narrator describes the iniquities of the members of the clan – an evil collection of characters who represent the maladies of the socio-political environment, while

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<sup>1</sup> COE, Jonathan. *The Winshaw Legacy*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996. All further references to the text will be indicated by page numbers in brackets.

playing the leading roles in the history of their family. They are witnesses to the second “tragedy” to strike the Winshaws, when a burglar is killed by the eldest member of the family, Lawrence, the lord of the manor.

In another abrupt stylistic change, the reader hears an entirely different voice, that of a first-person adult narrator who recollects the events of his ninth birthday, when he was prevented from watching the conclusion of a film entitled *What a Carve Up!*, thus becoming obsessed with “another of adulthood’s ubiquitous, insoluble mysteries: a story without a proper ending” (p. 35). This is the voice of Michael Owen, the writer who has been commissioned to record the Winshaws’ history and whose autobiographical reminiscences and personal exploits, especially his difficulties in completing his literary task, structure the narrative.

Coherently, the various genres and subgenres – biography, autobiography, the detective novel, besides other media (film and television) – that constitute the structural underpinning of *The Winshaw Legacy* meet at a common point: the need to elucidate a *mystery*, whether it be an unsolved crime, living in the chaos of modernity, or, for the modern writer, finding his way out of the entangled process of creation.

Part two of the novel, entitled ‘An Organization of Deaths’, offers an apparently simple solution: copy what has been done before. Thus the history of the Winshaw family, which Tabitha Winshaw had envisaged as “a tremendous book, an unprecedented book – part personal memoir, part social commentary, all stirred together into one lethal and devastating brew” (p.476) – ends in a grotesque and overt parody of Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Niggers*, whose film versions the characters discuss openly. Parody is Jonathan Coe’s solution for his problems of narrative technique.

This is actually the focus of this paper: the narrative structures that Jonathan Coe takes over from previous works, specifically the detective novel, and how he adapts those models to his needs – the criticism of both the present literary environment and of the socio-political milieu of post-war Britain. The discussion focuses particularly on the parody of the Agatha Christie classic which concludes the novel, but references to other intertextual exchanges throughout the novel will be made to evidence that *The Winshaw Legacy* aims at serious social commentary. This is in spite of what a minor character of radical tendencies argues to be the problem with the English novel today, that it has no tradition of political engagement: “It’s all a lot of pissing about within the limits set down by bourgeois morality, as far as I can see. There’s no radicalism” (p. 276).

Social criticism underlies the two narrative lines in the novel: the history of the Winshaws over a period of fifty years, from World War II to the Gulf War, and the personal story of the individual, Michael Owen, gathering material for his book and working on its composition.

Thirty years separate the two fateful family gatherings that open and close the action proper. The birthday celebration in 1961 brings into the limelight the main characters in the plot, which include the second generation, Lawrence, Tabitha, and Mortimer, and the third, Henry, Thomas, Dorothy and Mark. Aged nine and seven, the youngest Winshaws, Roddy and Hilary, are promising members of the clan. In a dispute over a coin, the boy treads on his sister's hand until the bones are crushed.

With the exception of Lawrence, long deceased, the same group is found at the reading of Mortimer's will on January 16<sup>th</sup> 1991, in an atmosphere of strange expectancy, as the omniscient narrator informs us, since at 5 o'clock the United Nations' final deadline for Iraq's withdrawal from Kuwait had expired.

In one way or another every member of the family has interests in the war. Thomas, the eldest, a banker and economist who enjoys "snatching these huge state-owned companies from the taxpayers' hands and carving them up among a minority of profit-hungry shareholders" (p. 321), is concerned with the profits to be made in the arms trade, in which his younger cousin Mark has commercial dealings with both sides. Henry, the turncoat member of parliament, has built a successful career in politics by keeping his opinions secret and worming his way in. Proud of being on speaking terms with Margaret Thatcher, he is in favor of "dumping the bitch, and fast" (p. 141) when she falls from grace. He goes along with the party's decision over the war.

Hilary is an overpaid journalist renowned for her biting - but often baseless - articles on current issues. She changes her opinion with no compunction at all: her editorials about Saddam Hussein as a patriot and hero turn into vicious indictment of "the tyrant". Ruthless Dorothy has built up what used to be her husband's quiet, old-fashioned, modestly run family farm into one of the biggest agrochemical empires in the country, by closely observing the "conversion rate"; that is, "how much food you put *in* to an animal, compared to what you get *out* of it in the end, by way of meat" (p. 18).

Michael Owen declares his disgust for this family of criminals

whose wealth and prestige were founded upon every manner of swindling, forgery, larceny, robbery, thievery, trickery, jiggery-pokery, hanky-panky, plundering, looting, sacking, misappropriation, spoliation and embezzlement. (...) Every penny

of the Winshaw fortune (...) could be said to have derived, by some route or other, from the shameless exploitation of persons weaker than themselves. (p. 88-89)

His personal memoirs are interspersed with his present actions and with his reflections about the composition of his book on the Winshaws. It is the biographer writing his own story. The story of the story structures the narrative we read and has the upper hand. With a slight detour to 1982, the seven sections in part one of the novel are arranged in chronological order from August 1990 to January 1991 and have to do with Michael's personal life. Intervening sections are named after the six Winshaw heroes and heroines: Hilary, Henry, Roddy, Dorothy, Thomas and Mark, and deal with their shady activities.

The reader learns how Michael, at the age of eleven, created his first fictional character, a Victorian detective who went by the exotic name of Jason Rudd, playing a typical role in a tale entitled "The Castle Mystery". Further on in the narrative, the adult Michael finds himself engaged in a sort of game: guessing who the murderer is out of a number of characters stranded in a big old house in the country. Michael's realization that the character he impersonates, Professor Plum, is actually the murderer foreshadows the concluding events of the novel, in the section entitled "An Organization of Deaths", and provides side commentaries on the role of the writer as either "disinterested observer" or controller of his narrative.

It was my destiny to act the part of a shy awkward, vulnerable little man caught up in a sequence of nightmarish events over which he had absolutely no control. (...) The solution revealed itself to me: the murderer, the culprit, was none other than myself, Professor Plum.(...) It seemed wrong that by a simple process of elimination you could find yourself guilty of a crime, and yet still not know how or where you were supposed to have committed it. Surely there was no precedent for this in real life? I wondered what it would actually feel like, to be present at the unraveling of some terrible mystery and then to be suddenly confronted with the falseness of your own, complacent self-image as disinterested observer: to find, all at once, that you were thoroughly and messily bound up in the web of motives and suspicions which you had presumed to untangle with an outsider's icy detachment. Needless to say, I could not imagine the circumstances in which such a thing might ever happen to me. (p. 302-303)

In fact, it is hard to imagine that Michael Owen's appointment to write *The Winshaw Legacy* had arisen from a chance meeting with an attractive girl who was reading one of his books on a train, and who turned out to be the daughter of the publisher in charge of finding a suitable writer for the Winshaws' history. Further on in the narrative the reader is informed that the meeting had actually been contrived.

Eight years later, after a sterile non-productive period, Michael Owen is still struggling with his unfinished book when he receives some helpful suggestions from his publisher, who tells him his book lacks passion. Taking passion as a synonym for intensity, Michael is dumbfounded to find out that his publisher simply meant sex. Owen takes the advice to heart, but his attempt to write a sexually arousing scene involving art-dealer Roddy Winshaw and a young female artist, whom - according to current gossip - he had lured to the family mansion under false pretenses, is one of the really hilarious passages in the novel. “My knowledge of sexually explicit books and films was small”, says Michael, once again establishing the parodic character of his text. After four days and nights of writing and re-writing he was still “dithering over preliminary niceties so as to avoid getting down to the action.”

*He pulled her roughly towards the bed*  
That wouldn't do. I didn't want to make it sound like rape.  
*He pulled her gently toward s the bed*  
Too wimpish.  
*He drew her towards the bed*  
*He sat down on the bed and drew her roughly towards him*  
*“Won't you sit down?” he said and pointed in the rough direction of the bed.*  
*He looked in the rough direction of the bed, and raised a provocative eyebrow*  
*A suggestive eyebrow*  
*He raised both of his eyebrows*  
*He raised his right eyebrow provocatively*  
*He raised his left eyebrow suggestively*  
[Finally, he comes up with a compromise.]  
*Raising both of his eyebrows, one provocatively, the other suggestively, he pulled her gently in the rough direction of the bed. (p. 333-4)*

The characteristic comic vision of postmodernism deconstructs that which it supposedly means to emulate, as in Michael Owen's failed attempt to parody the clichés of pornographic stories. According to Lance Olsen, “the postmodern creator becomes aesthetic and metaphysical terrorist, a freeplayer in a universe of intertextuality, where no one text has any more or less authority than any other” (1990, p. 18).

On the other hand, when discussing parody, Dwight MacDonald warns against the excessive broadening of the genre that might turn into mere jocularity: “most of what passes for parody is actually so broad as to be mere burlesque”. For him, “the genre expands or contracts, changing shape like a fish glimpsed under water, the water being one's own particular notion of the fish” (1960, p. xiii).

Martin Kuester (1992, p. 3-4) is more restrictive in his conceptualization. The term parody should be used in a structural sense in which humor is a possible quality of parodies but not a necessary prerequisite. To avoid the expected association between parody and

humor, Kuester suggests going back to the concept of parody as it was used by eighteenth century theorists and critics such as Samuel Johnson, and as it has been reintroduced by contemporary theorists: “a kind of writing, in which the words of an author or his thoughts are taken, and by a slight change adapted to some new purpose”.

Bakhtin’s theories of dialogism enhance the importance of parody in modern literary works of art, since modern societies can no longer produce monological texts that represent a coherent world-view, as was the case with the epic. One way of reacting against monological texts is to parody them. “The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their roles as genders); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure reformulating and re-accentuating them” (1981, p. 5). Thus parody can be an end in itself – the literary parody as a genre, for example - but the author can make use of the parodic word in various ways to serve other, positive purposes.

Linda Hutcheon (1991, p. 32) points out that parody is repetition with critical distance, a form of imitation characterized by ironic inversion, which marks difference rather than similarity. As an acknowledged borrowing, parody involves not only formal textual imitation but also the issue of intent.

It is evident that Jonathan Coe has a definite intent in parodying a genre dismissed by canonical criticism as mass literature. He uses the formulaic characteristics of detective fiction both to structure his narrative and as a means to protest against the callousness of the socio-political environment.

Edgar Allan Poe, the precursor of what he labels “tales of ratiocination”, suggests a formula for what was to become the classical detective story, which he defines in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Purloined Letter” (STERN, 1977). There are four aspects to the formula. .

1. *Situation*. The classical detective story begins with an unsolved crime and moves toward the elucidation of the mystery. There are two unsolved deaths (were they actually criminal?) in the history of the Winshaws. Was Tabitha right in accusing Lawrence of being a Nazi spy and of sending their brother Godfrey to his death from anti-aircraft fire in his top-secret mission over Berlin? What was the identity of the burglar killed by Lawrence?

2. *Pattern of action*. In Poe’s definition, the detective story formula centers around the detective’s investigation and solution of the crime. Jonathan Coe parodies the formula to help his narrator-protagonist – who is not a detective – to unravel the mystery, which is not the center of the narrative.

3. *Characters and relationships*. The classical detective story required four main roles: a) the victim; b) the criminal; c) the detective; and d) those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it. All elements are facetiously presented in Coe's parody

4. *Setting*. Poe's stories of "ratiocination" take place in isolated settings – the locale of the crime and the detective's rooms, where he pieces together the logical solution to the crime. Winshaw Towers corresponds in a way to the isolated setting of crimes.

Coe's narrative adapts, reverses or simply ignores formulas and rules in his parody. In fact, the reader is not mesmerized by the solution of the mysteries, a sideline in Michael Owen's personal story. It is only in the second part of the novel "An Organization of Deaths," a mere 69 of its 493 pages, that the long-protracted solution of the crimes, intricately enmeshed in the conclusion of the novel's narrative process, is reached with a boom and a bang. Besides tying up loose threads in the history of the Winshaws, the denouement solves Michael Owen's personal conflicts and his anguish as a writer.

### **An Organization of Deaths**

As mentioned above, the second part of the book, "An Organization of Deaths", is an explicit parody of Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Niggers*, in the form of a short detective novel told in the third person. The plot is a third reunion of the Winshaws, which includes their biographer Michael Owen.

The Agatha Christie classic is itself a deviation from the traditional pattern of "the novel of enigma", pointed out by Todorov (2003): 1) **Story one**: the story of the crime presented to the reader as a *fait accompli*; 2) **Story two**: the search for the murderer which establishes a link between the reader and the process of solving the crime: information is relayed in a clear and direct style that allows the reader to work out a solution. The narrator – someone other than the detective himself – functions as a mere observer, someone who reports events usually without understanding their significance.

As initiated readers know, *Ten Little Niggers* is unique in the canon of "the Queen of Crime": deaths are announced beforehand and occur in the order and in the ways indicated by the words of a nursery rhyme. There are no detectives and the solution of the crimes is also *sui generis*: the murderer himself, one of the ten prospective victims isolated on a lonely island describes his reasons and his actions in detail, puts the manuscript in a bottle and throws it into the sea. The bottle is, evidently, found by the police!!! At least in this, the story is conventional: there must be a solution to the mystery, however farfetched and improbable it

may be, which must be announced in a dramatic moment of revelation (CAWELTI, 1977, p. 87).

Seeing that Christie's text already deviates from accepted norms, "An Organization of Deaths" can be taken as the parody of a parody, as an imitating text that twice reverses the form of the formulaic detective tale (the imitated text) while facetiously pretending to renew interest in its old message – that crime must be punished. The division into form and content is a simplification insofar as these two elements – especially in parodies – are interdependent, but, as Kuester emphasizes, a parody forces us to be aware of form as an artifice (1992, p. 7).

Detective novels are a formulaic genre, however, and by concentrating on the explicit dialogue with the form of the imitated text we inevitably refer to its message. Ideological implications are the backbone of *The Winshaw Legacy* and its final part, "An Organization of Deaths", is a travesty or burlesque, a derisive and exaggerated imitation of such ideas.

Poe's division will be used as a structuring principle.

### **Situation**

Explicit dialogue with different genres and subgenres of popular literature establishes the initial situation: basically, the reunion of the Winshaws, with the presence of their biographer, for the reading of Mortimer's will.

The intrusion into Michael's quarters, in the premature dusk of a dreary day, of a mysterious stranger, whose face "would have struck terror into the heart of many a stronger man", mocks the clichés of horror stories:

Gaunt, misshapen and unhealthy, it expressed at once a meanness of spirit, a slowness of intelligence and, perhaps most chillingly of all, an absolute untrustworthiness. (...) It was a face which gave out a simple, dreadful message: abandon hope, all you who look upon this face. Give up every thought of redemption, every prospect of escape. Expect nothing from me. (p. 424)

This apparition turns out to be no other than Mortimer Winshaw's solicitor, who had come to request Michael's presence at the reading of his client's will.

On the train to Winshaw Towers, Michael examines a spy story entitled *I Was 'Celery'*, the memoir of a double agent whose codename explains the meaning of Lawrence's mysterious note BISCUIT, CHEESE AND CELERY, supposedly an order for lunch, a key element in the solution of the mystery surrounding Godfrey's death – which marks the Winshaws' first reunion. The third-person narrator who is substituted for Michael Owen's narrative voice suggests that Tabitha's accusations about her brother and his wartime treachery might be true.



Michael has supposedly been summoned for the unraveling of the mystery. There are surprising revelations: we are told that the burglar killed by Lawrence during the family's second reunion was both Godfrey's co-pilot, who had miraculously survived the crash, and Michael's biological father.

References to different genres of film that deal with a similar **situation**, the murder of several people in an isolated old house, foreshadow future developments: the Hitchcock thriller *Psycho*, a comic travesty with Bob Hope, and films based on the plot of Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Niggers*.<sup>2</sup> The situation at hand is an explicit parody of the latter: "Isn't there a film where some crackpot – he turns out to be a judge – invites a lot of people to a remote house and does 'em all in: the point being that they all have guilty secrets to hide, and he sees himself as their executioner – a sort of angel of justice?" (p. 452) Thomas Winshaw's question establishes the pattern of action, and puts the seal on the parodic nature of the text.

#### **Pattern of action:**

Jonathan Coe heeds the conventions of detective fiction when he pointedly provides logical explanations for everybody's presence at Winshaw Towers on the fateful night of January 16<sup>th</sup> 1991. Why should six of the wealthiest people in England – Thomas, Henry, Dorothy, and Mark, besides Roddy and Hilary – take the trouble to come to a derelict old house for the reading of the will of their respective uncle and father, a man known to have a very small personal fortune? Mortimer's will provides the answer:

They will be propelled by the very same force which has always – and solely – driven them throughout the entire conduct of their professional careers. I refer, of course, to greed: naked, clawing, brutish greed. (p. 438)

Michael's presence is equally accounted for as the family's "luckless biographer", who should be on hand to make a complete record of an evening expected to provide "a most fitting conclusion to his eagerly awaited history" (p. 437), which takes place in appropriate surroundings.

#### **Setting**

The description of the setting overtly parodies the style of gothic fiction. At the mercy of the wind and the rain, on a very dark night, Michael walks through "black naked peat, straggling heather, and weirdly shaped rocks", until he reaches a "squat, forbidding mansion", where he is received by the "ghastly howling of dogs". Attempting to lift "the immense, rusty

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<sup>2</sup> The novel was published in the United States with different titles: *And Then There Were None*, *The Nursery Rhyme Murders*, and *Ten Little Indians*.

knocker”, he found that the door “swung open of its own accord”. The “huge, dingy, stone-flagged hall, lit only by four or five lamps set high in the wood-paneled walls, with badly weathered tapestries and oil paintings adding to the crepuscular impression”, matches the picture on the cover of the book which opened this discussion.

By this time, in spite of the characteristics of *The Winshaw Legacy* as a bizarre parody of detective fiction, the inevitable expectations aroused by the genre still make the habitué reader hope for the clearing up of some obscure points in the narrative. And this is what Jonathan Coe finally does, by mercilessly juggling the roles of *the victim, the criminal, the detective and those threatened by the crime, but incapable of solving it.*

### **Characters and relationships.**

The victims are reduced to six, and their deaths reflect the characteristics of their fraudulent professional activities. Henry, the double-crosser and back-stabber, is the first to go, stabbed in the back. “How appropriate” is Hilary’s dry comment. “Does this mean that Mrs Thatcher is somewhere in the house?” (p. 446)

Mark Winshaw, the trafficker in arms, is chopped up with an axe. His body is found in the billiard room, his severed limbs protruding hideously from the two pockets at the baulk end. The macabre message scrawled in blood on the wall is a reference to another literary text: A FAREWELL TO ARMS.

When the lights go out, Roddy inadvertently chews the eyeball of Thomas, the voyeur, taken out of a bowl containing grapes. Dorothy’s body is trussed up neatly and tied by the ankles to a meat hook screwed into one of the beams, like a slaughtered calf. Hilary is crushed by a bulky parcel compounded of all the newspapers for which she had written a column over the last six years. The narrative voice comments she was “crushed by the weight of her own opinion, and knocked to the ground, as senseless as any reader who had ever been numbed into submission by her raging torrent of overpaid words” (p. 465). Roddy Winshaw, the unscrupulous art-dealer, is found dead in his bedroom, covered from head to foot in gold paint – a scene from another film, Shirley Eaton in *Goldfinger*, Michael Owen informs us, carrying out his self-appointed task as inquirer, a variation of the detective’s role.

At a certain point Owen becomes prime suspect, when it is pointed out that Owen is the name of the organizer of the “whole shindig” in *Ten Little Niggers*, Mr U.N.Owen. Back in his role as inquirer, he hears the confession of a blood-spattered weary Mortimer Winshaw, who was not dead after all, and who had been pretending to be a helpless invalid: he had tried to do mankind a small favor before he died by ridding the world of the Winshaws, “a handful of vermin”.

It runs in the family, you see. Mad as hatters, queer as coots, and nutty as fruitcakes, every one of us. Because there comes a point, you know, Michael (...) where greed and madness become practically indistinguishable(...) And there comes another point, where the willingness to tolerate greed, and to live alongside it, and even to assist it, becomes a sort of madness too. (p. 485)

This is the necessary moment of revelation in detective fiction, which clears the motives and means of the murder(s). Michael himself is not exempt from blame, however. It was his book – reports of which Tabitha had forwarded to her brother – that had finally persuaded Mortimer to act “and suggested one or two possible ... approaches” (p. 484). Michael’s role as disinterested observer is shattered and he finds that that he was “thoroughly and messily bound up in the web of motives and suspicions which you had presumed to untangle with an outsider’s icy detachment”, as quoted above.

Tabitha Winshaw’s contradictory roles emphasize Coe’s playful manipulation of the formula. She is the “old loony” who triggers the action – a parallel to “Aunt Emily, the deranged old spinster played by Esma Cannon in the film *What a Carve Up!*” (p. 35).<sup>3</sup> But she is also the sharp sleuth, placidly knitting while everybody else is running around, an ironic Miss Marple - Agatha Christie’s famous detective - who enjoys the whole to-do and reminds Michael of his authorial position: “What a long face you are wearing! (...) Or perhaps you are beginning to get a few thoughts about how your book might end?” (p. 449). In fact, Tabitha is the instrument that brings about the end of “An Organization of Deaths”, the story: within the history of the Winshaws, which is left unfinished. Disguised as a pilot, she flies Michael to a crash, laughing wildly – “the endless, hideous laughter of the irredeemably insane” (p. 492). Michael’s death completes the parallels with the imitated text: there are no survivors. “Tragedy had struck the Winshaws twice before, but never on such a terrible scale”: the meaning of the opening sentence becomes clear when repeated in isolation, after the novel’s conclusion. Death both puts an end to Michael’s personal conflicts and solves his problems as a writer: just leave the story incomplete.

In detective stories the troubles of life are reduced to a single problem: a murder has been committed and must be solved. Upon its solution, troubles disappear and life runs smoothly once again. This may be the primary reason for the continuing popularity of the genre. It certainly explains the parodic use of detective fiction as a solution for Michael Owen’s impasse: “The manuscript was in a serious mess. Parts of it read like a novel and parts of it read like a history, while in the closing pages it assumed a tone of hostility towards

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<sup>3</sup> The film actually exists: a 1962 production directed by Pat Jackson, starring Sid James and Kenneth Connor.

the family which was quite unnerving. I would have to decide once and for all whether to present it as a work of fact or fiction” (p. 91-92).

Fact and fiction are actually aligned in *The Winshaw Legacy*, which shows different levels of representation: the actor Sid James, for instance, the star of *What a Carve Up!*, becomes a character in an incident involving Thomas Winshaw’s voyeurism. That problems of representation are also a constant concern of author Jonathan Coe is evidenced by his choice of approach, which centers on writing as a self-reflexive process. His chronicle of post-war Britain and, by extension, of the post-war world becomes a parody of historiography, biography, autobiography, and of various genres of popular literature, besides establishing intertextual relationships with other media – film and television.

*The Winshaw Legacy* can be said to fit Linda Hutcheon’s concept of historiographic metafiction on account of its use of techniques that foreground the process of writing in the reconstruction of a historical period. And parody certainly is one such metafictional technique since, whatever its purpose, it is based on a primary text. For Hutcheon, parody is one of the major modes of formal and thematic construction of texts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, having a hermeneutic function with both cultural and even ideological implications (1991, p. 2).

Michael Owen, the inquirer, solves the mystery involving the deaths of Godfrey Winshaw and of his co-pilot and indirectly causes the murderers to be punished. Michael Owen, the writer, leaves his book unfinished. Like his writer-protagonist, Jonathan Coe, the author of *The Winshaw Legacy*, successfully exposes the greed and insanity of the modern world, while simultaneously turning a critical eye upon the task of the modern writer. The recurrent comments about the story’s lack of a proper ending, plus its parodic character, indicate that its author is still searching for an answer to his problems of representation.

#### Abstract

This paper analyzes the final division of Jonathan Coe’s 1994 novel, *The Winshaw Legacy*, as a parody of classic detective stories, namely Agatha Christie’s *Ten Little Niggers*. Parody, destructive comedy and reflections about the creation of the writer-protagonist’s book - the biography of the Winshaw family – are discussed as means that put into relief the novel’s metafictional character and its biting commentary on the economic and political milieu of contemporary England.

Key words: parody; metafiction; detective novel; Jonathan Coe; *The Winshaw Legacy*.

#### Resumo

Este trabalho analisa a parte final do romance *The Winshaw Legacy* de Jonathan Coe, publicado em 1994, como paródia do romance policial clássico, especificamente *O caso dos dez negrinhos* de Agatha Christie. Discute-se paródia, comédia burlesca e reflexões sobre a escrita do livro – a biografia da família Winshaw - pelo protagonista-escritor como meios de enfatizar o caráter metafictional do romance e seu comentário cáustico sobre o contexto econômico e político da Inglaterra contemporânea.

Palavras-chave: paródia, metaficção, romance policial, Jonathan Coe, *The Winshaw Legacy*.

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