

BREXITNESS: BREXIT, BREXLIT, AND ENGLISHNESS

Englishness and National Identity in two Brexit Novels

BOUKJE VAN DEN EIJDEN
S4573803
RADBOD UNIVERSITY NIJMEGEN
SUPERVISOR: DR. USHA WILBERS
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Image: Barry Blitt, "Silly Walk Off A Cliff," *The New Yorker*, 2016.

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Name of student: Boukje van den Eijnden

Student number: s4573803

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Abstract

Three years after the Brexit referendum, Britain still has not left the EU and is utterly divided. The academic field is highly interested in the causes and consequences of the referendum and a new literary genre has emerged; BrexLit. In those Brexit novels, British authors aim to address the social upheaval and division in society after the Brexit referendum. This thesis also explores the division in British society brought to the surface by Brexit, especially focusing on the role of British national identity. By a close reading of two BrexLit novels, *Autumn* by Ali Smith (2017) and *Middle England* (2018) by Jonathan Coe, this thesis analyses how the characters in the novels represent different attitudes towards the Brexit referendum by their identification with Englishness and Britishness.

Keywords: *Brexit, Englishness, Britishness, National Identity, BrexLit, European Union, Identification*

Introduction

All across the country, people felt it was the wrong thing. All across the country, people felt it was the right thing. All across the country, people felt they'd really lost. All across the country, people felt they'd really won. All across the country, people felt they'd done the right thing and other people had done the wrong thing. All across the country, people looked up Google: what is EU? ¹

In the Spring of 2019, the United Kingdom is far from being a united nation. Even more than two years after the Brexit referendum, the UK is still under the spell of the vote that divided the nation. While British citizens are either eagerly or wearily waiting for a future outside the European Union, academics are still debating about the causes and consequences of Brexit. One thing is clear: the UK now exists out of two camps, remain and leave, and those groups are extremely divided as well. Several British authors have published novels, appropriately labelled as BrexLit novels, that deal with this chaotic post-Brexit landscape and address the cultural causes and consequences of the referendum. In *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural Responses* (2018), Robert Eaglestone argues for the importance of studying culture and literature when analysing Brexit. He claims that Brexit is not only political, economic, and administrative; it is most of all a cultural issue. It grew from cultural beliefs about the UK and Europe. He goes on to argue that “nations are produced in the imagination by concepts, narratives, memories and traditions: that is, through the work of culture.”² Especially literature, he says, is a useful and appropriate way to address political arguments about national identity, which lie at the heart of Brexit.³ That is why I will provide a close reading of two BrexLit novels, *Autumn* by Ali Smith (2017) and *Middle England* (2018) by Jonathan Coe, in order to answer the following question: how do the characters in *Autumn* and *Middle England* represent different attitudes towards the Brexit referendum by their identification with Englishness and Britishness?

1. Ali Smith, *Autumn* (UK: Penguin, 2017), 60.

2. Robert Eaglestone, “Introduction,” In *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018).

3. Eaglestone, “Introduction.”

Ali Smith's *Autumn* immediately places the reader in a post-Brexit landscape where detachment dictates social interactions. The story revolves around 32-year-old Elisabeth Demand, a "no-fixed-hours casual contract junior lecturer at a university in London"⁴ and 101-year-old Daniel Gluck, who finds himself in an increased sleep period indicating that he is close to death. The reader learns more about their past and about how they met through a series of flashbacks, while in the present of Smith's novel, the Brexit referendum has just occurred. Where Daniel sleeps through this chaotic, post-Brexit period, Elisabeth encounters a divided country and a society with many opinions but no dialogue. Kristian Shaw calls *Autumn* the first post-truth novel and argues the characters are aware that 'facts don't work', pointing to right-wing nationalist propaganda. The divisive consequences of Brexit are complemented by the collage-like, disjointed form of the narrative.⁵ Where Ali Smith uses modernist techniques to depict post-Brexit Britain, Jonathan Coe takes more time to write extensively about 'the state of the nation.' *Middle England* starts with the election of the coalition government in 2010, describes the riots of 2011, the Olympics, the Brexit referendum, and ends in 2018. Different sides on the Brexit debate are shown through the characters. Some are right-winged and detest the 'political correctness' which has taken over the country, and some are left-winged, critical of Cameron's referendum plans or strongly against intolerance and racism. In the end, *Middle England* is not a novel that supports either side of the Brexit debate. Rather, it reminds us there is only one way out of Britain's current chaotic and polarised state: by listening to each other, and through political moderation and compromise.⁶

By analysing these two novels, and by showing the characters' contrasting identification with Englishness and Britishness, I will attempt to address how issues of national identity are connected to the Brexit referendum. There are many ways one can identify with either Englishness or Britishness. According to Ethnos Research, not all UK passport holders attach significance to their British identity. White English natives see themselves as English first and British second, but ethnic minority participants from England identified as being

4. Smith, *Autumn*, 15.

5. Kristian Shaw, "BrexLit," In *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018).

6. Alex Preston, "Middle England by Jonathan Coe review – Brexit comedy," *The Guardian*, November 25, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/nov/25/middle-england-jonathan-coe-review>

British but not English. They associated Englishness with being white.⁷ I expect both novels to extensively deal with issues of Englishness, both of them especially focusing on problems caused by ideas about the inclusive- and exclusiveness of the cultural phenomenon. The novels are expected to also focus on social division in the UK, mostly between the older and younger generations, which has come to the surface because of the referendum. Both novels will depict the current state of affairs in the UK and will also, at least partially, explain in what way Brexit has affected the British people.

This research will consist of a combination of both cultural and literary studies. I will provide a close-reading of two novels and study them through a lens of Englishness. Englishness, and Britishness as well, are both hard to define. They are concepts that change with time and generations, and that is also why it is difficult to name the exact meaning and definition. In an article published just before the referendum, Ailsa Henderson predicted that identification with either Britishness or Englishness would trigger different voting behaviour in the referendum. Whereas a strong identification with Englishness was expected to result in Euroscepticism, an identification with Britishness was not.⁸ According to research, national identity did not appear to influence attitudes on EU membership in Wales and Scotland, but in England it certainly did.⁹ This means I will be mostly focusing on issues of national identity within England, because in other territories in the UK, the correlation between national identity and voting behaviour is not as strong as in England.

The first chapter will give background information on Brexit and the post-Brexit landscape, and will then define and explain Englishness and Britishness, upon which the methodological framework is built. For a contextualisation of Brexit, I will turn to Goodwin, Clarke and Whiteley's *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (2017). De Burca's article *How British was the Brexit vote?* (2018) provides an extensive analysis of the causes for Brexit, especially focusing on the contrasting commitment towards European integration between the older and younger generations. For the methodological framework I will be using an extensive analysis of Britishness by Ethnos Research called *Citizenship and Belonging: What is Britishness?* (2005) to examine what Britishness means to citizens from

7. *Citizenship and Belonging: What is Britishness?* (London: Ethnos Research and Consultancy, 2005), 6-8.

8. Ailsa Henderson, Charlie Jeffery, et al, "England, Englishness and Brexit," *The Political Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2016): 194.

9. Henderson, "England, Englishness and Brexit," 195.

Scotland, Wales, England, and Northern Ireland. Rebecca Langlands' *Britishness or Englishness? The historical problem of national identity in Britain* (1999) will provide an overview of the difference between Englishness and Britishness. I will also refer to Storry and Childs' *British Cultural Identities* (2014) and James Meek's article *Brexit and Myths of Englishness* (2018). Henderson's *England, Englishness and Brexit* (2016) will be important in order to closely examine the relationship between Englishness and Brexit. The second chapter will consist of a close-reading of Ali Smith's *Autumn* with the framework of Englishness. I will mostly focus on the characters' opinion towards Brexit, or the general cultural landscape in Britain, and on the division between characters, relating to how they identify with Englishness and Britishness. In this chapter Eaglestone's *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural responses* (2018) will be central for the analysis of the novel. In the third chapter I will apply the same method to Jonathan Coe's *Middle England*. For the conclusion I will provide a synthesis of my findings and establish in what way the novels address issues of national identity relating to the referendum.

Chapter 1: Rejoice! The dragon has been defeated!

On Thursday 23 June 2016, 33,5 million Britons casted their vote on the following question: ‘Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?’ Ever since the day of the referendum, the UK has been divided to its core. Both the people and parliament are strongly divided over whether to remain or leave, whether to go for a soft Brexit or a hard Brexit, for a custom’s union or perhaps the Norwegian model. According to Clarke et al. (2017), the UK leaving the EU was no surprise. Ever since the UK became European member, public support did not run deep.¹⁰ When David Cameron decided to promise the British people a European referendum after the 2015 general elections, he made a dangerous wager. It was widely believed at the time that the country would vote to remain in the EU, and would choose the least risky path.¹¹ But Cameron lost his gamble, as the majority of the British people chose to ignore the advice of their own prime minister, most of the Cabinet and a large majority of parliament, and voted to leave the EU. The purpose of this chapter is to provide some background on the causes of Brexit, where I will be especially focusing on the role of Englishness and Britishness. I will do this in order to ultimately discover how *Autumn* (2017) and *Middle England* (2018) represent different sides of the Brexit debate by their characters’ identification with either Englishness or Britishness.

In *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (2017), Clarke et al. provide an analysis of the motivations behind a Leave vote. They argue that the causes for Brexit go back as far as 2004. Since then, the public’s views on the EU have been shaped by their support of governing parties, and how they were dealing with key issues such as immigration, the economy and the NHS.¹² If people felt like the government did not do enough to resolve certain issues, for example the economic crisis which started in 2008, this also affected their views on the European Union. The referendum result can also be connected to the rise of the populist right party UKIP. Many of whom joined Nigel Farage’s ‘People’s Army’ were elderly, white

10. Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, “Brexit Introduced,” in *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1. doi:10.1017/9781316584408

11. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, “Brexit Introduced,” 3.

12. Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, “Beyond Brexit,” in *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 205. doi:10.1017/9781316584408

men who had a strong desire to leave the EU. Instead of them being a marginalised group, their opinions were, and still are, widely shared across the British electorate.¹³ The people who felt left behind and economically marginalised, many of whom voted for UKIP, saw Brexit as an opportunity to improve Britain's future instead of as a serious risk to the country's future. Contrarily, it was this risk that was central to the Remain campaigners. Their 'Project Fear' tried to frighten voters about national security and economy, but their efforts were not enough. For the Leave voters, the fear of immigration was bigger, and they believed the UK would be better able to control its borders and counter terrorism if it left the EU.¹⁴

De Burca (2018), in her analysis of the Brexit vote, goes even further back when looking for Brexit causes, namely to the 1960s, when the UK joined the EEC (European Economic Community). She says that the UK sought different things from its membership than did the other six founding member states. While they wanted to create an 'ever closer union', the UK was mainly driven by its desire to avoid continued economic decline. Joining the EEC was a necessary and pragmatic choice instead of an indication of a commitment towards European integration.¹⁵ There seemed to have been support for EU membership among the British electorate over the years, especially amongst the younger generations "for whom Britain's post-war history and prior alliances are less salient."¹⁶ However, the substantial part of the older public, brought up in post-war Britain, never felt a deeper connection to European integration. Those are the generations that want to 'take back control', and who not only feel left behind on an economic level, but also on an emotional one. They feel that the 'new' globalising Britain and Europe are passing them by. This is why the vote revealed a deep split within the British people. The major differences in voting behaviour appeared along education and age, but also between urban and rural areas. Even though the result came as a shock, Brexit was a predictable outcome of a difficult relationship between the EU and the UK which never

13. Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley, "Beyond Brexit," 205.

14. Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley, 207.

15. Grainne De Burca, "How British was the Brexit vote?" In *Brexit and Beyond*, ed. Benjamin Martill and Uta Staiger (UCL Press: 2018), 48.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt20krxf8.10>

16. De Burca "How British was the Brexit vote?" 49.

managed to “transcend its reluctant and contested origins, and that never fully won the ‘hearts and minds’ of the British public.”¹⁷

Many researchers use terms such as ‘the left-behind’ and the ‘economically marginalised’ without explicitly mentioning the class system. This is striking, because in England, a country divided for centuries between the higher and lower classes, this was a crucial factor for the European referendum. Lisa Mckenzie (2019) argues that the voices of the working classes have been ignored for the last forty years, resulting in their widespread support for Brexit. She argues that ever since the miner strikes in the 1980s, the working classes have been held responsible for holding the country back. The general rhetoric that developed was the idea that the working classes were not being excluded, but were “excluding themselves from an otherwise modern, cosmopolitan and prosperous Britain.”¹⁸ The communities that suffered from deindustrialisation especially are the ones who saw the referendum as an opportunity for change. The middle and upper classes are angry at the working classes for ‘voting to go back into the past’, but the working classes are desperate and feel unseen and devalued.¹⁹ So while it might have appeared like the rigid class system was disappearing, Brexit has shined light on the still existing divides in British society. The referendum has not caused the split among the British people, it merely brought the differences between the classes back to the surface.

Additionally, there is a connection between voting behaviour in the referendum and Englishness. In her study on Brexit and national identity, Ailsa Henderson (2016) predicted that identification with either Britishness or Englishness would trigger different voting behaviour in the referendum. Research shows that voters in England who identified stronger with Britishness than Englishness were more positive towards the EU than those with a strictly English sense of national identity.²⁰ In Wales and Scotland, national identity did not appear to

17. De Burca, 50.

18. Lisa Mckenzie, “Many working-class people believe in Brexit. Who can blame them?” *Brexit* (blog), The London School of Economics and Political Science, January 31, 2019, accessed May 25, 2019. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2019/01/31/many-working-class-people-believe-in-brexit-who-can-blame-them/>

19. Mckenzie, “Many working-class people believe in Brexit. Who can blame them?”

20. Ailsa Henderson, Charlie Jeffery, et al, “England, Englishness and Brexit,” *The Political Quarterly* 87, no. 2 (2016): 194.

structure attitudes on EU membership. A strong identification with Scottish or Welsh identity did not lead to Euroscepticism, but in England, identification with English identity did.²¹ This means I will predominantly have to focus on Englishness, within England, as in Scotland and Wales there is no correlation between identification with national identity and voting behaviour.

So, if identification with Britishness had no consequence for the Brexit vote, but identification with Englishness did, what exactly is the difference between Englishness and Britishness? Rebecca Langlands (1999) explains that even though the two identities are often intermingled, there certainly is a distinction between the two. Whereas Scottish, Welsh, and English national identity primarily consists of a sense of common ethnic and historic identity, Britishness has always been defined more in terms of a common allegiance to the crown; as a political idea in order to provide a sense unity for the UK. This does not mean however that identification with Britishness exists merely in the form of political allegiance. Langlands argues that the ethnic population of the British Isles, so the Welsh, Scottish and English, often have a dual sense of national identity. She talks of a “secondary British national consciousness”, where for example the Scots feel Scottish first, and British second.²² Britishness can provide a sense of unity, because many cultural habits, and of the course the English language, are shared across all inhabitants of Britain. At certain times, however, Britishness can also create divisions, which can cause Britons to prefer their regional identities. If there is a feeling in Scotland and Wales that “the state is becoming top-heavy in favour of England”, for example in the case of Brexit, they are more likely to identify with Scottish or Welsh cultural identity first.²³ Especially in times of crisis, the English as well prefer Englishness over Britishness. Then, the English often hold on to the ideas of ‘Little England’; the epitome of authentic English values, of the uncorrupted countryside. Britishness, especially by the English, is often held in contrast to their ‘rural’ and uncorrupted sense of national identity. Britishness is then the cosmopolitan and the industrial, with its multi-ethnic society.

21. Henderson, “England, Englishness and Brexit,” 195.

22. Rebecca Langlands, “Britishness or Englishness? The historical problem of national identity in Britain,” *Nations and Nationalism* 5, no. 1 (1999): 63. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.1999.00053.x>

23. Langlands, “Britishness or Englishness? The historical problem of national identity in Britain,” 63.

So, in short, Britishness exists, but there is no homogenous idea of the concept. It can be interpreted as a form of political alliance, as a sense of conforming to ‘island-mentality’, or, for Britons living in bigger cities such as London, it is a more inclusive sense of national identity, open to immigrants from other ethnic backgrounds. It is important to keep in mind however, that for ‘native’ Britons, identification with Britishness is nearly always held in addition to their regional identities, and not as the first and only notion of national identity.²⁴

Ethnos Research (2005) conducted a study on the interpretation of British national identity, and also outlines the difference between identification with Englishness and Britishness. They conclude that their participants, randomly chosen from Wales, Scotland, and England, with either an immigration background or not, shared a common representation of Britishness, ranging over eight dimensions: geography, national symbols, people, values and attitudes, cultural habits and behaviour, citizenship, language, and achievements. Britishness was, for instance, associated with the British Isles, the Union Jack, and the royal family. When describing who exactly are ‘the British people’, some thought the British included all citizens, including immigrants, but for others, the British were exclusively white English people. Some cultural habits included were queuing, eating fish and chips, and having an English breakfast. Historical achievements, either positive or less positive, also came up, such as the empire, colonialism and the wars. Popular culture and music were deemed important; bands such as The Beatles and popular films were thought to be a great example of Britishness. The study then asked participants about their identification with the notion of Britishness. All UK passport holders knew they were British, but not all attached significance to it. Scottish and Welsh participants, and participants from an ethnic minority living in Scotland and Wales, identified more strongly with each of those countries than with Britain. English participants viewed themselves as English first and British second, but ethnic minority participants from England identified as being British but not English. They associated Englishness with being white.²⁵ This shows that, similar to Henderson’s findings, it is predominantly white English people, living in England, that identify with Englishness. Jeremy Paxman argues that Britain is a political invention, and that Britishness therefore allows for diversity, where Englishness does not. While it is very common for people to call themselves ‘black British’ or ‘Bengali

24. Langlands, 64.

25. *Citizenship and Belonging: What is Britishness?* (London: Ethnos Research and Consultancy, 2005), 6-8.

British’, it almost never happens that someone identifies as being ‘black English’. There seems to be a sense in Britain that immigrants can feel British, but to feel or be English you need to have been born on English soil. Britishness is an inclusive term, Paxman claims, if you can be both Scottish and British, you can also be Indian and British or Bangladeshi and British.²⁶

Paxman furthermore argues that the English are walking backwards into the future, “their eyes fixed on a point some time at the turn of the twentieth century.”²⁷ Storry and Childs, in *British Cultural Identities* (2013), claim something similar; namely that features of Britain’s past still shape national identity today. They describe Britishness and Englishness as relating to “an island people ‘unconquered’ for centuries; a largely rural community, but the first industrial nation; an imperial leader; a land divided between north and south, or London and the rest of the country; and a class-ridden society, from the monarchy through the aristocracy and the middle classes to the working classes.”²⁸ They claim the British people are still very much preoccupied with their national history. In stressful modern times especially, they often long for the past and look back to times perceived as more ‘stable’, such as the Victorian period.²⁹ This obsession with the past leads to a desire for monoculturalism. Many favour a dominant idea of national identity where difference and multiculturalism has no place.³⁰ On the relationship between the UK and the European Union, Storry and Childs claim that among the young, Europe is generally perceived positive and associated with good things such as holidays and good food.³¹ However, they state that Britain as a whole is reluctant to fully participate in European initiatives, similar to De Burca’s claim about the difficult relationship between the UK and the EU.³² Because of post-war immigration, British cultural identity has shifted from a white, mono-cultural identity to a plurality of cultural identities. Where younger generations have grown up with a multiculturalist idea of Britishness, the changes in ethnic

26. Jeremy Paxman, *The English* (London: Penguin Books, 1998): 74.

27. Paxman, *The English*, 234.

28. Mike Storry and Peter Childs, *British Cultural Identities*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 9.

29. Storry and Childs, *British Cultural Identities*, 7.

30. Storry and Childs, 29.

31. Storry and Childs, 277.

32. Storry and Childs, 273.

population and the rising influence of the EU have led older generations of the British people to think more deeply about their national identities, preferring to call themselves either Welsh, Scottish or English instead of British.³³

In his article *Brexit and Myths of Englishness* (2018), James Meek compares the Brexit referendum and the Leave campaign to the English myth of St. George. The myth tells the story of St. George who killed a dragon, which had been tyrannising the people of Silene (modern day Libia), causing them to live in a state of misery, fear and humiliation.³⁴ Meek argues the European Union represents the dragon, and Brexit is St. George, the epitome of English heroism. As an example, Meek mentions the headline of a Facebook ad run by Brexiteers: ‘The European Union wants to kill our cuppa.’³⁵ Besides this statement being literally untrue, it illustrates that Eurosceptics see the EU as a threat to Englishness and their treasured English cup of tea. But Meek stresses that English and British identity is changing, and the Remain campaign’s inability to acknowledge this has partially led to its defeat. Brexiteers point to abandoned coal mines, demolished factories, the demise of the NHS, economic problems, and unemployment. Even though they wrongfully use the EU as their scapegoat, they at least acknowledge that Britain is changing. This adheres to many British people, especially the ones who feel left behind economically. They long for a stable national identity and they want things to go ‘back to the way they were’. There is, then, a strong correlation between the wish for English identity and the rise of Euroscepticism.³⁶ Meek claims that a Leave vote is about personal ancestors and “the queen, Churchill, James Bond, Bobby Moore, Sid Vicious, Margaret Thatcher; the miners, the Spitfire pilot, the NHS nurse – and sacred spaces, some famous, such as Wembley or Waterloo or Dunkirk, some idealised: the factory, the village, the rural airfield in 1941.”³⁷ In other words, a Leave vote is a vote for Britain’s past, culture, and heroes; for Englishness.

The fact that the UK is leaving the EU is confounding, as there are many more Eurosceptic countries in Europe. Whether it is wishing for a past long gone, a certain island-

33. Storry and Childs, 285.

34. James Meek, “Brexit and Myths of Englishness,” *London Review of Books* 40, no. 19 (2018). <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v40/n19/james-meek/brexit-and-myths-of-englishness>

35. James Meek, “Brexit and Myths of Englishness.”

36. James Meek, “Brexit and Myths of Englishness.”

37. Ibid.

mentality, a fear of immigration, or Englishness; there are many factors inherent to British national identity that set the UK apart from other European countries. Even though scholars offer varying explanations for Brexit, they generally have one thing in common; they relate to issues with national identity. The British people are still very much preoccupied with their country's past, and a Leave vote was also a vote for British history and identity. It was an attempt to restore the British nation to what it once was, in their eyes at least. Ailsa Henderson predicted that for the English, national identity would play a role in voting behaviour, and it turns out that it did indeed. Where Britishness offers a more inclusive view of national identity and culture, Englishness is often associated with being white and with people born in England only. The people who affiliate with this exclusive sense of English identity are the ones who feel there is no place in the UK for immigrants with a different ethnic background. This thesis will set out to determine whether this notion is reflected within the characters of *Autumn* and *Middle England*. I will look at differences between the characters along the lines of age (and generation), class, level of education, ethnic background, and identification with Englishness or Britishness. I will also look at their general political orientation, place of residence, and their expressions about immigration and English past and heritage, in order to explore if there is a connection between the character's voting behaviour and sense of national identity.

Chapter 2: The leaves are falling and so is England – Ali Smith’s *Autumn*

“It was the worst of times, it was the worst of times.”³⁸ Ali Smith begins her novel *Autumn* (2017) with a slightly adapted quote from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), adequately capturing the post-Brexit landscape. *Autumn* deals with direct aftermath of the Brexit referendum, but instead of this being Smith’s main focus, the friendship between Daniel Gluck and Elisabeth Demand is central to the novel. When Elisabeth was a child, Daniel was her neighbour. Now he is 101 years old, and according to the care assistants he is very close to death. Elisabeth visits him and reads to him while he sleeps most of the time. Their past experiences and memories are explored by analepsis and prolepsis. The novel mainly focuses on their relationship, but this does not mean that Ali Smith refuses to address Britain’s political climate. She describes the dividedness in the country, the xenophobia and alienation. She does so through Elisabeth views, but sometimes also very directly through multiple page-long monologues. In this chapter, I will explore how *Autumn* represents the post-Brexit landscape and Englishness. Hereby I will mostly focus on Elisabeth and Elisabeth’s mother Wendy, and on particularly ‘English’ events described in the novel.

Elisabeth Demand, 32 years old, is a “no fixed hours casual contract junior lecturer at a university in London.”³⁹ She is a relatable character for the younger generation in Britain; she has no job security, and she is still trying to pay of her student debts while living in her old student flat. Her surname reveals even more about her, and possibly also about her generation. Demand stems from the French ‘de monde’, as Daniel points out, which means ‘of the world’ or ‘of the people’.⁴⁰ Elisabeth is a citizen of the world; she has grown up as a cosmopolitan. Her political views, or opinions about Brexit, are never mentioned explicitly, but her “reflections and her disorientation at the country’s climate change suggest she is a Remainer.”⁴¹ Partly because of her academic education, and thus her ability to see beyond what is happening on the surface, she cannot brace the political events without extreme bewilderment or even bouts of depression. This bewilderment comes to the surface when Elisabeth learns about the

38. Ali Smith, *Autumn*, 3.

39. Smith, 15.

40. Smith, 50.

41. Petra Rau, “Autumn after the referendum,” in *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018): 21-24.

murder on MP Jo Cox: “A man shot her dead and came at her with a knife. Like shooting her wouldn’t be enough. But it’s old news now. Once it would have been a year’s worth of news. But news right now is like a flock of speed-up sheep running off the side of a cliff.”⁴² The novel implies that there is so much happening in Britain (and in the world) at the moment, that even the killing of an MP is not relevant news anymore. Later we read a discussion between young Elisabeth and her mother, when Elisabeth has been given a school assignment to interview her neighbour. Her mother does not want her to contact Daniel, so she tells her to just make the interview up. But Elisabeth argues she cannot make it up, it is for News (a school subject presumably). “They’ll never know,” her mother says, “make it up. The real news is always made up anyway.” Elisabeth disagrees; the real news is not made up, “It’s the *news*.”⁴³ Ali Smith clearly comments on the current battle between real and fake news, or truth and post-truth. In an interview, she elaborated on the role of truth and lies in the Brexit debate: “Meanwhile, the time itself is tearing itself apart because there has been a massive lie and the lie has come from parliament and dissolved itself right the way through the country and things change. It’s a pivotal moment. We were dealing with a kind of mass culture of lies. And it’s a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie.”⁴⁴ Young Elisabeth thinks the news is always true, or that at least it should be. Her mother, however, has become adjusted to living in a post-truth world.

One week after the Brexit vote, Elisabeth encounters her mother’s village (which is unidentified but said to be close to the seaside) in a sullen state when she comes to visit. The entire passage is a reference to current state of England, and Wendy’s town is a typical countryside town that has not reaped the benefits of globalisation. First, Elisabeth comes across a cottage which has been covered in black paint and the phrase ‘GO HOME’. This indicates that in this typical English village, immigrants are not welcome, representing the exclusive and racist ideas often connected to Englishness. Sophie’s mother tells her that half the village is not speaking to the other half of the village, as a result of the vote. On an old map from 1962, her

42. Smith, 38.

43. Smith, 46.

44. Olivia Laing, “Ali Smith: ‘It’s a pivotal moment... a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie,’” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/oct/16/ali-smith-autumn-interview-how-can-we-live-in-a-world-and-not-put-a-hand-across-a-divide-brexit-profu>

mother has drawn a line where the new coastline is, which has eroded quite far inland. This represents both the literal and figurative ‘eroding’ of England; a land that is crumbling. Then she points to another place on the map, where a new fence has gone up. A fence of three meters high with a roll of razor wire has been erected around an empty piece of land, Wendy tells Elisabeth. When she takes Elisabeth to see the new fence, Brexit, the news, and its lies, come up again. “I’m tired,” Wendy says. “I’m tired of the news. I’m tired of the way it makes things spectacular that aren’t, and deals so simplistically with what’s truly appalling ... I’m tired of liars. I’m tired of sanctified liars. I’m tired of how those liars have let this happen.” Above all, she is tired of lying governments and of having to wonder whether ‘they’ did it out of stupidity or did it on purpose.⁴⁵ Wendy’s views on Brexit, and especially post-Brexit Britain, are clear. Elisabeth just listens to her mother’s speech and thinks of an old World War II pillbox that has fallen in the sea because of erosion; “I’m a brick under the water,” she ponders.⁴⁶ Instead of feeling angry, betrayed, or tired, like her mother, Elisabeth mostly feels alienated in and estranged from the country and people she is encountering. When she hears a discussion on the radio about immigration and democracy, this feeling of alienation comes up again: “It has become a time of people saying stuff to each other and none of it actually ever becoming dialogue. It is the end of dialogue.”⁴⁷ Elisabeth tries to remember in vain when this changed, and she wonders how long Britain has been in such a state without her noticing.

Autumn describes many different cultural and political events, such as the Profumo Scandal of 1963, the life of Pauline Boty, the murder of MP Jo Cox, and the referendum, without one event being necessarily more important or more prominent than the other. Basically, the novel is a collage of time, people, and of past and present. Smith argues that this is what life is; “it isn’t either/or. It’s and/and/and.”⁴⁸ The Brexit referendum is, to the contrary, a divisory line; voters can only choose one side, so it is either/ or. However, all the events that the novel describes say something about the present, about post-Brexit Britain. In the first passage of the novel, Daniel is dreaming about his past and memories, and wonders whether

45. Smith, 56-57.

46. Smith, 57.

47. Smith, 112.

48. Olivia Laing, “Ali Smith: ‘It’s a pivotal moment... a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie,” *The Guardian*, October 16, 2016.

there is ever “any escaping the junkshop of the self”.⁴⁹ Junk shops return later on in the novel when Elisabeth’s mother partakes in a TV show *The Golden Gavel*, where participants hope their junk turns out to be very valuable antique (similar to BBC’s *Antiques Roadshow*). Shows like these represent nostalgic fantasies, just like Brexit.⁵⁰ They reveal Britain’s preoccupation with their past and by using junk shops, Smith questions whose history, or which events in history, are worth remembering and which stories get forgotten. In the closing scenes of the novel, Elisabeth and her mother drive past the fence again, which is now patrolled by a security agency called S4FA. Wendy angrily gets out of the car and throws an antique barometer at the fence. After being detained for an hour by the security agency, she immediately goes to the antiques yard to gather more antiques to throw at the fence in order to go on “bombarding that fence with people’s histories and with the artefacts of less cruel and more philanthropic times.”⁵¹ She literally resists Brexit Britain, and its borders and fences, by bombarding it with British history. All these references to antique and junk shops are an allusion to Englishness and national identity, because as Storry and Childs argued, the English are obsessed with their past. Generally, people who are preoccupied with British history and who long back for the past, also have a strong sense of Englishness. This is what Ali Smith refers to by using junk shops, because they tell a story of the past, and it shows that the British people, by voting to leave the EU, only wish to remember a certain history of Britain.

The use of Pauline Boty and the Profumo Scandal seems to serve a particular purpose for Smith as well. As a junior lecturer in art history, Elisabeth chooses to study Pauline Boty and her work. Boty was a feminist pop-art artist in the 1960s and her artwork reflects events happening during her life. She had been commissioned to paint Christine Keeler, the 19-year-old model who was at the heart of the Profumo Affair in 1963. Boty portrayed her as the centre of the affair, sitting naked on a chair with the men who dated her painted in the background. The affair between Keeler and Secretary of State John Profumo severely damaged the Conservative Party’s reputation, especially when it became known that Keeler was at the same time also involved with a Soviet captain. Eventually the Labour Party defeated the Tories in the 1964 elections, and the relationship between the press and the government was severely

49. Smith, 11.

50. Petra Rau, “Autumn after the referendum.”

51. Smith, 255.

affected.⁵² Smith uses the Profumo Affair as a parallel to what is happening in Britain right now; Brexit, just like the affair, meant a seismic political change. As for Boty's artwork, Smith remarks that "it looks at how governing cultural myths are formed and perpetuated by way of images."⁵³ It shows that our understanding of the world is a construct. This is where Smith's argument about post-truth reveals itself. When Elisabeth and Daniel are making up a story, Elisabeth says that there is no point in inventing a world, because there already is a real world. Daniel then argues that she has to make a difference between the truth and the "made-up version of the truth that we get told about the world." It does not matter whether the story we get told is true, because as Daniel says, "whoever makes up the story makes up the world."⁵⁴ Ali Smith tries to explain that this is what the Brexiteers did with their campaign. The left-behind working classes wanted to see change, and the Brexiteers 'made up the story' that voting to leave the EU would bring that change. It did not matter whether their arguments were true or not, because, as Smith tries to illustrate, we are now living in a post-truth world.

Even though *Autumn* is a story written in fragments and flashbacks, Smith makes her stance on Brexit, and post-Brexit Britain, more than clear. Predominantly through Elisabeth and Elisabeth's mother Wendy, Smith shows what it is like to live in a country divided to its core. Apart from directly referencing to current events, like Jo Cox's murder and the refugee crisis, Smith also uses more complicated motifs to allude to Britain's political and cultural atmosphere. The novel mainly tries to spread an ethos of inclusiveness, because one should, as Daniel tells young Elisabeth: "always try to welcome people into the home of your story."⁵⁵ This is exactly the message Smith tries to convey. She shows that for many Britons, a vote for Leave was mainly a vote against immigration. In the novel, notions of Englishness are often connected to this fear of immigration. Even though Smith does use English national identity to draw a coherent picture of Britain's current state, the identification individual characters have with this cultural phenomenon is less in the foreground. Elisabeth never explicitly expresses her views on the referendum and Englishness; she is more contemplative about the situation.

52. Robert W. Pringle, "Profumo Affair," Encyclopaedia Britannica. Accessed on May 1, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/event/Profumo-affair>

53. Olivia Lang, "Ali Smith: 'It's a pivotal moment... a question of what happens culturally when something is built on a lie.'"

54. Smith, 119.

55. Smith, 119.

Elisabeth lives in London and is a cosmopolitan citizen; she has grown used to the multicultural society. It is clear that she does not identify with England and its current climate. She seems detached from what is happening, and at times even ashamed of her fellow citizens. This also reveals the class divide; Elisabeth belongs to the upper middle class, being academically educated, and she is often vexed by the opinions of the working classes. But instead of actively demonstrating against the fence, and against Brexit, she identifies with the pillbox at the bottom of the sea; she feels alienated and worlds apart from the events and discussions unfolding in her country.

Wendy expresses nostalgia for an 'old England' in the beginning of the novel and has a fondness for antique, and thus English history and identity. Later, however, she ends up throwing antiques in the fence as a demonstration against borders and the figurative wall erected between the British people. So, several months after the referendum, she is fed up with all the disagreement and hatred within British society and it seems she has given up on this ideal fantasy of Britain, and thus on Englishness. Even though Elisabeth, Wendy, and Daniel belong to different generations, in the end none of them really identifies with Englishness. This is probably because they all belong to the upper middle class and are higher educated. All three of them are Remainers, also the 101-year-old Daniel; he once told Elisabeth to be welcoming to immigrants (probably because he was once an immigrant himself). Even though Wendy is a Remainer, Smith does show the divide between the city and the countryside in her description of Wendy's seaside village. The small, English community living in the village does not welcome immigrants. But instead of focusing on Englishness as a central factor in the Brexit debate, Smith uses English national identity to provide examples of the current state of Britain. Her central arguments mainly revolve around the notion of post-truth and immigration, and the extraordinary friendship between Elisabeth and Daniel forms the moral centre of the novel.

Chapter 3: Adieu to old England – Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England*

In contrast to *Autumn*, Jonathan Coe’s *Middle England* (2018) reads like a quiet meditation on Britain’s current crisis of national identity. It is really a state-of-the nation novel; a testament of Britain’s political and cultural events from 2011 to 2018. The novel follows the same characters of *The Rotters Club* (2001), most of whom are now middle aged. The many characters all represent different layers of British society; the youngest is Doug’s teenage daughter Coriander, an avid support of the Jeremy Corbyn, and the oldest is Colin, whose last wish is to vote in the Brexit referendum. Despite the novel being a slow and reflective read, it features real anger, which keeps simmering in the background. This anger is mostly generated because England is different from what everyone wants it to be. For some, the country is changing too fast and for some, not quite fast enough. As in chapter two, I will explore which characters associate with Englishness or Britishness, and look at differences between generations, level of education and ethnic background. I will also analyse their general political orientation and their views on immigration in order to observe if there is a connection between the character’s voting behaviour and sense of national identity.

Benjamin Trotter has moved from the city to the countryside of middle England. He now lives in an old converted mill, close to the river Severn. At the beginning of the novel, after the funeral of his mother, he turns on one of his favourite songs: “Adieu to old England, adieu.” The song reveals the underlying theme of the novel, which is the decay of England, and the idea that everything was better before than it is now; “Once I could ride in me carriage / With servants to drive me along / Now I’m in prison, in prison so strong / Not knowing which way I can turn.”⁵⁶ This songs also reflects Benjamin’s feelings about English national identity. He repeatedly makes remarks about the changes his country has gone through, and he is often nostalgic for the England he used to know. Interestingly, for him that does not mean he supports Brexit in any way. While at the same time feeling nostalgic for an old England, he despises the class system, and especially the Etonians who have caused the split in the country. In a six-page long train of thought, he thinks of David Cameron, Michael Gove, Jeremy Hunt, and George Osborne, who were all at Oxford in the eighties. He continues that they “all knew each other, and now these self-satisfied, entitled twats were running the country ... and we were all

⁵⁶ Jonathan Coe, *Middle England* (UK: Penguin, 2018), 20.

having our lives shaped and redirected by these people.”⁵⁷ In the beginning of the novel we learn that Benjamin did not vote in the 2010 elections, simply because he was undecided whom to vote for. Towards the end of the novel he gets more and more vexed by the running government and most of all by the animosity the referendum has created: “It became more bitter, more personal, more rancorous.”⁵⁸ Benjamin wishes that the whole divisive business could just be over and forgotten as soon as possible. It is clear that he does not side with the Brexiteers, especially because of his hatred towards the Oxfordian elite who has driven the country into a mess. On the other hand, he remains nostalgic for the England of his childhood (pre-Thatcher Britain that is), as he believes that Britain was a more cohesive, united and consensual place at the time.⁵⁹

Colin, the oldest character in the novel and Benjamin’s father, has a completely different view on British politics. He has steadily voted Conservative since the 1950s and feels that England has changed too much and too quickly. When Benjamin takes him for a ride to Longbridge, Colin does not recognise the surroundings anymore. An old car factory has been replaced by a giant Marks & Spencer’s and another car factory called East Works has made place for an empty piece of land, hemmed in by fencing (a parallel to the fence in *Autumn*). Colin is distraught by what he sees, as he says “A building isn’t just a place, is it? It’s the people. The people who were inside it.”⁶⁰ He sees history being demolished and it is clear that he cannot grasp the concept of globalisation. He asks Benjamin how factories can be replaced by shops and houses: “If there’s no factory, how are people supposed to make the money to spend in the shops?”⁶¹ Furthermore, it seems he is ashamed by the fancy shops and prosecco bars that have replaced the factories. He thinks the British have gone soft; instead of working in a factory the people are now sipping champagne: “no wonder the rest of the world is laughing at us.”⁶² Colin clearly belongs to the group of older working class Remainers; he feels neglected in the new, cosmopolitan England. He has difficulty grasping the shift from an industrial to a

57. Coe, *Middle England*, 338.

58. Coe, 299.

59. Coe, 49.

60. Coe, 261.

61. Coe, 261.

62. Coe, 262.

service economy, and the only thing he really wants is for things to go back the way they were several decades ago. Unlike Benjamin, his nostalgia for post-war England does make him want to leave the EU. He strongly agrees with Boris Johnson when he says that the EU is current day Nazi Germany and one of his last wishes is to have his say in the referendum.

Benjamin's friend Doug is a left-leaning political commentator, unhappily married to rich socialite Francesca. He lives in a townhouse in the "hideously monocultural" Chelsea.⁶³ Doug is an academic and a metropolitan citizen and he is not particularly nationalistic or proud to be British. He is often very critical of the narrow-minded view of Englishness and English nostalgia, and only during the Olympics ceremony in 2012 he admits he is proud of his country.⁶⁴ He frequently meets up with Nigel, a member of the Conservative party, in order to get an inside look in Westminster. When Nigel tells him about Cameron's plans for a European referendum, Doug is extremely wary and warns Nigel against it. Nevertheless, because in the meantime he has started a relationship with a Conservative MP, he is happy when the Tories hold the majority after the 2016 elections. When he meets up again with Nigel after the elections, Doug already foresees the UK leaving the European Union; he argues that nearly no one really understands the EU and that the people will be voting with their gut. Clearly Doug is against the referendum because he knows that the vote will not be about Europe; it will concern problems within the UK instead. In the end he tells Benjamin he is too much obsessed with history, as the English generally are: "Obsessed with their bloody past, the English are – and look where that's got us recently. Times change. Deal with it."⁶⁵ Doug is the perfect example of an intellectual who has benefited from globalisation. He does not even feel at home in the predominantly white neighbourhood of Chelsea; he prefers East London, which is rowdier and more multicultural. His teenage daughter Coriander is even more a citizen of the world. She is outright bored living in Chelsea and has joined the group Students for Corbyn. She detests the fact that she was born rich and changes her name from Coriander to Corrie. According to Doug, her views on racism, inequality and identity politics are utterly uncompromising.⁶⁶ She disagrees with everything that has to do with established politics and

63. Coe, 78.

64. Coe, 132.

65. Coe, 391.

66. Coe, 187.

England is much too conservative for her. Coriander is an example of the young, idealistic and cosmopolitan generation in Britain who do not care for British nostalgia or Englishness.

Sophie is in her thirties and she is a Remainer. She is academically educated and teaches at Birmingham University. When she takes Colin, her grandfather, out for dinner in London, he remarks that he has not heard a word of English spoken on the way there. Sophie then thinks: “the thing he was complaining about was the very thing she most liked about this city,”⁶⁷ which perfectly illustrates the difference in attitude between the older and younger generations. Sophie has grown up in a multicultural society and welcomes different nationalities, but Colin does not recognise the country he grew up in anymore. Sophie’s best friend, the Pakistani Sohan, represents the immigrant population, and he often reminds her that the British are not as tolerant to ‘foreigners’ as Sophie thinks they are. When she starts dating and subsequently marries driving instructor Ian, Sophie soon has to step outside her academic bubble. She is often confronted with Ian’s mother’s ideas on British society. When she argues Enoch Powell was right with his rivers of blood speech, Sophie is mortified. This makes her realise there is a deep divide in English society; Sophie and Helena “might be living ... in the same country, but they also lived in different universes, and these universes were separated by a wall, infinitely high, impermeable, a wall built out of fear and suspicion and even – perhaps – a little bit of those most English of all qualities, shame and embarrassment.”⁶⁸

For Sophie, English identity is what created this divide in society. She acknowledges that the still existing class system prevents people from engaging in conversation, and that the very English atmosphere of shame and embarrassment makes sure this wall stays in place. When Sophie is invited to a lecture on a cruise, she again clashes with someone over politics. The older Mr Wilcox argues that the BBC is obsessed with political correctness, and is elitist, arrogant, metropolitan and out of touch; “it doesn’t speak for ordinary people.”⁶⁹ When Sophie says that she feels they speak for her, Mr Wilcox says she does not live in the real world. Coe shows that working-class people and academics might live in the same country, but they are worlds apart, predominantly because of the political course in the UK the last few decades. Working-class people like Mr Wilcox feel that the elitist and metropolitan group in society is leaving them behind in their quest for integration with the global community. Sophie, on the

67. Coe, 25.

68. Coe, 90.

69. Coe, 155.

other hand, feels that people like Mr Wilcox and Helena are holding the country back, and the Brexit vote brought this contrast within the British people to the surface.

Eventually, Sophie is not only confronted with Helena's views on politics and the referendum, but also with Ian's. When Helena claims the British are now living under a tyranny of political correctness, Ian does not disagree with her. She refers to an incident that happened a year ago, when Ian's colleague Naheed got a promotion instead of him. Helena argues they only gave her the job because of her ethnic background and skin colour; because of political correctness. When Ian later says he does not like being patronized by Naheed, Sophie tells him to get over his male ego. She thinks he is a privileged white man, but he feels like a victim in his own country. Then Ian brings up Brexit, and he claims Leave is going to win. When Sophie asks him why he thinks so, he answers "people like you, people like *you*."⁷⁰ Their arguments continue, and the moment of the referendum becomes the tipping point for their marriage. Ian's happiness over the result drives Sophie away, but instead of giving up immediately they attend Brexit therapy. It soon turns out the sessions are of no use. When their therapist asks what made them so angry at each other for voting Leave or Remain, their answers have nothing to do with politics. Rather, Ian says he is irritated by Sophie's air of moral superiority and Sophie answers that she cannot stand his stance of antagonism and competition in their relationship. The therapist then observes that perhaps the referendum was not about Europe at all: "Maybe something much more fundamental and personal was going on."⁷¹ This could reveal that rather than politics, Brexit actually concerns personal feelings about Englishness and inclusiveness. Eventually, Sophie and Ian decide to give their relationship one last try. They manage to largely overcome their differences by conversation and compromise, which seems to be the underlying message of Coe's novel.

Middle England extensively explores the divide in Britain. All characters have a different take on the current developments and by this, Coe manages to represent the different sides on Brexit and national identity in British society. Benjamin never really cared for politics, until Brexit created a nasty and violent atmosphere in the country. While he does feel nostalgic for the England of his youth, he does not feel that Britain leaving the EU will bring it back. This is no surprise, as Benjamin is an intellectual and is thus not perceptible to the story the Brexiteers are trying to sell. His sense of national identity predominantly consists of nostalgia, but he does not wish for a more monocultural society like it was in the 1950s. He just wants

70. Coe, 284.

71. Coe, 327.

England to become more cohesive and united again. Colin's nostalgia, on the other hand, did influence his voting behaviour. He has a very exclusive sense of Englishness and because of this he feels England is not really his country anymore; immigrants flowing in and historic buildings being demolished make him feel estranged and left-behind. Doug and Sophie are good examples of the intellectual and cosmopolitan elite. While they do have a slight sense of national pride during the Olympic ceremony, it is predominantly Britishness they identify with. They both like the multicultural aspect of Britain and are authentic metropolitan citizens. They never express nostalgia for the past and are all avid supporters of Remain. Both are irritated by the opinions of the working classes, because they think their opinions are too nostalgic and often racist. Ian and his mother Helena both identify with Englishness; they are not metropolitan and dislike multicultural society. For Helena, her support for Leave mainly comes from a sense of nostalgia, but for Ian, who is from a younger generation, it is mostly that he cannot identify with the intellectual elite in England. He feels they do not understand people like him, and just like his mother and Colin, he feels victimized by 'political correctness'.

Coe shows that there is a link between level of education and generation if it comes to voting behaviour in the referendum. He also frequently mentions the difference between the countryside and the city if it comes to identification with Englishness and Britishness. In a garden centre between Birmingham and Shrewsbury, traditional English food remains the most popular, despite the cook's attempts to make it more international. Every day, the grey-haired customers keep "feasting eagerly on the lemon drizzle cake, the scones and jam, and the pots of thick brown Yorkshire tea."⁷² When Sophie visits the small seaside village Headland, she notices its decay and she feels estranged from this corner of England. She considers herself a Londoner, from where she could travel more quickly to Paris or Brussels than to a village like Headland. Hereby Coe shows that London, and the city in general, is closer to Europe than it is to the English countryside. The characters who live in the countryside are the ones who identify with Englishness, and the ones who live in the city identify with Britishness, or at least with a more inclusive and multicultural form of Britain. Coe shows that the divide in British society was not caused by Brexit; it simply came to surface. In his novel he remains more in the middle of the debate than Ali Smith in *Autumn*. He shows both sides of the British people and their opinions, but he ends on a similar note as Smith; by showing that the only way to bring down the wall built between Leavers and Remainers is by dialogue and compromise.

72. Coe, 59.

Conclusion

Even though *Autumn* and *Middle England* have different approaches towards post-Brexit Britain, they both sketch the same image. At the start of the twenty-first century, Britain is utterly divided. The referendum has brought discord between the British people to the surface, but it has always existed. As Coe put it, perhaps all this animosity and disagreement between the British people is not about Brexit at all; it is about something much more personal and fundamental. I would argue it is, at least for a large part, the identification with Englishness and Britishness, or the lack thereof, that has caused discord in British society. Both novels show that the referendum itself did not divide the nation, but that it merely brought to the surface decades of Euroscepticism and resistance to mass immigration.⁷³ In Smith's *Autumn*, issues of national identity do not particularly stand out, and different attitudes towards the Brexit referendum are not notably connected to Englishness and Britishness. The novel does deal with events in British culture and history to draw parallels with the post-Brexit landscape, but the individual identification of the characters with Englishness or Britishness is not intensively explored. Even though all characters belong to a different generation, this does not make a difference for their views on the Brexit debate; namely, all characters are Remainers. All of them are higher educated and belong to the upper middle class. It is clear that Elisabeth is a Remainer, but because of all the animosity and conflict in society, she feels estranged from her country and fellow citizens. Elisabeth's mother is the one who is actively against the Brexiteers and their ideas about immigration and borders. Rather than focusing on issues of national identity, Smith chooses to highlight the fact that the UK is now a post-truth society. She frequently argues that, for the majority of the British people, it did not matter whether the arguments of the Leave campaign were true or not; everyone believes what they want to believe. The only way to break down the impervious wall between the two camps is by dialogue.

Contrary to *Autumn*, identification with Englishness and Britishness is central to *Middle England*, and it is very much connected to the characters' opinions on Brexit. Coe addresses different sides of the debate by also including pro-Brexit characters. Whether the characters identify with Englishness or Britishness depends on, as expected, their age, level of education, affiliation (or obsession) with English past and heritage, and on where they live; either in the countryside, middle England, or in the metropolitan city. But, as Smith has pointed out, factors

73. Kristian Shaw, "BrexLit," In *Brexit and Literature: Critical and Cultural responses*, ed. Robert Eaglestone (London: Routledge, 2018).

for identifying with Englishness are not either/ or, they are and/ and. It is not the case that older characters always identify with Englishness and are therefore always pro-Brexit; it also depends on whether they live in the city or countryside and on their level of education. Also, not all the younger characters identify with Britishness and are anti-Brexit. Ian, for example, has a very exclusive idea of what Englishness entails, even though he is part of the younger generation. He has not been brought up in a metropolitan environment and he is not academically educated, so he has a more exclusive sense of national identity than for example Sophie. He feels looked down upon and left behind by the elite, which is why he decides to vote Leave.

The contrast between cosmopolitanism and nationalism, and between Englishness and Britishness, that Coe addresses in his novel, is also a more central theme within Brexit literature. Literature has always been important for the perception of Englishness and Britishness, “shaping the identifiers of national identity in the popular cultural imagination.”⁷⁴ So, what literature does, is highlight and bring to the surface the issues of national identity that lie at the heart of society. This is something that *Autumn* and *Middle England* both do, albeit to a different extent. Smith’s *Autumn* does not explicitly address issues of national identity, but this is because all characters are Remainers. Therefore, it is logical that identification with Englishness is not in the foreground, because none of the characters really identify with Englishness. This is as expected; higher educated, upper middle-class citizens voting for Remain prefer a more inclusive view of national identity to the more narrow-minded view of Englishness. *Middle England*, however, does feature a stark contrast between Remain and Leave voters and their identification with Englishness and Britishness. Contrary to *Autumn*, Coe’s novel features characters from all classes, with different educational backgrounds, and their ideas about national identity shape their opinions about the referendum.

Where *Middle England* explores the divide between the British people by addressing both sides of the debate, Smith’s novel only focuses on Remainers. Kristian Shaw calls ‘Remain’ novels like Smith’s a risk, as they “might create another leftist echo chamber that neither heals nor speaks to an already fractious nation.”⁷⁵ This is ironic, because the main message in *Autumn* is for the opposing sides to enter in dialogue; for people to break out of their bubble. The question is then, how successful Smith is in her attempt to unite the British people. Perhaps this is something that *Middle England* does more convincingly, by featuring

74. Shaw, “BrexLit.”

75. Shaw, “BrexLit.”

both Leave and Remain supports and by having a narrative voice that remains rather more in between the two camps. Nevertheless, both novels encourage a more inclusive and diverse form of national identity by highlighting the negative effects a too narrow view of Englishness can have.

In June 2019, the UK is still a European member, even though it is nearly three years ago that they decided to leave the EU. This fact alone reveals that the rift within British society is deep and yet unresolved. The anxiety and uncertainty the Brexit referendum has caused has left many British people fed up with their government and their country at large. The term ‘Brexit Fatigue’ is widely known and identified with, and many Britons are no stranger to Brexit therapy and meditation.⁷⁶ But this uncertainty and anxiety does not limit itself to the British Isles. Brexit also affects other countries in Europe, and there most of its negative consequences are yet to be experienced. More and more anti-European parties gain influence on the European mainland, and if nationalist sentiments managed to prevail in the previously anti-fascist and conservative United Kingdom, what stops them from winning in the already more nationalist-leaning countries on the continent? It might be necessary for future BrexLit novels to not have such a narrow focus on British society and the consequences of anti-EU sentiment there, but instead deal with European society more generally. As nationalist sentiment is spreading and growing in other European countries, the role of literature becomes even more vital, as it gestures towards a more open-minded view and encourages dialogue and compromise with less like-minded people. Perhaps literature can have a role in preventing a Nexit, a Fraxit or a Grexit, but for Britain, all BrexLit can do now is try and close the enormous distance between the British people to make sure that all feel they have a place in the Britain of the future.

76. Thomas Daigle, “Coping with Brexit ‘trauma’: Britons turn to meditation, therapy.” *CBC*, April 15, 2019. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/brexit-anxiety-britain-mental-health-1.5097650>

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