

## RECUPERATING FAITH FROM DESPAIR IN HELEAN GARNER'S THE CHILDREN BACH

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### ABSTRACT

While Literature is the physique, faith is the spirit that is confronted in the practice of Psychoanalysis. A lack of self-confidence or the loss of faith is linked to despair and a consequent display of aggressiveness. In psychoanalysis, Faith develops quickly and is the result of a great deal of effort put forward within relationships. This paper explores the theme of resilience as depicted via the character of Dexter, who navigates the challenges within his marriage and ultimately overcomes various obstacles alongside Credence.

**Key Words:** Faith, Psychoanalysis, Self-confidence, Aggressiveness

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Credence is the quality of having faith or confidence. It is a mid-Fourteenth Century phrase and originates from the Roman word *credentia*, which meant "belief". It also denotes the past. Alan Cohen in his book *A Deep Breath of Life* points out the importance of credence as, "If you gave your inner genius as much credence as your inner critic, you would be light years ahead of where you now stand" (48).

The essence of love is Faith. Trust in love requires enormous Faith. Love is all about having Trust and Faith. It is having Faith in a person as well as having faith that the love will be eventually returned, which is the highest examination of character. Real love requires a lot of Faith. It doesn't always seem right. The difficulty in love arises in maintaining a relationship during a downturn. To have faith in love is to think that in a relationship, both partners will face life's challenges and finally evolve. When a couple has Faith in one another and views their relationship as a source of comfort and a foundation for progress, going forward is much simpler and the relationship becomes more enjoyable. The secret to a happy relationship is Faith, which is the conviction that one is with the right person for the right reasons. Faith, hope, and love are interrelated human transcendence manifestations.

Helen Garner in her other book, *The Children's Bach* portrays the life of Dexter and Athena. *The Children's Bach* takes place in Melbourne and is about the life of the couple Athena and Dexter. They live independently with their two sons, Billy and Arthur, of whom Billy is disabled. Athena herself confesses on Billy's condition as:

'I used to think there was some kind of wild, good little creature trapped inside him, and I tried to communicate with that. But now I know there's . . .' (she knocked her forehead with her knuckles) ' . . . nobody home.' (37)

As time passed, Athena herself admits to giving up on Billy, when Elizabeth questioned her:

'How do you bear it?' she said.

‘Bear it?’ Was this one of Elizabeth’s dramatic exclamations, or did she really want to know? ‘I’ve abandoned him, in my heart,’ said Athena. ‘It’s work. I’m just hanging on till we can get rid of him.’

‘Get rid of him?’ said Elizabeth.

Athena’s small, calm smile did not alter. (36)

Athena, Billy’s mother gave up on him yet his father Dexter didn’t give up at all. Athena admits that it is Dexter who still has hope and faith on Billy, “‘Dex is still romantic about him,’ said Athena” (37). Dexter and Athena were coping hard to survive the hazards put forth by life and continued to move on ahead. But, arriving from Dexter's past, Elizabeth upends this Faithful existence that appears to be comfortable. Vicki, the sibling of Elizabeth, accompanies her, along with Philip, the romantic partner of Elizabeth, and Poppy, the preadolescent daughter of Philip. Athena and Dexter are lured into a civilization that challenges the fundamental principles of their relationship. The narrative now revolves around the manner in which Dexter and Athena navigate their relationship with Credence, ensuring its endurance.

Dexter right from the beginning of the story is against modern way of living and lifestyle, which he calls Americanism, “‘I hate modern life,’ he said. ‘Modern American manners.’” (34). The life of Dexter and Athena seems like a very typical story, but Garner extracts something rather unique from it. It was something that is brutally honest in the manner they survive their life.

Helen Garner's novel, *The Children's Bach*, explores the theme of resilience as depicted via the character of Dexter, who navigates the challenges within his marriage and ultimately overcomes various obstacles alongside Credence. Dexter has stern Faith in his marriage with Athena. Athena is his angel. But life has something brewing for him. Garner compares their marriage to the photo of Tennyson that Dexter had taken from a magazine:

Dexter found, in a magazine, a photograph of the poet Tennyson, his wife and their two sons walking in the garden of their house on the Isle of Wight. To the modern eye it is a shocking picture . . . It is a photo of a family . . . Dexter stuck this picture up on the kitchen wall, between the stove and the bathroom door. (1)

The very photo was a classic example of Dexter’s marriage with Athena and the struggles it had witnessed:

It is torn and stained, and coated with a sheen of splattered cooking grease. It has been there a long time. It is always peeling off, swinging sideways, dangling by one corner. But always, before it quite falls off the wall, someone saves it, someone sticks it back. (1)

Their marriage was one that was facing the test of time. Dexter and Athena loved each other. Their marriage was going on steady, Athena “loved him. They loved each other. They were friends” (2).

Once they returned from a music club, as soon as Athena got back into the car, she admired her husband, Dexter: She stood bent over, half in and out of the car, and looked at his face from the side. She found it pretty. It wasn’t, but that was how she saw it. She thought, ‘You will never be anything to me but beautiful.’ (49)

Everything was going on well until the arrival of Elizabeth and Philp into the life of Dexter and Athena. Dexter and Elizabeth had been very close in college, and they fell in love

with one another. But soon they drifted and started living their own life with absolutely no contact between them:

How strange it is that in a city the size of Melbourne it is possible for two people who have lived almost as sister and brother for five years as students to move away from each other without even saying goodbye, to conduct the ordinary business of their lives within a couple of miles of each other's daily rounds, and yet never to cross each other's paths. To marry, to have children; to fail at one thing and to take up another, to drink and dance in public places, to buy food in supermarkets and petrol at service stations, to read of the same murders in the same newspapers, to shiver in the same cold mornings, and yet never to bump into each other. Eighteen, twenty years may pass! How strange! (3)

Elizabeth had moved on. She was not the marriageable type. But Dexter is someone who always remembers the past:

Had Dexter and Elizabeth thought of each other during this time? Of course they had, Dexter more than Elizabeth, not because of any imbalance of affection, but because Dexter was mad about the past. He believed in it, it sustained him, he used it to knit meaning into the mess of everything. He recited it in anecdotes told always in the same words. He even recalled in detail dreams that other people had had years before. Elizabeth disliked the past. It was full of embarrassment. She and Dexter had never been in love. (3)

Garner's portrayal of Dexter emphasizes his habit of clinging to things and remembering them until the end. He does not move on. The same goes for Dexter and Athena's marriage. Dexter's affection revolves around Athena and their children. Even his car makes him think about them:

He unlocked the car door and got in. His wide, short trouser leg snagged on the door handle. The inside of the car comforted him. He could smell his children in it, their grubbiness, their chip packets; and something else, something more than a smell, a faint fleshiness which was evidence that his wife had been there. (47)

Everything was going smoothly until Elizabeth and Philip arrived. Elizabeth and Philip were lovers, but their love was modern American, which Dexter rejected:

'I don't understand the way you live,' said Dexter. 'What are the rules?

Does he – you know – betray you?'

'Of course, he bloody "betrays" me,' said Elizabeth. 'When you've been with someone that long, what else is there to do?' . . .

'I hate modern life,' he said. 'Modern American manners.' (26)

He even describes their love as tortured love. When Vicki, Elizabeth's sister, asks Dexter if he loves Athena, he responds yes, but not in the same way as Elizabeth and Philip do:

'But weren't you in love with Athena?' said Vicki, scandalised.

'No,' said Dexter. 'Not in that tortured way you read about.'

Vicki looked quickly at Athena, afraid she would be hurt, but Athena was smiling and listening. (27)

Dexter and Athena's life and love overcame all obstacles. Dexter was a firm believer in his marriage to Athena. Philip, however, shook his faith and tested it. Athena began connecting with Philip and his way of life:

The edifice trembles.

Athena stops eating, though she still buys food and prepares it. Her clothes hang off her, but her husband's and her children are still clean and ready. She starts to walk by herself at night, she can hardly wait to be out of the house, they cannot seize her attention once the sun has set, her eyes will wander away to the open door, and Dexter knows he is not invited. She comes back after they have gone to sleep, and yet wakes before them. Her sexual life is solitary. (60)

Athena was looking forward to another world. She left Dexter and her two children, Billy and Arthur, and relocated to Sydney with Philip, intending to experience a new world and live a fresh life:

Perhaps there was a world where people could act on whims, where deeds could detach themselves cleanly from all notion of consequences. Perhaps this never-quite-present Philip might be that mythical creature, a man who was utterly scrupulous and who was yet prepared to do anything. Perhaps she too might never apologise, never explain. (61)

But still Dexter believed in his marriage and had immense Faith in it. He believed that it was Philip who took advantage of Athena's innocence, "No! It's his fault. She was naive. He saw that. He took advantage of her" (74). He hoped she will return and even fights with Elizabeth to have stopped it as she had known something was brewing between Athena and Philip:

Elizabeth lined up the knife, the board, the squeezer, the glasses, and began to work with easy efficiency. As she sliced, she spoke to Dexter over her elegant shoulder.

'So. She wouldn't come back, eh?'

He twisted his head away.

...

'Couldn't you have stopped it?' he said.

...

'No! It's his fault. She was naive. He saw that. He took advantage of her.'

...

'She's a saint! Someone like you couldn't even see that!' (73 – 74)

Dexter had complete faith in Athena. He was convinced that she was persuaded by Philip and carried away, and that she would return the following day. Dexter even had a moral lapse. He made love to Vicki:

Dexter turned over in a muck sweat. There was somebody else in the bed. It was not Athena. But he had his arm around this person. She had her back against his stomach and his hand covered a small, hard breast. A whiff of vomit hung about her hair.

He sprang away to the edge of the bed. She did not move . . . (85)

Dexter was heartbroken. He fell a prey to what he had despised, Americanised modern living:

This was modern life, then, this seamless logic, this common sense, this silent tit-for-tat. This was what people did. He did not like it. He hated it. But he was in its moral universe now, and he could never go back. (88)

He felt bad of himself:

So, he was as bad as the rest after all. He was just another exploiter. He was no better than that tattooed, guitar-playing turd who'd pushed her up against the fridge and then turned around and taken Athena away. The feminists were right. Men were bastards. He was a bastard, a low, rotten perv, a slimy seducer of children. He was practically in loco parentis. He had abused Morty's trust. He had broken faith with Athena. He was like one of those men his father made old-fashioned jokes about: he had let a girl get drunk and then he had taken advantage of her. (86)

The most important point to note amidst Dexter's anguish is that, "He had broken faith with Athena" (86). Despite Athena's elopement with Philip and her refusal to return to him, Dexter maintained 'Faith' in her. This confidence drew Athena back to him. Athena left everything and returned to Dexter. She tells Philip that she's going back to Dexter:

'Dexter came looking for me.'

'Here?' He laughed, and turned off the television. 'Bloody Elizabeth. Big-mouth.'

'I sent him away. He was crying.' . . .

'Of course,' said Athena. 'Of course I know that. I only came back to get my bag.' (83 -84)

Athena returned to Dexter. Dexter won her back with his faith in her. He hadn't given up on her:

She walked down the sideway. The car was not there. There was nobody home . . .

She got up and started work . . .

And then she sat down and waited for them to come home.

And they will come!

And Vicki will say, as they drive in through the gateway, 'Hey! The bins are out! Athena must be back.'

And Billy will not even have noticed her absence, and Arthur will come and stand beside her, trying not to smile, and Vicki and Dexter will not touch her straight away. (90)

Dexter's faith had paid its dividends. Athena came back to him and his life became the same.

While talking about Faith, James Matthew Barrie in his book, *Peter Pan* emphasizes on Faith as, "All the world is made of faith, and trust, and pixie dust" (73). The two regions with no bounds are literature and faith. They transcend spatial and temporal bounds. They cannot be limited to a particular area or culture. Their inception and growth are peculiar. In these two spheres, there is so much that is both common and odd that no amount of words could possibly convey it.

Having faith in a relationship is a terrific approach to better your life. A person's faith gives them confidence that there will be mutual respect and honor among them, and that everything will work out for the benefit of all parties concerned. Furthermore, when couples experience difficulties that lead to separation and breakups, religion is what holds them together. Faith, as the antithesis of fear, shields couples from abandonment or loss. To be confident in one's marriage, one must look past the obstacles before them and toward what they truly believe. Faith is more than hope. It's both a demonstration of faith and a surrender. Focusing on what one wants to happen rather than what actually happens necessitates trust. It is a deliberate decision to transcend reason and one's own understanding. Dexter had much faith in his marriage to Athena. Even when Athena wandered away, he remained devoted. He pursued her, and she returned to him. Though his repressed thinking permits him to have a one-night stand with Vicki, Dexter's ultimate desire is to remain faithful to Athena. Dexter's faith brings Athena back to him, and they live happily ever after.

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