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Class Transfuge in Annie Ernaux's *A Man's Place*

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Abstract: ***A Man's Place is a memoirist by Annie Ernaux revealing the life of her father. Ernaux distributes her memories of her father elucidating class alienation and the shame that haunted him during his lifetime. It is an unsentimental portrait of her father, a man from the working class from whom she grew distant as her circumstances changed from a working-class daughter to a married middle-class career woman. The author traverses across her father's life trying to capture every nuance of it explaining his actions and the role he played in society.***

The paper illustrates the relationship between the author and her father. Ernaux describes how her education and change in lifestyle detached her from her father, a straightforward man who battled the hardships of life without adequate formal education. Her father, son of Normandy farmhands, evolves from a struggling cowherd to a marginal businessman who runs a café cum grocery store along with his wife. His greatest achievement in life was to provide his daughter with the life he was denied. Throughout his life, he lives with the fear of poverty and the shame of ignorance. Nevertheless, the man was loved as a parent and admired as an individual.

Keywords: Class-alienation, Ernaux, memoirist, class transfuge, education, A Man's Place.

I. INTRODUCTION

Annie Thérèse Blanche Ernaux is a French-born on 1st September 1940 in a working-class family in Lillebonne, France. Her parents later moved her to Yvetot, France, where they ran a café cum grocery store. Her parents earned just enough to send her to a private Catholic secondary school. Later, she graduated from the University of Rouen and the University of Bordeaux. Her renowned works include The Years (2008), A Women's Story (1988), A Girl's Story (2016), The Empty Cabinets (1988), A Man's Place (1984), and many more. She is the recipient of the 2022 Noble Prize in Literature *"for the courage and clinical acuity with which she uncovers the roots, estrangements, and collective restraints of personal memory"*. In her writing, Annie Ernaux explores a life that is distinguished by significant discrepancies in gender, language, and social status.

In this story, *A Man's Place (1984)* Annie examines the life of her later father, Alphonse Duchesne (1899-1967). His life and experiences, as recounted by Ernaux was one similar to his generation's traditions, beliefs, biases, and wants. She writes, *"I shall collate my father's words, tastes and mannerisms, the main events of his life, all the external evidence of his existence, an existence which I too shared. No lyrical reminiscences, no triumphant displays of irony." p. 18.* The author notes that even though he was an unremarkable man there is little to differentiate him from other men of his generation. The author acknowledges that she doesn't intend to tell us what her father meant to her but to describe his life as a father, a husband, and as an individual. She highlights the shame that haunted her father throughout his life, a man thrown by lack of proper education and class transfuge. Separated from his daughter due to the change in their lifestyle, yet loved and respected. A man who is recalled by her for childhood vacations to the circus and the seaside, but who is also remembered as a figure who, at heart, was a countryman, and from whom she grew irreparably apart.

A. His Upbringing

Annie's father, Alphonse Duchesne was born in a straitened family in a small village in France. Born to a poor farmhand worker who would fly into a rage whenever he saw his wife or children reading and his mother a convent school-educated factory worker, who provided vitality and levity to her children. Duchesne was educated until the age of 12, then his father sent him to work on the landowner's farm. The author notes that during those days higher education was not meant for the people of the working classes and it was expected that her father work to make ends meet. During the First World War, Mr Duchesne left his parents to serve his country. Later he meets Annie's mother Blanche, a woman employed as a co-worker in a rope factory with similar background. The couple merge their savings to buy a small grocery store in a nearby village. Annie's father who was a worker all him life, enjoys the concept of being a businessman. It has been highlighted that though he had to take up a job later due to their financial condition, at home and in the shop, he maintained his profile to give an image of a shop owner.

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B. His Relationship with his Wife

Ernaux's mother was superior to her father in turns of education. The author believes that her gift of writing and reading was passed on to her by her mother. She was a strong and independent woman who is staunch to her role in society. A hardworking woman, who had to carry out the business both before and after her husband's death. The author writes, *"In distinguished society, grief at the loss of a loved one is expressed through tears, silence and dignity. The social conventions observed by my mother, and for that matter the rest of the neighbourhood, had nothing to do with dignity." p.14.* The author recollects that her parent's relationship is a turbulent one: *"At home, when we spoke to one another, it was always in a querulous tone of voice. Only strangers were entitled to polite behaviour." p.48.* It was easier for Mrs Duchesne to connect with her daughter and society. She was a lively worker, outspoken and a woman with a high fashion sense. She believed that she was as good as her peer and the middle-class people. Never letting people belittle her status as a factory worker or a shop owner. She understood the lifestyle of the other class and unlike her husband didn't take extreme measures to fit in. The author recollects her as, *"She was the sort of woman who could go everywhere, in other words, she could 'transcend the class barriers'" p. 31.* The author also observes similarities between her parents, who were afraid of losing their fortune and lapsing back into working-class poverty. Both were also against luxury spending. Nevertheless, they were a successful couple for the standard of their generation, and Mr Duchesne admired her.

C. Wartime Hero

During World War II, Mr Duchesne was too old to be recruited for the war. But this didn't stop him from serving his country. He provided refuge to his mother-in-law, accompanied by her daughters and their children. Every week, he would cycle thirty kilometres to buy goods as wholesalers didn't deliver them home anymore. Even during the heavy bombing in Normandy in 1944, he continued to go for fresh supplies, begging for extras for the elderly, large families and all those who couldn't afford to buy from the black market. He was seen as a hero by the people in the Valley. The author states that *"He acted this way because he had to, not because he chose to.* ***Looking back, he felt sure he had played a role, lived the war years to the full****." p.35.*

D. The Influence of Poverty

Throughout his lifetime, Ernaux's father felt ashamed of his poor educational status, which was brought on him due to the poor economic condition of his parents. As an adult, he ensured that his indigent is not visible to others. He didn't want to be recognized as a worker. His main focus was to display himself as a shop owner. *"He didn't drink. He wanted to maintain his status. To look more like a shopkeeper than a worker." p.32.* When he started working in the Standard Oil refinery, in the Seine estuary, his face puffed and the smell of oil clung to his body *"It was inside him and it became his only nourishment." p.31.* This must have taken a toll on his mental health as he had stopped eating due to this. So, Ernaux's father must have felt like he was losing his status as a business owner.

E. His General Thinking and Actions

According to the author, the motto of her father was *"Better to be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion." p.41* He believed that those who admired the old things they owned, only did so to prevent them from acquiring new things. This also encouraged him to take a loan to buy the premises and the land. He became the first person in his family to own a property. He also ensured that Ernaux had everything necessary for her school. She writes, *"The kid has everything she needs." p.39.*

He saw even insignificant events like having to pay the difference amount for entering the first-class compartment instead of his allotted one and making spelling mistakes as pangs of humiliation. *"Always this fear of being ashamed, out of place" p.41.* But he also was not inclined to spend money on things that were not necessary. *"Nothing fancy, just the standard thing." p.41.*

Ernaux's father tended to impress those who were from a higher status than him. He had the constant desire to feel as though he belonged in their world. Ernaux writes, *"In front of people whom he considered to be important, his manner was shy and gauche and he never asked any questions. In short, he behaved intelligently. Which consisted in gasping our inferiority and refusing to accept it by doing everything possible to conceal it." p.42.* He wanted to present himself as an intelligent and decent man, who doesn't hover money. "*Through necessity our possessions became sacred. My parents saw greed and envy in everything they heard, even when it came from their daughter*." *p.40.* Overall, he was someone who takes things easy. He invented things to do which kept him out of the café. He felt a compulsive urge to demolish and rebuild their house. Ernaux's mother would say: *"Well, what do you expect, he's a countryman."p. 46* According to him an unkempt garden and neglecting vegetables was a sure sign of slovenliness. Towards the end of his life when his strength had left him, he felt useless. But even then, he was determined to get better and start a new life. He felt that business was a mere means of survival which would disappear when he died. So, he decided to enjoy life.

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F. His shame

He saw patois as something old and ugly, a sign of inferiority. Hence, he was proud to have stopped using certain idioms. He was chatty with the customers and his family but in front of educated people he would remain quiet or would pause in mid-sentence and willing the other person to finish the sentence for him. *"He always spoke carefully, terrified of using the wrong world, which would have been as bad as breaking wind." p.43.* He would apply to speak properly in front of other people, but would automatically revert to Norman dialect and his broad accent and aggressive tone whenever he spoke to his family. This would ultimately ruin his efforts to create a good impression.

He hated pompous sentences and new expressions which 'didn't mean anything'. He refused to use new vocabulary and expression, unlike his wife who wanted be portraited as an educated woman. The author states that he was a man who forced her to speak properly and articulate the words clearly but he didn't like it when his pronunciation was corrected. He felt miserable and flew into a terrible rage. The author writes, *"Looking back, I realize now that anything to do with language was a source of resentment and distress, far more than money." p.44.*

He was someone who would pronounce words with deferential regard, taking care to separate each syllable. He even refused to go to school fete, even if his daughter was part of it. But he never failed to encourage and support his daughter in his ways: *"Every time I did well in an essay, and later in my exams, he saw it as an achievement and with the hope that one day I might be better than him." p.51.*

G. The Society Around Him

Annie describes that their society was filled with people from the low-income bracket. The middle-class people (white-collar workers, shopkeepers from the town centre) wanted to look as if they have 'come up from the country'. *"There was nothing worse than looking and behaving like a farmhand when you weren't one." p.48.*

The author also states that courtesy between parents and children remained a mystery to her. *"It took me years to understand that kindliness with which well-mannered people greet each other." p.49.* According to her, the memories of lowly existence are seen as a sign of bad taste.

H. His Relationship with Annie

In Annie's memory, he was always a cheerful man, who often joked with the customers, veiled references to sex, scatological allusions and irony were not his forte. He enjoyed listening to quiz shows (he was willing to improve his knowledge) and the *chansonniers*. He took her to the circus, to films and to watch fireworks. He enjoyed spending time with his daughter and loved her dearly.

I. He was not Someone Who would Visit Museums

He was a man who enjoyed gazing at the fields and beech groves while listening to Bouglione's orchestra. As for Annie, her middle-class school friends exposed her to jazz and classical music, Jacques Tati or René Clair. The author recollects this as *"I soon realized that I had entered a new world." p.45.* This could be seen as a sign of schism from her father.

As time passed, they grew distant from each other. They ate in silence and the author never laughed at home. *"I broke away from the things that were closest to me. I was slowly drifting into the middle-class circle." p.54.* Her life changed and became completely different from that of her father. The whole world turned upside down. For the author, the ideas that come from her background seemed ridiculous. According to the author, her father was a *simple and modest man.* They no longer exchanged conversations like stories of his childhood or talks about her school. He could no longer understand her lessons. Her studying all day annoyed him and he saw this as the reason for her bad mood. He felt that the author being too involved in her studies could lead to her bad health. But, for the author, studying was the price one had to pay to get a decent job and avoid marrying a factory worker. This illustrates the author's eagerness to break free from her social situation and move to a higher level.

The fact that the author was 17 and not making money of her own was something her father was ashamed of. According to him, the author was a good learner but never a good worker. His table manners and the way he spoke were criticized by the author. They argued constantly due to their different way of thinking and change in social status.

He could never understand why the author had left the schoolteacher training where she was well taken care of. For him, Math or Spanish were far more relevant than French language and literature. He was afraid that people would consider her to be privileged and hence never admitted that she had received a scholarship. *"He was constantly beset by the envy and jealousy of others, this perhaps the most distinctive sign of his social condition." P.62.*

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Needless to say, her father was glad to welcome her well-educated friends. He treated them similarly to the way he treated the middle class in his circle. "*He took a keen interest in everything they did and spoke to them at great length, keeping the conversation going out of politeness.*" *p.62.* He went out of his way to make her friends comfortable. He wanted to show her friends that he was well-mannered.

His only expectation from her future husband was that he should be a good-mannered. He considered his relationship with his son-in-law as one that could transcend their social differences. "*They were convinced that being well-read and well-mannered were marks of an inner excellence that was innate.*" *p.63.* He believed that his daughter would not end up becoming a social outcast.

II. CONCLUSION

A Man's Place by Annie Ernaux is an ethnography which tries to understand a social group from the inside, reconstruct its worldview and values, to objectify them without judging them, in a distanced and objective mode. The author uses ethnography to reconstitute her father's world, a man admired as an individual, loved as a parent, and respected as an individual but due to habits, and education, heartbreakingly apart. The novel illustrates his beliefs and values, in his dignity and not through bourgeois lenses.

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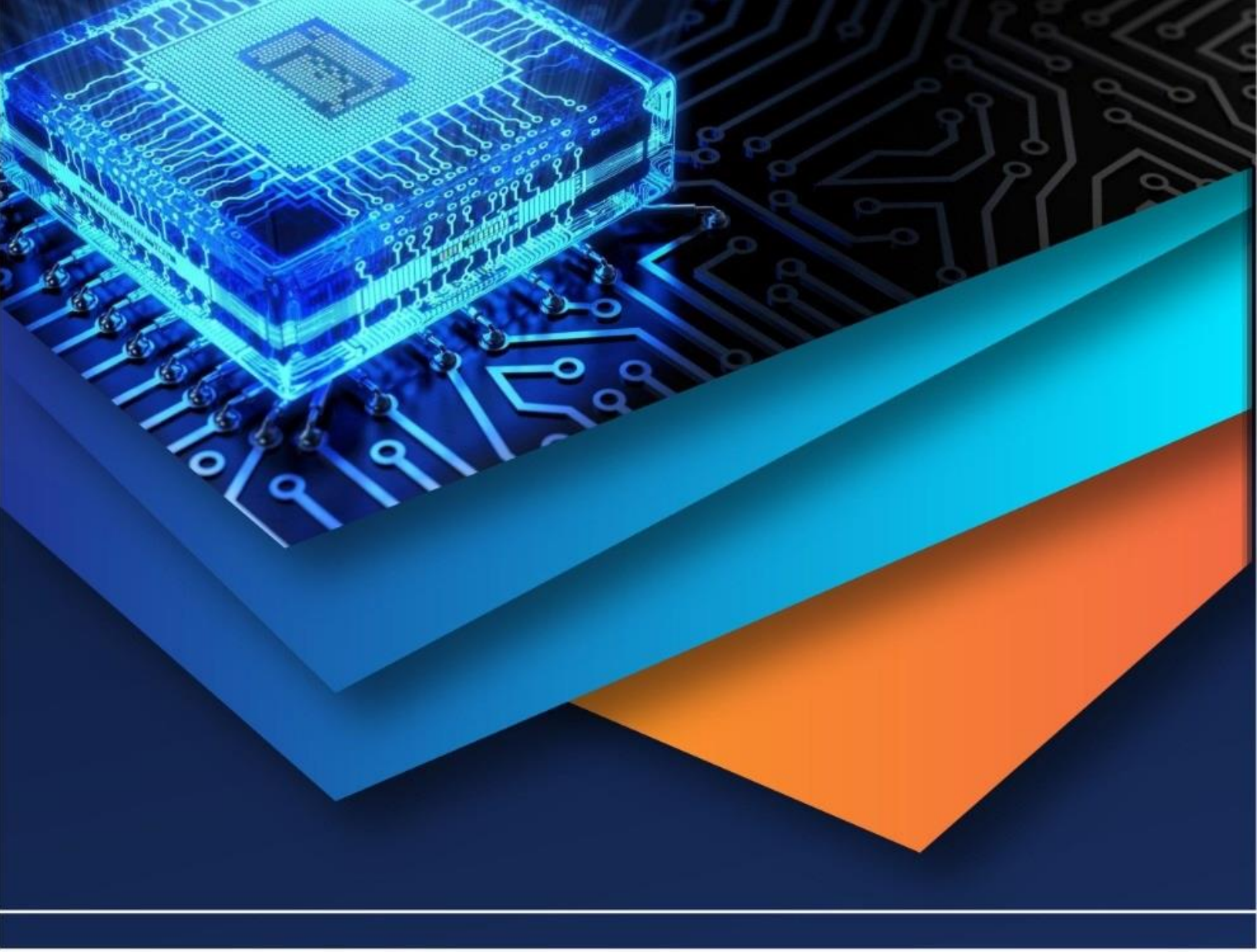

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