



# International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science

e-ISSN: 2544-9435

Scholarly Publisher  
RS Global Sp. z O.O.  
ISNI: 0000 0004 8495 2390

Dolna 17, Warsaw,  
Poland 00-773  
+48 226 0 227 03  
editorial\_office@rsglobal.pl

---

## ARTICLE TITLE

THE ALIENATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE PROBLEM OF MORAL CHOICE IN JONATHAN COE'S NOVEL "THE CLOSED CIRCLE"

---

## ARTICLE INFO

Aliyeva Leyla Astan. (2025) The Alienation of The Individual and The Problem of Moral Choice in Jonathan Coe's Novel "The Closed Circle". *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 1(45). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3239

---

## DOI

[https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1\(45\).2025.3239](https://doi.org/10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3239)

---

## RECEIVED

19 January 2025

---

## ACCEPTED

05 March 2025

---

## PUBLISHED

07 March 2025

---

## LICENSE



The article is licensed under a **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License**.

---

© The author(s) 2025.

This article is published as open access under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), allowing the author to retain copyright. The CC BY 4.0 License permits the content to be copied, adapted, displayed, distributed, republished, or reused for any purpose, including adaptation and commercial use, as long as proper attribution is provided.

# THE ALIENATION OF THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE PROBLEM OF MORAL CHOICE IN JONATHAN COE'S NOVEL "THE CLOSED CIRCLE"

*Aliyeva Leyla Astan*

*Ph.D. Student at Azerbaijan University of Languages, Baku, Azerbaijan*

*ORCID ID: 0009-0001-4213-5865*

---

## ABSTRACT

The investigation sheds light on the issues of alienation of the individual in the novel "The Closed Circle" by the modern English writer Jonathan Coe. At the same time, it examines the problem of moral choice raised in the novel. The author of the article comes to the conclusion that J. Coe solves the issues of choice and lack of choice in a Hamlet-like way. Hamlet's tragedy lies in his search for truth, and the tragedy of the novel's hero lies in the lack of a chance to make a choice. His indecision and doubtful thoughts are also related to the problems prevailing in society. The peculiar sense of guilt expressed on the basis of the image of Hamlet is characterized as a characteristic feature of the hero. Lack of choice creates a dead end in the hero's life, a feeling of indecision, hesitation until the end does not leave him, and thus, any action resembles a closed circle. All the characters of the work face their own sins and the dilemma of choice, which is also related to the problem of moral choice raised by the writer.

---

## KEYWORDS

Jonathan Coe, "The Closed Circle", Alienation, Moral Choice, Novel

---

## CITATION

Aliyeva Leyla Astan. (2025) The Alienation of The Individual and The Problem of Moral Choice in Jonathan Coe's Novel "The Closed Circle". *International Journal of Innovative Technologies in Social Science*. 1(45). doi: 10.31435/ijitss.1(45).2025.3239

---

## COPYRIGHT

© **The author(s) 2025**. This article is published as open access under the **Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0)**, allowing the author to retain copyright. The CC BY 4.0 License permits the content to be copied, adapted, displayed, distributed, republished, or reused for any purpose, including adaptation and commercial use, as long as proper attribution is provided.

---

## Introduction.

The novels of the contemporary English writer Jonathan Coe criticize English society; reflect the tragedy of an individual who can't get rid of the heavy "burden" of social problems. At the same time, J. Coe exposes the political life of England with bitter laughter, speaks of political "businessmen" in the light of the past and the present. In his work, the social, political and economic situation that existed during the reign of Margaret Thatcher and Tony Blair is described in all its reality. Along with all the mentioned features, J. Coe's novels also talk about the alienation of the individual and the reasons that create this alienation.

In J. Coe's novel "The Rotters' Club", written in 2001, the problem of moral choice constitutes the idea-content of the work. The writer's heroes have to decide on something at a certain stage of life. J. Coe puts his heroes in a position of choice. What should be preferred, loyalty or betrayal, honesty or meanness, cruelty or mercy? Is this choice always the right one? Some choose cowardice, preferring a sense of justice and responsibility, while others, on the contrary, choose self-interest. In order not to make a mistake at the crossroads, not only courage is needed, but also a sense of reason and dignity, because often a person's fate depends on moral choices.

His 2004 novel "The Closed Circle" is intended as a sequel to "The Rotters' Club". In this novel, we again encounter the same characters, but now they are not teenagers. They are middle-aged people who have occupied certain places in society. Years have passed, and teenagers who are now schoolchildren are already facing different problems. Now they listen to classical music, facing problems more important than a midlife crisis. What has not changed is what is happening in the world. The same problems that are happening in the world continue, and this worries the main character of the work, Ben Trotter. He and his friend Philip Chase

still do not have answers to many questions. In this sense, the novel is about the feeling of guilt, choice and lack of choice that a person acquires over time. As you read the novel, it becomes clear that years pass, but a person remains unchanged with all his vices and virtues. The writer's novel is built on the principle of the end before the end, and for this reason the work is marked from chapter 28 to chapter 1. Ben and his friends are people who can't fundamentally change anything due to their social status, and who have already taken the place of their parents in the country's political and economic system. Thus, each of them is an individual who draws his own closed circle and repeats it again. This reality upsets Ben, puts him in a dead end. The dead end reduces his ability to make a choice to nothing.

J. Coe's novel "The Closed Circle" also describes the life story of the Trotter family, who were in power during the prime ministership of Tony Blair. The novel highlights the misunderstandings that arose between the upper elite and ordinary English people. The youngest of the family – Paul becomes a member of parliament, and his image embodies many of the negative features of the political elite. Paul uses his position to achieve his goals, gets involved in corruption and acquires wealth. J. Coe, who is the harshest critic of the country's social policy, creates a panorama of England in the 70s-90s. Such a description is characteristic of a modern English novel. According to literary critic Yegane Abdullayeva, "the modern reader wants to learn the past and tries to find its full interpretation. This is due to the fact that humans live in a chaotic reality. The world surrounding them is divided into fragments. The only way out is to "create" something about the past, which is happening in the past, and to "revive" it" (Abdullayeva, 2021). J. Coe also sheds light on the present by learning the past. He looks at what happened in the past again with the eyes of today.

The novel deals with the relationships between people representing various social groups. The conservatism prevailing in school education of the time, which influenced their formation, as well as the numerous problems of parents related to the general decline in the country, are taken as the basis. The crisis covering all spheres of society leads to a number of dramatic events in England. This is caused by the closure of factories and plants, unemployment, and the lack of confidence in the future of young people. The Cold War and the threat of nuclear conflict also play a major role in the life of the country.

J. Coe satirically describes the attitude of teachers who are preoccupied with personal problems to their work, mocks the rules and regulations prevailing in the school and shows that what is happening affects everyone's psychological state. The management of education by excessively strict laws creates stress in young people. Thus, the novel gives a wide place to England of the 70s-90s of the last century. Conservatism and the absurdity of school rules, the radicalization of English society and intolerance in international relations, the failure of trade unions also do not escape the writer's satirical criticism. The feeling of a closed circle permeates all spheres of the country's life. According to J. Coe, the political system of England resembles a closed circle.

### **Choice and lack of choice as a closed circle.**

The novel is also a satirical mockery of the decline of moral principles in English society. The writer's sarcasm can be explained by the crisis of traditional values in today's England. Because John Copland, the country's leading scientist, is ignored at a banquet, while the public's attention is drawn to the winners of a reality show. The novel criticizes the authoritarian people who have wide opportunities and influence the development of events. The writer shows the situation in the country as a normal state of society: a society that has undergone moral decline primarily pursues financial goals, while human life is relegated to the background, and its desires are not taken into account.

The feeling of a closed circle permeates all spheres of the country's life and is reflected in the lifestyle of the characters. The British political system resembles a closed circle. Here, neither the left nor the right, nor the conservatives nor the laborers can be seen in their true colors. Everyone is mixed up with each other, and political will is at a standstill. One of Ben's friends, Doug Anderton, says sarcastically: "I mean if the public ever got to hear what he really thinks – well, they'd realize. Because most of them still believe that they've voted in a left-wing party. Whereas really, they've just voted for another five years of Thatcherism. Ten years. Fifteen, even" (Coe, 2006). But in other part of the novel he says: "I mean that the entire system nowadays is only geared to accommodating a tiny minority of political opinion. The left's moved way over to the right, the right's moved a tiny bit to the left, the circle's been closed and everyone else can go fuck themselves" (Coe, 2006).

Ben's life can also be described as a closed circle. His character and inner world lead to failures in life. The novel "Restlessness", which Ben wrote for twenty years, remains unfinished and does not interest anyone. Steven Poole writes that "he is haunted by self-doubt" (Poole, 2004). Doubtful thoughts, indecision, hesitation to the end don't leave him. Apparently, for this reason he can't go beyond the established boundaries. Family life is also subject to failure. His refuge in a monastery in Normandy and his "battle" with his own thoughts

there also doesn't provide comfort. Ben, who takes refuge in God, can't find comfort in the monastery either. The limited monastic life reminds him of a closed circle. After a while: "The breath of God!" The breath of God, I called it!..The breath of God". "Benjamin, God works in many ways, you know. Many and mysterious ways. Just because there turns out to have been an explanation for what happened, that doesn't make it any less . . . meaningful." "I thought it was a miracle," said Benjamin, as if he hadn't heard her" (Coe, 2006).

The writer depicts the modern man in the person of Ben. He shows that he is defeated in the face of lack of choice. The writer shows that free choice, the right of the individual to choose his own destiny, is nothing more than an empty fantasy. Accepting the impasse as fate, Ben returns to England and thus the circle closes again.

One of Ben's friends characterizes him as follows: "The world in which Ben lived, the world itself seemed incomprehensible to him. This absurdly huge, complex, chaotic, boundless world is an endless game of human relations, political relations, cultures, histories.... How can one hope to feel comfortable in it?" (Coe, 2006). If we look closely at the character of Ben, we will see that he resembles the character of Hamlet, who is trapped in hesitation. Hamlet's fault was also in his indecision and inaction. Ben, like Hamlet, is a true and honest person, but he hesitates a lot before doing something. This characteristic of Hamlet ends with the tragedy of his loved ones, and in the end he himself is destroyed and can't fulfill the mission he has undertaken. Hamlet's tragedy lies in his indecision, which in turn makes him guilty before other characters. In other words, Hamlet's tragic sin lies in his own choice. If we look at the character of Ben, we can see that he repeats Hamlet. The writer, as it were, brings two characters together and puts them back into a closed circle in the person of Ben. He is also unable to get out of the closed circle. His brother Paul is always surprised at him: "You know—his real trouble is that he's perfectly indifferent, but he won't allow himself to admit it. Being unpublished suits him. Being unperformed suits him, too. Nothing could please him more than being able to think of himself as the Emile Zola of the double-entry system. The fact that the rest of the world refuses to recognize him just adds to the piquancy" (Coe, 2006). Doug Anderton draws parallels between him and his brother and reveals Paul's true nature: "I know them both. Benjamin's one of the cleverest and most talented people I've ever met and it just so happens that he's never had a break in his life. Paul Trotter is a nonentity. A famous nonentity, admittedly, but if the people who voted for him knew what his real opinions were he wouldn't even be that for long" (Coe, 2006). Paul is a member of parliament from the Labour Party and names his son Tony to please Tony Blair. However, he struggles with his inner voice and is unsure whether to vote for or against the Iraq war. He tries to climb the political ladder, but is very unethical, has a weak character and tries to "capture" his assistant Malvina, who eventually makes him his lover.

Human life consists of an infinite number of coincidences, causes and necessities. One of them gives rise to another. Personal interests, thoughts and behaviors form the general flow of existence. How can these relationships and the reasons arising from them be understood? Ben repeatedly asks himself similar questions, looking for a god who would allow him to distinguish right from wrong. But in the end, he comes to the conclusion that the world revolves forever, the circle closes, and man remains in the same confusion. Ben accepts the lack of a chance to choose.

"Hamlet" touches on many eternal themes, but the problem of choice raised in the work always remains the central theme. Ben also faces the same problem, how can one remain pure and untouched in reality? Remain a pure person or destroy the humanist person in oneself and become like everyone else? Ben, like Hamlet, is faced with the question "To be, or not to be... that is the question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer" (Shakespeare, 2011).

Ben and his wife Emily repeatedly want to bring their family life into order. As his marriages fall apart, he takes refuge in the Christian faith, seeking refuge in God. But this attempt can't save him either. He "deceives" himself in writing, hoping to become a writer and stay away from everyone, but no one reads his work. They laugh behind his back. Each new attempt creates new problems, and the impenetrability that arises in society and interpersonal relationships affects his entire life. It seems that Ben develops "Hamlet disease", a person's suffering from his own doubts and passivity opens the way for new problems. Hamlet's indecision and suspicious thoughts are reflected in Ben's behavior. In other words, his own sense of guilt expressed on the basis of the image of Hamlet becomes Ben's characteristic trait. Analyzing the work, Romanian researcher Denisa Dumitrascu writes that "The Closed Circle, presents the contemporary situation in the form of a globalised, depersonalised world.... Paradoxically, the level of disenchantment and political inactivity has become similar to the attitude of the intellectual 30 years ago. It seems that globalization has petrified the feeling of insignificance to the point that the modern individual does not even try to make his/her voice heard anymore" (Dumitrascu, 2017).

On the other hand, Ben's sense of guilt stems from the lawlessness, indifference, and neglect that exist in a world where humans are collectively guilty. His friend Doug is concerned about his behavior and thoughts and thinks: "Benjamin's remarks alarmed Doug. Having worked for a major newspaper for many years, receiving dozens of letters from readers every week, he had realised, among other things, that mental illness, of varying degrees of severity, was far more widespread than most people realised, and that in addition it could take the most intricate forms. He was familiar with the term 'mania of complicity,' a mania that caused a person to believe that the most innocuous article on general subjects was full of hidden hints that only he alone could understand. This mania could manifest itself in a rather ghastly way" (Coe, 2006).

The regrettable point of the feeling of guilt is also connected with the hero's youthful mistake. His relationship with Cecil, whom he loved in his youth, results in the birth of a disabled daughter. Ben, who has not known about his daughter for many years, learns about her only from his brother Paul. His personal feeling of guilt also results in Paul's indirect participation in this sin. Thus, the father, who is unaware of the existence of his daughter, and his brother Paul, behaves as if he had no kinship with her. Malvina, who knows that she is Paul's uncle, can't get rid of this terrible feeling of guilt. The writer embodies the idea of an unimaginable and cruel world with the sins of the father, and as a result, the sins are turned against his own child, and thus the circle closes. Again, the idea of impossibility and the lack of a chance to choose comes to the fore. The feeling of responsibility for the meaninglessness of the world again points to the theme of Hamlet. At this time, Hamlet's "worldly sorrow" is imbued with the spirit of Christianity. Apparently, this is why Ben takes refuge in a monastery. In some parts of the work, Ben and his wife Emily are presented as Christian fanatics. A Hamlet-like sense of guilt is manifested in Ben's thoughts. It is obvious that there is no one among the characters who dies, but everyone is a participant in this indifference, everyone is guilty as one. Indifference in society, indifference in human relations, indifference in the family, etc. There are no murders, crimes and mass deaths in the work, but everyone is complicit in the crime. Lev Vygotsky, the founder of the futurological study "New Man", puts forward the following idea in his essay on Hamlet about indecision: all people on earth go through sins: "We, all born, are participants in the tragedy and, realizing it, see our sins on the stage - the sin of birth, the sin of existence" (Vygotsky, 2015).

In J. Coe's novel, as the plot develops, the answers to the main character's questions appear. The hero, feeling a certain guilt in everyone, puts forward considerations, which in turn leads to the disclosure of the true essence of sins. The search for truth begins with the reality prevailing in the world in the person of Ben, Doug, Paul, then moves on to family drama and again goes out on a world scale with secret family conflicts and turns into universal sin in human existence. The state of "world sorrow" that Hamlet comes to also destroys Ben's life. Thus, the writer solves the issues of guilt, choice and lack of choice in a Hamlet-like way and shows that a person can't escape from the inequality and unwritten laws occurring in the world. Hamlet's tragedy lies in his search for truth. Ben's tragedy lies in the fact that everyone bears the guilt, the lack of a chance to choose: "He thought about the past; his failed marriage; Emily; Malvina; Cicely; any others who happened to visit his consciousness. He thought about his lost faith, and his wasted years. Tried to decide whether they really had been wasted. Tried to decide all sorts of things, big and small. And invariably failed". In other words, the feeling of guilt is not only an answer to the narrow questions of crime, it is hidden in larger issues. Joseph Fletcher wrote that certain human actions should be evaluated depending on the circumstances. That is why J. Fletcher put forward the idea that these actions can be morally correct (Fletcher, 1966).

Gradually, the reader begins to understand the image of Ben again. Now his silence is understood as a high responsibility, Ben's internal protest, a silent protest against what is happening in society. The writer sees the behavior of individual people, here Paul, Doug, Emily, Phil and others, and family conflicts are understood as a kind of reflection of world events: "There are individuals. There are bad individuals – it's as simple as that – and they're the people you have to watch out for, and even if there are reasons for the way they behave, nine times out of ten they're not to do with history, and not to do with culture. It's to do with psychology and human relationships. Other people have made them the way they are.. Parents and society most of the time" (Coe, 2006).

Ben's silence and indecision can be explained by his infinite faith in God and his divine justice in judging people. If for Hamlet the transition from thought to action was truly a spiritual experience, a desire to reach the truth to the end, Ben chooses inaction. It is no coincidence that he is indecisive in his actions, because his internal contradictions arise from English society. The reason is the injustice that occurs in society. Here too he approaches the image of Hamlet. Hamlet-like life choices have existed at all times, and Ben is not alone in this regard.



One of the interesting characters in the work is Philip Chase. Like Ben, he constantly asks questions and voices the crisis of values. Philip is a journalist, in his articles he shares his views on political movements and comes to the conclusion that the modern racism that is reviving in some countries is based on more cunning, more simplified ideological ideas. False values, insincere initiatives are taking place. He agrees with his childhood friend, black Steve Richards, and supports his protest against the racism and nationalism that prevails in the country. Philip believes with all his heart that the moral decline of society, the loss of true values, will create chaos in interpersonal relations. The transformation of the mass media into ideological mouthpieces will create confusion among people and make them believe in false ideals. According to Philip Chase, structures governed by this thinking will overthrow the world order. Philip concludes that modern Labourists in England are not much different from modern liberals. Both serve the same purpose. The difference is only in their names.

### **Conclusion.**

Both Ben and Philip face the same problems. These problems force them to make a moral choice, to determine their position. Philip, like Ben, thinks that the above-mentioned ideologies that have spread to power will eventually lead to conflict. That is why Ben isolates himself, his ideals, and seeks refuge only in the spiritual world.

The loss of the individual's "I", his identity, which has become the main feature of his personality, is the main theme of J. Coe's novel "The Closed Circle". Almost all the characters of the work are left alone with their sins and the dilemma of making a choice. Understanding the hidden essence of the Trotters' family tragedy is also connected with the problem of choice. Ben Trotter's indecision, silence, and Hamlet-like living are a kind of psychological defense. From this point of view, it can be firmly said that J. Coe partially repeats the image of Hamlet in the image of Ben. The image of Ben is organically intertwined with the motive of guilt, presented by the writer with the impossibility of making a choice. At the same time, issues such as choice and lack of choice are presented together with psychological problems.

### **REFERENCES**

1. Abdullayeva Y. Historical Imagination: Interpretation of the Past in Postmodern Novels A History of the World in 10½ Chapters and The Incomplete Manuscript // Academic Journal of Modern Philology, Vol. 14, 2021. p.9-24.
2. Coe J. The Closed Circle. UK: Vintage. 2006. 384 p.
3. Dumitraşcu D. Power in Politics and Academia in Jonathan Coe's Novels. Cambridge Scholars Publishing. 2017. 360 p.
4. Fletcher J. Situation Ethics: The New Morality. Westminster John Knox Press. 1997. 192
5. Poole S. Squaring the circle // The Guardian. 4 Sep., 2004. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/sep/04/fiction.jonathancoe>
6. Shakespeare W. Hamlet. New York City: Simon & Brown. 2011. 330p.
7. Vygotsky L. Complete collection of works: in 16 volumes. T. 1. Dramaturgy and theater / Ed. V.S. Sobkina. M.: Lev, 2015. 752 p.