

Dual Identity: The Representation of Irish Identity in Victorian England in Anthony Trollope's Phineas Finn

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Identity has been a cornerstone of human comprehension for centuries, it serving as a lens through which both individuals and communities define themselves. Within this context, the idea of dual identity stands out as a crucial element that showcases the intricacies of people who traverse multiple cultural, social, or personal connections. This research article explores the complex representation of Irish identity in Victorian England through Anthony Trollope's novel Phineas Finn. It vividly portrays the challenges faced by an Irishman attempting to traverse the political and social spheres of England during the Victorian era. Phineas Finn, the protagonist, embodies the dual identity of being both Irish and a member of the British Parliament, highlighting the cultural tensions and identity struggles inherent in this position. Through an analysis of Phineas' political career, social relationships, and personal dilemmas, this study investigates the portrayal of the marginalization of Irish identity within the dominant English culture. The paper also discusses the broader historical and cultural context of Anglo-Irish relations during the period, considering how Phineas Finn reflects the complexities of assimilation and national loyalty. By examining Trollope's narrative techniques, character development, and use of symbolism, this article argues that Phineas Finn offers a critical commentary on the precarious position of Irish identity in Victorian England. The findings contribute to the understanding of how Victorian literature grapples with issues of national identity, integration, and the politics of belonging. This study positions Phineas Finn as a significant text in the exploration of Irish identity within the broader scope of British literature.

Keywords: Anglo- Irish relations, Irish Identity, Cultural tension, Political fiction, British fiction.

1. Introduction

The concept of identity has long been central to human understanding, offering a perspective through which individuals and societies define themselves. An identity crisis emerges when this understanding becomes unsettled, leading to a period of self-doubt, confusion, and questioning. It was first introduced by psychologist Erik Erikson in his psychosocial theory, the term originally described the struggles of adolescence—a time of reconciling internal self-perception with external societal expectations. Over time, the notion of identity crisis has transcended its psychological roots, becoming a multidisciplinary framework applied to sociology, literature, cultural studies, and postcolonial theory. In a rapidly changing world marked by globalization, technological advancements, and shifting social norms, the idea of a stable, coherent identity has become increasingly elusive. Postmodern scholars argue that identity is not a fixed construct but a fluid, dynamic process shaped by historical, cultural, and political forces. This fluidity, while empowering, can also result in fragmentation, alienation, and a sense of disconnection.

In literature and the arts, identity crises are frequently depicted as moments of personal and societal upheaval, revealing the complexities of selfhood and belonging. From the existential dilemmas of modernist protagonists to the cultural dislocation in postcolonial narratives, the theme of identity crisis reflects the universal human struggle to reconcile the inner self with external realities. The study of identity crisis has been enriched by diverse critical perspectives, each offering insights into the complexities of selfhood, societal expectations, and cultural dislocation. The concept of identity crisis, originating from Erik Erikson's psychological theories, has evolved into a multidisciplinary framework for understanding the complexities of selfhood about societal and cultural forces. Erikson defined an identity crisis as a period of confusion and doubt about one's sense of self, arising from the need to reconcile internal perceptions with external expectations. This notion has since been expanded by scholars such as Stuart Hall, who argues that identity is a fluid and fragmented process shaped by historical and cultural contexts, asserting that "identity is not something that is fixed, it is a process that is never complete—a production that is always in process." Similarly, Judith Butler's perspective on gender emphasizes the performative nature of identity, contending that it is constructed through repeated acts and societal norms, often creating a tension between conformity and authenticity. Postcolonial critics like Frantz Fanon and Homi K. Bhabha highlight how identity crises are exacerbated in colonized contexts, where individuals grapple with dual consciousness and cultural hybridity. Fanon famously noted, "The more [the colonized] renounces his Blackness and the more he dreams of becoming white, the more he becomes estranged from himself," illustrating the alienation experienced under cultural domination. Meanwhile, Bhabha introduces hybridity as both a space for creative self-definition and a site of ambivalence, where individuals navigate the dislocation of belonging. Existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre associate identity crises with the human condition of freedom, emphasizing that identity is not preordained but continually shaped by personal choices, a process that often generates anxiety, as he observes, "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself." Sociologist Anthony Giddens adds that the uncertainties of late modernity, marked by the erosion of traditional markers like religion and community, further complicate identity formation, as individuals are left to construct their sense of self in a fragmented world.

Anthony Trollope's handling of Irish identity in Phineas Finn provides a detailed exploration of the complexities and challenges of dual identity during the Victorian era, particularly through the experiences of the titular character, Phineas Finn. As a young Irishman navigating the political landscapes of London, Phineas embodies the conflicts and tensions of maintaining one's national identity while striving to integrate into a predominantly English society. Trollope uses Phineas' journey to explore the broader theme of Irish representation in England, shedding light on the prejudices and opportunities that Irish character's face in a foreign political and social environment.

In his Autobiography, Anthony Trollope reflects candidly on the challenges of creating Phineas Finn,

It was certainly a blunder to take him from Ireland—into which I was led by the circumstance that I created the scheme of the book during a visit to Ireland. There was nothing to be gained by the peculiarity, and there was an added difficulty in obtaining sympathy and affection for a politician belonging to a nationality whose politics are not respected in England. (263)

This passage reveals Trollope's awareness of the prejudices of his audience and his struggle to present an Irish character as both relatable and admirable within the context of English politics. His use of the term "blunder" underscores the difficulty of challenging entrenched biases through literature, particularly when dealing with a figure from a nationality whose political aspirations were often viewed with skepticism or outright hostility in Victorian England.

These reflections not only highlight Trollope's sensitivity to the socio-political landscape of his time but also provide valuable insight into the complexities of creating sympathetic and complex representations of marginalized identities in literature. They underscore the broader challenges Trollope faced in addressing Irish identity within the Victorian literary canon, as well as the cultural and political limitations imposed by his readership's expectations.

Phineas, as an Irish member of the British Parliament, encounters the inherent contradictions and challenges of serving two national interests. He is often caught between his desire to serve his constituents in Ireland effectively and the necessity to adhere to the political norms and expectations of his English colleagues and voters. This duality of allegiance and identity highlights the broader Victorian anxieties about Irish integration and representation. Trollope portrays Phineas' struggle with identity not merely as personal but as emblematic of the Irish expatriate experience in England—torn between loyalty to his homeland and the pragmatic need to adapt and succeed in a dominant culture. At some point, Phineas knows that,

He had already known many members of Parliament to whom no outward respect or sign of honour was ever given by any one; and it seemed to him, as he thought over it, that Irish members of Parliament were generally treated with more indifference than any others. (62)

Trollope critically engages with the concept of "Irishness" as a marker of otherness in Victorian England, using Phineas' character to challenge stereotypes and elicit sympathy from his readers. Through Phineas, Trollope invites his audience to reconsider the simplistic categorizations of Irish identity prevalent at the time, offering a more complex and humanized portrayal. The interactions and relationships Phineas develops throughout the novel also serve as a commentary on the potential for integration and mutual respect in a diverse society.

In *Phineas Finn*, Trollope not only addresses the personal identity crisis of his protagonist but also engages with the larger political and cultural crises regarding Irish identity in Victorian England. The character of Phineas Finn, an ambitious young Irishman who enters the British Parliament, Trollope engages with the complexities of national identity, cultural assimilation. The novel reflects Trollope's intricate understanding of the socio-political dynamics between Britain and Ireland during the 19th century. The British characters in the novel, particularly those involved in politics, are depicted as embodying the authority and power of the English establishment. The characters like Plantagenet Palliser and Mr. Monk represent the English political elite, who view politics as a matter of national duty and public service. The political system is portrayed as hierarchical and deeply entrenched in British values, with clear expectations for those who participate in it. Trollope highlights the rigid social structure of British society, where class distinctions are deeply ingrained. British characters are often defined by their social status, and this hierarchy influences their interactions with others, including Phineas. The British aristocracy, represented by characters like Lady Laura Standish and Violet Effingham, is portrayed as both powerful and restrictive, with social norms that must be adhered to for acceptance. The British identity in the novel is marked by a sense of cultural superiority and confidence. The British characters often exhibit a paternalistic attitude towards Phineas and other Irish characters, viewing them as outsiders who must be guided or assimilated into the English way of life. This dynamic mirrors the broader imperial relationship between Britain and Ireland, where British culture is seen as dominant.

Trollope's deep understanding of the complexities of Anglo-Irish relations is frequently praised. Robert Tracy argues that Trollope's depiction of Phineas Finn reflects the nuanced and often tense relationship between Ireland and England during the Victorian era. Trollope is seen as providing a balanced view, acknowledging the grievances and aspirations of the Irish while also depicting the challenges faced by those who sought to navigate the British political system.

Trollope portrays the marginalization of Irish identity through Phineas' experiences in London. Phineas often feels like an outsider, grappling with the pressures to conform to British norms while remaining true to his Irish heritage. This internal conflict is a recurring theme in the novel, reflecting the broader identity crisis faced by the Irish in a society that views them as "other." "he was most anxious to see whether her reception of him, as a member of Parliament, would be in any degree warmer than that of his other friends. Hitherto he had found no such warmth since he came to London, excepting that which had glowed in the bosom of Mrs Bunce." (71). His Irishness sets him apart from his English peers, creating both opportunities and challenges. Phineas's charm and eloquence win him friends and supporters, but his Irish background also makes him a subject of suspicion and prejudice.

British and Irish identities in *Phineas Finn* is complex and multifaceted. He does not reduce the view of the cultural and political interactions between the two nations. While Trollope is often seen as sympathetic to the Irish plight, he also reflects the prevailing attitudes of his time, portraying the British as culturally superior and the Irish as struggling to find their place within this framework. Trollope's treatment of these themes can be seen as both a reflection of and a commentary on the broader socio-political context of Victorian England. The novel captures the ambivalence and tension that characterized British-Irish relations, offering insights into the challenges of identity, loyalty, and belonging in a colonial setting. Through Phineas Finn,

Trollope explores the idea of what it means to be Irish in a predominantly English world, highlighting the personal and political costs of navigating between these two worlds.

W.J. McCormack have critiqued Trollope's depiction of Irish politics as somewhat simplistic or evasive. They argue that while Trollope does engage with the "Irish Question" in *Phineas Finn*, he tends to sidestep the more radical or contentious aspects of Irish nationalism, instead focusing on the personal struggles of his protagonist. This approach, according to McCormack, can be seen as a way for Trollope to avoid fully confronting the political realities of Irish-British relations.

Phineas Finn's cultural and national identity as an Irishman is central to his character and the challenges he faces in Anthony Trollope's *Phineas Finn*. Coming from Killaloe, a small town in Ireland, Phineas brings with him the values, experiences, and sense of loyalty rooted in his Irish heritage. This identity sets him apart in the English-dominated world of Victorian politics, where his Irishness marks him as an outsider. In London and the British Parliament, Phineas is viewed with a mix of curiosity, admiration, and subtle condescension by his English peers, who often regard him as different, if not inferior. This outsider status complicates his political and social life, as he must navigate a system where being Irish is seen as an obstacle to full acceptance. While his charm and eloquence win him friends, these traits also underscore his "otherness," making it clear that, despite his talents, he will always be somewhat apart from the English establishment. This duality—his pride in his Irish identity and the struggles it brings in English society—defines much of Phineas's journey and the internal and external conflicts he faces.

The ambition and political aspirations of Phineas Finn in England are driven by his desire to rise above his modest Irish origins and make a significant impact within the British political system. As a young man from a small town in Ireland, Phineas is drawn to the prestige and influence that come with being a Member of Parliament in Victorian England. His decision to pursue a career in politics is fuelled by a combination of personal ambition and a genuine belief in his ability to contribute meaningfully to public life.

Once in London, Phineas quickly realizes that the path to political success is fraught with challenges, particularly for an Irish outsider. Nevertheless, his ambition propels him forward, and he uses his natural charm, intelligence, and eloquence to gain the support of key political figures and make a name for himself. Phineas expresses his political ambition,

He almost thought that he could die happy if he had once taken his seat in Parliament, – if he had received one letter with those grand initials written after his name on the address. Young men in battle are called upon to lead forlorn hopes. (47)

The notion that he "could die happy" after attaining such a milestone underscores the profound importance he attaches to this goal. For Phineas, securing a seat in Parliament is not merely a career achievement but a validation of his identity and aspirations. The "grand initials" after his name (likely MP, Member of Parliament) signify not only personal accomplishment but also societal recognition, a mark of prestige in Victorian England. The comparison to young men called upon to "lead forlorn hopes" evokes the imagery of soldiers in desperate, often suicidal, military endeavours. This metaphor connects Phineas's political aspirations to notions of bravery, sacrifice, and perhaps even futility. Just as a young officer might risk everything

for glory or honour, Phineas seems willing to stake his happiness and sense of purpose on achieving this singular goal.

The aspirations are not merely self-serving; he is genuinely interested in issues such as reform and justice, particularly as they relate to Ireland. However, his ambition often forces him to navigate a delicate balance between staying true to his principles and making the necessary compromises to advance his career. As Phineas rises through the ranks of English politics, he encounters the harsh realities of the system, where power and influence are often dictated by social connections and the willingness to conform to the expectations of the English elite. Despite these challenges, Phineas remains committed to his political ambitions, though he increasingly grapples with the personal costs of his pursuit of power, including the tension between his Irish identity and the demands of his political career in England. His journey reflects the broader struggles of those who seek to succeed in a society where they are seen as outsiders, highlighting the complexities of ambition in a world governed by rigid social and cultural hierarchies.

Phineas Finn's social relationships in England are crucial to his efforts to assimilate into the upper echelons of British society, yet they also reveal the complexities and limitations of this assimilation. As an ambitious Irishman in London, Phineas seeks to integrate into the English aristocracy and political elite, where social connections are as important as political acumen. His relationships with key English characters, such as Lady Laura Standish, Violet Effingham, and Madame Max Goesler, are central to his social and political journey.

Lady Laura Standish, in particular, becomes both a friend and a mentor, guiding Phineas through the intricacies of English high society and politics. Their relationship is marked by mutual respect and affection, but it is also complicated by unspoken romantic feelings and the constraints of class and societal expectations. Phineas' romantic pursuit of Violet Effingham further highlights the difficulties of assimilation. At one point in the novel the doubt forms into accusation; it occurs in a late discussion of Phineas between Laura and Violet:

Mr Finn, when I came to measure him in my mind, was not small, but he was never quite tall enough. One feels oneself to be a sort of recruiting sergeant, going about with a standard of inches. Mr Finn was just half an inch too short. He lacks something in individuality. He is a little too much a friend to everybody. (732)

Despite his genuine feelings for her, Violet's ultimate rejection of Phineas underscores the persistent barriers posed by his Irish identity and outsider status. While Phineas can form meaningful connections and gain the support of influential figures, these relationships often come with conditions and expectations that challenge his ability to remain true to his Irish roots. His social relationships require him to navigate a world where he is never fully accepted as an equal, no matter how much he tries to conform to English norms. This tension between his desire to assimilate and the realities of being an outsider shapes Phineas's experience in England, revealing the complexities of social mobility and the personal costs of trying to fit into a society that views him as different. Ultimately, while Phineas achieves a degree of success and acceptance, his social relationships in England are a constant reminder of the limits of assimilation for someone who is seen as an outsider.

Scholars have noted an ambivalence in Trollope's portrayal of Irish characters and issues.

Barbara Hayley, in her analysis, she suggests that while Trollope shows empathy towards the Irish, he remains fundamentally conservative in his views, often aligning with the British status quo. This ambivalence is seen in the way Trollope handles Phineas's political decisions, where his loyalty to Ireland is often compromised by the demands of English political life. Phineas Finn's journey in the British political sphere eventually leads him to a profound sense of political isolation and disillusionment. Initially driven by ambition and a desire to make a meaningful impact, Phineas enters the English Parliament with high hopes and a strong sense of purpose. However, as he becomes more deeply involved in the political machinations of Victorian England, he gradually realizes the limitations and compromises that define the system.

Phineas' political isolation stems from his Irish identity, which continually sets him apart from his English colleagues. Despite his best efforts to assimilate and succeed within the British political establishment, he remains, to many, an outsider. This outsider status becomes increasingly evident as Phineas finds himself sidelined in key political decisions and debates, particularly those concerning Ireland. His attempts to advocate for Irish interests often meet with indifference or hostility from his English peers, highlighting the deep-seated biases and prejudices within the system. He navigates the complexities of English politics, he begins to see the stark contrast between his ideals and the often cynical, self-serving nature of the political world he inhabits. The realization that his influence is limited and that the system is resistant to meaningful change leads to a growing sense of disillusionment. Phineas becomes increasingly aware that his ambitions conflict with his principles, and that the political arena he once aspired to dominate is, in many ways, corrupt and unresponsive to the needs of those it purports to serve. This disillusionment is further compounded by the personal sacrifices Phineas must make in his pursuit of political success. The compromises he is forced to accept, the alliances he must form, and the constant pressure to conform to English norms all erode his sense of self and his belief in the possibility of genuine political reform. Finn's journey in Phineas Finn culminates in an identity crisis that compels him to return to Ireland, reflecting the deep internal conflict he experiences as he navigates the challenges of life in England. Throughout the novel, Phineas grapples with his dual identity as both an Irishman and a participant in the English political system. This tension between his roots and the pressures of assimilation intensifies as he faces increasing alienation and disillusionment in England.

Identity crisis is fuelled by the persistent clash between his Irish heritage and the expectations of English society. Despite of Finn's efforts to succeed and belong within the English political and social elite, he never fully escapes the stigma of being Irish. His struggles with political isolation, the sacrifices of personal integrity, and the sense of never being fully accepted. The constant need to conform to English norms while suppressing aspects of his Irish identity leads to a growing sense of internal fragmentation. This crisis of identity is further exacerbated by the realization that the political system he has devoted himself to is deeply flawed and resistant to the changes he hoped to advocate for, particularly concerning Ireland. Phineas's growing disillusionment with English politics, combined with the pressure to compromise his values, leads him to question the purpose of his ambitions and the true cost of his assimilation. Ultimately, Phineas's decision to return to Ireland represents his need to reconnect with his roots and reclaim a sense of identity that feels authentic and true to himself. This return is both a retreat from the disillusionment of his political career in England and a reassertion of his

Irish identity, which he realizes he cannot fully integrate into the English framework without losing a part of himself. By returning to Ireland, Phineas seeks to reconcile the conflicting aspects of his identity and find a place where he can live more in alignment with his values and heritage. His return symbolizes a resolution of sorts, a retreat from the alienation of English society, and a return to a more grounded and coherent sense of self, rooted in his Irish identity.

2. Conclusion:

The exploration of Phineas Finn's identity in Anthony Trollope's *Phineas Finn* provides valuable insights into the complexities of cultural assimilation, national identity, and the struggles of individuals who navigate worlds divided by power, politics, and prejudice. Through Phineas' journey, Trollope vividly illustrates the challenges faced by an Irishman attempting to succeed in the English political system, highlighting the tensions between personal ambition and cultural loyalty, as well as the costs of assimilation in a society that often marginalizes those it deems outsiders. Phineas Finn's experiences underscore the persistent conflict between his Irish heritage and the demands of English society, revealing the deep internal and external challenges faced by individuals who straddle two cultures. This dual identity creates a sense of alienation and disillusionment, as Phineas grapples with the compromises required to succeed in a system that views his Irishness. The novel also sheds light on the limitations of political ambition in a system resistant to change. Phineas' growing disillusionment with English politics reflects the broader frustrations of those who seek to effect reform within entrenched power structures, especially when their cultural or national identity sets them apart from the majority. Phineas' return to Ireland symbolizes a reassertion of his cultural and national identity, as he rejects the pressures to fully assimilate into a society that requires him to compromise his sense of self. This return highlights the importance of staying true to one's roots and values in the face of external pressures to conform. The study of Phineas Finn's identity struggles in Victorian England offers important lessons for the contemporary world, where issues of cultural identity, assimilation, and the challenges of navigating diverse societies remain highly relevant. In an increasingly globalized world, many individuals and communities face similar tensions between maintaining their cultural heritage and integrating into dominant societal frameworks. Phineas' experiences remind us of the complexities of identity and the personal costs that can come with the pursuit of acceptance and success in a society that may not fully embrace diversity. *Phineas Finn* not only deepens our understanding of Victorian literature and the historical context of Irish-English relations but also offers timeless insights into the struggles for identity.

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