

## The Influence of Family and Faith on Nicholas Sparks's Novels

L. Divya Bharathi<sup>1\*</sup>, Dr. K. Muthuraman<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University)

<sup>2</sup>Professor of English, Annamalai University

### Abstract

Nicholas Sparks is an American novelist, whose novels are inspired by his own life. All his novels insist that people cannot live without love and that people may even die if there is no love in their life. Sparks's own life and his family's faith, past and present, provide the foundation for most of his fictitious creations. As a Catholic, he went on in life to find his true love, a woman by the name of Cathy who also belonged to the same faith. In his memoir, Sparks describes his wife: "Like me, she was Catholic and went to church every Sunday. She was also a middle child, though one of four. Like me, she had an older brother and a younger sister. Her parents, like mine, were poor before attaining middleclass status, had never been divorced, and shared the same anniversary" (191). Nicholas and Cathy Sparks's complementary faith and life experiences ultimately formed a lasting union between them and no doubt their faith and experiences form the pages of every one of Sparks's novels.

**Index Terms:** Love, family, faith, similarity, union, and fiction\*\*\*\*\*

Nicholas Sparks is one of the greatest American authors of the twenty-first century. His novels are about love, romance, passion, drama, tragedy, comedy, triumph, and mystery. His stories are heartwarming and inspiring. He does not have a specific writing style, but the way he unravels his stories is interesting. His own life and his family's faith, past and present, constitute the foundation for his novels. Brought up as a Catholic, he went on in life to find his true love, a woman by the name of Cathy who also belonged to the same faith. In his memoir, Sparks describes his wife: "Like me, she was Catholic and went to church every Sunday. She was also a middle child, though one of four. Like me, she had an older brother and a younger sister. Her parents, like mine, were poor before attaining middleclass status, had never been divorced, and shared the same anniversary" (191). Nicholas and Cathy Sparks's complementary faith and life experiences ultimately formed a lasting union between them; therefore, their faith and experiences form the pages of every one of Sparks's novels. Concerning and Sparks's relationship with his wife, their connection to each other as well as their children seems to be the most complicated. It is this association that acts as the pervasive background for Sparks's literary landscape as a writer. In his memoir, *Three Weeks with My Brother* (2004), Sparks writes at length about the unique dynamic of his family, and how through all the awkwardness, they still thrived. In trying to define the relationship between Sparks's parents, the easiest term to use would be that life together made each of them feel "comfortable." Through all the arguments and their temporary separation across a time zone, they "had a comfortable relationship" (85). While it is not love that would captivate viewers on the silver screen, Sparks describes his parents in his memoir: "While they weren't overtly affectionate most of the time, they weren't needy, possessive, or jealous either. I never heard either of them say something negative about the other, and I seldom heard them argue anymore. They'd put the past behind them more successfully than most, and seemed to be exactly what the other one needed" (85). The love found in the Sparks's household may not exemplify the quintessential definition, but each parent was able to affect the children's lives.

Without devaluing the words of Sparks himself, it is worth questioning whether or not such a romanticized, and similarly reverent perspective would be present in the memoir if his parents were still alive. There is no doubt that Sparks has been shaped by his familial experiences, but one has to wonder, given that Sparks is tremendously influenced by his own life, "Do his novels represent the relationships he experienced within his own upbringing, or are the moments of strong familial influence a product of Nicholas writing about the way life should have been in the Sparks household? While the issue is certainly one worth debating, what is even more important is the content of the debate itself, which centers on family and familial influence.

In *Message in a Bottle*, Garrett Blake is not able to decide whether or not to stay with his new love, or continue to live in the world of his dead love. The battle Garrett has between his present and his past is ultimately mediated by his father, who also has had similar experience of lost love. The similar experiences of father and son makes it possible for a comfortable dialogue between them, but more importantly, the conversations between the father and the son evolve from Sparks's personal life. Garrett's father tries to make him understand that he is spoiling his life by thinking of his lost love with whom he can no longer live. Jeb Blake argues with his son about his son's rejection of his new love. When Garrett explains his reasoning, the father responds: Yeah, you've explained your reasons, but you haven't been honest about it. Not with me, not with Theresa, not even with yourself. She may not have told you about the letters, and granted, maybe she should have. But that's not why you're still angry now. You're angry because she made you realize something that you didn't want to admit (*Message in a Bottle* P. 298). What Garrett does not want to admit is that he has not forgotten

the loss that he felt for his deceased wife, Catherine. This is but one instance in Sparks's novels that represents the relationship he had with his mother throughout his life.

Characters in all of Sparks's novels seek the advice of their family whenever they are not able to take a decision. Sparks's writing career began with an offhand remark from his mother who just wanted Nick to leave her alone for a little while and asked him to "Write a book," and the rest is history known: "Your problem is that you're bored. You need to find something to do..." Then she looked at me and said the words that would eventually change my life: "Write a book." Until that moment, I had never considered writing. Granted, I read all the time, but actually sitting down and coming up with a story on my own? ...I was nineteen years old and had become an accidental author. Even a casual comment in jest by the mother was accepted by her son as a worthy suggestion, and such incidents abound the pages of every one of Sparks's novels as characters search to find their path in love and in life.

After graduating from college and marrying Catherine, pharmaceutical representative job provided his life with temporary stability. Then in 1989 his mother died tragically. The loss of his 47 year old mother sent his family into tough times, and her husband, Sparks's father became a recluse, and both of Sparks's siblings struggled for mental and emotional strength. A few years later Nicholas Sparks got his big break with his first major novel, *The Notebook*, bought by Warner Books for a million dollars. Then he received the startling news that his father had died tragically in a car accident. In consequence the Sparks children were left all alone without any parents to look after them. After giving birth to beautiful twins after years of battling seizures, Sparks's sister Dana lost her battle to brain tumors and left her two brothers as the remaining members of the Sparks lineage. At probably one of the worst times of his life, author.

At the funeral of his sister, Sparks said, "I told the congregation to remember my sister with a smile, like I did, for even though she was buried near my parents, the best parts of her would always stay alive, deep within our hearts" (326-7). In a Sparks novel loss affects a person's emotion only temporarily in a negative manner. Evidently this too has been one of the influences from Sparks's own life as evident from his words about his sister's death. While the physical body is no more, the great influence of a particular person along with his or her ideals is timeless and will affect others for as long as they live. The death of his wife sent Patrick Sparks into hellish darkness which just tells us that life can never be the same throughout one's life.

Nicholas admits that his father was able to find love again before his death, but for a long time no one in his extended family could seem to soften up the hardened widower. The characteristics of his father during this time of conflict find an expression in many of the novels.

*A Bend in the Road*, *Message in a Bottle*, *The Guardian*, and *Nights in Rodanthe* (2002) deal with the topic of lost love and the process of overcoming the depression surrounding these difficult times that are full of unanswerable questions. Garrett Blake's situation in *Message in a Bottle* certainly seems to represent the condition Nicholas's father faced after losing his wife. Even though they may not have shared the same type of relationship as the fictitious Garrett and Catherine Blake, the love shared between Patrick and Jill affects the lives of those around them. The loss of those people in Sparks's life rivals the losses of the characters within his novels.

Though Sparks's characters represent certain people within his own life, many of his characters are created as a reaction to the voids felt within his own experience. This is merely hypothetical, but relevant in trying to understand the thought process of Sparks: He has create characters who are inspired by his own life. In *A Bend in the Road*, Miles Ryan makes it his life's purpose to understand what exactly happened during the tragic hit and run accident that killed his wife. A happy marriage with the addition of a beautiful son quickly changed into a painful life of single parenting. As the story comes to its climax, Miles learns that the death of his wife happened accidentally at the hands of his new love interest's brother. Once again Knowing the truth, Miles is full of grief.

As his father aged, his emotional outbursts lessened and his compassion for his family made him much less of a recluse. One of the best examples of change in the Sparks canon comes in the form of Landon Carter in *A Walk to Remember*. Landon's unruly behavior forces the Principal of his school to impose community service and his immediate placement as a lead in the school play. While the latter may not seem like much of a punishment, for an unruly cool kid who most closely resembles James Dean, life as a thespian is not one he would choose. Through his experience he winds up falling in love with Jamie Sullivan and ultimately decides to marry her even though he knows she has been diagnosed with leukemia. With all the distress that surrounds a debilitating disease such as leukemia, Landon is always positive and motivates his love and her family. Her father, a minister, initially sees Landon as incorrigible due to his belligerent actions. Jamie believes in the good that lies deep within Landon and it is this belief that is ultimately reciprocated by Landon after Jamie dies. Although their initial perceptions of one another were strained through the tragic loss of a woman they both loved, the two become intimately close and are the best of friends towards the end of the novel. In the same way, the loss of their sister Dana to brain tumor only brought the Sparks brothers closer together, the same is true for the relationship between Jamie's father and her husband Landon.

*The Rescue* is Sparks's romance novel. Set in Edenton, North Carolina, it follows single mother Denise Holton and her four-year-old son, Kyle, who has a speech development delay. While driving along a highway, Holton gets into a car accident; when she regains consciousness, Kyle is missing from the car. With the help of volunteer firefighter Taylor Mc

Aden, Holton recovers Kyle and then falls in love. Taylor reveals his own troubled past, trying to maintain their relationship while recovering from repressed trauma he sustained from the death of her father.

The novel begins just before an intense storm falls over Edenton. Holton and her son leave a doctor's appointment and try to drive home before being stranded. They don't make it home in time to avoid the rain, and the minimal visibility prevents her from seeing an oncoming semi-truck. The two vehicles collide at an angle, sending Holton and Jack flying in their vehicle off the highway, where they collide with a tree. Holton comes to her senses and realizes that she is injured and bloody. Suddenly, she panics, looking around the wrecked car for Kyle. His seat is empty, and he isn't visible anywhere outside the wreckage. She calls for help. Taylor McAden, drives down the same road several minutes after the crash, takes Holton to the emergency room, where his mother, Judy, gives her company. He goes back to the scene to help the police search for Jack. Judy commiserates with Holton, being a single mother herself. Miraculously, Taylor returns with Jack, who returns unscathed.

In course of time, Taylor and Holton become closer. Holton believes she falls for him, but Taylor is resistant to falling in love. Ever since the death of his father, he has not been able to imagine dating anyone. After an argument, the two are separated. Quickly regretting the split, Taylor turns hostile. He gets into a bar fight with his best friend, Mitch.

When Taylor gets home, he comes to know that the fire department has called to request his help fighting a large fire that broke out at a paint warehouse. He rushes to the scene to help the man who has recklessly run into the fire, without a gas mask. To his shock, the person is Mitch. He and Mitch apologize for their treatment of each other, and Taylor reconciles his differences with Holton.

At the end of the novel, Holton and Taylor get married. They give birth to a son named Mitch McAden, in honor of Taylor's best friend. The novel emphasizes the possibility of finding love in the wake of trauma and loss, suggesting that love can arrive in one's life spontaneously if one is open to receiving it.

The analysis of some of the novels of Nicholas Sparks reveals the undeniable truth that his works of art are profoundly influenced by his family and faith, which to an extent contributes to his success as a fiction writer.

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