Family Values in The Pinhoe Egg

An apparent requirement in children’s literature is for the child protagonist(s) to be separated from their family in some way in order that they might come into their own without encumbrances. Usually, this is achieved through the author killing off either one or both of the protagonist’s parents, or making them absent in some other fashion. However, in The Pinhoe Egg, not only are Marianne’s parents present, but her entire extended family is as well, forming a tight-knit family unit where everyone knows what everyone else is up to. Thus, the separation comes in the form of “disappointment” expressed by the entire family. However, in the end, this “disappointment” only serves to highlight the failures of the family and their closed-mindedness.

We are introduced to the first of these disappointments, Joe, at the very beginning of the book, except at the same time we learn that it is because “Joe worked [hard] at being disappointing… Joe’s heart was in machines. He had no patience with the traditional sort of witchcraft or the way magic was done by the Pinhoes…. As far as that kind of magic went, Joe wanted to be a failure. They left him in peace then” (316). This is the first hint we get that being a “disappointment” in the Pinhoe family isn’t necessarily a bad thing to those who bear the label. Next is Marianne’s Uncle Charles, “And Uncle Charles had a humorous twitch to his thin face, quite unlike the rest. He was held to be ‘a disappointment,’ just like Joe. Knowing Joe, Marianne suspected that Uncle Charles had worked at being disappointing, just as hard as Joe did” (328). Meanwhile, at the beginning of the novel, Marianne is far from being disappointing, as she is in line to be the next Gammer, and she works hard to please her family. However, in the end, she works just as hard as her brother and uncle to be a disappointment, but unknowingly: all she tries to do is tell the truth in spite of her family’s negative reaction to it. Her own father exclaims, “Look what you brought us to, Marianne! This is all your fault for thinking you know better than the rest of us. The good old ways are not good enough for you” (652). Finally, the crux of the disappointment is revealed.

The Pinhoes are steeped in tradition, as Chrestomanci explains at the end. They have no real reason for their beliefs or traditions, except for the fact that they are based in the past. When these traditions are challenged in some way, however apparently small, as with Joe and Uncle Charles, they express disappointment. However, when someone threatens the entire belief system, drastic measures are taken. Gaffer Pinhoe had to be
dealt with because he started going against the grain: "That did it, see. Gaffer said it like a prophecy, and Gammer couldn’t have that. Gammer’s the only one that’s allowed to prophesy, we all know that. So she told her brothers Gaffer was quite out of hand and ordered them to kill him" (638). The fact that Gammer is willing to kill her own husband because he infringed on her traditional role, as well as the fact that the other men in the family went along with it (for the most part) shows the dangers of such deep-seated beliefs, leading to such effects as the Briggs and Briggs article describes.

Additional challenges to Western mores spring from the novel’s representations of family and the individual’s relationship with it. Since Marianne, and perhaps even Cat’s, situations—i.e. having a present, if not always fully supportive, family around—are most likely more recognizable to the average reader of Jones’s books, there seems to be a definite message that it is ok to be a “disappointment,” breaking with tradition isn’t always bad, questions are good, and, most importantly, believe in yourself, trust yourself, as Cat tells Marianne. Yet there also seems to be an undertone that perhaps undermines traditional family values, in that Western society has high regard for a complete family unit, believing that is the key to happiness. Indeed, even other outcasts or disappointments in other children’s books still hold family in high regard, despite, or perhaps because, of the distinct lack of one. The Harry Potter series, despite the Dursleys, keeps the family unit as the ultimate prize in life, as shown most strongly in the series’ epilogue. The Pevensies, the Murrys, and even the sisters in “Goblin Market,” also uphold the key idea of the family unit as paramount. In The Pinhoe Egg, though, personal integrity is considered the most important thing for the individual. Yes, family is important, but so is questioning the assumptions that come with being born into a world, reinforcing the discussion in the Briggs article. This is almost certainly a reflection of the more modern context of the writing of the novel, with the advancements in feminism and encouragements of individualism rampant in the Western world today.