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Atonement, Sense and Sensibility, Regeneration
British National Corpus
Miller and Marxism
Gender Identity and Language
Hamlet
Child Language Acquisition

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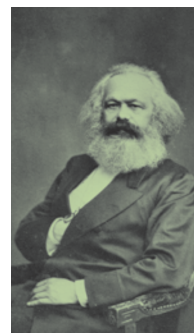

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Correction

Our apologies to Mukahang Limbu whose name was spelled incorrectly in *emagazine* 78. This has been corrected in the PDF edition available online.

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- Rose Page explores silence and trauma in *The Handmaid's Tale.*
- Fran Hill discusses the issues (and emotions) around initial 'so'.
- Andrew Green analyses a passage from *The Great Gatsby*.
- Gillian Thompson's transcript to accompany the article 'Leonie Speaking – One Year On'.

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- New in emagClips: Leonie Speaking – One Year On

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Close Reading Competition 2018

The *emagazine* Close Reading Competition is now a well-established fixture in the year. We pride ourselves on selecting very different passages each year for you to respond to (from Edith Wharton, John le Carré and Charles Dickens to Lisa McInerney) and this year is no exception. We've chosen an extract from Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*. Winner of the Betty Trask Award 2002 and the Somerset Maugham Award 2003, it's a novel described by the *New York Times* as 'sweeping [and] audaciously playful…' and by the *Literary Review* as 'marvellous, original and intelligent'.

We're confident it's a passage you'll enjoy reading and writing about.

This year the competition will be judged by the *emag* editors and Professor John Mullan, University College London and author of *How Novels Work*.

Entering the competition

- Write a 500-word close reading of the passage from *The Impressionist*.
- Download the official entry form from the *emagazine* page of the English and Media Centre website: https://www.englishandmedia.co.uk/e-magazine/
- Fill in your details and paste your entry into the space provided.
- Email your entry to web@englishandmedia.co.uk, using *emagazine* Close Reading Competition 2018 as the subject line.

Timeline

- Close of competition: 5pm Thursday 29th March 2018. (**Please note: we will NOT accept entries received after 5pm Thursday 29th March, so don't leave it to the last minute!**).
- Results announced online and by email: 8th May 2018.
- Results and winning entry published in *emagazine*: September 2018.

The Impressionist – Hari Kunzru

This extract is taken from part way into the first chapter of the novel. Published in 2002, *The Impressionist* is an historical novel set in India at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Fire and water. Earth and air. Meditate on these oppositions and reconcile them. Collapse them in on themselves, send them spiralling down a tunnel of blackness to re-emerge whole, one with the all, mere aspects of the great unity of things whose name is God. Thought can travel on in this manner, from part to whole, smooth as the touch of the masseur's oiled hands in the hammam. Amrita wishes she could carry on thinking for ever. That would be true sweetness! But she is only a woman, and for ever will not be granted her. In the absence of infinity, she will settle for spinning out what time she has, teasing it into a fine thread.

Inside the palanquin it is hot and close, the smells of food and stale sweat and rosewater mingling with another smell, sharp and bitter. Once again Amrita's hand reaches out for the little sandalwood box of pills. She watches the hand as she would a snake sliding across a flagstone floor, with detachment and an edge of revulsion. Yes, it is her hand, but only for now, only for a while. Amrita knows that she is not her body. This crab-like object, fiddling with box and key and pellets of sticky black resin, belongs to her only as does a shawl or a piece of jewellery.

A bump. They have stopped. Outside there are voices. Amrita rejoices. At

nineteen years old, this is will be her last journey, and any delay is cause for celebration. She swallows another opium pellet, tasting the bitter resin on her tongue.

*

As it does every year, the wind has blown steadily out of the south-west, rolling its cargo of doughy air across the plain to slap hard against the mountains. For days, weeks, the air has funnelled upwards, cooling as it rises, spinning vast towers of condensation over the peaks. Now these hanging gardens of cloud have ripened to the point where they can no longer maintain themselves.

So, the rain.

It falls first over the mountains, an unimaginable shock of water. Caught in the open, herdsmen and woodcutters pull their shawls over their heads and run for shelter. Then in a chain reaction, cloud speaking to cloud, the rain rolls over the foothills, dousing fires, battering on roofs, bringing smiles to the faces of the people who run outside to greet it, the water for which they have been waiting so long.

Finally it comes to the desert. As it starts to fall, Forrester listens to the grubby Brahmin's chit-chat, and hears himself tetchily agreeing that now would be a good time and here a good place to camp. Perhaps this Moti Lal is offended by his brusqueness, but Forrester can't worry about that. His eyes are fixed on the palanquin, the grumpy maid fussing around its embroidered curtain. Its occupant has not even ventured a peek outside. He wonders if she is ill, or very old.

Soon the rain is falling steadily, swollen droplets splashing into the dust like little bombs. Camels fidget and grumble as they are hobbled. Servants run around unpacking bags. Moti Lal keeps up a steady stream of conversation as Forrester dismounts and unsaddles his horse. Moti Lal is not the master here, oh no, just a trusted family retainer. It has fallen to him, the duty of escorting the young mistress to her uncle's house in Agra. Most unusual, of course, but there are extenuating circumstances.

Extenuating circumstances? What is the bloody fool on about? Forrester asks where they have come from, and the man names a small town at least two hundred miles west of where they stand.

'And have you walked all the way?'

'Yes, sir. The young mistress says walk only.'

'Why on earth didn't you go by rail? Agra is hundreds of miles from here.'

'Unfortunately train is out of the question. Such are extenuating circumstances, you see.'

Forrester does not see, but at the moment he is far more concerned with erecting his tent before the rain worsens. It seems to be getting stronger by the second. Moti Lal puts up his umbrella and stands over the Englishman as he bashes in pegs, just close enough to get in his way without actually offering any shelter. Forrester curses under his breath, while all the time the thought circulates in his head: so she is a young woman.

Rain drips through the ceiling and lands in her lap, darkening red silk with circles of black. Amrita turns her face upwards and sticks out her tongue. The rain sounds heavy. Outside it is dark, and perhaps, though she is not sure, she feels cold. To ward off the feeling she imagines heat, calling up memories of walking on the roof of her father's haveli in summertime. Vividly she senses the burning air on her arms and face. She hears the thud of carpets being beaten and the swish of brooms as the maids sweep sand from the floors. But heat leads on to thoughts of her father, of walking round the pyre as the priest throws on ghee to make it flame, and she recoils back to the dark and cold. Drops of water land on her forehead, on one cheek, on her tongue. Soon the rain is pouring through in a constant stream. The soaked curtains start to flap limply against her side. The wind is rising, and still no one has come for her. No one has even told her what is happening. With no mother or father she is mistress now. If only she could gather the energy to assert herself.

Amrita unlocks her box, shielding it from the water. She is to be delivered to her uncle, and that will be an end. He writes that he has already found her a husband. At least, said the old women, she will arrive with a good dowry. So much better off than other girls. She should thank God.

Within half an hour the dust has turned to mud. Despite his tent, Forrester is drenched. He clambers to the top of a hill and looks out over the desert, scored by a fingerprint whorl of valleys and ridges. There is no shelter. As the wind tugs at his topi and forked lightning divides the sky into fleeting segments, he is struck by the thought that perhaps he has been a fool. His red-brown world has turned grey, solid curtains of water obscuring the horizon. Here he is, out in the middle of it, not a tree in sight. He is the tallest thing in this barren landscape, and he feels exposed. Looking back down at his tent, set at the bottom of a deep gully, he wonders how long the storm will last. The Indians are still struggling to put up their own shelters, fumbling with rope and pegs. Amazingly the palanquin is still where they discarded it. If he had not been told otherwise, he would have sworn the thing must be empty.

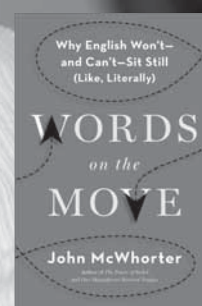
Before long, a trickle of muddy water is flowing through the gully, separating Forrester's army tent from the Indians' contraptions of tarpaulin and bamboo. A fire is out of the question, and so the bearers are huddled together forlornly, squatting on their haunches like a gaggle of bidi-smoking birds. Moti Lal climbs the ridge to engage Forrester in another pointless conversation, then follows him back down the hill and crouches at the door of the tent. Finally Forrester is forced to give in and talk.

'So who exactly is your mistress?'

Moti Lal's face darkens.

THE IMPRESSIONIST by Hari Kunzru (Penguin Books, 2003). Copyright (c) Hari Kunzru, 2002, with permission.

An interview with *emag*



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Linguist John McWhorter speaks

John McWhorter is Professor of Linguistics at Columbia University and has written several books on language and dialect and language change. He also reaches out to non-specialist audiences, his TED talk on texting having been viewed by over two million people! Here he responds to questions put to him by *emagazine's* editors.

1 In *Words on the Move*, you describe how word meanings change as a 'step-by-step inching'. Is there a risk that language is changing more quickly than that, and leaving some people confused and uncertain?

Never. It's easy to suppose that such a thing might happen, but no such case has ever been recorded – i.e. of a group of humans encountered whose language has for some reason escaped their comprehension and fallen to pieces. Language change, whatever its rate, is communal, not individual – we talk to each other, and thus it's only things that afford communication that make it into the flow.

2 Is a dialect different from a language? Why does it seem to matter so much? Is that a linguistic issue or a societal/attitudinal one?

The term is essentially meaningless. A linguist 'wants' it to mean that languages are mutually unintelligible while dialects are mutually intelligible varieties of a single language. But actual speech doesn't work that way – Mandarin and Cantonese are called 'dialects' when they are as different as Spanish and Italian, because of the unity of Chinese culture and writing. Norwegian and Swedish are called 'languages' because they are spoken in separate nations despite the fact that their speakers can converse. Then laymen 'want' dialect to mean 'a degraded version of the real language'. But the only reason one variety is enshrined as standard is historical accident – i.e. the English of the London area became 'standard English' because things were run from London.

3 Black English, Ebonics, AAVE – does the naming matter? If it's a language, not a dialect, why is that? Do you think it's important to treat it as a language?

I actually do not think of AAVE as a 'language'. It is a variety of American English, and therefore what anyone would call a dialect of it. The point is that non-standard dialects are as coherent and nuanced as standard ones. It's good to *name*

a dialect, to counter the idea that it's a degraded version of the standard. But that doesn't mean that it is a separate 'language'. In my opinion, to claim that only fosters public scepticism, as we all have a horse sense of how different 'languages' are from one another.

4 You're quoted as being an opponent of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. Is this so? If so, why?

Because the hypothesis as popularly presented implies that to speak a language is to have one's thoughts channelled into distinct patterns, which the evidence simply doesn't support. Experiments show that a language's grammar makes a person infinitesimally more sensitive, under artificial conditions, to certain fine distinctions such as shades of blue or types of material. However, to allow this to foster the idea that every language marks a different thought pattern leads to uncomfortable conclusions you'd have to take along with the 'cooler' ones. For example, Chinese is much more telegraphic than European languages – a lot is left to context. Does that mean that to speak Mandarin is to be less attuned to life – i.e. less intelligent? Of course not – but to understand that requires being very careful about the usual arguments made about what languages make you *more* sensitive to.

5 Is standard English more about imposing an arbitrary set of rules on language users than it is about mutual intelligibility?

Yes. It is certainly *handy* for allowing communication among people who might have trouble understanding one another otherwise, although that problem would be much more acute in your part of the world than here in America. However, the reason the standard emerged was a sense that because it was on the page, and was the variety outlined and described by scholarly people, that it was somehow the 'real' English. After a few generations it was all but impossible to imagine a time when no one thought of any one kind of English as the 'real kind' in that way.

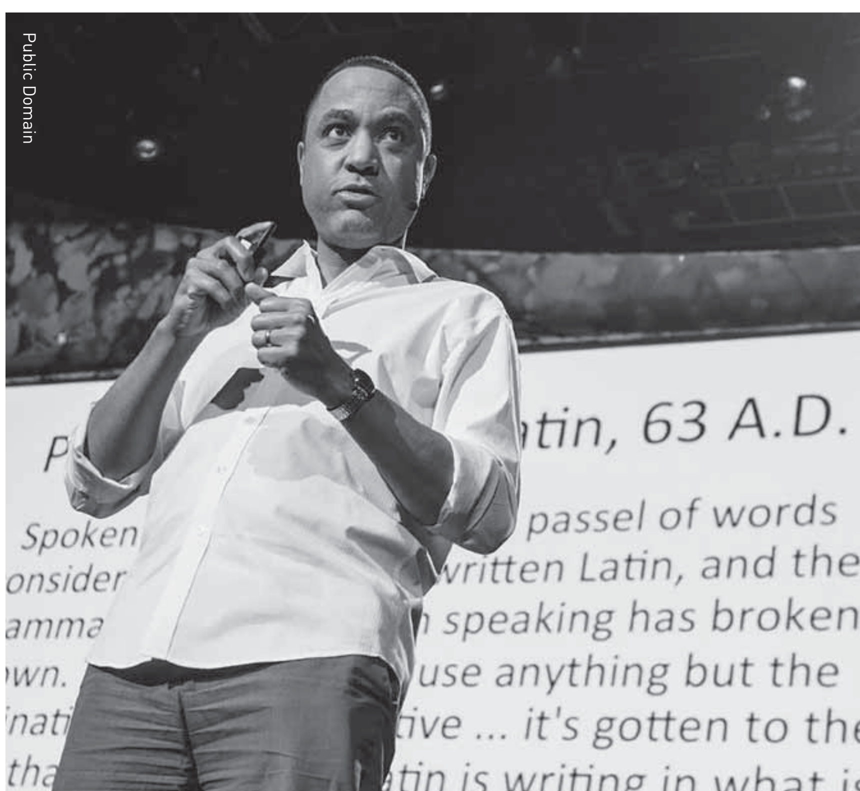
6 Is there a political element to your work as a linguist? Is linguistics a scientific, neutral discipline, or is there room for bringing to bear one's own political and social beliefs?

Linguistics is, in many of its facets, highly sociopolitical. One mission of linguistics, which I applaud, is helping the public to understand that it doesn't make scientific sense to suppose that most people speak their native language 'badly.' As an outgrowth of that, I would venture that the subfield of sociolinguistics tilts significantly towards exploring the speech of the disempowered – there is only so much explicit interest in how affluent, straight white men talk! My own work as a linguist is sociopolitical where I write on Black English for the general public; that, however, is not what I usually work on in the academic sense. Most of my academic linguistic work is just geeky exploration of issues relating to how language changes and how languages come together in the structural sense, with the social part marginal. I adapt as I need to.

7 Which linguists have influenced you most and why?

The first one was Mario Pei, who wrote popular books on language in the late 20th century. I read many of them and wanted to be him; I still explicitly think of his work when I write my own. Then Derek Bickerton's work on creoles lit my mind up. He and I had many disagreements back in the day and many of his basic ideas on creoles have been revised heavily since the 80s, but his work revealed creole languages as interesting in a way that I am now battling other creolists in defending.

John McWhorter is Professor of Linguistics at Colombia University.



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- Susie Dent: Tribes of English, *emagazine* 76, April 2017

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- Kevin Watson on Language – Sociophonetics

Saoirse Ronan as Briony Tallis - Age 13 in Atonement. Entertainment Pictures / Alamy Stock Photo

Briony, Morality and Textuality

ATONEMENT

Fergus Parnaby asks questions about the moral compass of Ian McEwan's novel and shows how issues of morality are explored not just in the lives portrayed but also in the act of writing fiction.

Ian McEwan's 2001 novel *Atonement* is a complex and problematic text that explores morality from several angles. At the heart of the story is the wrong committed by its protagonist, Briony, whose false accusation against Robbie Turner, her sister's lover, results in his imprisonment and her sister's estrangement from their family. The text goes further than a morality tale, however, in interrogating its own reality, and raising the question as to what fiction is, and to what extent it can reveal the 'truth'.

Setting Up a Moral Boiling Pot

The novel opens with a day in the Tallis house, somewhere in the Home Counties, before World War Two. Briony is a girl of 13 with a powerful imagination and a propensity for wild fantasies; she is possessed by a 'controlling demon', as we are warned on page 5, which subjects everything and everyone around her to her wish to be in charge, to create a stage and control the characters for her own personal drama; she has even written a play at the beginning, more or less compelling her young cousins to take part while she directs, the first clue to the blurring between reality and fiction that occurs in the novel (the play's title, 'The Trials of Arabella', is a reference to *The Female Quixote*, a take on the famous Cervantes story).

The Tallis house is itself a boiling pot of conflicting emotions: Robbie and Cecilia's awkward and suddenly disclosed love for one another, signposted by references to novelists Richardson and Fielding, and feckless brother Leon's sinister friend Paul Marshall, whose assault of cousin Lola precipitates Briony's accusation against Robbie and seals his fate later in the novel. As for the parents, Jack Tallis is ensconced in London, busy with work and possibly having an affair, leaving his wife Emily nominally in charge; she is incapable of looking after the household effectively, spending most of her time in bed. Meanwhile, Briony, like any child left to her own devices, shows a preternaturally strong awareness of the inherent romance of the surrounding world, and an innocence threatened only when she opens Robbie's graphic love-letter to Briony's elder sister, Cecilia.

Briony, of course, sees herself as the heroine, as well as the author, of her drama, her story. This is what her 'controlling demon' really means: that she is driven to transfer what she sees into a romance, or thriller, based on the books she has consumed. (McEwan gives tell-tale clues, name-checking several novels and literary works throughout Part One whose themes echo the story, as above.)

Romola Garai as Briony Tallis in Atonement (2007). AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Detective or Victim?

In Briony's mind, McEwan shows us, she is not merely a nosy child but a *detective*, piecing together clues from Robbie's behaviour, his letter to her elder sister, the moment she sees him seemingly attacking Cecilia in the library, the bruise on Lola's arm. The novel presents these events from different perspectives, showing the ease with which they could be misconstrued. Indeed, so sure is Briony of Robbie's guilt that when she confronts Lola she seems to force the words out of her:

'It was Robbie, wasn't it?'

Although Briony is a child, she is growing into adulthood; yet at no point does she think to check her facts – the 'demon' has her in its thrall throughout. Briony's testimony ultimately seals Robbie's fate, and although we are told she has the chance to withdraw or change her version of events on several occasions, she feels helpless, a slave to their momentum. Her youth and her vividness of imagination make her as much a victim of the chain of events as Robbie. Nonetheless, she becomes increasingly aware that she has done wrong, and it is this that, more than anything, signals the transition into adult awareness that poses the novel's key dilemma.

An Author's Invention of Truth

Briony's compulsion for invention – her desire to be the author not just of her own destiny but also that of the 'characters' in her story – then, results in the jailing of Robbie and the rupturing of his and Cecilia's relationship. Part Two shows us how, after Robbie is let out of jail on condition that he join the army, he is involved in the headlong retreat from Dunkirk. Here McEwan ratchets up his playing with ideas of truth, highlighting again the author as puppetmaster. Presented to the reader as 'truth' within the world of the novel, this story too is later revealed to be a reconstruction by Briony. She appropriates Robbie's 'story' and creates her own version of events, even recreating a wartime rendez-vous between Robbie and Cecilia. All of this section carries the trademarks of melodrama and romance – the wartime hero, fighting his way back to his love at home – and is evidence of McEwan's meta-textual fixation.

Guilt and Atonement – Life and Fiction

Why do this? One answer is that McEwan is showing Briony as having learnt her lesson and being remorseful for the suffering she has caused Robbie and Cecilia. In this section, Briony presents us with a different aspect of wartime, documenting her experiences as a volunteer nurse who has taken up the call as an attempt to 'atone' for her crime; although she admits to herself that

whatever skivvying or humble nursing she did [...] she would never undo the damage. She was unforgivable.

By slaving away on the ward looking after sick soldiers that put her in mind of Robbie, she tries to remove the stain of guilt from herself. By visiting Robbie and Cecilia she becomes a penitent, begging forgiveness, offering to do whatever is necessary to set the record straight. She apologises to the couple again as she leaves them at Balham Tube Station, noting her response as 'foolish and inadequate'. It might be a true moment of atonement, although on the next page we see that this is just a manuscript, signed by her own hand, dated 1999, the final draft for her novel. Though this removes the sense of 'objective' fact from the narrative, perhaps it is evidence of something deeper, the ever-present will to put things right. For the reader, it provokes a troubling question about fiction: by presenting Briony as attempting to atone for her crime (and its consequences) through her imaginative reconstructions, what is McEwan saying about literature?

Writing as an Act of Redemption

Can Briony find forgiveness for her wrongdoing? In order for someone to qualify for forgiveness, society requires that they first face up to their misdeeds; they cannot do so if they are still lying to themselves (and to others, if the novel is

taken as that). Does Briony really face up to the wrong she has done through writing her text, or is she still trapped by her own fictions, unable to escape them and reach redemption? The answer rests upon whether her story itself can be considered an act of atonement. She gives some clues as to how she sees things:

> There was our crime: Lola's, Marshall's, mine […]

> There was the crime, but there were also the lovers […]

It is interesting that she implicates herself in the 'crime', and that through playing the detective, she has become the criminal. Nonetheless:

> As long as there is a single copy […] of my final draft, then my spontaneous, fortuitous sister and her medical prince survive to love.

For Briony, the act of writing the novel is still capable of redeeming her and the whole situation, and McEwan shows us that the narrator of a story can use it to wrest back control of the narrative itself: it becomes a vehicle for the exploration of her conscience.

But even she feels uncertain of this:

> The problem these fifty nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?

The Reader as Judge of Briony (and Fiction's) Truth

Ultimately, the reader is invited to judge, the postscript leaving the door open. Perhaps the character Briony meant it to be this way, opening herself up for judgement to a third party, allowing her readers to decide on whether to forgive or condemn her. There is a certain honesty in her revealing her uncertainty at the end, as narrator (and even in portraying herself as stubborn and fallible in her convictions as a character in the novel). McEwan himself suggests one answer:

> She cannot undo what she has done. But she can, however, live the 'examined life'. Over her lifetime she has written many versions of the story that won't let her go […] The reader has possession only of the final version, the one that deliberately invents and distorts in order to re-unite the lovers that she once, as a foolish little girl, irrevocably forced apart.

It is in living the 'examined life' that Briony simultaneously crosses the line from immoral to moral, guilty to innocent, and from character to author. *Atonement* thus uses its self-reflexive nature to show that fiction can not only re-create, but re-write history, and perhaps even redeem what has gone before.

Fergus Parnaby is a teacher of English at Stowe School.

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- Neil King: *Atonement* – Questioning the Imagination, *emagazine* 31, February 2006
- Robert Kidd: *Atonement*, *emagazine* 38, December 2007
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- Dr Natasha Alden: *Atonement* and Postmemory, *emagazine* 66, December 2014
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- Professor John Mullan: Coming to the End, *emagazine* 54, December 2011

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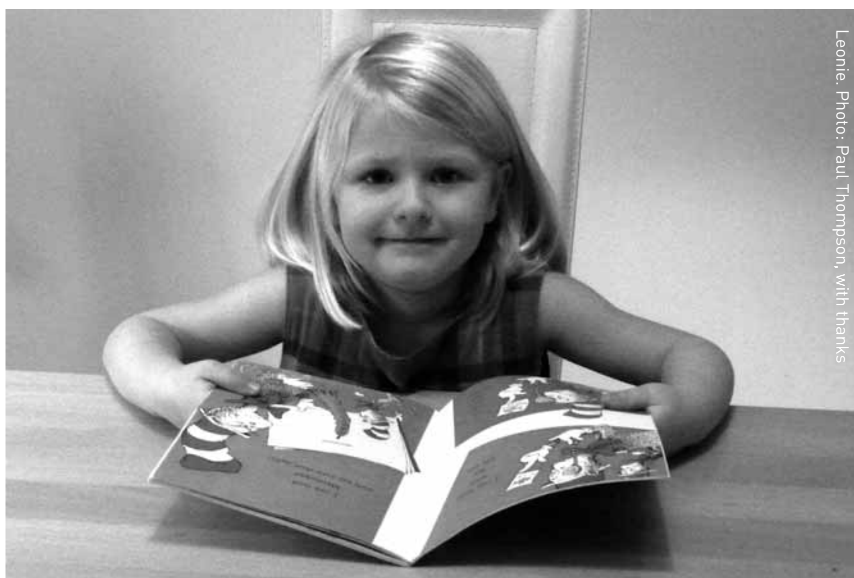
- Professor John Mullan on Key Aspects of Narrative

Vanessa Redgrave as Briony Tallis in Atonement (2007). AF archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Leonie Speaking

In 2016, teacher Gillian Thompson wrote about conversations with her granddaughter Leonie. We published her article, with a transcript and video recording on the *emagazine* website. Now, just over one year on, Gill has followed this up to see what has changed in Leonie's speech, relating it to theories of CLA. As before, you can read the article here, and see the transcript and video on the website.


Leonie. Photo: Paul Thompson, with thanks

Leonie is now three years and eight months old. A lot has happened in the last year. She currently attends pre-school four mornings a week and so her social circle has widened. Her speech will be influenced by her peers and teachers as well as by her family. She has also acquired a little sister, Corinne, born at the beginning of May 2017.

Language researchers refer to investigations over time as **longitudinal studies**. Their advantage is that you can monitor language change in real time – as in my analysis of the changes in Leonie's speech over the last year. The problem with this, though, is that it can take a very long time. If you want to gain a quick impression of change, you need to conduct an **apparent time study**. In terms of children's language acquisition, for example, you could analyse the speech of a 2 year old, a 3 year old and a 4 year old and so gain a quicker impression of the changes that occur over that period, even though it is with a different child. Luckily, as she is my granddaughter, I have regular access to Leonie so I can monitor her speech changes as they happen.

This recording threw up a problem that wasn't there a year ago: at nearly 3¾, Leonie is much more aware of technology. When she was first filmed, she showed little or no concern that there was a cameraman in the room. As he didn't interact with her, she ignored him. This time, however, she looks at him curiously from time to time and speaks in a shy voice, not the confident tone she normally uses. William Labov, the American socio-linguist, referred to this as **observer's paradox**. He pointed out that we need to gather authentic data in order for our research to be fully representative, but can only do so through observation. Being observed makes us self-conscious and less inclined to speak naturally, hence the paradox. An added complication was that I was setting the agenda for the conversation as I wanted to focus on particular experiments which demonstrated how Leonie's speech had changed. She only really relaxes at line 199, when she is eating chocolate, and exclaims spontaneously, 'they're a bit crunchy!' and line 243 when she is recalling an event ('I did go in my jamas'). Nevertheless, I do gain some interesting insights into Leonie's linguistic development.

The 'Wug Test'

Psychologist Jean Berko devised this test back in 1958, to test children's capacity to apply grammar rules. She drew a fictitious creature called a 'wug' and showed it to a child. Then she drew another one and asked the child to describe the pair. Children, who had never heard adults say 'wug' (as they don't exist!), were able to apply the plural rule 'wugs', thus suggesting that they have an implicit knowledge of the way words are formed. Although Leonie failed to do this a year ago, labelling my attempt to draw a 'wug' variously as a 'duck,' a 'birdee' and 'Pingu' (see *emag* 74), this year she happily forms the plural (see line 149 of transcript). She also does this with some of Berko's other drawings of fictitious creatures – the 'kazh' (line 153) and the 'lun' (line 182). These examples show that over the last year Leonie has gained a knowledge of how the plural is formed and can apply it to different nouns, even made-up ones.

She can also do this with verbs. When shown a man who is said to be 'ricking' (line 154), and asked what he did 'yesterday', Leonie replies 'he did rick' (line 159). She does a similar thing on line 187 when she declares that a man who is 'spowing' today, 'did spow' yesterday. Leonie does something quite interesting with the past tense and this is consistent throughout the transcript (when asked what she did at her friend's house she says, line 243, 'I did go in my jamas'). Rather than add an inflection to the verb stem (ie 'spow**ed**' for 'spow' and 'rick**ed**' for 'rick'), she uses an auxiliary verb instead ('**did** rick', '**did** spow'). This is quite a clever way round a tricky situation! We have many irregular verbs (such as 'go', 'come', 'is',

'has') in English and it takes a long time to learn them. Leonie has worked out that all she needs to do to form the past tense is to use the main stem of the verb ('go', 'rick', 'spow') but add the past form of the verb 'to do' ('did') as an auxiliary. That way she doesn't have to change a thing! Another explanation is that I quite often frame the question using 'did' (as in 'What did you do at Sienna's house?' on line 235 of the transcript). It could be that she repeats the auxiliary verb from my question in her answer, assuming that is an appropriate thing to do. Either way, she shows great economy of effort!

Adjectives in my re-creation of Jean Berko's test prove a little more tricky. When asked, 'What do you call a dog with 'quirks' all over him?' Leonie is unable to make up the adjective 'quirky', instead offering the rather more prosaic answer 'dog' (line 174 of the transcript). Mind you, last year, the only adjectives she used were colour words, such as 'green' and 'purple'. This year she has many more: 'soft' (line 32) 'uggerly' (line 64), 'crunchy' (line 199) 'yummy' (209). She can even supply synonyms: when I ask if her playdoh heart is 'rough' (line 33) she replies that it is 'bumpy' (line 36), both demonstrating an understanding of the meaning of the adjective 'rough' and the fact that it has other words that are similar in meaning.

Pragmatics and Play

Leonie is developing a sense that language can be fun as well as functional. In lines 210 to 229 of the transcript, we play a rhyming game. Leonie rhymes 'yummy' with 'tummy'; 'flower' with 'power' and 'tower;' and 'house' with 'couse'. It doesn't matter that the last example isn't a word: it *sounds* like one and for Leonie, in this instance, playing the game is more important than communicating accurately.

She is also learning that language can be imaginative. In lines 48 to 134 of the transcript we look at the story of *Cinderella* (in hindsight an unfortunate choice as Leonie insists on calling her 'Belle' throughout, suggesting she is more familiar with *Beauty and the Beast*!). However, what is clear is that she knows words from a semantic field of fairy tales such as the 'uggerly' sisters (line 64), a 'stepmother' (line 75) and a 'fairy mother' (line 84). She is even aware that 'they got married' represents a happy ending (line 132).

Abstract Concepts

In the 1960's and 70's, a psychologist called Walter Mischel conducted what he called the **delayed gratification experiment** where children were offered a choice between one small reward provided straight away or two small rewards if they waited for a short period. When I tried this with Leonie (lines 189 to 195 of the transcript) she immediately goes for the instant reward ('one piece of chocolate now'). She clearly wasn't prepared to risk waiting! This tells us something about her understanding of time: she has no set idea what 'ten minutes' feels like. It could be forever! In previous conversations she uses the time adverbial 'yesterday' to mean anything from several days to several hours ago. Although she can use words from a semantic field of time, she has little idea of the periods they represent.

Similarly, when I try to engage her in a conversation about what happened a few days previously when she went to play with her friend Sienna (lines 230 to end of transcript), she initially struggles to recall the event, preferring to stay in the present where she is rolling a piece of playdoh ((lines 236 to 240 of the transcript).

She is gaining *some* knowledge of abstract concepts though: when asked what a heart represents (line 19 of the transcript) she replies, 'I love you' suggesting she has some awareness of symbolism.

Leonie has learned a great deal over the past year: her utterances are longer and more fully formed; she has expanded her vocabulary considerably and her pronunciation is more developed.

Who knows what the next year will bring?

Gillian Thompson teaches English at Godalming College.

Accessing the Transcript

Subscribers can access the transcript on the website in emagplus 79 and in the archive, while the video can be found in emagClips. If your school does not subscribe to the website, please see the *emag* home page for the transcript. The video is available in the Previews for *emagazine*.

emagplus

- Gillian Thompson's transcript to accompany the article 'Leonie Speaking – One Year On'.

emag web archive

- Dr Marcello Giovanelli: 'It's Sleep Time' – Children's Routines and the Language of Bedtime (CLA), *emagazine* 62, December 2013
- Amy Bidgood: Learning about Language Acquisition – The Language 0-5 Project (CLA), *emagazine* 72, April 2016
- Amy Bidgood: What Comes Before Words? – The Beginnings of Language Development, *emagazine* 73, September 2016
- Gillian Thompson: Doing What Comes Naturally – Leonie Speaking (CLA), *emagazine* 74, December 2016
- Gillian Thompson: Leonie Talking – Theories and Transcript, emagplus 74 for *emagazine* 74, December 2016
- Fran Hill: How Daisy's Writing Develops, *emagazine* 75, February 2017
- Rebecca Woods: Child Language Acquisition – Behind the Text, *emagazine* 78, December 2017
- Nikolai Luck: Delving into the *emag* Archives: Child Language Acquisition, *emagazine* 68, April 2015
- And many, many more articles!

emagClips

- Leonie Speaking – Child Language Acquisition (CLA) and Leonie Speaking – One Year On (to accompany this article)

A Great Combination

Studying English Language and Literature A Level

Student Noah Matthews has loved studying the combined Language and Literature A Level. Here he explains why it has been such a stimulating and challenging course, and looks ahead to continuing his studies at university.

What did you particularly enjoy about the course?

The dynamic variation of texts was something I found intriguing as your studies range from examining the linguistic devices of tabloid journalism, with its particular kind of rhetoric, to the exploration of more literary texts, such as novels and plays. One lesson may centre on Russell Brand's linguistic battle with MP Keith Vaz during Brand's evidence to the parliamentary drug reform, whilst the next lesson you may employ more literary critical ideas when looking at Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. These examples also highlight the larger social implications of English, as to study language you are examining the insinuations, sometimes subtle or even subconscious, we all make when we communicate. To study literature is to study how writers have turned this human experience into art, through narrative, description and self-exploration

Can you talk about the relationship between reading and creative writing on the course? Did you find that particularly engaging and if so why? What do you think writing contributed to your understandings as a reader?

I found the academic study melded well with the creative aspects of the course as I was able to gain a greater appreciation for small, stylistic choices as they can have a huge influence on an overall text. This meant that when creating my own pieces I also paid more attention to particular linguistic choices rather than merely ignoring them to focus on the general form of the text. I'm not denying that large decisions about form can have a major impact – Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' is a good example of how a big structural shift can be of critical importance. However, the lexical choices he employs to initially gain the trust of the reader, and the lexical comparisons of children and food are just as important for the overall tone of the text. When I began my own creative coursework, a satirical newspaper column on Brexit, the impressions made by the non-fiction anthology had a huge impact on my style of writing. Moreover, once you have learnt the linguistic conventions of such texts, you know how to flip them for effect, which I found more interesting as that freedom to twist expectations is something I think all aspiring creative writers wish for, and to make a teacher laugh, which I did, is quite an achievement, even if I say so myself.

How well do you think the course has prepared you for university English and why?

Language and Literature A Level really does prepare you for any English BA out there. The skills I learnt in studying texts have been crucial to the way I analyse texts. It's fairly straightforward to take a literary approach to a text and find points to support your claim. However, if I were to analyse texts with my stylistics approach I feel I'm able to access so much more information about the text and what the author is trying to convey. This by now ingrained sense of analytical particularity really helps when you go on to study English at university. It gives Lang/Lit students an edge in analysis. Cambridge's Practical Criticism paper, which many would argue is a staple of their course, makes undergraduates study unseen texts without applying literary theories to them. They are forced into close reading with emphasis on form and stylistics. Moreover, Oxford's English course is combined; they do not offer a pure literature course. These two Goliaths of the academic world both emphasise that you need some form of knowledge of stylistics to fully analyse texts.

Would you recommend the course?

I would definitely recommend the course to any students wanting to study some form of English A Level. I believe it offers a great combination of literary approaches as I experienced through my study of *The Great Gatsby* and Blake's *Songs* while also foregrounding the linguistics that underpin all texts, literary, non-literary, spoken and written. I think the pairing of analytical study and creative writing works incredibly well as both activities develop the other. You become more aware of the creative devices on offer to writers and the most applicable ones to use, whilst also heightening your

Sebas Ribas on Unsplash

analytical eye when using reading new texts as you then have a deeper insight into the mind of an author.

What am I doing now?

I am hoping to go to university to read English next September. Although it will obviously be a challenge, I'm also quietly confident as my analytical skills have been developed greatly through this A Level. Currently I'm also working as a filmmaker on short films, both fiction and non-fiction, having transferred my tonal gauge from text to the visual form. That's the thing about this A Level: although it's rooted in the written format, the ways to tell a story that I've learnt are universally applicable. Literary choices can be translated to visual: plosive to quick cuts, elongated sentences to isolated framing, unreliable narrators to visual cutaways (thank you Mr Fitzgerald). The essence of the course is that what you learn when studying English can be adapted to whatever creative endeavours you want to pursue. That's what I learned. That's what I have loved about it.

Noah Matthews is studying English Language and Literature A Level at Godalming College and hopes to study English at university next year.

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- Jenniah Brown: From GCSE to Degree – A Student Perspective, *emagazine* 69, September 2015
- The Brilliant English Undergrad Student – What Are We looking For? *emagazine* 72, April 2016
- Ed Limb: English at A Level and University – What *emagazine* Can Do For You, *emagazine* 74, December 2016

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Regeneration, 1997. Moviestore collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

The internal divisions of

Regeneration's **Billy Prior**

Billy Prior is obsessed with sex, determined to shock and resolved that everyone around him should dislike him intensely – including himself. Yet throughout the *Regeneration* trilogy he's even more key to the moral questions that Barker raises than Sassoon's 'A Soldier's Declaration'. So argues Charlotte Woolley.

James Wilby in Regeneration, 1997. Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo

Divisions Personified

Regeneration's Billy Prior is riddled with internal divisions. His class experiences place him in both the working class and middle class. His war experience is also divided, between service at home and in France, punctuated by his short stay at the Craiglockhart war hospital for officers suffering from shellshock, which is where he meets Dr William Rivers. Prior is not a historical character, unlike both Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon (whose 'A Soldier's Declaration' begins the novel's moral discussion over the cost and process of war) but his experiences are drawn from Barker's extensive research. In an EMC interview, Barker describes Prior as 'designed to elucidate something in Rivers'. Through Prior's constant probing of Rivers' internal conflict over his work, curing men to send them back to war, she explores the moral conflicts of World War One and its effect on a generation of young men.

Conflict of Class and Status

Through their treatment sessions with Rivers, Barker juxtaposes Prior and Sassoon – an upper-class officer. For Prior the deep class divisions of the army heighten the tension his background creates. A visit from his parents reveals the upbringing that has shaped him. Prior's father is almost a caricature of the working-class man, seeing physical labour as both his job and that of his son. Gruff, associating masculinity with dominance, drinking and violence, he confirms that Prior volunteered for army service without his approval:

> Time enough to do summat for the Empire when the Empire's done summat for you.

Mrs Prior's contrary insistence on gentility creates conflict between father and son, and their aspirations for Billy's future. Billy's father calls him 'neither fish nor fowl', unable to settle into the traditional masculine working-class lifestyle yet not accepted by his social superiors. Although in the officer class, Prior's attitudes are a complex combination of adopting their mannerisms and attitudes to fit in, and adopting them in order to mock those who look down on him as a 'temporary gentlemen'.

Although Prior is abrasively conscious of his internal class conflict, the chip on his shoulder is well-founded. He points out that while Rivers always used other officer's surnames (Sassoon, Owen), he was always 'Mr Prior', and he angrily contradicts any suggestion that class is irrelevant in the army:

> It's made perfectly clear when you arrive that some people are more than others. It helps if you've been to the right school. It helps if you hunt.

Psychological Interpretation

The psychological impact of these conflicts is explored through physical manifestations of class difference. Prior arrives at Craiglockhart mute and unable to remember his experiences. After his voice returns, Rivers identifies Prior's mutism as a reflection of his class:

> 'What you tend to get in officers is stammering […] [the physical symptoms] are all common in private soldiers and rare in officers. It's almost as if for the […] the labouring classes, illness has to be physical.'

Barker's novel develops the philosophy of shellshock that soldiers, trapped in trenches without control even over their own movements, develop ways of coping or symptoms that make it impossible for them to continue serving. In what Rivers describes as 'the labouring classes' (soldiers like Prior), these are physical symptoms that prevent them from continuing to fight.

Victorian psychologist Henry Maudsley suggested that women were more likely to suffer 'hysteria' (an early term for many mental illnesses), because

> the range of activity of women is so limited, and their available paths of work in life so few, compared with those which men have.

In *The Female Malady*, Elaine Showalter develops this idea, concluding that historically women's depression has been driven by

> women's oppressive social roles rather than by their bodies or psyches.

In *Regeneration*, Pat Barker uses Prior to interrogate the differences between pre-war women and the soldiers trapped in France. The soldiers are powerless, at the mercy of the Germans on the other side of No Man's Land but equally beholden to the generals

far behind the lines orchestrating each movement and battle. In contrast, women like Prior's girlfriend Sarah found their horizons expanding. Prior thinks when he meets her that women

> seemed to have changed so much during the war, to have expanded in all kinds of ways, whereas men over the same period had shrunk into a smaller and smaller space.

For Sarah, munitions work is well-paid and offers her significant independence far removed from the life of service she was destined for before the war.

Rivers' treatments regularly explore the 'division' his patients experience. Of all the trilogy's characters, Prior's internal division is the most profound, resulting in an 'alter-ego' appearing in *The Eye in the Door*. His other persona seems to have all Billy's inner strength and none of his moral conscience. Attending a therapy session, Rivers sees Prior in his alternative form as

> quite different, suddenly: keen, alert, cold, observant, detached, manipulative, ruthless.

While in this alternative state he investigates and betrays conscientious objectors, working-class people he has been best friends with since childhood. Through hypnosis, he and Rivers discover that the 'alternative personality' is a way Prior has previously coped with his parents' violent marriage, enabling him to block out traumatic memories. The other personality resurfaces in France when he is injured and trapped in a shell hole overnight.

Sex – Comfort, Weapon, Shock

Barker's characters also struggle with issues of sexuality and Prior is no exception. Rivers says to Sassoon that the war has developed concerns about the differences between comradeship and romantic feeling:

> [there is] this enormous emphasis on love between men – comradeship – and everybody approves. But at the same time there's always this little niggle of anxiety. Is it the right kind of love?

Contrasting Rivers' implicit asexuality and Sassoon's matter-of-fact homosexuality, Prior's sexuality is overt and often manipulative. He uses sex as a weapon, deliberately flirting with Rivers as a way to provoke and challenge his authority as well as to deflect discussion from uncomfortable subjects.

Prior's relationship with Sarah Lumb is equally ambivalent. Walking with her on the beach front he feels 'callous towards her' and is 'determined to get her', implying that possession and control of her are a kind of retaliation against civilians who can't understand his experiences. Yet just a page later, there is a surprising combination of passion, tenderness, and sensuality in the description of their first lovemaking:

> Through the thickness in his throat, he said, 'I'm not pushing, but if you wanted to, I'd make sure it was all right.' [...] his nostrils filled with the scent of rock pools at low tide. He slipped his hands underneath her, and lifted her, until her whole pelvis became a cup from which he drank.

Prior appears to fall in love with Sarah, finding emotional and sexual comfort. However, in another symptom of his internal divisions she is kept separate from much of his life, a safe haven to which he can retreat or a symbol of the life he could have had if the war had not interfered.

The Only Possible End

In Rivers' treatment of all his patients, Barker addresses a fundamental conflict: when a doctor works for the army, the responsibility is no longer to the patient but to the state, to enable the patient to recover well enough to be sent back to the front. By the end of *Regeneration*, Prior's mutism has been cured. Rivers visits another doctor, treating a patient (Callan) with mutism by applying electrodes to his tongue. Rivers connects Callan, Sassoon, and Prior. Sassoon returns to the front; although he refuses to rescind the Declaration he knows he can only continue to protest through his poetry. For Prior and Callan, losing their voices was the only method of protesting against the war: by getting them to speak again, Yealland and Rivers have silenced them.

By the end of the trilogy, Prior has returned to active service in France, serving alongside Wilfred Owen. He comments with dark irony:

> We are Craiglockhart's success stories [...] We don't remember, we don't think, we don't feel [...] By any proper civilised standard [...] we are objects of horror.

Prior and Owen are killed a week before Armistice Day. The horror and futility of their deaths is juxtaposed with the impression that, for Prior, this is the only possible ending to the conflicts that the war has deepened in him. Although engaged to Sarah, it's impossible to imagine him having any future ordinary life. Troubled already by his struggles with class and sexuality, the war has sharpened his sense of injustice and anger. In Prior, Barker represents those soldiers who came back, but never really succeeded in leaving the war behind, and the generation of young men sacrificed to a war that originally seemed just, but transformed into a bloody mechanised conflict on an unimaginable scale.

Charlotte Woolley teaches A Level English Literature at Skipton Girls' High School, and regularly blogs about literature at www.charlotteunsworth.com

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- Ros Fraser: Internal Division in *Regeneration*, emagplus for *emagazine* 40, April 2008
- Priscilla McClay: History and Fiction – *Regeneration* and *Birdsong*, *emagazine* 49, September 2010
- Dr Paul Norgate: Who's Who? Billy Prior and Wilfred Owen in *Regeneration*, *emagazine* 65, September 2014.
- Mike Peters: World War 1 in Contemporary Novels, *emagazine* 74, December 2016

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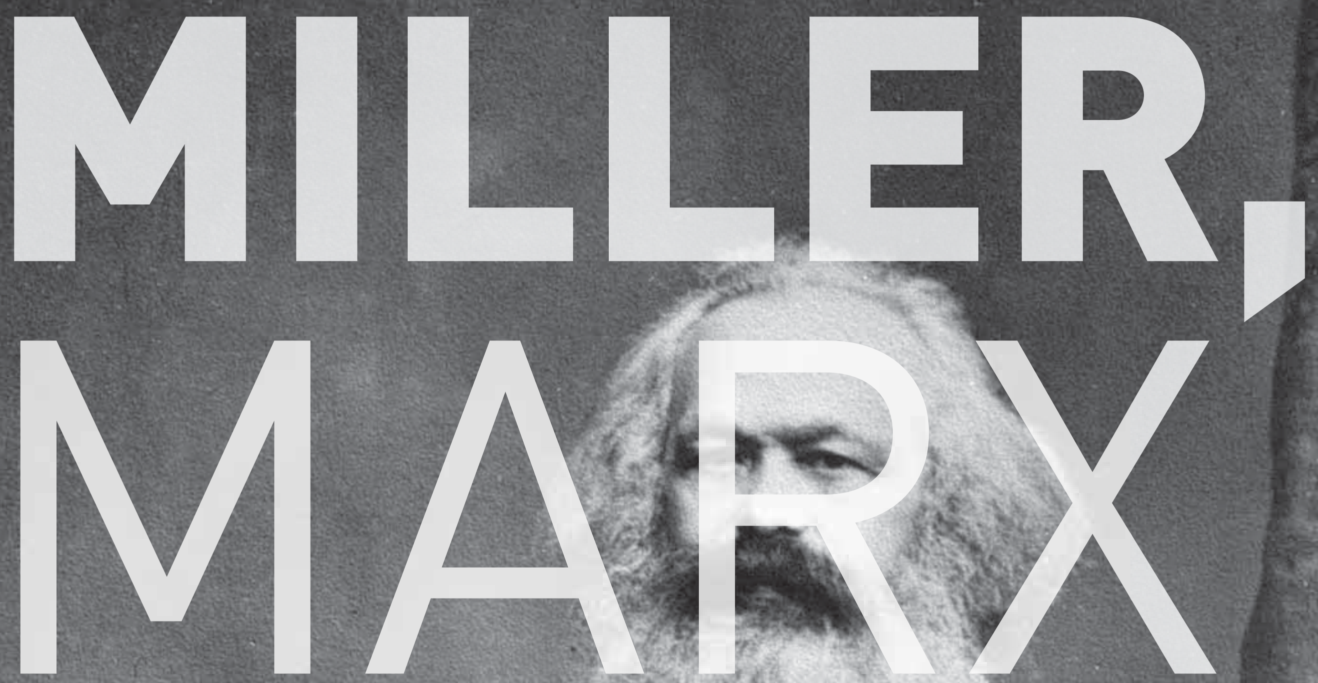
- Professor John Mullan on Key Aspects of Narrative



MILLER, MARX

and The American Dream

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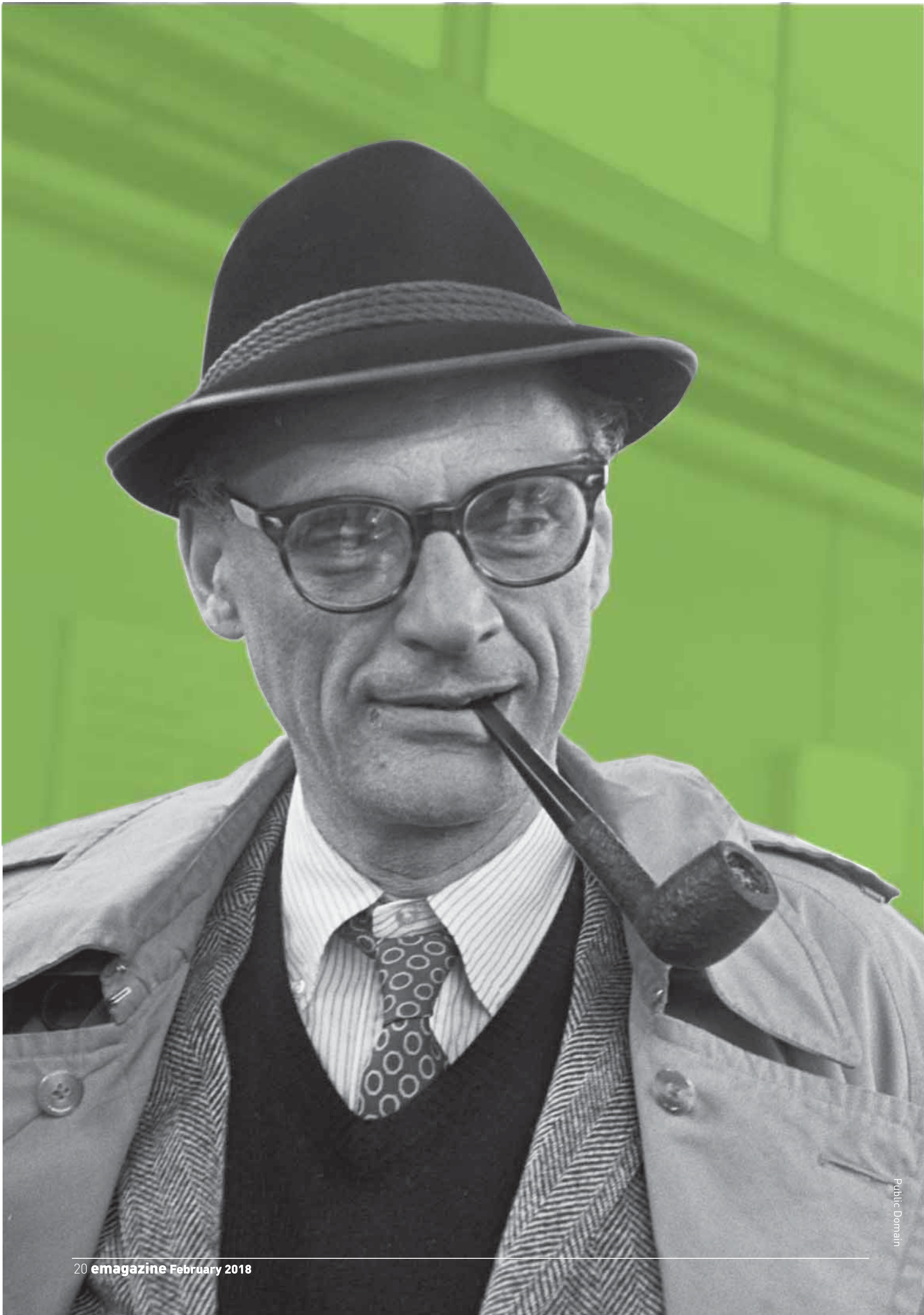
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A View from the Bridge. Geraint Lewis/Alamy Stock Photo

Reading *A View from the Bridge* and *Death of a Salesman* through a Marxist lens shows us not only how Miller questions the American Dream, suggests Dr Kurt A. Johnson, but also how he exposes the tragic commercialisation of human relationships in a capitalist system.

Marco: Sardines.
Eddie: Sure. (*Laughing.*) How you gonna catch sardines on a hook?
Beatrice: Oh, I didn't know they're sardines. (*To Catherine.*) They're sardines!
Catherine: Yeah, they follow them all over the ocean, Africa, Yugoslavia… (*She sits and begins to look through a movie magazine. Rodolpho joins her.*)
Beatrice (*to Eddie*): It's funny, y'know. You never think of it, that sardines are swimming in the ocean! (*She exits to kitchen with dishes.*)

'Sir', one student asked aloud in the middle of reading *A View from the Bridge*, 'why is Miller banging on about sardines?' My student's question suggested exasperation, but buried within her voice was genuine inquiry. I had, after all, been teaching my students all year that writers use language purposefully; everything means something.

So, it was with some embarrassment that I responded, 'Huh, well…I don't really know.' But her question burned in my mind: why does Miller bang on about sardines? And coffee? And bananas? And oranges and lemons? And whiskey?

Why does Miller make Eddie a longshoreman off-loading (and stealing) these imported goods – and not, say, a postman, like my grandfather who humped the streets of a Red Hook-like neighbourhood back in Philly during the 1950s? Why does Miller make Marco and Roldolpho's primary employment as fishermen who traverse the Adriatic and Mediterranean Seas – from the coasts of Sicily, to what is now Croatia and Tunisia? Why is Catherine's first impulse, after Eddie agrees to the stenographer job at the plumbing company, to buy a new rug and table cloth for the house?

In short, why does Miller spend significant stage time and dialogue on seemingly trivial matters that appear to do little to drive the tragic plot or the prominent conflicts forward?

The realisation came suddenly: wrapped in these scenes of placid, mundane domesticity were the hallmark references to capital, commodities and modes of production – the base machinations of Marxist theory. These things that Miller fills his play with are all the material goods of a capitalist system that compel Marco and Rodolpho to leave a war-torn and economically-stagnant Italy to seek the American Dream in the States; that compel Catherine to seek not just sexual but financial independence, thereby igniting the fuse for Eddie's tragedy; that, even before the play ever begins, trap Eddie in his tragic fate: being the everyday, blue-collar worker whose terrible destiny is fixed by his impoverished economic circumstances.

In this way, Miller reveals the real tragedy for 'sardines' like Eddie: not so much that they cannot achieve the American Dream, but that the American Dream was never there for them to achieve in the first place.

Miller and Marxism

Miller grew up in an initially well-to-do German-Jewish household in New York City during the 1910s and 20s; however, his family lost their business during The Great Depression and Miller grew to know the hard-luck poverty most working-class Americans experienced at the time. During the 1940s and 1950s, Miller began to sympathise with Communist critiques of capitalism; this was dangerous given that, at the time, anti-Communist sentiment in the US was at a fever pitch. In 1956, the infamous anti-Communist senator Joseph McCarthy brought Miller in front of the House Un-American Activities Committee requiring him to condemn Communism and its supporters in the theatrical trade. Miller refused. As a result, he was held in contempt of court and

Antony Sher as Willy Loman in Death of a Salesman by Arthur Miller, A Royal Shakespeare Company Production directed by Gregory Doran. Geraint Lewis/Alamy Stock Photo

his passport was rescinded. Miller would allegorise this Communist 'witch hunt' – which largely defined the Cold War period of geopolitical intrigue and mistrust between the US and Soviet Union – in his play *The Crucible*. (Incidentally, this was the very play whose opening he was unable to attend in Belgium because of his passport revocation.)

Given his personal connections with Communism, Miller's plays are ripe pickings for a Marxist interpretation.

As a literary theory, Marxism asks the reader to critique the economic circumstances that bear influence on the characters, the narrative and the general production of the text. It asks us to question the capitalist system and why it disadvantages or favours the characters. It asks us to consider the exploitative and/or exploiting labour conditions in which our protagonist(s) may work. Marxism is not just about those with and those without, but also about the systems – and ideas – that are put into place that entrench economic disparity.

Miller, Willy and The American Dream

In *Death of Salesman*, Miller explores the exploitative ideology of capitalism through the American Dream. With its roots in the Declaration of Independence's revolutionary statement that 'All men are created equal' who have a right to 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness', the American Dream, simply stated, is the cultural belief that any American, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic status, can be (materially) successful if they work hard enough.

Miller uses ideas about the American Dream to critique the economic reality of his characters, showing how economic circumstances fuel the play's larger tragedies. As a salesman, Willy travels around the country to sell products, investing his labour to create within those products a sense of desirability, all at the expense of his relationship with his family. He is an illusionist who must use his powers of persuasion to make people see potential and necessity that may not be there – to, as Miller said, peddle the 'bullshit', 'pseudo life' idea that one could 'touch the clouds by standing on top of a refrigerator'. Quite literally, Willy's labour has no material substance. It is not real. This lack of substance serves as the crux of Willy's existential crisis: if a person's labour is worthless, then the person must also be worthless. Willy's worth is only as material as his dreams, suggesting why Miller has Willy spend most of the play residing in the intangible realm of memory.

Interestingly, even ironically, we never know exactly what Willy sells, because in the end what he ultimately sells is himself – his own life (and for a measly $20,000 in life insurance at that). That was the market value for a man of Willy's socioeconomic standing. By giving up his life for the material benefit of his family, Willy's death symbolises the moral void which forms the centre of a consumerism-crazed American society. The death of the salesman is not only the death of the American Dream – because, as Charlie and Happy put it, the dream is all the salesperson has – but the death of a moral society that values human life and dignity above conspicuous consumption and commodification.

Thus, Miller's use of material goods – from sardines to footballs, rugs to Chevys – highlights the ways in which he sees individuals becoming commodities to be exchanged and traded to the impairment not only of the individuals themselves, but also the very familial foundations that serve as the bedrock of society.

Death of Salesman – The Commodification of the Individual

Willy's notion of the American Dream is based on flawed superficiality, investing in the physical materialism of 'personal attractiveness' rather than intellectual rigour (Bernard) or honest labour (Biff's ranch work out West). Willy constantly equates other people's 'love' for him with his material success, indelibly tying human emotion to capital gain. That Willy's older brother Ben embodies the personal magnetism of the American Dream –

> Why, boys, when I was seventeen I walked into jungle and when I was twenty-one I walked out […] and by God I was rich!

only further strengthens the appeal of the American Dream for Willy, despite the falsely fabular nature of Ben's tale, along with its gross impracticality as a sustainable and fair economic model for working people.

But most depressing of all is the extent to which Willy bequeaths this ideology of human commodification to his sons. This mentality frames many of his fatherly interactions with the boys, (presented in flashbacks). In Act I, Willy lauds Biff for his sporting prowess, thereby forgiving his criminality in stealing the very material sporting goods that allow for the otherwise wholesome fatherly interaction of playing football to take place. By acquiescing in the theft, Willy not only taints his paternal relationship with Biff, but ultimately teaches him that material goods are more important than knowledge, laws and even people.

In the same scene, Willy pushes Happy aside – despite Happy's incessant attention-seeking interjections – in favour of Biff's (mythologised and morally-compromised) sportsmanship. This emotional rejection is one Happy channels into womanising in later life, relegating women to mere sexual commodities. Happy laments this to Biff – he dreams of a steady and loving relationship with a woman – but the fact that he can, like Ben, go into the jungle and come out rich when it comes to sexual relationships is a form of emotional capital from which Happy cannot divest himself.

The ideology of the American Dream is enough in this instance not only to destroy a life, but to destroy the entire humanity of the Loman family.

In the vast economic oceans of capitalism, Miller makes the reader realise the extent to which there are only so many sharks; the rest of us are just sardines swimming around unknowingly. And just as many people don't think about sardines swimming in the ocean, many people don't think about the untold poor struggling to make it in an economic system designed to make them lose … and lose everything.

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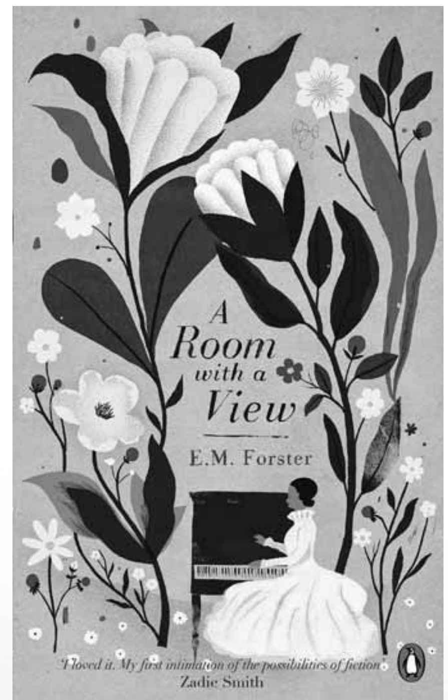
A ROOM
– and a Narrator –
WITH A VIEW

Maya Little's account of the narrative voice in E.M. Forster's novel draws attention to both its variety and subtlety, showing how the narrator is anything but a detached information-giver, but instead plays a key role in shaping our views on the characters and events.



Many novels use a detached narrator whom we trust implicitly, but in *A Room With a View*, the narrative voice is not so impersonal. This is crucial in forming the social comedy of the novel. It also allows the reader access to Lucy's feelings, whilst never being caught in her 'muddles', the narrator always rescuing us before we become stuck in any one character's mind.

In simple terms, the narrator of *A Room with A View* is third person, and omniscient. What this categorisation ignores, however, is that whilst Forster's narrator is indeed all knowing, this does not make them impartial. It also ignores the moments in the novel where we feel the presence of this narrator, not simply as someone who relates information, but as a voice with its own opinions and motivations.

E.M. Forster by Dora_Carrington, 1924-25[Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Authorial Intrusion

The most obvious of these is when the narrator addresses the reader directly:

> It is obvious enough for the reader to conclude, 'She loves young Emerson.' A reader in Lucy's place would not find it obvious. Life is easy to chronicle, but bewildering to practice [...] She loved Cecil; George made her nervous; will the reader explain to her that the phrases should have been reversed?

This authorial intrusion is a perfect instance of Forster using the detached nature of his omniscient voice to create a clearer overview of the characters' relationships in the novel. It is not 'obvious' to Lucy that she loves George, but the reader can still know this fact because the narrative voice is separated here from the voices of the characters and thus can give us these emotional insights. The direct references to the 'reader' seem to acknowledge that the novel is a fiction, but the phrase 'will the reader explain to her that the phrases should have been reversed?' is a question which invites dialogue between the reader and the characters, with the narrator straddling our reality and that of the novel, bringing us closer together. For example, 'Life is easy to chronicle, but bewildering to practice' acts as a reminder that the reader is supposed to view Lucy as someone who is practising life, rather than simply an artefact being written about, thus evoking

Domenico Loia on Unsplash

our sympathy for Lucy's mistakes as we are reminded of our own bewilderments.

This passage also forces the reader's attention onto the narrator themselves; able to ask questions of us, their presence becomes more substantial as they act as Lucy's sympathetic chronicler. This is something that separates the voice of the narrator from Forster; Forster is writing a fiction. The narrator is telling a truth.

How Lucy's 'Muddle' is Handled

Lucy's 'bewildering' life is often represented in the novel by her 'muddle', and the handling of the 'muddle' through the narrative voice is significant. The narrator's omniscience means that Forster can both let Lucy's thoughts and feelings bleed in to the narrative, and withdraw from this 'muddle' in order to offer clarity for the reader.

This technique is present in the words

> Charlotte's energy! And her unselfishness! […] so Lucy felt, or strove to feel.

Here, the first two exclamatory sentences are clearly Lucy's thoughts, as reported to us by the narrator, but the latter part of the sentence is more ambiguous. 'So Lucy felt' seems to be a continuation of the thought, but 'or strove to feel' is a contradiction. If this is still part of Lucy's thoughts, the contradiction highlights her constant confusion about what she truly feels.

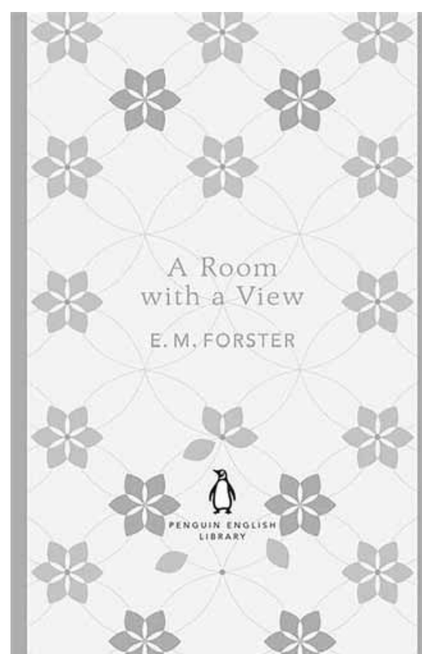
If, instead, the phrase 'So Lucy felt, or strove to feel' is seen as a comment by the narrator, a mid-sentence shift in perspective, then perhaps this narrator is suggesting that Lucy has to 'strive' to feel the correct way – to unnaturally change her feelings to keep in line with the polite sentiments demanded by her society. If so, Forster's use of an omniscient narrator allows him to clarify Lucy's feelings, but also, by allowing us to view Lucy's muddle from the outside, to hint at a social message: that Edwardian society was restricting people's access to their emotions, leaving them unsure of what they actually felt, and which of their feelings they had shaped in order to conform with the conventions of their social class.

More Than One Voice – Free Indirect Discourse

As well as weaving his own opinions into the narrative voice, Forster also, at times, weaves in the voices of the novel's characters by employing a technique called **free indirect discourse**. Free indirect discourse is when a character speaks, but without the usual indicators of speech ('she said'/'he said' or speech marks). This means that the characters words are essentially blended with the narrative voice, as in the following passage:

> Miss Bartlett was, after all, a wee bit tired, and thought they had better spend the morning settling in; unless Lucy would at all like to go out? Lucy would rather like to go out, as it was her first day in Florence, but, of course, she could go alone. Miss Bartlett could not allow this. Of course she would accompany Lucy everywhere. Oh, certainly not; Lucy would stop with her cousin. Oh, no! that would never do. Oh, yes!

The backwards-forwards rhythm of this section seems to reflect the constant restriction of freedom that Miss Bartlett



imposes on Lucy – yet another instance of Forster manipulating the narrative voice to best point out the failings in his society; both Lucy and Miss Bartlett fail to express a definite opinion in this exchange, using hedging devices to weaken their suggestions at first ('wee bit', and 'rather like' are two examples) and then quickly switching sides, with Miss Bartlett declaring a firm 'Oh no!' in response to Lucy essentially agreeing to do what Miss Bartlett had wanted. The insincerity of what is said is thus brought to the forefront, and the expressions of everyday speech, like 'of course', and 'a wee bit', seem pointlessly indirect when quoted outside of the context of conversation. It also heightens the social comedy; rather than each person's speech being clearly defined, they flow on from each other, giving Lucy and Miss Bartlett's conversation a flustered, jumbled tone. Thus, by employing different aspects of narrative voice for different conversations (free indirect discourse here, direct speech when old Mr Emerson speaks, for example), Forster's narrator influences the reader's perception of the sincerity of different conversations.

The Narrator's Tone – Contrasts and Comedy

Not every student will think 'comedy' when they think of *A Room With a View*. It's unlikely to leave one helpless with giggles on the train, but there is something lastingly comic about the line

> Miss Bartlett […] stood brown against the view.

It's the contrast that brings the comedy. Throughout the novel, Forster skilfully manipulates the narrator's tone between poetic and blunt styles of writing, and this is another way in which the narrative voice is able to take on an opinion about the matter of the story. In this particular chapter, there's the melodic description of the violets, which 'ran down in rivulets and streams and cataracts'. Here, Forster uses the repeated 'and' to create a lulling rhythm, with the long sentence emphasising the profusion of flowers. Lucy and George kiss – a heightened moment which the narrator has described in a highly poetic style. And then –

> The silence of life had been broken by Miss Bartlett, who stood brown against the view.

This ends the chapter abruptly, 'brown against the view' a startling change in tone from the enclosed world of beauty in which George and Lucy had just a sentence earlier been kissing. This change of tone has several effects on the reader: coming just before the end of the chapter, it leaves us as disorientated as Lucy; coming just after her kiss, it immediately de-escalates the romance, leaving us uncertain as to whether that moment ought to have happened; it is also comic – Miss Bartlett is the dull, incongruous 'brown', and stands ridiculously small against the expansive, overwhelming 'view' that has just been described to us. This ability to vary tone so quickly for effect is an important part of Forster's narrative voice. The narrator is not only directing the reader's opinions of the characters through the content of what is said and unsaid, but through the very style of writing they choose to use when talking about them.

The narrator's voice is a manipulated one. It is sometimes Forster's voice, sometimes Lucy's, but never simply a conveyor of information. It is not consistent, but instead, it is constantly adapted to the situation. Thus, the narrator seems to be a kind of shadow character, roaming through the story that Forster has created, and every now and then, catching our eye.

Maya Little is an English undergraduate student, now in her first year at Mansfield College, Oxford. She wrote this soon after completing her A Level studies.

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To just listen in on
British chit chat

Spoken British National Corpus 2014

Robbie Love explains what the BNC2014 is and how the data was collected. He offers one fascinating example – the split infinitive – to show how the corpus can be compared with that of the 1990s to look at the realities of how we are 'actually' speaking.

Every day, billions of words are uttered in hundreds of languages all over the world. For corpus linguists – that is, people who study the form, use and function of language using specialised computer software – speech is like the golden snitch in a game of Quidditch. It appears to be everywhere around you and yet it is incredibly difficult to capture. The reason is very simple – examples of writing, especially those found online, are already committed (or can be easily converted) to a format that can be read on a computer screen. These include e-books, online news articles, Tweets, blog posts, play scripts and such like. On the other hand, speech is rarely captured in a permanent form – especially private conversations among family and friends. Words are uttered and then they disappear, leaving no trace. The result is that linguistic research is often based on examples of writing and not speech. Transcripts of spoken interactions are rare.

Enter the Spoken British National Corpus 2014 – 11.5 million words of informal British English chit chat collected between 2012 and 2016, and fully transcribed for the benefit of linguists, educators and, of course, students.

What is BNC2014?

We at Lancaster University and Cambridge University Press have worked together for several years to gather this huge corpus (a corpus – plural corpora – is simply the name for a large collection of language). It is the largest and most comprehensive modern collection of British English speech ever released to the public. To achieve this, we encouraged contributors from all over the UK to record their normal, everyday conversations with friends and family and send them to us. We then listened to, transcribed and anonymised these recordings so they could be collated into one big corpus. The finished corpus was recently made freely available for researchers, academics and teachers to use in their studies and teaching.

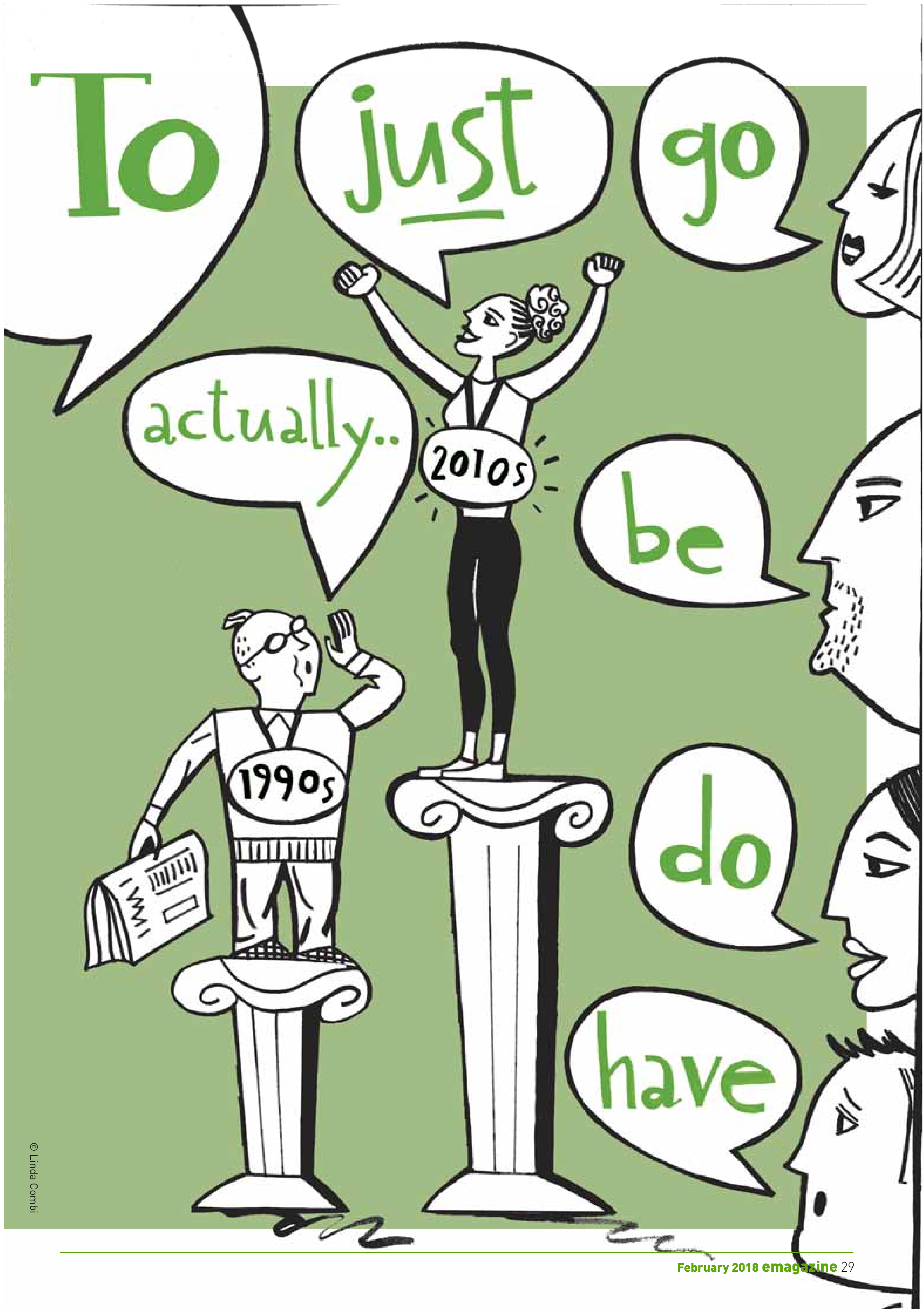
We aimed to capture a wide representation of the UK today – the way people talk and, importantly, how people talk about all kinds of topics – this means we had to gather recordings from people of different regions, ages and backgrounds, who spoke in a range of accents and dialects about a wide variety of things.

Our innovative method for collecting recordings reflects how heavily we use technology in all of our lives. We wanted people to make recordings wherever and whenever was convenient to them by using whatever recording equipment they had available – usually smartphones, and sometimes tablets or laptops. We found that this produced excellent results. We received recordings made in a wide range of settings – at home, in cafes, in pubs and bars, during journeys and on holiday. We also gathered a hugely eclectic range of topics – some of the most common include food, family, work, TV and relationships.

Nearly 700 speakers were recorded in more than 1,200 conversations which, after being transcribed, equate to more than eleven million words of text.

Descriptivists and Prescriptivists

There is a diverse range of opinion about language change and variation. It can be characterised very simply as a divide between 'descriptivists' and 'prescriptivists'. Descriptivists accept changes in language and seek to observe and understand them. They may speak of 'rules', but only when based on evidence from actual language use. Prescriptivists make value judgements about aspects of language – positive and negative – and therefore believe that certain aspects of language ought to remain unchanged. The 'rules' that they speak of are often based on what they believe to be right or wrong.



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Are We Following Prescriptive Rules?

With the corpus finished, we can now start to investigate all sorts of questions about the nature of spoken British English, comparing present-day speech to that of the 1990s. We can do this because a very similar collection of British English conversations was made in the early 1990s – the spoken part of the original British National Corpus – so we can see how informal chit chat may have changed over the last two decades.

One question we can ask of the data is whether the 'rules' laid out by prescriptivists actually carry weight in casual spoken discourse. In English, a good example is the split infinitive. This happens when one or more words, usually with adverbial function, come in between the word 'to' and the infinitive form of a verb. Examples include:

to boldly go where no one has gone before

Star Trek

so they're going to actually buy the desserts from the college

1990s corpus

you might want to kind of make sure that they're highlighted

2010s corpus

Some people regard splitting the infinitive as a grammatical error – something which should be avoided at all costs. In each of these examples, the underlined adverb would have to occur anywhere but in between the 'to' and the verb.

The question is: are British English speakers paying any attention to this rule? Well, the evidence suggests not. In fact, they appear to be paying much less attention to it now than they were in the 1990s. In the 1990s corpus, the split infinitive occurs 47.06 times per million words. (In corpus linguistics, frequency is often presented as occurrence-per-million. This allows us to compare how often a word occurs across corpora of different sizes.) But in the 2010s corpus, it occurs 189.27 times per million – that is, four times as frequently.

The Resilience of the Just Infinitive

What might have caused this large increase? It is hard to say, but the most frequent forms of the split infinitives might provide a clue.

In the 1990s corpus, the most frequent split infinitives are:

to actually say

to just go

to just sit

to really do

to really get

In the 2010s corpus, the most frequent ones are:

to just go

to just be

to just do

to just have

to just get

Interestingly, the most common split infinitives in the 2010s are split by the adverb 'just'. In total, the 'just' infinitive accounts for 28% of all split infinitives in the 2010s corpus, compared to 25% of the 1990s split infinitives. Conversely, the 'actually' infinitive has fallen from 17% of the 1990s split infinitives to just 11% of the 2010s ones. It seems that the 'just' infinitive is holding its ground as a resilient split infinitive. This is largely responsible for its rise: the word 'just' alone has almost doubled from 3,926 instances per million in the 1990s to 7,484 per million in the 2010s.

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What is certain is that the split infinitive is a common feature of present-day conversational British English. Insights about this and other grammatical features are very useful – we can help learners of English by teaching them the features of English they are most likely to routinely encounter in conversation. And the split infinitive can take its rightful place among them.

Robbie Love wrote this article when he was a PhD Research Student at the University of Lancaster, working with the Department of Linguistics and English Language.

Finding Out More

You can find out more about the BNC2014, which is funded in part by the Economic and Social Research Council, by visiting the project website: http://corpora.lancs.ac.uk/bnc2014/

To get in touch, email Robbie Love:
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@BNC_2014

Coming in April

How to do your own investigation using corpus data.

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- Professor Paul Baker: Using a Corpus to Analyse Gender and Language, *emagazine* 75, February 2017
- Gill Francis: Language Change and Corpus Data – A Super-Mega-Free-For-All? *emagazine* 62, December 2013
- Coming in April 2018: Using a Corpus to Investigate Language – A Guide to Getting Started

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- Elena Semino on Stylistics includes discussion of corpus data

Flaticon

The Importance of Small Things

Style in The Namesake

George Norton offers three ways of thinking about the language and style of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel, each of which makes one realise that her 'lack of stylisation' in no way implies a lack of style and that the small shifts in the writing perfectly match the subtle changes in identity of the main characters.

I've always found writing about language and style in prose fiction a difficult thing. Poetry is so much easier. By their very nature, poems use more concentrated language, more foregrounding, more metaphors and complex images; because the writer's craft is more obviously on display, there are more things to write about. With prose fiction – especially in the realist mode, with apparently 'transparent' language – what, I've often asked myself, is there to discuss?

The problem of how to talk about the ways in which meaning is shaped is one which immediately confronts students of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*. The realism of its characters and settings and the clarity of Lahiri's undemonstrative prose were recognised by many of the novel's first critics. 'She writes with journalistic precision,' enthused the *Daily Telegraph*; the *New York Times* was pleased that Lahiri

> renounced the writerly flourish, never once played the exotic and […] scaled her characters to actual human existence

while the *Guardian's* reviewer noted that the novel's

> guileless vocabulary and an appealing lack of stylisation [conjured] a bleak, arm's-length mood, a sense of a life spooling inevitably on.

So, is the sort of formal analysis, so beloved of A Level examiners, impossible for this text? I want to offer three ways of tackling the language and style of *The Namesake* which will, I hope, enable us to answer that question in the negative.

Complex Shifts of Focalisation

Let's begin with *The Namesake*'s deceptively simple narrative style. Lahiri moves between an unintrusive omniscient narration and a technique called **focalisation** where the action is narrated from the restricted perspective of one of the characters. Although Gogol's viewpoint dominates, different parts of the book are narrated from the point of view of Ashima, Moushumi, and, in key passages in the first two chapters, Ashoke. These shifts between omniscience and restriction enable Lahiri to create a subtle set of ironies. For example, the scene in which Ashoke presents Gogol with the book of his namesake's short stories is narrated largely from Gogol's perspective; the verbs of perception and cognition give us his point of view:

> Gogol is especially surprised to see a gift in his father's hands.

But then the omniscient voice gives us this key piece of information:

> He has never been told why he was really named Gogol, doesn't know about the accident that nearly killed his father.

The reader knows about Ashoke's accident – it's narrated analeptically in the opening chapter – but knowing what Gogol doesn't

Irfan Khan ,Tabu, Sahira Nair & Kal Penn in The Namesake (2006). AF archive / Alamy Stock

know informs our response to his almost dismissive receipt of the book, making his ingratitude more understandable, and increasing our appreciation for his father's stoic sensitivity when he decides 'to keep the explanation of his son's name to himself' because his 'birthday is a day to honor life not brushes with death.'

Another interesting shift in viewpoint occurs in Chapter 10 when Moushumi becomes the focal character. This change in perspective is partly pragmatic – the chapter deals principally with Moushumi's affair with Dimitri of which Gogol is painfully ignorant – but it also enables Lahiri to develop the ideas of names and naming. The word 'Gogol' appears only twice in the chapter, once in relation to Gogol's change of name and once as part of a neutral speech tag. This shows us that Moushumi thinks of her husband only as 'Nikhil'; his Gogol-ness is, for her, firmly in the past. But the strategic near-absence of the word from the chapter foregrounds its presence in the rest of the text. Because Gogol is always referred to as Gogol, even after he changes his name, Lahiri suggests that he cannot wholly escape who he is; the overcoat of Nikhil-ness cannot entirely eliminate his earlier identity.

Absence of Free Indirect Style

For a novel that uses so much focalisation, it's interesting that there is very little **free indirect style** (where, without being marked off as direct speech, the voice of the character takes over from the narrator, bringing us closer to that character's consciousness). As one of the novel's most perceptive critics, Judith Caesar, has noted, despite the shifts in viewpoint,

> we almost never know what the characters are thinking, about who they are to themselves as they experience the rush of sounds and sensations that are their lives.

We never learn, for example, how Gogol feels about his separation from Maxine and know only a little more about his reaction to Moushumi's betrayal. Caesar argues that such absences signify

> the ways in which essential identity [...] is beyond the power of words to describe. We can only know the surface.

The Symbolism of Everyday Objects

A second aspect of Lahiri's style is her intricate use of symbolism, especially the symbolism of everyday objects. David Lodge has noted that

> the novelist should make his spade a spade before he makes it a symbol.

This, he says, is especially important for writers (like Lahiri) who are

> aiming to create anything like the 'illusion of life'. If the spade is introduced all too obviously just for the sake of its symbolic meaning, it will tend to undermine the credibility of the narrative as human action.

Lahiri is scrupulous in obeying this rule. Her symbols are everyday objects (shoes, food, clothes) which create important meanings without seeming contrived. One such object is the mailbox. The Gangulis' mailbox is mentioned for the first time when they move to Pemberton Road:

> The Gangulis, apart from the name on their mailbox [...] appear no different from their neighbours.' The mailbox is both a signifier of their assimilation into American suburbia (everybody has one) but also of their otherness because their name denotes their ethnic difference. A few pages on, the mailbox is vandalised, the name 'shortened to GANG, with the word GREEN scrawled in pencil following it.

Gogol is 'sickened, certain of the insult his father will feel', but Ashoke is 'unaffected', and replaces the letters that evening. This is the only explicit example in the novel of racial prejudice; as the episode is narrated from Gogol's half-comprehending perspective, Lahiri allows the reader to infer that although Ashoke tries to protect his son from the realities of racism, they are impossible to escape. Later, when en route to vacation in New Hampshire, Gogol introduces Maxine to his parents, Lahiri reminds the reader of the mailbox by having Gogol park next to it. The significance of this becomes apparent when Gogol and Maxine arrive at the Ratliffs' holiday home:

> There is nothing to mark where they turned, no mailbox or sign.

Complacently assured of their identities and place in the world (Maxine, Gogol realises, 'has never wished she were anyone other than herself'), the Ratliffs have no need of the signifying security of a mailbox; for the Gangulis, an immigrant family whose social position is far more unstable, the mailbox becomes a symbol of their tentative claim to their 'small patch of America'. Once Gogol has moved into the Ratliffs' house, a 'willing exile from his own life', the 'metal box' at his own apartment from which he collects his mail becomes his only connection with his old life; it is, significantly, 'nameless', the person to whom that mail is sent is ceasing to exist.

Popular Cultural References

A novel with a protagonist named after a famous Russian writer is bound to contain significant intertextual references to canonical literary texts; indeed many of the scholarly accounts of the novel have focused on the relationships between Lahiri's text and Nikolai Gogol's 'The Overcoat'. I want to focus on Lahiri's use of popular cultural references because it exemplifies further the ordinariness of her style. I'm about a year older than Gogol (born August 1968) and recognise how acutely Lahiri skewers the pretentious cultural interests of the 1980s middle-class teenager (I never grew a goatee but, like Gogol, I listened to Charlie Parker and Elvis Costello, and read Nietzsche).

She does especially clever things with Gogol's Beatles obsession. In the scene discussed earlier dealing with Ashoke's present, Gogol is listening to the Beatles' *White Album*, specifically to side three of the double LP which includes a track called 'Birthday'. Its choice isn't accidental. At the moment when Ashoke is offering Gogol the unappreciated link to his family heritage, he's listening to an album which is literally white, connecting him to a set of Western cultural practices and values (although ironically many of the songs on the record were written while the Beatles were on a rather ill-fated retreat in India, so Gogol isn't separating himself from his Indian culture as much as he'd like to think). The choice of the *White Album* rather than another of the Beatles' 13 studio albums also connects to the novel's key motif of 'good' and 'pet' names. Although the *White Album* is what the record is usually called because of its simple white sleeve design, its 'real' name is *The Beatles*, the pet name becoming, like Gogol's own, a good name. Later, in the short chapter describing Gogol's solitary activities in New York when he believes Moushumi to be away at a conference, he listens to the Beatles' *Abbey Road* which contains their final recordings and includes a song called 'The End', a clear indication to the reader that Gogol's marriage is doomed. Lahiri's pop cultural references almost invariably do more than locate the narrative in a certain social moment; they contribute to the novel's ideas and themes just as powerfully as her more conventional literary intertexts.

The Unremarkable Details of Ordinary Life

Unlike other postcolonial novels dealing with the immigrant experience (Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss*, Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* to name only a few), *The Namesake* eschews grander geo-political concerns and focuses instead on the unremarkable details of ordinary life. It is appropriate then that many of the aspects of meaning-making discussed here are subtle and undemonstrative. This is not to suggest that *The Namesake* isn't a political novel but rather to argue that Jhumpa Lahiri shows us that the immigrant identity is constructed by small shifts in personal and familial relationships, and that the nuanced and understated aspects of her style discussed here – small alterations of narrative viewpoint, the symbolism of everyday objects, the significance of pop cultural references – function almost as a metaphor for that incrementally evolving dynamic. If, as Arundhati Roy puts it in *The God of Small Things*, Great Stories are

> the ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don't deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don't surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in

then surely *The Namesake* qualifies as a Great Story and one that richly repays attention given to the ways in which it shapes its meanings.

George Norton teaches English at Paston Sixth Form College in North Norfolk.

Author's Note

I should probably say this at the end of every article I write but this one really couldn't have existed without the insights of my students at Paston, especially Charlie Williams-Burchell and Sarah Rigby, my fellow Beatlemaniac, who came up with those brilliant ideas about the *White Album*.

Flaticon

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- Dr Priya Gopal on Postcolonial Literature

KEEPING

The Silence of Gertrude in *Hamlet*

Clare Gunns questions readings of Gertrude that minimise her importance, arguing rather that her character is ripe for rich interpretation. Shakespeare, she argues, offers us plenty of scope for thinking about Gertrude's invidious position, which is at the heart of the play, rather than peripheral to it.

From a critical perspective, Gertrude has suffered because she is most often constructed as the mother of Hamlet, or wife of Claudius, rather than being analysed as a character in her own right. In fact, Shakespeare gives her just 155 lines, fewer than any of the major characters and around just four percent of the total lines in the play, so it is perhaps understandable that she is treated as somewhat of a bystander in terms of the tragedy. However, by analysing Gertrude's language and understanding her presence on stage, one can discover unexpected depths both to her own individual drama and role within the play as a whole.

MUM

Angus Wright as Claudius, Andrew Scott as Hamlet, Juliet Stevenson as Gertrude. Manuel Harlan, with permission of Almeida Theatre and Emma Holland PR

Benjamin Boucvalt as Hamlet and Ginger King as Gertrude, 2010.
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Why is Gertrude Ignored?

Gertrude's motivations for marrying Claudius are largely missing from academic criticism, and the focus on her construction as a mother, even more so. Carolyn Heilbrun, writing in 1957, sought to redress the balance. She pointed out that critical views by male critics such as A.C. Bradley who calls her 'very dull and very shallow', and Harley Granville-Barker who describes her as 'but a passive part in the action of the play' are misinterpreting the language of Shakespeare in his time and removing her importance as a major influence on the plot. Yet still, Gertrude is ignored or vilified as the audience continues to focus on Hamlet's interpretation of events.

Is this because the play *itself* chooses to ignore potentially fruitful and fascinating angles on Gertrude's plight, rather than a failure of critical interpretation of the play? For instance, in events before the play begins, we can suppose that Gertrude, keenly aware of her loss of power through the death of old Hamlet, might seek to stabilise her precarious political position through marriage to Claudius, the new King. This was not unusual in Tudor times; indeed Henry VIII's first wife, Catherine of Aragon, was initially married to his elder brother, Arthur, and after his death, was wedded to Henry in order to continue an alliance with Spain. However, Shakespeare constructs Gertrude through the eyes of Hamlet, who sees her new relationship as one of lust, rather than strategy. Perhaps like any son he finds the idea of his mother as an object of sexual desire an embarrassment, and Shakespeare conveys Hamlet's distaste by lumping her in with the extended metaphor of degradation that pervades Elsinore.

Reading Gertrude Against the Grain

However, there are some aspects of her presentation by Shakespeare that could be read rather differently than critics traditionally have done, giving Gertrude more strength and depth as a character, providing more scope for audience reflection. In Act 1 Scene 2, the initial on-stage encounter between mother and son conveys Gertrude's authority, and the relationship is shown to be mainly positive; Hamlet is not angry with her, but with Claudius. Gertrude issues imperatives, 'cast thy knighted colour off,' (1.2 l.68) and 'Go not to Wittenberg.' (1.2 l.119) where Hamlet pointedly explains he will obey her, rather than Claudius. Equally, she establishes her concern for him and praises his father as 'noble'(1.2 l.71), recognising it is difficult when mourning the death of a parent, but challenging her son that it is time to look forward.

As a queen, too, despite the lack of speaking lines, Gertrude retains her power by her very presence on stage. (Gertrude is on stage in 10 scenes, compared with 11 for Claudius and 14 for Hamlet.) She is privy to the visit from the ambassadors of Norway in Act 1 and is a companion to Claudius during official appointments such as the play. She guides conversations, instructing Polonius to hurry up in his speech, and participates in questioning Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about her son.

Private Mother, Public Queen

It is here then, that the real interest in her as a character is revealed, as the dual roles of queen and mother begin to become problematic for Gertrude and her power wanes as she attempts to fulfil the desires of both her husband and son. For example, after all of their plans have failed to establish the reasons for Hamlet's behaviour, Polonius suggests that Gertrude should be employed as a last attempt:

> Let his Queen mother all alone entreat him
> To show his grief…
> If she find him not,
> To England send him
>
> 3.1. l.183-187

Gertrude's public and private personas become increasingly mixed and as Hamlet and Claudius recognise this duality in Gertrude, both mistrust her, or think that she represents the other's interests more.

In the closet scene, for instance, Hamlet accuses her of duplicity by labelling her,

> the Queen, your husband's brother's wife,
> And were it not so, you are my mother.
> 3.4 l.16-17

The last comment is meant to hurt the most – it is an outright rejection of her love – but Hamlet is correct in that she is, as he speaks, conspiring with her husband against him. She is failing in her loyalty to her son and thus her reaction to him is not as strong as it could have been if she knew she was innocent. For instance, Lisa Jardine points out that she continues to use the formal 'you'(3.4 l.18) rather than the familiar 'thou' (3.4 l.10) with which she began her telling off. What is also interesting about this scene is that the presence of Polonius indicates Claudius' own mistrust of Gertrude. Her seeming lack of understanding is also ripe for interpretation. Reading the subtleties of pronoun use, and the detail of what is said, reveals much. Speaking little does not mean that a lot isn't going on under the surface.

Scope for Interpretation

There are a number of opportunities in this scene for directors to explore the character of Gertrude, which have implications for the drama as a whole. For instance, it is only when Hamlet is absolutely explicit, in this scene, that she seems to understand why he is so upset. Is this blindness, a reluctance to acknowledge what she secretly understands, or a sign of how little she really knows about the machinations of Claudius?

Claudius clearly doubts Gertrude's feelings for him are as strong as her love for Hamlet, understanding that as mothers, 'nature makes them partial' (3.3 l.33) and entrusts Polonius to watch on his behalf. Thus, although we watch the closet scene knowing that Gertrude is deceiving Hamlet, we must also be aware that she knows she is also being watched and judged. Once her husband's spy is dead, she is free to ask Hamlet, 'What shall I do?' (3.4 l.182) as an indication of her loyalty to him once more.

Ending as Mother not Queen?

As soon as Gertrude appears to give up her role as a sexual object, it could be argued, Hamlet reclaims his ability to act. She sacrifices her power and position in court for her son, and is similarly spurred on to act against her new husband during the final scene of the play. Gertrude's final words and actions suggest that Claudius was correct to question her loyalty to him over Hamlet. Marguerite Tassi explains that choosing to oppose Claudius in public helps Gertrude to make amends for her guilt and simultaneously prompts Hamlet into killing Claudius and avenging their family unit.

There is debate over Gertrude's knowledge of whether the wine is poisoned or not, or when she realises, although her movements on stage show that she 'openly goes over to Hamlet's 'side' leaving the throne and the King' before deliberately defying Claudius' order not to drink from the cup. Tassi notes that there is a clear gap of five syllables in the rhythm between Claudius' line and Gertrude's, and it is in this space that Shakespeare makes it clear that she understands Claudius is trying to poison Hamlet and sacrifices herself in his place. Her last words directly oppose her husband's attempts to cover his actions as she clarifies that she is not fainting because of the blood, but because 'I am poisoned.' (5.2 l.305).

However, she is still not explicit in her accusation of Claudius at this point, leaving it to Laertes to declare, 'the King's to blame'. (5.2 l.314). Indeed, Hamlet suggests Gertrude will be in hell when he tells Claudius to 'Follow my mother' (5.2 l.321) and labels her 'Wretched Queen' (5.2 l.327) in a last denial of their bond so that, even in death, Gertrude's dual roles and motivation are questioned by her son.

Gertrude may not have the lines of dialogue of the other main characters, but it could be argued that this space allows directors to explore the reactions of the protagonist and antagonist to her wavering allegiances. By carefully reading her actions and presence on stage, reading between the lines and noticing the shifts in her words and behaviour, recent critics have demonstrated that far from minimising her drama, Shakespeare's presentation of her places Gertrude at the very heart of the play.

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Where do we find the literary? EVERYWHERE!

Teacher Gabi Reigh investigates whether a rigid division between the literary and non-literary is either desirable or possible, arguing that many so-called non-literary texts, whether in print or other media, draw on literary conventions as part of the very nature of what they're doing.

The study of A Level Language and Literature involves the exploration of relationships between literary and non-literary texts. Superficially, we tend to think of literary and non-literary texts as polar opposites, the former characterised by rich metaphorical language and carefully plotted narratives, while the latter is perceived as being entirely dependent on objective factual sources, with a radically different set of linguistic features. However, it is possible instead to see all texts on a continuum, occupying different positions on the spectrum of 'literariness'. For a start, there is literary non-fiction – forms like diaries, autobiographies or travel writing that are written to be read in the same way one might read a novel but are based on real events and experiences rather than invented ones. These clearly position themselves close to the 'literary' end of the spectrum. However, it could also be argued that non-literary factual texts, with a readership or audience that is not expecting something 'literary', such as newspaper articles or reality TV transcripts, often exhibit features which we normally associate with literary texts, such as the use of imagery or conventional plot structures, in order to persuade or entertain their audiences.

Defining 'Literariness' – Metaphor

'Literariness' is usually a concept we associate with fiction. Some theorists have argued that one of the key distinguishing features of such works is the use of metaphorical language. In his 1917 essay 'Art and Device', the Russian literary critic and linguist Victor Shklovsky aimed to

define the intrinsic qualities of literary texts by stating that:

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived, and not as they are known.

According to Shklovsky, metaphors are used in literary texts in order to 'defamiliarise' ordinary events and present them in a new light. For example, in *Great Expectations*, the protagonist Pip is threatened by a convict he encounters on the marshes and forced to bring him supplies. As he watches the convict eating, he is reminded of the image of a dog devouring his food. Dickens uses a simile to present the scene through Pip's homodiegetic narration:

> The man took strong sharp sudden bites, just like the dog.

By superimposing two familiar images, that of a dog and that of a man eating a pie, we are presented with the 'sensation' of Magwitch's desperation and ravenous hunger, and we 'perceive' Pip's fear and disgust towards him.

Barthes and Mythologies

However, it is clear that metaphorical language permeates every aspect of our lives – it is part of the way we think about ourselves and create narratives about our world. It is there in our use of idioms (as dead metaphors, such as 'raining cats and dogs' or 'speak of the devil', as well as more freshly minted ones such as 'the glass ceiling'). But metaphorical language in a more 'crafted' sense can be found not only in literary texts such as novels or poetry, but also in many non-literary texts. Newspaper articles, particularly from the tabloids, constantly use imagery and hyperbole to engage the reader and manipulate their sympathies. The French literary theorist Roland Barthes commented on the way the language of the mass media uses symbolism to create particular 'sensations' in their audience, rather than simply delivering objective factual information. In the preface to his collection of essays *Mythologies*, Barthes wrote that his aim was to deliver

> an ideological critique bearing on the language of so-called mass culture.

He expressed

> a feeling of impatience at the sight of the 'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up reality.

His essays looked at the way real objects or people, such as the actress Greta Garbo, are presented in the press through imagery which recreates them as cultural symbols or 'myths' – in other words, literary constructs.

Amanda Knox – The Myth of the 'Black Widow'

The same theory can be applied to the presentation of Amanda Knox in the media in more recent times. In 2007, Knox was convicted of the murder of her flatmate Meredith Kercher in Perugia, where they were both studying. Looking at newspaper articles written about her, it is possible to see that metaphors and patterns of imagery are used in order portray her as a charismatic, yet villainous character. In her column in *The Sun* newspaper, Louise Mensch described the press representation of the investigation as a 'macabre soap opera'. Even after her acquittal in 2011, the media's fascination with Knox continued, as she appeared in a Netflix documentary, wrote her memoirs, and was even the subject of a play. The 'mythologising' of Amanda Knox in the tabloids calls to mind recognisable literary constructs, such as the stock characters of 'The Black Widow' and 'The Femme Fatale'. Mirroring the iconography of these characters, Knox was stereotyped as a seductive, yet manipulative sociopath. Far from being factual or objective, the language of the news coverage of her case was laden with metaphors and emotive language. An article from the *Daily Star* (1.2.2014) used both metaphor and language from the semantic field of artifice: she was described as an 'Ice Maiden', her 'glamorous' 'veneer' hiding the heart of a 'magnetic and manipulative' killer; a 'brilliant actress' who 'paint[ed] herself as a warm, loving human being' and shamelessly promoted herself as a 'TV star'.

Narrative Structure – The World's Strictest Parents

Another defining aspect of literary texts such as novels and drama is the way they use particular narrative structures. Aristotle's *Poetics* provides one of the earliest theories of what the structure of a literary text should be. When defining the elements of the 'complex plot' in tragedy, he outlines that it should involve events which evoke fear and pity in the audience as they witness the suffering of the protagonist. The drama reaches its climax as the hero experiences a change of fortunes and undergoes the process of **anagnorisis** – a

moment when they finally understand the cause of their suffering. This plot structure finds an echo in another literary genre, the **bildungsroman**. This genre, which has its origins in the novels of Goethe in the 18th century, uses a formulaic plot structure which charts the development of a young person who, after enduring suffering and experiencing conflict, finally matures and gains a greater understanding of the world.

Despite the fact that 'Reality TV' is supposed to be unscripted and spontaneous, it is possible to see how episodes of programmes such as *The World's Strictest Parents* have been edited in such a way as to follow the narrative structures outlined above. In an episode first aired on Sunday 17th October 2010, Tamsin, a teenager from Brighton, is sent to New Jersey to be 'reformed' by the world's strictest fathers. The narrative here certainly fulfils Aristotle's definition in *Poetics* of a 'complex plot' which provokes shock and pity towards the protagonist's actions and results in a change of her fortunes by the end of the 60 minutes. Like all the episodes in this series, Tamsin's 'story' involves anagnorisis but with a happy ending that is plotted in terms of the conventions of a bildungsroman. Typically, it begins with the protagonist's journey, in this case from Brighton to New Jersey. There is also a conflict between the young character and her parents, who are concerned that she is taking drugs. However, with the help of 'the world's strictest parents', Tamsin experiences anagnorisis as she becomes aware of the need to change her self-destructive behaviour but, unlike Aristotle's tragedy trajectory, the typical bildungsroman goal of maturity is reached. The narrator of the programme stresses the need for Tamsin to confess her failings and embrace society's values through a series of metaphors such as

> Tamsin's drug use is a major barrier between her and her parents

and

> The dads are slowly getting Tamsin to open up.

All the episodes in the series share the same ending, sceptically described by Sam Wollaston in a review in the *Guardian*:

> By the end of week they're all hugs and kisses and love-yous and tears at the airport and stay-in-touches.

According to Wollaston, what we see here is just as much a fictional construct, as a simple depiction of real life, because it is

> television. Nothing more; and to think it's anything else, or that anything or anyone is really being addressed, or changed, or helped would be a mistake.

In *The World's Strictest Parents* we see how even the most 'natural' recording of human behaviour has been edited to follow the conventions of a well-known narrative structure in order to create an entertaining 'drama' for the audience.

'The Literary Mind'

So if literary and non-literary texts have many similarities in terms of the metaphorical language and plot structures which they use, how does this help us understand what is 'literariness'? On the one hand, it is possible to argue that tabloid journalists or TV producers deliberately include literary features in their texts or programmes in order to engage and entertain their audiences by creating strong emotional responses. However, as suggested previously, some theorists have contended that 'literariness' is something which is fundamental to all of our communication and even our thinking. For the cognitive scientist Mark Turner, author of *The Literary Mind – the Origins of Thought and Language*, the presence of imagery and other literary qualities in everyday communication or newspaper articles should come as no surprise. In his book, Turner contests the idea that 'literariness' is a kind of 'special performance' only to be found in fiction or that language is 'built up from the sober to the exotic'. Instead, Turner argues that the 'literary' is right there from the beginning, an essential part of how we make sense of the world. In particular, he looks at the way that parables have been used to explore our place in space and time and to help us understand life. 'Parable', Turner states:

> is the root of the human mind – of thinking, acting, knowing, creating, and plausibly even thinking.

According to Turner, 'the literary' – be it metaphor, parable, or narrative structure – is present in all texts because it is central to our rationalisation of our experiences and our communication with others. Turner concludes:

> Language is the child of the literary mind.

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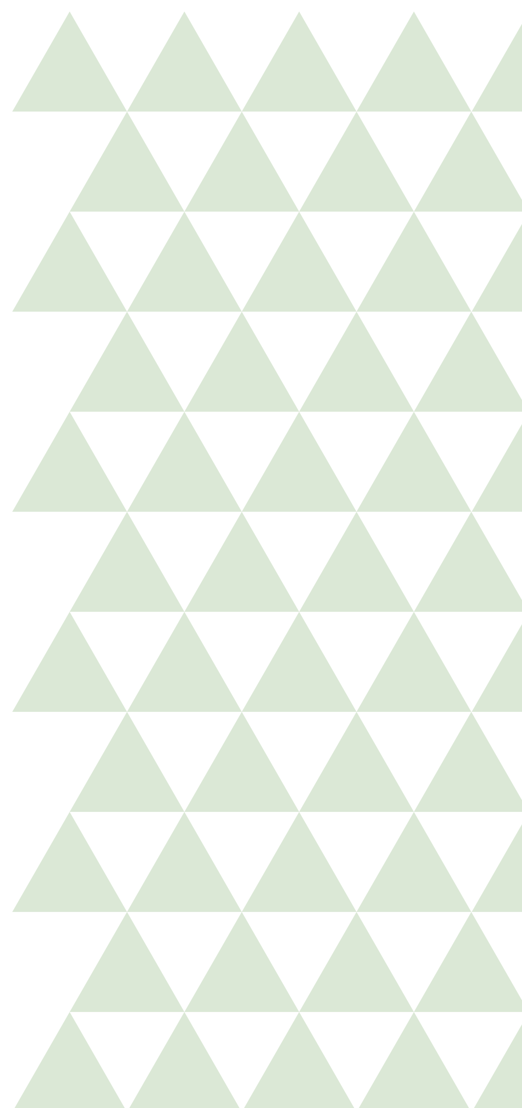

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Native Son

The soul frets in the shadow

Although *Native Son* is over 70 years old, Richard Wright's narrative voice still resonates, especially in the context of today's America of cultural suspicion and racial tension. Roshan Doug explores the sense of exclusion and yearning for the unattainable at the heart of Bigger's tragedy.

In this article, I want to illustrate how the main protagonist in Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), Bigger Thomas, is a complex character who personifies the concerns of black America by becoming the mouthpiece of the author. The politics of race are central to this novel.

Often what characters in novels want, their raison d'être, is the very thing that is the cause of their greatest anguish. The fiction shows them struggling to come to terms with a sense of exclusion, loss or desire for something they cannot yet attain. James Joyce's protagonist, Stephen Dedalus illustrates this powerfully in the seminal text *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when he comments on the speech of his English dean that represents for him a world from which he feels excluded. This is speech that he finds unsettlingly foreign and unfamiliar but desperately wishes to inhabit and make his own:

> The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language.

We see the echoes of this paradox in *Native Son*. It is a novel about racial tension in USA, communal inequity and black subjugation. But to many readers, it is also a portrayal of a distinct dichotomy in which African Americans find themselves as the subject of racial segregation. They serve a capitalist society that creates economic alienation. They themselves are excluded, ostracised from the social privileges that come with that capital, such as titles, class, education, clubs and political contacts. It is what the French sociologist and philosopher, Pierre Bourdieu refers to as 'social capital'.

Yet, ironically, the very thing Bigger yearns for – wealth and materialism, brought about through capitalist exploitation – is the very thing that binds him to poverty and injustice, creating the unrest of his spirit. The world he inhabits is strange and alienating. It keeps him 'at bay'. Writer and social critic, James Baldwin, Wright's protégé, develops this idea of social and racial disconnectedness in his perspective of white society:

> These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine; the cathedral at Chartres says something to them which it cannot say to me, as indeed would New York's Empire State Building, should anyone here ever see it. Out of their hymns and dances come Beethoven and Bach. Go back a few centuries and they are in their full glory – but I am in Africa, watching the conquerors arrive.
>
> Baldwin, 1953

Complex, Psychological, Conflicting

In *Native Son* we witness Bigger Thomas wanting equality of opportunity – the very area in which his 'soul frets in the shadows'. The protagonist arouses polarised feelings: on the one hand, empathy and understanding and, on the other, indignation, horror and condemnation when he murders a white girl, Mary Dalton. This is because Wright illustrates the plight of the black people with both humour, understanding and sensitivity. His text acts both as an artistic work of fiction and psychological documentary that paints a realistic though complex picture of the main protagonist.

The story centres on Bigger Thomas a 20-year-old 'son' who lives in a slum and is denied all prospects of breaking 'the mind-forged manacles' placed on him by the racist America of the 1930s. With little elementary education he knows how deeply entrenched in poverty he and his fellow black people are. He gets involved in crime, mainly petty robberies. For Bigger, even the harsh sentences passed on black people for these crimes, exemplify the injustice. Jealousy, anger and hatred naturally build up, elements brought about by a capitalist system that thrives on inequity. Bigger is aware that it is no longer slavery but capitalism that 'shackles' him. He highlights this in his recognition of his own oppression:

> 'They don't let us do nothing.'
> 'Who don't?'
> 'The white folks!'

Later he acknowledges that it is the white people who have 'got everything. They own the world.'

Richard Wright and Gloria Madison, on-set of the Film, "Native Son" directed by Pierre Chenal, 1951. Glasshouse Images/Alamy Stock Photo

The hardship of the depression is captured when Bigger is offered employment by an employment relief agency. The job is as a chauffeur at the Dalton's palatial residence. Although it is something, the meagre salary will barely support him, let alone his family as well. Initially, it is the inadequacy of the employment that preys on his mind.

Alienation, Powerlessness, Confusion

Later, upon taking employment with Mr Dalton, he notes the mansion and the household. The opulence is so far removed from his own local familiarity with the 'Black belt' ghetto in Chicago that he feels a sense of alienation. When Mary and her boyfriend extend a proverbial hand of understanding, friendship and camaraderie, Bigger Thomas is unable to equate this with genuine compassion and, instead, treats it as a manufactured and patronising gesture of certain class sensibilities. Bigger is further perplexed when Jan and Mary ask him to take them to his neighbourhood, the 'Black belt' to get a feel of what life is like in such a ghetto. It is condescension at the deepest level but it is the power imbalance that bothers and shames Bigger. This sense of powerlessness comes to a climax when Bigger's mother comes to see the Daltons pleading for his life:

> 'Is you Mrs. Dalton?' she asked.
> Mrs. Dalton moved nervously, lifted her thin, white hands and tilted her head.
> Her mouth came open and Mr. Dalton placed an arm about her.
> 'Yes,' Mrs. Dalton whispered.
> 'Oh, Mrs. Dalton, come right this way,' Buckley said hurriedly.
> 'No; please,' Mrs. Dalton said. 'What is it, Mrs. Thomas?'
> Bigger's mother ran and knelt on the floor at Mrs. Dalton's feet.
> 'Please, mam!' she wailed. 'Please, don't let 'em kill my boy! You know how a mother feels! Please, mam […] We live in your house […] They done asked us to move […] We ain't got nothing […]'
> Bigger was paralyzed with shame; he felt violated.

His subjugation and submission to white middle class community is cemented.

Baldwin – A Contrived Political Statement

Despite its success, Baldwin described the novel as contrived and synthetic, where the characters are artificially brought together to highlight the themes of

segregation, economic deprivation, poverty and inequality. To him the plot pushes the boundaries of credulity because Bigger Thomas is all too knowing, especially in the early part of the novel when Wright evidently places Bigger as someone more intelligent, more in tune with the politics of race than his friends and peers. To Baldwin, the didactic element interferes with the Art because the text becomes, to him at least, a mere political statement. Further on, the humanity and compassion Jan shows even after his discovery that Bigger killed his fiancée, is rather utopian, idealistic and thus implausible.

Critiques of Bigger – Justifiable or Not?

There is little doubt that Wright was using Bigger Thomas as a device to lecture his readers about the imbalance of wealth distribution, about America's unfair treatment of black people and the inhumanity of its ignorance – or cold indifference at their plight. However, for some readers and commentators, including black writers, the representation of Bigger Thomas has been quite contentious. There has been some debate about whether Wright plays into the stereotypes of the aggressive black male or does something more radical with him (and his readers). For instance, both Baldwin and Fanon argue that Bigger's propensity to crime, his anger, his hatred and his partiality to violence suggest Wright is negating the positive image of the black male. But it could be argued that Wright is, unapologetically, painting a complex psychological picture of Bigger Thomas, portraying incongruous and conflicting feelings that are themselves capable of both arousing the same kind of conflicting feelings in the reader – both deep empathy and sheer abhorrence.

Even today, over three quarters of a century later, *Native Son* continues to resonate with readers who are perturbed about race politics and the ever-growing tide of cultural antagonism. Wright's concerns are re-contextualised and echoed in the protest campaign, Black Lives Matter and Trump's explicit vilification of Muslims, Mexicans and immigrants. They act as a reminder of social and cultural inequities and the kinds of prejudice which black people have to navigate. The disparity between wealth and abject poverty – personified by mainly black communities residing in ghettoes and the disproportionate number of black men in prisons in relation to their white counterparts – is indicative of how, more than class, race is the core of civil unrest sweeping through America. Even today, black people remain excluded from wealth, privilege and cultural and symbolic capital which the upper strata of white society enjoys. Like Bigger, black people's souls continue to fret in the shadows of racial inequality and injustice.

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Ariel
in The Tempest

Servitude and Freedom

The Tempest at the Barbican (press image)

John Hathaway uses multiple readings to question conventional thinking about Ariel's relationship with Prospero and suggest that perhaps 'delicate Ariel' has more power than his master. He draws on postcolonial perspectives, psychoanalytic readings, theatrical interpretations by directors and even a re-writing by Margaret Atwood.

The Tempest at Shakespeare's Globe (press image)

It is perhaps fitting that a character who is described variously as 'brave spirit', 'delicate Ariel' and 'tricky spirit', and who is so strongly associated with the elements of air and water, should be so difficult to pin down in any concrete form. For such a major and instrumental role, Ariel remains fluid, mobile and changing throughout *The Tempest*. His importance as a character can be usefully explored through his relationship with Prospero and a consideration of the power that he wields.

Master and Servant Relationships

The only character who is aware of Ariel's existence is Prospero, and it is highly significant that it is Ariel alone who is privy to Prospero's plans and ambitions. This foregrounds the relationship between these two characters, making void any assessment of Ariel's role or function that does not consider how he relates to Prospero. Ariel, on the one hand, is often viewed as having a loving, close relationship with his master. He delights in serving Prospero, and is eager to show his devotion, asking for work:

To thy strong bidding, task
Ariel and all his quality

and

What shall I do? Say what? What shall I do?

In a play that examines master/servant relationships from a number of different angles, Ariel is an example of a servant who loves his master and seeks affirmation of that love when he poignantly asks 'Do you love me, master?' He fulfils his duties precisely, and, in addition, acts to protect Prospero, warning him of Caliban's plot to usurp him. As such, he is clearly juxtaposed to Caliban, who is repeatedly referred to as Prospero's 'slave' and openly defies his master. In contrast, Prospero calls Ariel his 'chick', reflecting an almost paternal, nurturing relationship. The 2016 RSC production captured this dynamic in Prospero and Ariel's relationship when Ariel left the stage slowly and reluctantly to embrace his freedom, at one point turning back to his master, before leaving Prospero bereft and alone, deserted by the one character that knew him unlike any other.

A Postcolonial Reading

However, it is also possible to view Ariel's relationship with Prospero in a more cynical way, particularly if a postcolonial reading is applied to the play. Jonathan Miller's 1970 production of the play cast Ariel as an educated slave who desired to seize power when Prospero left the island. The play ended with Ariel brandishing Prospero's broken staff menacingly towards Caliban, who was portrayed as an uneducated slave working in the fields. Seen in this light, Ariel is just as contemptuous and resentful of Prospero as Caliban is. The only difference is that Ariel seeks to deceive Prospero and convince him of his faithfulness and loyalty as a deliberate strategy in order to gain power. Whereas

Caliban repeatedly challenges Prospero, Ariel only makes this mistake once, asking 'Is there more toil?'. The word 'toil' is particularly significant, reflecting the fact that his acts of service are not joyfully completed out of love, but are necessary acts of compliance. It is perhaps fitting that Ariel is a character associated with illusion as he seeks to fool Prospero with the illusion of his servitude, whilst constantly agitating for his freedom beneath this veneer. His repeated references to Prospero as 'potent master' and 'noble master' can thus be viewed as nothing more than obscuring flattery. It was Sam Mendes who in his 1993 production most infamously expressed this view of Ariel. When granted his freedom, Ariel spat in Prospero's face, drawing gasps from the shocked audience. In fact, so unpopular was this that Mendes altered the production, having Ariel withdraw from the stage defiantly without spitting. Arguably the audience reaction reflects how easy it is for us to be taken in by the myth of Prospero's supposedly benevolent dictatorship. In a postcolonial reading, Ariel's shocking act of spitting in Prospero's face confronts the audience with the true nature of Prospero's totalitarian control, drawing clear parallels with colonial relationships.

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A Victim of Rhetoric

Margaret Atwood, when discussing her rewrite of *The Tempest*, *Hag Seed*, called Ariel 'Prospero's special effects guy'. Such a view relegates Ariel to the position of second fiddle to Prospero. After all, Ariel in many ways acts as Prospero's stage manager, enacting his plans and fulfilling his purposes. He keeps the various groups of characters separate and leads them around the island, only allowing them to converge when Prospero wills it. In addition, he magically creates the Masque scene and himself takes the role of harpy to allow Prospero to succeed in his goal of presenting marriage as a social (and not a sexual) union and confronting the courtiers with their wrongdoings. Prospero himself tells Ariel after the harpy scene that

Of my instruction hast thou nothing bated
In what thou hadst to say.

Ariel can thus be viewed as nothing more than a performing puppet, fulfilling every wish of his master.

And yet it is Ariel and not Prospero that appears to have most power. After all, the only acts of magic that Prospero enacts in the play are putting Miranda to sleep, causing Ferdinand to drop his sword and drawing a magic circle. Some productions rob even these deeds from him, giving them to an invisible Ariel to perform. This begs the question: if Ariel is more powerful than Prospero, why does he serve him? Caliban is tortured for his disobedience, and yet Ariel does not face the same kinds of punishment that Caliban frequently faces. Perhaps the only power that Prospero has over Ariel is the power of rhetoric: he bullies Ariel into serving him and makes him believe that he is indebted to Prospero and in his control. This explains why Prospero, in the space of a few lines, moves from calling Ariel 'my brave spirit' to denouncing him as a 'malignant thing'. Prospero's monthly recounting of how he saved Ariel from Sycorax's torture very firmly casts himself in the role of saviour:

It was mine art… that made gape
The pine and let thee out.

This of course does nothing to hide the fact that Prospero threatens a similar but more severe punishment on Ariel than he suffered under Sycorax, replacing the 'pine', a soft wood, with a firmer and more solid (and therefore more painful) 'oak' that he will 'peg' Ariel inside. Threaten, however, is all Prospero appears able to do. Arguably, the true tragedy of this play is that Ariel never realises he is imprisoned in nothing more than a cage of words. Orwell wrote

He who controls the past controls the future

and Prospero here (as he does elsewhere in the play) presents his version of the past in order to control and manipulate Ariel in the future. This explains why Prospero continually dangles Ariel's freedom in front of him to ensure his compliance. Prospero recognises that he is nothing without Ariel, and he uses his considerable powers of rhetorical manipulation to control and enslave him.

The Tempest at Shakespeare's Globe (press image)

An Inhuman Human

Psychoanalytical readings of the play, such as Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror*, posit a relationship between Ariel, Caliban and Prospero which sees all three as being inextricably bound together. Ariel represents the super-ego, or Prospero's internal desire to do good, whilst the earthy Caliban represents Prospero's id, or instinctive desires. This is most clearly seen when Ariel confronts Prospero with his own inhumanity, expressing the sympathy that he would feel, 'were I human', when gazing upon the distracted royal party following the harpy scene. Prospero's response to Ariel's pointedly chosen and moving depiction of Gonzalo's suffering is telling:

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself
(One of their kind, that relish all as sharply,
Passion as they) be kindlier moved than thou art?

This section comes just after Prospero's declaration of his total power and control:

At this hour
Lies at my mercy all mine enemies.

Prospero's dangerous delight in having manipulated all of his foes into a position of absolute weakness reflects his desire to take a more permanent form of revenge against those who have wronged him. It is only Ariel, the inhuman alien, who is able to remind Prospero of his own humanity, triggering his epiphany that

The rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance.

Ariel therefore acts as Prospero's moral compass, saving him from turning into a power-crazed despot who commits inhuman acts by leading him towards accepting his own humanity and recognising the danger inherent in the god-like omnipotence that he possesses. Regardless of Ariel's true feelings towards Prospero or questions of who is more powerful, it is this act that fundamentally shapes the play and foreshadows Prospero's renunciation of his magic and release of Ariel. In setting Prospero free from his all-consuming desire for revenge, Ariel himself guarantees his own freedom. His final song in which he celebrates his liberty acts as a thematic coda to the play, allowing the audience to contemplate the freedom that all characters, to a greater or lesser extent, experience as we applaud Prospero's actions after his Epilogue, beguiled until the very end by this masterful manipulator.

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Facebook and a Fractured Society

How Online Communication is Changing Friendship and Politics

What, if anything, is the link between getting annoyed by your friends on Facebook and the fake news epidemic which supposedly led to Brexit and the rise of Donald Trump? This article by Dr Philip Seargeant and Dr Caroline Tagg suggests that an understanding of how people communicate on social media can help us understand the way that society as a whole is changing – and can give insights into how to cope with these changes.

There is apparently a growing trend among people working in Silicon Valley to send their children to schools where the use of iPads and iPhones is banned. They're worried, it seems, about the harmful influence that technology – and particularly social media – can have on the cognitive and social development of their children. They're worried about its addictive nature, the effects it has on the attention span, and the pressures that come from constant and limitless exposure to the online world. In other words, the very people who are responsible for designing this modern online world are now emerging as its leading sceptics. They're the ones now stressing not only about how it's altering the way we communicate, but how it's reconfiguring society as a whole.

Media reaction to sites such as Facebook and Twitter has always swung between naïve idealism and moral panic. For some, social media has great democratising potential. It gives everyone the ability to publish their thoughts and opinions; to have their voices heard. This, so the argument goes, offers potent new ways for people to hold those in power accountable. But for others, social media is responsible for a dumbing down of culture, for the lowering of IQs, and for creating a whole new category of addiction. Research shows that people today touch and swipe their phones on average over two and a half thousand times a day. And for some commentators, there's a direct link between this addiction and the seismic shifts that have taken place in the political landscape in the last couple of years – shifts which are threatening to undermine the idea of democracy as we know it.

Fake News, Personalisation Algorithms and Filter Bubbles

At the centre of this panic over the assault on democracy is the concept of 'fake news'. The phrase 'fake news' can refer to a range of different things these days. At one end of the spectrum it's become a cover-all insult used by politicians to disparage their rivals and to criticise occasional lapses in the 'mainstream media'. At the other end of the spectrum it refers to purposefully fabricated news stories which are spread either for profit (from the advertising revenue they can attract) or for political manipulation. For example, in the aftermath of the recent deadly shooting in Las Vegas, several false news stories were promoted on Facebook and Google which claimed that the gunman was a supporter of the Democratic Party and had an anti-Trump agenda. These stories were entirely made-up, and were spread by political trolls intent on exploiting the tragedy for their own ideological ends – a trend which has become ever more common in recent months.

The reaction in the newspapers to this incident was to blame Facebook and Google for helping the stories to flourish. Ever since the beginning of the 'fake news' panic, this has been the main response: blame the technology for allowing people to manipulate it for their own exploitative purposes. The particular focus for this criticism has been the personalisation algorithms that the companies use. These are designed to feed users stories that are likely to appeal to them, while filtering out ones they'll be less interested in. In theory, this allows Facebook to create a positive, individualised user experience. But what it also does is create so-called 'filter bubbles', whereby users are shielded from ideas and opinions they disagree with. Add to this the fact that news is not editorially scrutinised by the company, and that

Facebook is now used by over two billion people – which is the equivalent of the entire world population only ninety years ago – and you have an environment where misinformation can spread far and wide with great speed and ease.

Technology or a Product of Human Interaction?

There's a lot of sense in this analysis of the situation. But to see it entirely in these terms – and thus to claim that the 'fake news' epidemic is solely a technology issue – is to overlook how people themselves are using this technology. It neglects any consideration of how people's own actions may contribute to the situation, and the way that filter bubbles may in fact not simply be a product of the machines, but of human interaction as well.

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To investigate this issue we carried out a survey of over one hundred Facebook users as part of a research project entitled **Creating Facebook**. The survey was designed to elicit how people viewed Facebook as a forum for communication, why they behaved in the way they did on the site, and how they felt about their experiences on it. To elicit this, one of the questions we asked was whether people were ever offended by what their friends posted on the site, and, if so, what they did in response.

What we found was that people were overwhelmingly offended by political and religious opinions that they disagreed with, as well as by posts they found homophobic or racist. For example, respondents told us:

> I remember defriending one person (friend of a friend) as she kept posting her political opinions that were the complete opposite of mine.

> I know someone who posts quite racist comments. I cannot defriend her so have simply adjusted things so I never see her posts.

> I have a particularly hard time with pro-gun posts...

> Still, I don't think Facebook is really the place that people choose to listen to opposing views, so I usually ignore posts of that nature.

The various responses suggested that, even where someone feels strongly about a topic, they don't engage the person who's made this comment in debate, or publicly denounce them. Instead, they respond by quietly unfriending the offender, blocking their posts from their newsfeed, or simply ignoring them.

The reasons for this are complex but they revolve around two main issues. Firstly, there's the perception, for the respondents in our survey at least, that Facebook isn't really a

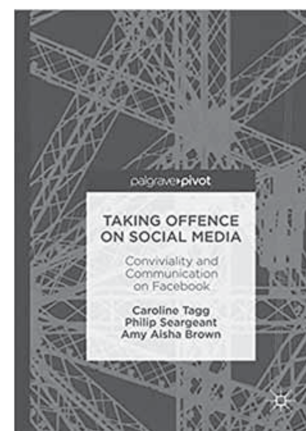
> place [where] people choose to listen to opposing views.

This is partly because the interaction isn't face-to-face, and also because people are keen to maintain a harmonious and convivial environment. The attempt to create 'online conviviality' is prompted by the wide variety of different people that make up any one person's network of 'friends' – a miscellaneous group of parents, extended family, close friends, work colleagues, vague acquaintances and so on – and the attempt people make to manage all these diverse relationships. On the one hand, this diversity appears to increase the chances of any one user being offended, because they're more likely to come into contact with a wide range of different views. On the other hand, it seems to stop them from engaging or arguing with offending posts, as they don't want to provoke too much conflict with their 'friends'.

The True News about the Facebook Experience

So what does any of this have to do with fake news? Firstly, this research shows that people do have access to opposing views on Facebook, and so these aren't completely filtered out by the site's personalisation algorithm. Secondly, rather than filter bubbles being created solely by the technology, it seems that people's own actions contribute to the echo chamber effect by filtering out views with which they disagree. In other words, both the technology and people's own actions combine to create the particular experience that any one user has of Facebook.

What all of this means is that any attempt to find a solution to the problematic relationship between fake news and social media needs to take into account the fact that Facebook isn't only a news-sharing site; it's also still very much a place where social relationships play out. A place where people are often motivated not by the quest for truth but a



desire to come across in a certain way and to align themselves with friends. Whether or not something is 'fake' may be less important than questions regarding who shared it and whether a user is willing to offend them. If we want to tackle the problem of fake news, therefore, we need to take into account the impact that people's desire not to annoy their friends – or to show their annoyance with them – might have on their decisions regarding whether to denounce, ignore or share potentially misleading information.

Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg both lecture in applied linguistics at the Open University. Their most recent book is *Taking Offence on Social Media: Conviviality and Communication on Facebook* (2017, Palgrave Macmillan).

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Sylvia Plath

Reimagining Motherhood

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Brittany Wright explores a much-neglected aspect of the poetry of a poet whose troubled life, early death and marriage to Ted Hughes have threatened to drown out everything else.

Jeannette Winterson once described Plath as a woman born out of time and this characterisation creates the same view of Plath that we often meet in literary criticism of her work. From Plath as naïve, highly-strung schoolgirl to Plath as married victim of male misogyny, we view her with the reverential pity of those who have lived through a feminist revolution and look back through history to salvage the dignity of our less fortunate sisters. It is this feminist appropriation of Sylvia Plath, and tendency to read her poetry through her life, that potentially marginalises important aspects of her poetry and her identity. It is important for us to remember that, as well as being a daughter and a wife, Sylvia Plath was a mother and that motherhood features in her poetry. In the spirit of Plath's own daughter's view, we will analyse three of the *Ariel* poems from the 2004 'Restored Edition' and explore motherhood in the light of the idea that it gave Plath the opportunity to live 'to the fullness of her ability' (Hughes, 2004, p.xvi).

Marginalised Motherhood

The presentation of motherhood in Plath's work is subject to far less scrutiny in academic circles than wider themes of female oppression and mental illness. Although most academic attention is focused on Plath's poetry collections and on her novel *The Bell Jar*, by 1962 she had even written a playscript for the BBC which explored maternal themes. *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices* (1962) foregrounds the importance of Plath's role as mother both in her personal life and in relation to her literary works. Despite Plath's interest in the maternal, some critics have been unimpressed by these explorations. Dobbs (1977) went so far as to assert that Plath

> could not deal with maternity or babies in a positive or hopeful manner and at the same time raise the quality of her writing out of the level of mere verse and into the realm of true poetry

The idea that a presentation of motherhood and high-quality poetry are incompatible seems to have been shared in part by Ted Hughes, who removed two poems focused on motherhood from the original manuscript of Plath's posthumously published *Ariel*. Whilst Hughes' meddling with Plath's last poetic work is often seen as a final act of male suppression of Plath's essentially female genius, it is interesting that two of the poems he dismissed as 'weaker than their replacements' (Hughes, 2004, p.xiii) were 'Magi' and 'Barren Woman', both of which explore the maternal role.

Motherhood as Triumph, Miscarriage as Defeat

In 'Barren Woman', Plath evokes the aching emptiness of miscarriage. The poem was written on 21st February 1961, in the same

month that she experienced this trauma herself. The poem opens with

Empty, I echo to the least footfall

and Plath deliberately evokes the unanticipated silence that she associates with the unexpected loss of her unborn child. Despite Hughes' dismissal of the poem, it seems to me that Plath expertly uses structure in order to create a sense of the speaker's footsteps echoing through the 'museum without statues'. There is parity of line length and rhythm across the two stanzas, creating a Grecian sense of symmetry which also fits her use of metaphor throughout the poem. Far from motherhood being viewed by Plath as negative in this poem, it is depicted as her reason for being, and her perceived failure leaves her bitterly imagining what could have been. The speaker tells us that she imagines herself

with a great public,
Mother of a white Nike

and here is another clue that, for Plath, motherhood is celebratory and should be revered. The 'great public' imagined in the second stanza contrasts with the empty loneliness of the first stanza, suggesting that motherhood, far from being lonely, affords companionship and community.

Furthermore, Plath's reference to Nike, Greek goddess of victory, suggests that part of the pleasure of motherhood is rooted in the legacy that is left behind through the success of one's children. Rather than a preoccupation with her own future here, she wistfully reflects on her missed opportunity to bring another being into the world. Despite the melancholic tone of the poem, Plath, perhaps wryly, contrasts the glory of giving birth to a daughter with the birth of 'several bald-eyed Apollos'. The ambiguity of Plath's imagery, often seen in her treatment of other subjects, is at work here too. Is she contrasting the imagined birth of a victorious daughter with a clutch of lesser sons? Or, perhaps, instead, she is alluding to the association between the Greek god Apollo and poetry, in order to compare the gift of childbirth with what she sees at this point as the inferior consolation of her own creative process of birth as represented in the composition of her poems. In a much earlier journal entry in February 1956, Plath described a short story that had been rejected by *The New Yorker* as 'my baby…a stillborn illegitimate baby' (Plath, 2013, p.106), demonstrating that she had previously linked the creative process to conception and childbirth and could again be referencing this here in her dismissive reference to the 'bald-eyed Apollos' that she could one day bring into the world.

New Confidence as Protector and Advocate

In contrast with the sadness of miscarriage, Plath's poetic treatment of motherhood is both reverential and confident in her earlier poem 'Magi', written in 1960. As with 'Barren Woman', Plath plays with gendered expectations of motherhood by using theological references, alluding to the three wise men (or magi) who attend the birth of Christ, though the title of the poem. The voice of the poem reflects on the contrast between this group of ambiguous, now ungendered visitors, perhaps other mothers or family members and friends, and the vitality of the speaker's daughter. While 'the abstracts hover like dull angels', the voice notes with awe that her daughter is only 'sixth months in the world, and she is able', foregrounding her surprise at the seemingly extraordinary capabilities of her young child. By the end of the poem, the voice has dismissed the goals of 'these papery godfolk' and recognised that, despite their inherent levels of goodness and piety, they are no better at parenting than she is. With a growing confidence in her own role as mother, Plath questions the 'dull angels' with a provocative and damning question:

what girl ever flourished in such company?

Arguably, Plath sets out a vision of childhood and motherhood here that rejects the limitations usually experienced by women in society, asserting the importance of new ways of raising daughters to help them flourish rather than flounder throughout their lives. It is the voice of the poem that is presented as the protector or at least the advocate of the child, suggesting that, through understanding the 'mistake' of previous forms of parenting, she can begin to carve out a new approach in which the power of the mother can in turn empower the daughter.

Acceptance and 'Morning Song'

Whilst he dismissed 'Barren Woman' and 'Magi', Hughes honoured Plath's choice of 'Morning Song' as the opening poem in the *Ariel* collection, perhaps valuing its aesthetic accomplishment and its depiction of a crucial moment of change as Plath reflects on becoming a mother for the first time. Written just two days before 'Barren Woman', 'Morning Song' suggests mixed

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feelings as the speaker crosses the liminal boundary of motherhood. While the first half of the poem focuses on the sounds of the speaker's newborn baby, from its 'bald cry' to the 'moth-breath' of sleep, the speaker's uncertainty about her new role is interrupted in the fifth stanza, reflecting a sense of immediacy and instinctiveness in her depiction of the role of the mother. 'One cry,' the voice tells us, 'and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral'. The quick response to the baby's cry suggests that the baby's 'morning song' allows the speaker to transcend her own uncertainties and doubts by occupying herself with the present moment. The final line of the poem illustrates the power of the baby's cries to hold the mother's attention with the simile 'the clear vowels rise like balloons'. There is a clear sense here of the speaker coming to terms with motherhood and recognising the comfort and value afforded by the unconditional love of a child. It is tempting to regard this as a poem about Plath's own experience of motherhood. If so, perhaps this is even more tragic when the timing of the poem is considered as, despite this poem's positive, transformational mood, the references to the baby as a 'new statue/in a drafty museum' hauntingly foreshadow the setting of the grief-stricken 'Barren Woman' which was written so soon afterwards.

Motherhood as Power

While Plath is often seen as a poet who appeals to the interests of teenage girls and a mistaken idea that they might be fascinated by depression and death, (Greenberg and Klaver, 2009), the representation of motherhood as complex, confusing, but ultimately rewarding in *Ariel* allows us to examine Plath as a poet of life rather than death, and to explore her adult engagement in childbearing and future generations. Instead of defining Plath by her depression, youthful preoccupations, and ultimate suicide, we can see how her poems hold experience up to the light and illuminate it in very different ways, from the everyday experience of a mother watching her children play to the darker experiences of grieving after a miscarriage. In such a way, we can throw off the chains in which feminist literary criticism sometimes imprisons Plath, constricting our view of her. We can reject the image of her as tormented Daddy's girl or scorned wife and instead celebrate poetry that explores, at least to some degree, the power and fulfilment of a woman's role as a mother. This is not to oversimplify Plath's life and work, reinventing her as a formidable and ecstatic matriarch, but rather to reaffirm the poetic value of her reflections on being a mother in the face of the greater emphasis that is often placed on her other relationships.

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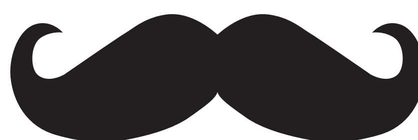
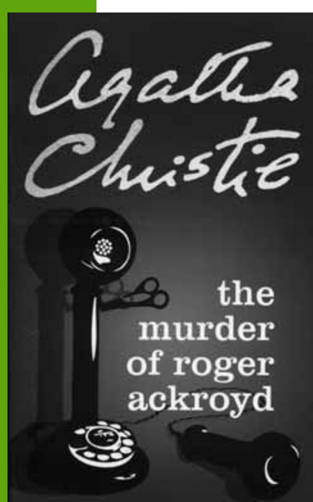
Narrative Voice in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

A QUESTION OF TRUST



Agatha Christie establishes trust in her narrator in ways that we might associate more with a writer like Jane Austen. But is that trust wise? Judy Simons suggests that far from leaving us in the safe, comfortable terrain of classic fiction, Christie draws us into the more murky world of the modern novel, where part of the pleasure for the reader is in having that trust betrayed.



Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence.

As you read this, please don't think that you have wandered into the wrong essay by mistake. I am just using the opening words of Jane Austen's *Emma* as an example of the sort of fiction that underpins Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and to which the later work is deeply indebted. Despite its irony, Austen's sentence invites readers to relax in the safe world of the book, and to trust the all-seeing narrator, who joins in sharing the jokes at the heroine's expense, and who navigates us through the complex, multi-layered text.

As with many 19th-century novels, *Emma's* authorial persona directs the reader how to view and also how to judge the fictional characters, and it conveys a sense of moral certainty that may leave scope for nuanced debate but not for any doubt on issues of moral responsibility. Like a kindly and occasionally angry parent, the voice of classic fiction soothes its audience with its combination of authority and familiarity. It establishes a contract between storyteller and reader, and even in a first

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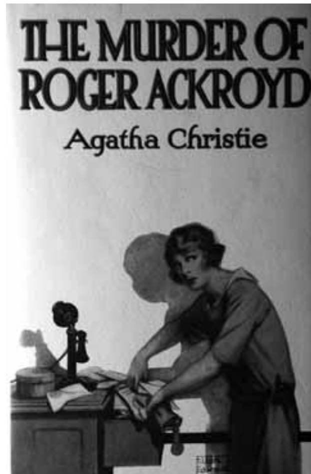


person **bildungsroman**, such as Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, where we might question the protagonist's motives, that voice continues to evoke a recognisable social order and a stable set of values, which frame the human drama. Experience has taught us to accept and adopt the narrator's version of events.

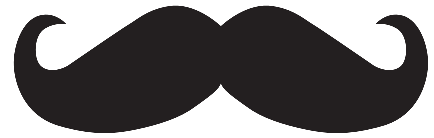
Trusting the Narrative Voice

Many 20th-century novels on the other hand exploit this tradition to subvert readers' expectations, and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, an early example of this approach, is now considered a milestone in the crime fiction genre. Its fundamental premise takes for granted readers' complicity in a predetermined narrative contract. Detective novels enjoy a special relationship with their readers, who assume the role of investigator and consequently become embroiled in the fictional action. As with all whodunnits, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* assembles an intricate puzzle for the reader to solve, but its key trick can only work if we trust the narrative voice. It is Dr Sheppard's perspective that in turn shapes ours.

So, whilst Sheppard's account is scrupulously accurate, his narrative is teasingly incomplete. As Hercule Poirot explains towards the end of the book, when he refers to the 'reticence of the manuscript',

> 'It was strictly truthful as far as it went – but it did not go very far.'

It is what Sheppard omits that is so telling, and the phraseology is intentionally



ambiguous, so that any re-reading immediately suggests alternative interpretations. Initially, however, as gullible readers, we are more than ready to be seduced by Sheppard's measured and objective tone and by his insistence on fidelity and the inclusion of tiny details – aficionados of crime are after all always on the lookout for clues. In the absence of any other guide, Sheppard appropriates the role of author to introduce all the essential information – characters, names, locations and timings – that is required to enable the reader to solve the mystery. Inevitably this has the added effect of deflecting attention away from him to the rest of the dramatis personae.

A Betrayal of Narrative Trust

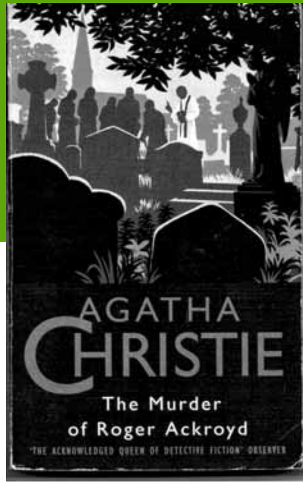
The opening sentences of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* offer a perfect illustration of the betrayal of narrative trust. Do not ignore, incidentally, the significance of the chapter titles in contributing to the obfuscation. 'Dr Sheppard at the Breakfast Table', for instance, not only gives the reader the necessary facts about who and where but is sufficiently mundane to suggest that (if 'murder' did not appear on the book's cover) the sentence which follows –

> Mrs Ferrars died on the night of 16th – 17th September – a Thursday

– could be a routine observation on the part of a doctor who deals with the dying regularly in the course of his professional duties. The domestic setting, another typical feature of Christie's work, helps to create the deliberately limited stage for the action, in which every character is a suspect. How though does it continue?

> I was sent for at eight o'clock on the morning of Friday 17th. There was nothing to be done. She had been dead some hours.
> It was just a few minutes after nine when I reached home once more. I opened the front door with my latchkey, and purposely delayed a few moments in the hall, hanging up my hat and the light overcoat that I had deemed a wise precaution against the chill of an early autumn morning. To tell the truth, I was considerably upset and worried. I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks. I emphatically did not do so. But my instinct told me there were stirring times ahead.

On the face of it, there is nothing to arouse suspicion in this report. It opens with



statements of fact that are incontrovertible. Yet how many of those statements are equivocal? 'There was nothing to be done', says Sheppard. Does he mean that on medical grounds he cannot save the patient, or that as a blackmailer and murderer, he realises he is now in the hands of fate? And why does he delay 'purposely? Why is he 'upset and worried'? The surface rationale is that, as a doctor, he may have misgivings about the circumstances of Mrs Ferrars' death. The other explanation is that his behaviour and feelings are those of a guilty man, who knows that this episode puts him in danger. Similarly, the economy of style and the simple sentence constructions could be thought a reflection of Sheppard's lack of literary sophistication. Yet with hindsight they emerge as a deliberate ploy. As Hercule Poirot drily points out,

> Dr Sheppard has been a model of discretion.

The impression of candour is further strengthened by a series of direct admissions. 'To tell the truth' and 'I am not going to pretend', says the villain winningly, phrases which instil confidence, and, which, while genuine, are central to his technique of evasion.

A Façade of Veracity for the 'Common Reader'

In playing with the conventions of classic fiction, Christie was also responding to the literary trends of her age. The detective novel was enjoying a golden moment in the years between the two world wars. And whilst the avant-garde writing of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf might attract a highbrow audience, the 'common reader' to use Woolf's term, was lapping up realist fiction that depicted a recognisable social order with which middlebrow readers could identify. The determinedly traditional, bourgeois landscape of Christie's novels establishes a comfortable and familiar literary scene, which contributes to the façade of veracity. This is compounded by Sheppard's professional status. The label of doctor (only his sister calls him James), coupled with his narrative authority, signals his personal integrity, and the book's other characters trust him implicitly with the result that their confidence consequently boosts the reader's. In particular, Christie draws on the prototype of Dr Watson, the side-kick of the then most famous medical man in crime fiction, Sherlock Holmes John Watson, honest, straightforward, logical and faithful, is both the narrator of and participant in Conan Doyle's mystery tales, and a perfect foil for the dazzlingly intuitive Holmes. Secure in the fore-knowledge that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* will be a showcase for the talents of its star detective, Hercule Poirot, the reader is predisposed to slot Sheppard into the Watson mould of reliable but dim witness.

An Ingenious Metafictional Surprise

It is only at the very end of the novel that the reader is made aware that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is a metafictional narrative, whereby Sheppard's account of events is itself a fictive artefact to be scrutinised. Suddenly the text changes direction and turns from a boast into a confession. In the final Apologia, Agatha Christie points out the ingenuity of her own authorial technique. 'I am rather pleased with myself as a writer', says Sheppard.

> 'What could be neater, for instance, than the following:
> The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone.
> All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?'

This is an open invitation to readers, naively thinking that there is no more to unravel, to retrace their footsteps, and I defy anyone who has been immersed in the story, trying to outwit Poirot, not to go back and look again at earlier sections to see what clues have been missed. Christie, never one to be overly modest about her work, switches the focus from plot and action to the craft of writing itself. In this way the narrative technique becomes not just a vehicle for relating events but the very heart of the book's achievement.

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Referring with Respect

The Way We Talk about Gender Identity

Margaret Coupe explores the ways in which second-wave feminism, ideas about political correctness and an increasing awareness of the experience of people of trans and non-binary gender have brought significant language change.

Let's start with four fairly recent examples:

1. In Series 4 of the police thriller *Line of Duty* the somewhat unreconstructed male superintendent Ted Hastings, is taken to task by Chief Inspector Roz Huntley for failing to use language which is 'gender-neutral'. He had called her 'darling'.

2. The 2017 MTV Awards had a non-gendered category for 'Best Actor'. Emma Watson, the winner of the award, was pictured in the satirical magazine *Private Eye* holding it and saying: 'I'd like to thank my parent and my parent.'

3. Since 2016 transgender customers with HSBC bank have been able to choose from 10 gender-neutral titles. Those who do not identify as a Mr, Mrs, Miss or Ms will be able to choose from a range of options. These include Mre (an abbreviation of mystery), Msr (a combination of Miss and Sir) and Ind (short for individual). The customer's chosen title will then be used by staff when speaking to them on the phone or in a branch, as well as printed on bank statements and cards.

4. The initialism LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual and Transgender) has now added another letter 'Q' to indicate 'Gender Questioning'. Some have argued that an additional initial 'I' should be added to incorporate intersex individuals (those born with biological characteristics of both sexes).

These four examples could suggest that the language we use to address gender in the 21st century has become a positive minefield or that increasing linguistic sensitivity to the way in which individuals conceive of their gender is being shown.

Looking Back – First-wave Feminism

First-wave feminism was a period of feminism from the 1830s to the early 20th-century. Its main focus was on gaining the right for women to vote. Second-wave feminism started in the USA in the 1960s and really took hold in the UK in the 1970s. It broadened the debate to sexuality, to contraception and abortion, to family, to the workplace, and to legal inequalities. Challenges to what was seen as a patriarchal society resulted in the interrogation of language. Redressing the balance included the introduction of gender-neutral terms, for example 'police officer' for 'policeman' and 'head teacher' for 'headmaster'.

That said, I have a feeling that words like 'history' being replaced by 'herstory' and 'women' being substituted by 'wimmin' to eradicate the morpheme 'men' may have been dreamt up by reactionary figures to discredit the movement.

Until the mid-20th century, the traditional terms of address for men were 'Master' (probably now obsolete) for a boy or young man and 'Mr' for an adult male. Women were 'Miss' until they married, when they became 'Mrs' and took their husband's name. At the risk of sounding like David Attenborough, I could say that perhaps the term 'Mrs' was a way of warding off other males and showing that a woman was no longer available. As a woman was 'given away' in church by her father, this was seen as a way of passing on property. Feminists baulked at this and the term 'Ms', which gave no indication of marital status, was introduced. This was often used on official forms – and still is – but some people have found the word hard to say, even though there was a magazine set up in 1985 called by the phonetic spelling *Mizz*. (It folded in 2013.) Some cynics have argued that whilst Ms may be a neutral term as far as marital status is concerned, it could clearly indicate that one is a feminist.

Many women now keep their birth name on marriage. This was once referred to as 'maiden' name, with its connotations of virginity. In the 1980s I was teaching in an area that could not be called affluent. I noticed a lot of 'double-barrelled' names on my registers. I had always associated these names with the upper class, such as 'Ponsonby-Smythe' or Jeeves and Wooster

characters like 'Gussie Fink-Nottle'. I then realised that couples who wanted some measure of equality in their relationship were putting their surnames together. I have heard of couples blending their surnames to avoid one partner's name being dominant. I recently read an article in the *Guardian* 'Family' section about a couple who had each kept their birth name but had chosen an entirely independent surname for their children based on the place in Zanzibar where they met.

In 2012, the French government banned the word 'Mademoiselle' on the grounds that it was discriminatory, sexist and suggesting virginity and availability. Henceforth the name 'Madame' was to be used for all women and was to be symmetrical with 'Monsieur'. Apparently calling a woman 'Mademoiselle' was a classic chat up line in France, as it was a way of saying a woman didn't look her age. Some people argued that the French government should have looked at wage equality and the 'glass ceiling' rather than changing language. But words matter and can change attitudes. 'Mademoiselle' literally means 'my little hen'. It's unlikely that unmarried men would ever have wanted to tick a box with 'Mon Damoiseau' ('my little bird') the medieval equivalent of 'Ma Demoiselle.'

Transgender, Non-binary or Genderfluid?

Towards the end of the 20th century there was increasing awareness of the experience of those who identified as 'trans' gender. A 'trans' person is someone whose sense of self and gender does not correspond with their sex assigned at birth; or, put another way, that their mental and physical sexes do not align. The etymology of 'trans' is from Latin: it is a prefix meaning 'across, beyond, through, changing thoroughly'. In the late 1990s the word 'cisgender' appeared in various articles. It denotes someone whose gender identity matches the identity they were assigned at birth or that they perform a gender role that society considers in keeping with their sex. The lexeme 'cis' is also of Latin origin and means 'on this side of'. Why did this word emerge? Perhaps to suggest that if there is no word for those whose bodies and brains are aligned, then this privileges and 'normalises' them and marginalises those of transgender.

Another expression which has currency is 'non-binary' gender. This refers to gender identities that are not exclusively masculine or feminine, and which are thus outside of the gender binary. Having a fluctuating gender identity can be termed 'genderfluid'.

The singer Miley Cyrus has described herself thus, as has the cookery writer and activist Jack Monroe. In an interview the latter explained that being 'non-binary transgender' meant it wasn't about transitioning to male. Jack was transitioning to being neither female nor male, or at least a bit of both:

> I want to be treated as a person, not as a woman or a man.

Incidentally, Jack's preferred term of address is Mx.

Personal Pronouns

Use of personal pronouns is a tricky linguistic area as far as gender is concerned. In the late 20th century, in order to move away from an androcentric (male-centred) worldview, the third person female personal pronoun was used in academia. For example: 'If the reader traces these themes, she may find…' In order to avoid privileging the male pronoun first as in 'he or she', the plural form 'they' was often used.

An article in *The Independent* in December 2016 headlined with:

> Oxford University students told to use gender-neutral pronoun ze.

A leaflet distributed by the Student Union urged students to use 'ze' instead of 'he' or 'she' in order to prevent transgender students feeling offended by incorrect pronoun use and to cut down on discrimination on campus. Deliberately using the wrong pronoun for a transgender person is an offence under the university's behaviour code. Human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell welcomed the leaflet, adding:

> This isn't about being PC. It's about respecting people's rights to define themselves as neither male nor female.

In parenthesis, I would like to add that whilst I can see that the Oxford Student Union is being well-meaning, someone, say, who has transitioned from male to female would embrace the pronoun 'she' as it validates their sense of their own gender. Offence would be caused by being referred to as 'he'. In the Royal Exchange Theatre production of *Twelfth Night*, Feste, the fool, was played by a trans woman; in the programme notes, she wrote about her hurt at being referred to by the third person masculine pronoun.

In an article in the *Sunday Times Style Magazine*, the actor Asia Kate Dillon, who identifies as neither man nor woman, is said to prefer the pronouns 'they, them, their'. The writer of the piece heard Dillon being 'misgendered' multiple times by being referred to as 'she' and by the outdated marked term 'actress'. Perhaps all this confusion could be dealt with if the English Language was like Hungarian which does not have gender-specific pronouns?

Respect Reflected in Language

Gender identity is embedded in many people's self-perception. Language is changing to reflect the notion that gender is a spectrum rather than a strict binary. It is vital that the words we use show respect for individuals and that we take care with the way we address people.

Margaret Coupe is now retired, having been an Advanced Skills teacher and Head of English.

Jack Monroe. Public Domain

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Greg Wise and Kate Winslet in Sense and Sensibility (1995). Moviestore collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Women and Mobility in Sense and Sensibility

Katherine Limmer explores modes of transport and journeys in Austen's novel, revealing the vital importance that access to the means of travel has for the female characters, what it signifies about them, and what effect it has on their lives.

How one travelled was more just than a practical question in Regency England, it was also a signifier of wealth and gender. Not only was an income of at least a thousand pounds (equivalent to around £34,000 today) necessary to maintain a carriage, gender restrictions meant that whilst gentlemen could drive themselves about in fashionable curricles, ladies needed a servant to undertake any driving, and a chaperone to accompany them if unmarried. This had a significant impact on the lives of the kind of women Austen made the protagonists of her novels, as access to transport facilitated social as well as geographic mobility. Visits to family and leisure activities in towns offered a well-established route to meeting a wide range of possible marriage partners. Throughout *Sense and Sensibility* Austen draws attention to how the absence of both kinds of mobility affects her heroines in their pursuit of happiness.

Losing a Carriage – Losing Status and Society

One of the surest signs of the decline in the Dashwood family fortunes at the start of *Sense and Sensibility* is the sale of their carriage. When the newly bereaved Dashwood family's income is reduced to five hundred pounds a year, both selfish Fanny and sensible Elinor recognise that they can no longer support this symbol of wealth.

> They will have no carriage, no horses and hardly any servants

is Fanny's mean-spirited summary of the impoverished lives the Dashwood's can now look forward to. She also draws attention to the detrimental impact that the lack of a carriage will have on their social lives, 'they will keep no company'. Mrs Dashwood's initial reluctance to sell the carriage, we learn, is not inspired by any love of show, but her awareness of how circumscribed her daughters' social lives will become without the independence and mobility that it offers. Without their own

Emma Thompson, Kate Winslet, Gemma Jones in Sense and Sensibility (1995). Moviestore collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

means of transport, Elinor and Marianne are faced with very serious restrictions on their movements. This, in turn, limits the variety of society they can encounter and, crucially, their chances of meeting suitable young men, where marriage is the only respectable way for them to improve their economic situation.

Once the family are settled at Barton Cottage their only means of travel is by foot. Their company is thus restricted to people within walking distance, or those who can travel to visit them. This is further limited however, because,

> the independence of Mrs Dashwood's spirit overcame the wish of society for her children; and she was resolute in declining to visit any family beyond the distance of a walk.

To understand her qualms, we must remember the reciprocal nature of hospitality governing regency society. Rather than be embarrassed or beholden through receiving a visit she cannot return, Mrs Dashwood chooses to visit only those families within walking distance. This social squeamishness is perhaps understandable in a woman whose social status has fallen so dramatically with her widowhood, but the costs to her daughters' marital prospects are drawn attention to by Austen.

The limited mobility of Elinor and Marianne is also explicitly contrasted with that of the gentlemen in the novel, who can both ride and drive themselves about the country with relative freedom. This is emphasised through episodes in which they appear suddenly or leave abruptly. In Chapter 13 for example, Colonel Brandon immediately leaves Barton Park for London on receiving an urgent letter. He is able to call for his horse to take him to the nearest town, from where he will travel in a hired carriage to London. Neither cost nor social restrictions prevent him from acting independently and decisively. Later, Willoughby takes a similarly swift exit from Barton Cottage when he is dismissed by his aunt. Even the seemingly passive Edward can visit both Elinor and Lucy without his family's approval or knowledge. It is this mobility that allows the male characters to pursue their various 'attachments', whilst Elinor and Marianne have to wait, immobile, in one location, hoping for their return.

To London

Until Mrs Jennings makes her offer, the idea of visiting London, where both Willoughby and Edward can be expected to be encountered, seems to be beyond the Dashwood sisters' ability. In the unlikely event that they were invited to visit their brother in London they couldn't accept, as Elinor tells Lucy Steele. It is not just the cost that would prevent them but also social restrictions. Standards of propriety demanded of single ladies meant they couldn't travel any distance unless accompanied by a suitable chaperone, and certainly not alone. It's clear that similar restrictions did not apply to working class women; Mrs Jennings is quite happy to send her maid on her own to London by public carriage, for example. The barely genteel Steele sisters are keen to maintain this distinction of rank and when Mrs Jennings asks how they travelled to London, Miss Steele tells her with 'quick exultation',

> 'Not in the stage, I assure you […] we came post all the way.'

Travel to London only becomes a possibility for Elinor and Marianne when invited by Mrs Jennings for, as a wealthy widow, she can provide means of travel in her chaise and suitable companionship in her own person.

The motivations behind the Dashwood sisters' trip to London are subtly teased out by Austen. Mrs Dashwood is happy to promote their journey on the virtuous grounds of entertainment and education, declaring,

> 'I would have every young woman […] acquainted with the manners and amusements of London.'

Mrs Jennings' cheerful vulgarity, however, is more explicit about the benefits of such a visit when she promises,

> 'If I don't get one of you at least married before I have done with you, it shall not be my fault.'

Elinor realises, from her eagerness to accept the invitation, that Marianne's motivation is not so different from Mrs Jennings'; she sees it as an opportunity to advance

her relationship with Willoughby. Young ladies were not supposed to be so forward in pursuing their romantic attachments and this is the reason why Elinor, 'could not approve of' the visit for Marianne. Elinor is not unaware that Edward is also staying in London and she is suspected of just such an unladylike pursuit herself by Lucy's later insinuations. It is not just mean-spirited comments about their motives that young lady travellers risked, however. The cautionary tale of Colonel Brandon's ward Eliza shows just how dangerous travel to a city of pleasure, away from the protection of their family, could prove for them.

Travelling Home

Just as getting to London was a delicate and expensive undertaking, returning home proves equally difficult for Elinor and Marianne, and reinforces how little control they have over the timings and means of their travels. Once Marianne's reason for accepting Mrs Jennings' hospitality is rendered void by Willoughby's rejection, she wishes to return home immediately. Elinor objects that:

> civility of the commonest kind must prevent such a hasty removal as that.

When Edward appears equally irrevocably lost to Elinor, however, she is just as keen to leave but, unlike Marianne,

> she was conscious of the difficulties of so long a journey.

Both cost and propriety hinder their ability to travel how and when they wish, and they find themselves once again dependent on the arrangements of characters whose wealth allows them to maintain independent means of travel. Elinor's delicate feelings about accepting the offer to travel in the Palmers' coach, reminds us of her mother's unwillingness to become beholden to her wealthier neighbours. She is very sensitive about appearing to impose on her acquaintances, and it is only when the invitation was

> inforced by [...] real politeness by Mr Palmer

that Elinor accepts. That her qualms are well-founded is evident when her grasping brother John congratulates Elinor

> on their travelling so far towards Barton without any expense.

During Marianne's illness Colonel Brandon proves his disinterested love for Marianne through two key journeys: bringing her mother to visit and taking the recovering Marianne home in comfort. The way in which he decisively manages these journeys emphasises his credentials as a worthy suitor for Marianne:

> not a moment was lost in delay of any kind.

Whilst Colonel Brandon travels to Barton in order to be of genuine use and comfort to Marianne, Willoughby, by contrast, impetuously drives to Cleveland to obtain her death-bed forgiveness. Although we may be temporarily swept away by his romantic gesture, Willoughby's is a self-serving mission concerned only with salving his own conscience whereas Brandon's is that of a true friend. The last journey of the Dashwood sisters, before their romantic and economic troubles are successfully overcome, is to return home and, in a novel punctuated by the complications of transport and journeys, it is perhaps fitting that its resolution establishes Elinor and Marianne living happily 'almost within sight of each other'. Mobility has never been sought for its own sake by Austen's heroines and a happy ending is also a stable and settled one.

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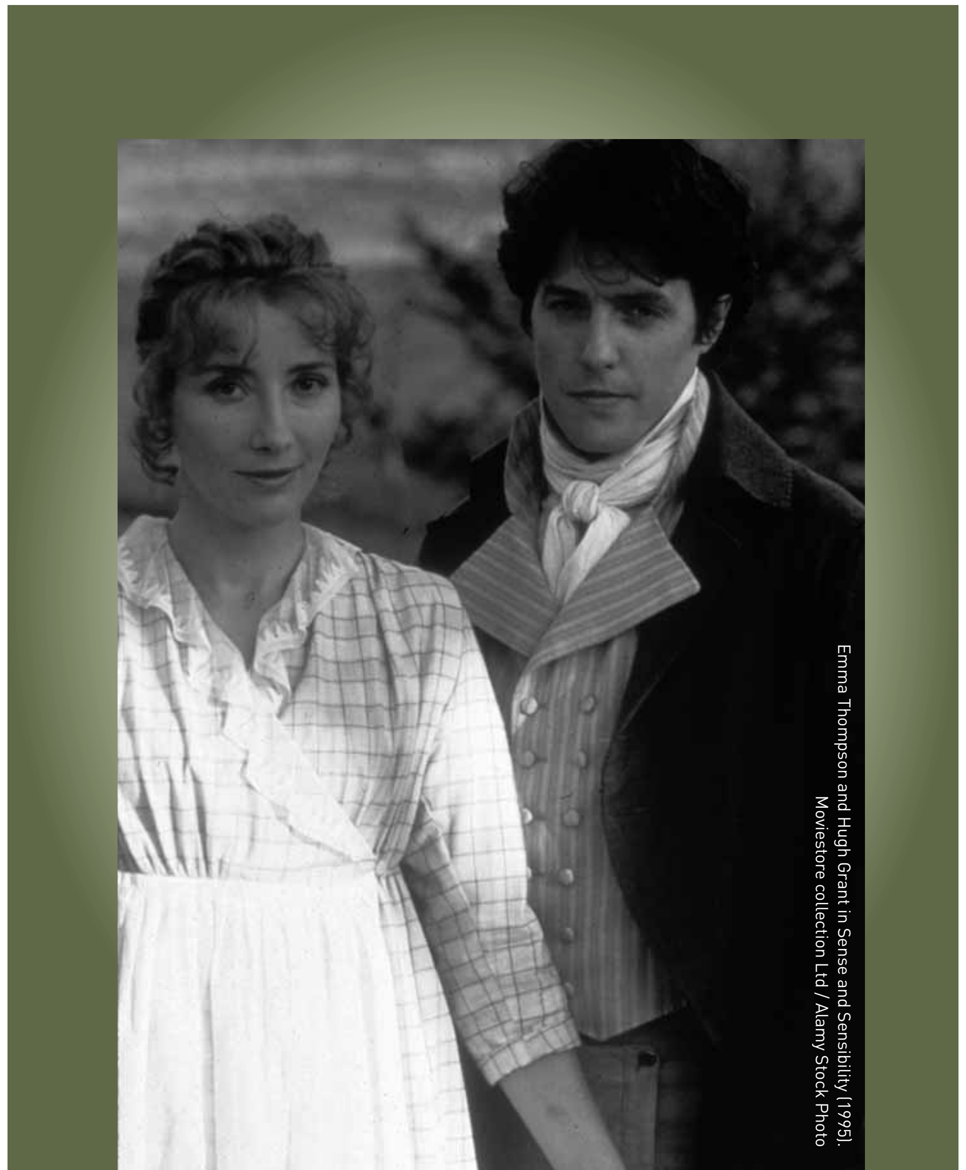

Emma Thompson and Hugh Grant in Sense and Sensibility (1995). Moviestore collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

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His dodgy foot

Meter and Identity in Poems of the Decade

Jack Palmer's account of the use of meter in Turnbull's 'Ode', Burnside's 'History' and Barber's 'Material' explains how meter works in poetry before applying this understanding to develop a rich reading of its effect in the three poems.

Meter can often be difficult to write about. The counting out of syllables and stresses in the lines of a poem can, in itself, feel like a rather 'pedestrian' exercise; what's more, if we do successfully identify a meter, we are then faced with the difficulty of relating this rhythm to the meaning of the poem. Many Literature students, for instance, will be familiar with one of the most popular meters in English poetry, iambic pentameter. A line of true **iambic pentameter**, we are taught, repeats the pattern of 'unstressed syllable, stressed syllable' five times over. Here's an example: 'to *race* back *home*, for *work* next *day*, to *bed*' (my italics).

But what is the purpose of this rhythm? Often, when a meter is used in a poem, each line follows the pattern closely; this means that, as readers, we are tempted to make generic comments about the rhythm. These comments tend to follow a similar trend, such as 'the iambic pentameter links the poem to the beating of the heart', or 'the iambic pentameter makes the poem flow'. The problem with both of these statements is that neither engage with the specific effects of meter within the context of a particular poem – they treat meter as a one-size-fits-all backing track. Though different poems might use the same meter, no two poems use meter identically. To craft meaning, poets can call upon an endless range of tones, moods, idioms, and sounds, all of which work alongside meter in dynamic and unexpected ways. Any given poem, then, expresses its own identity. Many poems in Forward's *Poems of the Decade* anthology are preoccupied with the nature of identity, and this article will analyse how the use of meter in three poems – Tim Turnbull's 'Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn', John Burnside's 'History' and Ros Barber's 'Material' – has an important role in shaping three unique poetic voices.

Tim Turnbull's 'Ode on a Grayson Perry Urn'

Turnbull's poem both adheres to and challenges the 'ode' form that its title claims. Traditionally, an ode addresses a person or object that captures the speaker's attention; in this poem, it is the contemporary artist Grayson Perry's 1999 urn, entitled 'Language of Cars', that is mused on:

> [a] kitschy vase […] delineating tales of kids in cars.

Odic language is normally elevated and full of praise. However, at the beginning of this poem, when the drivers behind the wheels of these cars are imagined, the 'Burberry clad louts' are treated with an acerbic judgement. Odes are typically written in iambic pentameter, too, and this is true of Turnbull's poem. Though the boy-racer culture is initially treated with suspicion, this attitude eventually gives way to one of understanding, and perhaps even admiration. This shift seems to emerge from the allure the speaker finds in the rhythmic aspect of racing culture, and the strong iambic beats in 'the throaty turbo roar', 'the joyful throb', and 'with pulsing juice' make the energy of this scene audible. Similarly, though the first stanza of the poem maligns the youths 'on crap estates' as society's pariahs, by the final stanza this outcast status gives the 'children' a unique form of freedom:

> will future poets look on you amazed,
> speculate how children might have lived when
> you were fired, lives so free and bountiful

The meter is key to the poet's message here. Following the enjambed 'when', the word 'you' that begins the next line disrupts the iambic rhythm in which this poem is written. The emphasis on 'you' in 'you were fired' changes the first two syllables of the line from 'unstressed, stressed' to 'stressed, unstressed'. In metrical terms, this is known as a **trochaic inversion**, where a reader expects an iamb, but instead find a trochee (the name of the 'stressed, unstressed' pattern). By upturning the metre, Turnbull suggests that the high-risk existence of these 'free and bountiful' children gives them the power to subvert the monotonous rhythm that most of society is required to live by.

Unstressed, stressed – five times… then 2 stressed, followed by 1 unstressed…

What could be the meaning of this disruption to the Iambic rhythm?

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John Burnside's 'History'

The subtitle of John Burnside's 'History' is integral to our understanding of the poem's meaning. It reads as follows:

St Andrews: West Sands; September 2001

This text was published within three weeks of the attacks on the twin towers, and the poem's speaker, a father who is by the sea with his son, is attempting to locate some kind of coherence in a world of 'muffled dread'. The father's desire to gather something out of the wreckage influences the form of the poem (how it is laid out) as much its content, with 'History' being written in predominantly free verse, which means that there is no regular rhyme scheme or rhythm:

I knelt down in the sand
with Lucas
gathering shells
and pebbles
finding evidence of life in all this
driftwork

Here, Burnside's use of indentation, blank space, and varied line length make visual the speaker's difficulty in creating order out of the dispersed 'driftwork'. However, part-way through the poem, the poetic voice does becomes momentarily composed and contemplative, as three lines are arranged in steady iambic pentameter:

and though we are confined by property
what tethers us to gravity and light
has most to do with distance and the shapes
we find in water

Although Burnside's 'History' is a mediation on the condition of America, it is also a reflection on the significance of 'quiet, local forms/of history' (as he writes elsewhere in the poem). This means individual histories – in this case a father and son – but also the local histories that we as communities share. The lines Burnside chooses to write in pentameter suggest a fear of a large scale 'us versus them' way of thinking, whereby people identify themselves in the first instance by their nationality, their religion, or the 'confine[s]' of the 'property' they own. Burnside instead proposes a more grounded sense of identity, one which would include, for instance, humanity's relationship with landscape – 'the shapes/we find in water'.

Considering the context in which this poem was written, Burnside's use of meter helps, if only for a brief moment, to 'tether' both the speaker and the reader back to the day-to-day experience of lived reality.

Ros Barber's 'Material'

In Ros Barber's 'Material', the symbol of a handkerchief is used to evoke both the speaker's relationship with her mother, and the Britain of her childhood. The meter in which the poem is written, iambic tetrameter, is essential for re-creating the atmosphere of this era. This rhythm, though still written in the familiar iambic pattern of 'unstressed, stressed', is repeated in only four lots per line – here's an example from the poem: 'she'd *have* one, *al*ways, *up* her *sleeve*' (my italics). When voiced, the rhythm is jolly and jaunty, replicating the cadence of early 20th-century war tunes, many of which would have been well-known in the speaker's household. But this meter also taps into our earliest encounters with rhythm during childhood: the nursery rhyme. Parts of 'Material' which describe the mother, for example, resemble this form:

And sometimes more than one fell out
as if she had a farm up there
where dried-up hankies fell in love
and mated, raising little squares.

Even when the meter is disrupted, for instance in the poem's fifth stanza, the poet does so in a knowingly playful manner. As the text develops, the handkerchief draws out various identities from the speaker's memory, such as 'George' the 'greengrocer':

And somehow, with the hanky's loss,
greengrocer George with his dodgy foot.

It is worth noting that, in metrical terms, a 'foot' is a single unit of rhythm – in this case just one lot of 'unstressed, stressed'. Try reading the above lines aloud: the word 'his' curiously introduces one syllable too many, making the foot of the line uneven. This is known as a **hypercatalectic line**, one which contains an odd extra syllable in the final foot. Greengrocer George's lagging leg, then, is reflected fondly, and perhaps with an element of the tongue-in-cheek, in the clunkiness of the four syllables that describe it.

Later on in 'Material', however, the tone changes to one of wistfulness, as Barber steadies the poem's pace with polysyllabic words:

I miss material handkerchiefs
their soft and hidden history.

In these lines, the stressed syllables draw attention to the sounds that exist within words: the repeated aspirate 'hi' ('hidden' 'history') and the sibilant 's' ('handkerchiefs', 'soft', 'history') work together to create the effect of a tender whisper, quietly yearning for a culture that exists no more. This, perhaps, is an example of poetry's special power, of which meter is a vital part. A poem exists silently when read on the page, but it also exists physically when read aloud, as the reader's voice is guided, almost eerily, by a sequence of stressed and unstressed beats. This poem, entitled 'Material', is an attempt to conjure up the physicality of a 'soft' handkerchief; for a moment, the poem does achieve this, as the movement of our lips, teeth, and tongue turn language into something materially held in the mouth. By this measure, rhythm does not deaden words by fixing them in place, but rather awakens language to a new life.

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