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***DWELLING AFTER HUMANITY***



**EXPLORING CONFLICTING COSMOPOLITAN  
CONSCIOUSNESS:  
THE TRANSNATIONAL THEME  
IN HENRY JAMES'S *THE AMBASSADORS***

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**Abstract:** *Henry James was an avowed promoter of cosmopolitanism and transnational cultures. The cultural exchange between America and Europe finds its thematic locus in his novel The Ambassadors (1903). Among the characters, Maria Gostrey is an American expatriate who has spent most of her life in Europe and adopted its customs and tastes. Waymarsh, in spite of living for so many years in Europe, reveals a vehement predilection for his native land, America. Strether is the most noticeable cosmopolitan, who has the ability to adjust in both America and Europe. Our article will explore how the characters show their conflicting cosmopolitan selves and how some of them express their deep attachment to their native lands.*

**Keywords:** *America, conflict, cosmopolitan consciousness, Europe, Henry James, transnational cultures*

## **1. Introduction**

“*The Ambassadors* is a story of the making of an American cosmopolitan and in this sense may be regarded as a spiritual autobiography.” (Wegelin 1958: 88)

The theory of Cosmopolitanism, which traces its origin in ancient Greece, has gone through a discernible progress. Eighteenth century philosopher Immanuel Kant gave it a modern dimension and modeled it to form a utopian world (Bohman and Bachmann 1997: 36). Georg Cavallar (2012: 95) says that Kant “is usually seen as a typical representative of eighteenth century cosmopolitanism. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, considers Kant an antidote to critics of Enlightenment universalism and cosmopolitan humanism.” In many ways, the works of Henry James could be regarded as the fictional embodiment of this Kantian conception of cosmopolitanism. James is widely known as a novelist and the conspicuous theme which his novels generally represent is transnationalism and its different facets. Though there were other writers who dealt with transnationalism, like W. D. Howells and Edith Wharton, it was only in Henry James that the theme became predominant. But there are some social and moral incongruities between Americans and Europeans, which are clearly portrayed in some of his novels. Some characters in his fiction are over-sophisticated, rich, and highly civilized. They are cosmopolitans in the true sense of the term, as they never feel at home in any particular corner of the world. Among his novels,

*The Ambassadors* (1903) is very prominent in portraying such characters that have conflicting cosmopolitan consciousness. The title of the novel – *The Ambassadors* – tellingly bears the cosmopolitan theme, because an ambassador always establishes connections among many places. There are scholarly articles which interpret this novel from various perspectives, but the characters' moral conflict regarding cosmopolitanism has not been discussed so far. This paper will therefore focus on this particular theme.

The first impact of the term “cosmopolitan” on us is connected to transnationalism, and any work bearing a cosmopolitan theme indubitably deals with transnational cultures (Ostby 2018: 263). Though the mingling of different cultures is very much essential in such a novel, the difference in manners is also an important factor in delineating the contention in cosmopolitan consciousness. Christof Wegelin's comment is quite appropriate for describing this theme which is present in *The Ambassadors*:

*The Ambassadors*, then, is another version of the conflict between American and European manners, of American misapprehension of European conduct which had occupied James during his earlier career. (Wegelin 1958: 100)

This is very different from the internal American conflict between Virginia and New England. It was also not the question of why Americans went to Europe for cultural reasons and what difficulties they faced there, but there is something more. James's novels address this theme from diverse angles. The author's own international experience improved his insight and some of his novels are the result of that fruitful experience. The cosmopolitan theme with its conflicting aspects is the keystone of his major novels, which are included among the most exquisite writings that America has ever produced.

## 2. Henry James as a cosmopolitan writer

The outbreak of the Civil War in 1861 made many young American men take part in that. Yet one person who did not was Henry James. And the reason for not joining the Union Army was that in October 1861 he had suffered a back injury, which he eventually called “a horrid even if an obscure hurt” (Dupee 1956: 415). In 1864 James's family relocated to Boston and he became familiar with New England. He travelled to many places and gathered experiences not only from America, but also from European countries. During these explorations of two continents, his taste in art underwent a paradigm shift. And because of this, he produced a great treasure of writings and his novels especially bear international themes. He began to devote most of his time to composing new literary pieces. His first short-story “A Tragedy of Error” was published anonymously in *The Continental Monthly* of February, 1864. *A Passionate Pilgrim* (1871), a novella, was one of the best reflections of what he had discovered in Europe (Tintner 1991: 116). It is perspicuous that, at the beginning of his literary career, he wrote short-stories and novels in which the protagonist's quest for manhood is related to his encounter with Europe. It is because of his writings that he found many opportunities to meet prominent literary figures like Charles Dickens, George Eliot, William Morris, and so on. Though America had proved to be a better

and more challenging soil for a writer, James felt contented and found better company abroad. In 1870 he came back to America, but was ill at ease in his home country. In his letter to Charles Eliot Norton from Cambridge, on 16<sup>th</sup> January, 1871, he expressed this fact (Edel 1974, Vol. I: 252). In November, 1875 he went to Paris and settled there for almost one year. There he met literary persons like Flaubert, Maupassant and a few others. He again moved to England in 1876 and, except for some trips to America, he lived there for the rest of his life.

After travelling to so many places, James decided to incorporate the cosmopolitan theme in his writings, especially in his novels. He was so adept in this theme that it is really challenging to discover whether he was an Englishman writing with knowledge about Americans or an American writing with apprehension of English people. F. W. Dupee (1956: 96) – a famous American literary critic – appropriately says about James that “the American in contact with Europeans was his fine unique theme”. James was proficient enough to use the international theme in his fiction. He strove to focus on the elegance and refinement of European culture in contrast to the naïve American culture. As Tia Byer (2022: 39) observes, “Through James’s transatlantic examination and challenging dichotomy, he deconstructs mythic notions of the distinction between the Old World and New.” This particular theme was James’ persistent choice, which he implemented through the characters in the best ways possible. Sometimes he is accused of having abandoned his own country, America, in order to make his fortune in Europe, but this circumstance stood him in good stead to become a great novelist.

### **3. Twenty-first century relevance of cosmopolitanism and Henry James**

Henry James’s relevance in the twenty-first century is based on his writings that embody cosmopolitanism, identity, and cultural hybridity. His fiction explores many transnational features which lay emphasis on global interconnectedness. Most of the characters of his novels navigate international settings, identities, cultures that reflect contemporary globalized experiences. His novels often bear the traces of empathy and fellow-feeling which are indubitably essential for cosmopolitanism. Blurring the national boundaries and establishing cultural exchanges and hybridity are also the important parts of global citizenship. Kwame Anthony Appiah’s observation is quite relevant in this respect:

Cosmopolitanism shouldn’t be seen as some exalted attainment: it begins with the simple idea that in the human community, as in national communities, we need to develop habits of coexistence: conversation in its older meaning, of living together, association. (Appiah 2007: xvi-xvii)

The characters’ experiences in multiple countries resonate with James’s own global experiences as well as with present discussions about transnationalism. James’s works always encourage readers to embrace humanity beyond national peripheries (Tredy et al. 2019: 11). Diversity and intersectionality are major parts of cosmopolitanism. Garrett Brown (2009: 17) appropriately observes that Kant is the focal point of a

“viable form of Kantian cosmopolitanism” in our modern globalised world and James followed the Kantian cosmopolitan tradition in his writings. The intersections of gender, class, and race are included in much discussed cosmopolitan diversity (McMurrin 2013: 34). Some novels criticize privileged class people and power imbalances, which are still very pertinent in today’s world. *The Ambassadors* is one of such novels. James’s insight was so powerful that his works have become a rich repertoire which aids in perceiving the benefit of multiculturalism and understanding international relations.

#### **4. Contrasting cosmopolitan characters in *The Ambassadors***

##### **4.1. Lewis Lambert Strether and Waymarsh**

On his way to Paris, Lambert Strether, a middle-aged American, went to Liverpool for meeting his friend Waymarsh. Despite being an economically successful lawyer and living in Chester for a significant period, Waymarsh has to cope – as Strether describes – with “the ordeal of Europe” (James 2008: 37). But Strether feels the opposite after reaching Europe. He begins to see Europe as a land of new possibilities. Through Waymarsh and Strether, James portrays the dichotomy between American nationality and internationalism, but at the same time emphasizes the interrelation between the two. Sarah Wilson rightly points out:

Although this complexly modernist nationality may be neither acknowledged by nor desirable to all Americans, for James Americanness and internationalism cannot be separated. It is simply the American recognition of this condition that remains in question. Modernization of American conceptions of nationality will be brought about by American acknowledgement of the inescapability of internationalism. (Wilson 2004: 511)

The international contradiction and the characters’ response to it are meticulously represented by James “to show the exposure of American innocence to European experience” (Wegelin 1958: 106). Waymarsh is eager to remain an American, while Strether shows his complete adaptability in every place he visits.

Waymarsh is stuck in his past. He talks about his New England hometown situated at Milrose and praises the ethnic moral code of that place. He considers Europe only as a continent where his career can flourish more. This is why, after so much travelling, he wishes to go home. Despite being a cosmopolitan for the sake of his profession, he is deeply rooted in America. He is an American “type” and his dislike of Europe is described as “the sacred rage” (James 2008: 51) by Strether. The character of Waymarsh occupies a small space between cultures, which elevates as well as complicates his cosmopolitan understanding. On the other hand Strether’s is a journey to self-awareness. By getting acquainted with new cultures, he discovers his hidden cosmopolitan self. The two characters are therefore in stark contrast in their adaptability to multiculturalism.

#### 4.2. Strether meets Chad - cosmopolitanism and transformation

Strether is a character who likes diversity in life. He is the American “ambassador” to Europe. Mrs. Newsome – a rich widow living at Woollett in New England – has sent Strether to meet her son Chad Newsome in Paris and to bring him back, because she thinks that her son is under the spell of Madame de Vionnet, Chad’s patron in Paris. But when Strether sees Chad, it becomes clear to him that Chad has become a cosmopolitan or “a man of the world” (James 2008: 128). Chad is no more a person who can be part of a small place, as his mother wants him to be. He has become a mature and responsible person, who is now open to the world. When visiting Europe, Strether not only notices the changes of the places, but also of the characters he knew earlier. This is a reflection of his own journey from innocence to experience (Bauer 2016: 168). When Strether meets Madame de Vionnet, he compares her to a goddess. Later, when Chad wants to return home to Woollett, Strether requests him to stay on with her. In this context Paul B. Armstrong (2018: 65) says:

Woollett’s skepticism about Paris clashes with Strether’s revelatory trust in Chad’s transformation and the virtue of his attachment with Madame de Vionnet.

Strether becomes so enamoured with Vionnet, that he takes her out to lunch. As a consequence, he forgets his purpose “to save him [Chad] by removal” (James 2008: 226). When Strether asks Chad to remain in Paris, Chad is taken aback and cannot help questioning Strether whether he feels “the charm of life over here” (idem: 253). Strether immediately replies “Immensely...you’ve helped me so to feel it that that surely needn’t surprise you” (ibid.).

Strether perceives that she has made Chad better or even the best. Strether’s transnational and compassionate self feels sorry for Vionnet. His viewpoint regarding the Parisian woman becomes completely altered after seeing her. He encourages Chad to remain with Vionnet, against Chad’s mother, Mrs. Newsome’s wishes, and he feels his decision is justified. Strether’s experience of Europe becomes verily fruitful, as it elevates his moral consciousness. He came to Paris as an intolerant American representative of Mrs. Newsome, but the varied experiences in the Parisian society make him tolerant and amicable. Elizabeth L. Throesch (2017: 172) observes that “Strether’s transcendence of his limitations as a represented, literary character is obtained by entering ‘into’ and passing ‘through’ his aesthetic vision”. Throughout the novel, Strether tries to assess Chad’s circumstances, which ultimately aids him in discovering his own empathetic soul, and this contributes to his becoming a true cosmopolitan character. As Jessica Berman (2001: 64) opines, “Strether and Chad both return home changed Americans, changed particularly in their ability to be open to cultural difference, and to accept their perpetually incomplete and partial perspectives.”

#### 4.3. Strether comes across Maria Gostrey – a budding cosmopolitan meets an experienced cosmopolitan

When Strether met Maria Gostrey – an American woman in her mid-thirties, living in Europe – he thought his life would take a significant turn. Strether’s

encounter with Maria reveals her character quite conspicuously. She delineates herself as a guide for Americans and also declares that she is proficient at “putting them through” (James 2008: 44) so extensively, that they never wish to come back. Maria is therefore a cosmopolitan who not only becomes accustomed to new cultures, but also helps others to do so. Her character plays a significant role in Strether’s journey of embracing new people and their cultures. She is an emissary of light in his life and facilitates the bridging of the continental divides. As Sarah Wilson (2004: 517) says, Strether “takes solace in the thought of Maria Gostrey, the eternal expatriate, who will help him (and the reader) to cobble together some kind of an understanding suited to his new position”. She is an accomplished mediator, who bridges the crevasse between Europe and America.

In this context, Paul B. Armstrong (2018: 82) significantly remarks that “James establishes Maria early on as an authority in the well-known convention of a guide or teacher who helps a quester on a journey through unfamiliar terrain”. But in the novel, Maria’s disappearance and subsequent reappearance as a supporter rather than a superior positions her character in perfect equilibrium. She renounces her earlier authoritative mantle to become more acquainted with Strether’s journey of self-discovery. At the end of the novel, when Maria asks Strether why he must go back to Woollett, he answers “To be right” (James 2008: 470). The life he started in Europe would no longer be continued, as he has been unable to perform his duty as requested by Mrs. Newsome. Here, the word “right” has a moral connotation, because, despite being aware of his own flourishing life in Europe, he wishes to return to Woollett as he was feeling guilty. But the Parisian values change his mindset and “Lambert Strether’s narrative is intimately bound up with his desire to possess the city of Paris – visually and epistemologically – along with all that it represents” (Tredy et al. 2011: 44).

#### **4.4. Various traits of cosmopolitanism in other characters**

Miss Barrace, a friend of Chad and little Bilham, grew up in Paris. Her parents are Americans. She is so accustomed to the Parisian social structure, that French customs have become part of her being. Her character is a bit superficial, because she focuses on appearances rather than on cosmopolitan engagements. As she lives in Europe, she may be disconnected from her American roots and that highlights the tension between national belonging and cosmopolitan thinking. So, her character has both benefits and limitations. Miss Barrace probably resembles the charming American expatriate Henrietta Reubell, whom James met in Paris in 1876 (Edel and Powers 1987: 70). John Little Bilham is a young American who lives in Paris. He is one of Chad’s dearest friends. He came to Paris to study painting, but soon he understood that he had no talent in that. Although he has not much money with him, he continues to live in Paris, as he has begun to appreciate the socio-cultural life of the city. His cosmopolitan self overpowers his pecuniary problems, caused by his stay in Paris. There are other characters in the novel, like Gloriani, Jim Pocock, and Madame de Vionnet, who are the epitomes of transnational humanity.

## 5. Conclusion

Like in most of James's novels, the cosmopolitan theme is of paramount importance in *The Ambassadors* (1903). James is a writer who devoted most of his life to writing and his personal experiences gave momentum to his becoming a cosmopolitan novelist. James took Americans to Europe to portray their national distinctiveness, in juxtaposition with an already well known socio-cultural structure of Europe. Leon Edel (1968: 332) rightly observed that James's "cosmopolitan self had found fulfillment" in Europe. This novel reveals the author's modernism, as an opposition to national conservatism and the conventional. "Henry James is in a period of transition from realism to modernism" (Chen 2021: 77) and this modernism does not keep American nationality in isolation, rather makes it acquainted with the European culture. Despite having conflicting viewpoints on cosmopolitanism, the characters of the novel have their unique qualities that allow them to adapt in new countries and position themselves in their own particular manner. James is indeed an international novelist, who has not only created cosmopolitan characters, but also experienced being a cosmopolitan; his novel reveals that becoming a cosmopolitan does not mean discarding one's own nationality, but fusing and harmonizing national and cosmopolitan identities.

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## STYLISTIC ANALYSIS OF THE POEM “I DWELL IN POSSIBILITY” BY EMILY DICKINSON

JYOTHIS JOSEKUTTY, R. JOSEPH PONNIAH

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents the stylistic analysis of the American poet Emily Dickinson's poem “I dwell in Possibility” at various levels of analysis: phonological, graphological, grammatical, lexical and semantic. The analysis shows how the style used complements its theme and contributes to the overall meaning and effect of the poem. Our stylistic analysis has also helped to uncover deeper insights of the poem and shows that style and content are equally important for understanding the complete essence of a literary work.*

**Keywords:** *Emily Dickinson, experimentation, linguistics, poetry, style, stylistic analysis*

### 1. Introduction

Stylistic analysis, a field closely associated with linguistics, has emerged as a valuable tool in contemporary literary studies. It has its roots in the early 20th century formalist school of literary criticism that emerged in Russia (Jeffries and McIntyre 2010: 1). It acts as a link between literary criticism and linguistics and is important for interpreting and teaching literary works (Widdowson 2013: 3). Widdowson (ibid.) defines stylistics as a reading strategy for literature, where the study of literary texts is undertaken from a linguistic perspective. Stylistics makes use of a close-reading strategy to analyse the formal features and linguistic techniques of a text and to show how substantial they are in interpreting the meaning of the text (Wales 2011: 400).

Hence stylistic analysis is an objective and systematic method of interpreting a text by analysing the linguistic elements it contains. Usually, when we read a literary work, our focus will be on what meaning is conveyed by it. In stylistic analysis, the focus is shifted to how the meaning is conveyed by using language in the text. A style that is most apt and suitable should complement and embellish the content of the work. The analysis of the distinct style and language of a work helps one to read between the lines and get to the deeper layers of meaning, which would otherwise not be possible. In line with this, Carter (2014: 5) states that stylistic analysis is relevant for teaching literature, as it helps to foster “interpretative skills and to encourage reading between the lines”.

Many literary writers carefully craft their ideas in a style that goes hand in hand with the content of their work. Emily Dickinson is one such poet, who is known for her unique style and unconventional linguistic experimentation. Her experimental tenor is reflected in the lines of one of her last poems, where she says “Experiment

escorts us last” (Dickinson 1999a). She radically manipulated the conventions of form, sound, meter, and syntax in her poetry (Steger 1977, Miller 2007). Most of her poems make use of experimental techniques - like symbolism, juxtaposition, unusual punctuations, paradox, metaphors, and metonymy (Hagenbüchle 1993). Her terse poetic language is rich with multiple connotative possibilities (Thackrey 1954). She is considered as “one of the most powerful and innovative formalists in American literary canon” (Dickinson 1996). She crafts the form of her poems in such a way that, together with their content, it enhances and shapes the meaning of her poems (Dickinson 1996: 3). In other words, both the style and content are equally important in conveying her poems’ full meaning and intent.

Dickinson’s poem “I dwell in Possibility” (given in annex A) is one such poem that employs stylistic elements that complement the subject matter. The poem itself is an example of meta-poetry and with the help of the extended metaphor of the house, Dickinson juxtaposes the concept of poetry and prose. While the house of poetry stands for freedom and liberation, the house of prose denotes constraints and limitation (Wohlpert 2001: 64). This dichotomy at the level of subject matter (prose versus poetry) is also supplemented by using contrasting stylistic elements in the poem. By writing a poem about poetry itself, she argues about the potential and freedom available in poetry and establishes that it is superior to any other form of writing. This poem has been interpreted by readers as her defense of poetry as well as a “boastful celebration of her unorthodox form, grammar, and syntax” (Schoerke 2016: 495).

## 2. Research objectives

The way in which the poem “I dwell in Possibility” is crafted stylistically complements and enhances its theme and content. Most existing analyses of this poem either focus on thematic interpretations or examine only certain stylistic features in isolation. Specifically, no previous analysis has utilized a comprehensive multilevel linguistic framework, encompassing phonology, graphology, grammar, lexis, and semantics, to explore the nuanced stylistic elements and how the elements at these levels interact to convey meaning. Furthermore, previous studies on this poem have not given in-depth attention to subtle stylistic elements, such as the significance of capitalization, full stops, dashes, sound patterns and visual structure, which this study aims to address comprehensively. The study thus gives an integrated stylistic analysis that not only illuminates the linguistic intricacies of Dickinson’s poem, but also demonstrates the inseparability of style and content. Keeping this in mind, the objective of this paper is to:

- i) analyse the nuanced stylistic elements used by Dickinson in this poem and discuss their significance
- ii) show that the peculiar style used by Dickinson complements and contributes to the content of her poem
- iii) show that stylistic analysis helps to discern the deeper meaning of a literary text.

### 3. Methodology

The stylistic analysis is done at the five major levels of language, as suggested by Paul Simpson (2014: 5). The five levels of language at which the poem is analysed include:

- i) the phonological level, where we study the sounds employed in a literary work, including aspects like pronunciation, rhyme scheme, consonance, alliteration, assonance, and other devices.
- ii) the graphological level: we shall look into the patterns of written language, including aspects like capitalization, spelling, structure, and punctuation in a work.
- iii) the grammatical level: we shall look into how words combine to form phrases and sentences and how they function in a sequence.
- iv) the lexical level: we shall analyse the vocabulary, particularly the words chosen in the poem.
- v) the semantic level: we shall pay attention to the meaning of words, phrases and sentences, to the literary and figurative language employed.

### 4. Results

The results of our stylistic analysis of Emily Dickinson's poem "I dwell in Possibility" are given in what follows.

#### 4.1 The lexical level

The lexical level of analysis focuses on the choice and usage of words in a text. The majority of the open-class words in the poem are nouns, which are listed in Table 1.

Nouns	
Possibility (L1)	Eye (L6)
House (L2)	Roof (L7)
Prose (L2)	Gambrels (L8)
Windows (L4)	Sky (L8)
Door (L4)	Visitors (L9)
Chambers (L5)	Occupation (L10)
Cedars (L5)	Hands (L11)
	Paradise (L12)

**Table 1.** A list of nouns used in the poem

Some of these nouns can be divided into concrete nouns related to a house and as abstract nouns.

Concrete nouns related to a house	Abstract nouns
Window (L4) Door (L4) Roof (L7) Chambers (L5) Gambrels (L8)	Possibility (L1) Prose (L2) Occupation (L10)

**Table 2.** Classification of nouns into concrete nouns related to a house and abstract nouns

In Table 2, it can be noted that there are several concrete nouns used in the poem which refer to physical objects that are parts of a house. The poem conveys the features of abstract concepts (given in table 2) such as prose, poetry (referred to as “possibility”), and the poet’s occupation, by connecting them to the more tangible elements, like the parts of a house (given in table 2). For instance, the poet describes poetry as a house with more windows and doors, along with an everlasting roof, than the house of prose. By referencing the concrete parts of a house, such as “doors” and “windows”, the poet illustrates the abstract features of poetry, emphasizing its openness, freedom, experimentation and interpretive possibilities, in contrast to prose, which is more confined, structured, and less open to interpretation. Thus, through the extended metaphor of two distinct houses with different features, the poet tries to juxtapose the features of these two genres of writing. The nouns used can also be classified in a different way, as in Table 3.

Nouns related to house	Nouns related to nature and the divine
Windows (L4) Door (L4) Chambers (L5) Roof (L7) Gambrels (L8)	Cedars (L5) Sky (L8) Paradise (L12)

**Table 3.** Alternative classification of nouns

In Table 3, we see that the nouns used are mostly related to parts of a house and this creates a homely atmosphere. It suggests that for Dickinson, poetry is akin to her own home, a place that gives her shelter, solace, and freedom. It is a place of security and refuge for her (Herd 2022). Further, the vocabulary chosen also suggests that poetry is closely tied with nature and connected to the divine. The poet’s house of poetry is made of cedars. Cedar was considered to be sacred, strong, and durable and was used to make ancient temples and palaces. It is believed that even Solomon’s temple and palace were made of cedar and there are many references to the tree in the holy bible (1 Kings 4:33, King James Version; Isaiah 60:13; Leviticus 14:4). By bringing in the image of the cedar, the poet-qualifies poetry as having a superior quality and divine essence. Also, the unlimited potential and immortality of poetry are highlighted by linking it to words related to the vast nature, with its huge trees and endless sky. By linking poetry to nature, she means that “poetry arises from nature and creates freedom and liberation” (Wohlpert 2001: 64). Poetry gives the poet the agency to move beyond her finite, limited space to the realm of infinite imagination and possibilities, which is suggested by the words “sky” and “paradise”- poetry gave her the wings to touch the sky and experience the bliss of paradise.

Further, the lexical chain relating to the uniqueness of the house of poetry is *fairer* (Line 2), *numerous* (L3), *superior* (L4), *everlasting* (L7), *sky* (L8), *spreading* (L11) and *gather paradise* (L12). These words, in turn, suggest the multiple interpretations, perspectives and potentials of poetry, when compared to the more limited, less digressive, and restricted prose. To highlight this, the poet has deliberately used the word “possibility” instead of *poetry* to show its unrestricted

and endless potential. For her, prose is associated with restrictiveness, while poetry is the realm of “possibility” (Raab 1998: 290).

Moreover, the lexical chain related to the readers of poetry is limited to *visitors* (L9) and *fairest* (L9). The “visitors” of the house are used as a metaphor for readers of poetry. By addressing them as the “fairest”, she means that the genuine readers of poetry are those who judge poetry fairly without prejudices. Also, the only word that is repeated in the poem is the word “fair” in its comparative and superlative forms. It is used in the comparative degree, ‘fairer’, to support the poet’s stand that poetry is better than prose, and in the superlative degree, “fairest”, to suggest that it is superior to any other form of writing.

We can also see that some words in the poem are used in peculiar ways: for example, the word ‘possibility’ is used instead of poetry, ‘visitors’ is used instead of readers, ‘windows’ and ‘doors’ are used to denote the possibilities and limitlessness of poetry and “cedars” is used to show how poetry is connected to nature and the divine. As mentioned before, the dichotomy in the subject matter of the poem is accompanied by various techniques, which supplement and add to the contrastive effect. An example of this at the lexical level are the words used in opposition, that is, pairing two words with contrasting connotations. Phrases like “everlasting roof”, “impregnable of eye” and “spreading wide my narrow hands” combine contrasting ideas and enhance the effect of dichotomy prevalent in the poem’s subject matter. For instance, in the phrase “everlasting roof”, ‘everlasting’ conveys a sense of being endless or unlimited, while the noun ‘roof’ suggests something closed or limited. Another way to look into the contrast in this phrase is that ‘everlasting’ means something eternal or unchanging, while **‘roof’** represents a physical, often temporary structure that can wear down or decay over time. Similarly, in the phrase “impregnable of eye”, the contrast lies in ‘impregnable’, which suggests something that **cannot be easily seen, penetrated, or understood**, juxtaposed with ‘eye’, typically associated with vision and exposure. Lastly, in the phrase “spreading wide my narrow hands”, ‘spreading wide’ represents an attempt at expansion and growth, while, in contrast, ‘narrow hands’ highlights physical limitations, smallness, or constraints.

Thus, lexical analysis shows how the words and phrases chosen emphasise the superiority of poetry, the dichotomy present in the subject matter, the multiple possible interpretations of poetry, its connection to nature and its divine quality. It makes the features of poetry more solid by comparing it with the concrete parts of a house. It also reveals how Dickinson’s vocation as a poet helped her assert her agency and empowered her to explore beyond her limitations.

#### 4.2. The grammatical level

The poem doesn’t have a proper grammatical structure and doesn’t follow the conventional rules of syntax. The sentences are broken and connected to each other by dashes. The unconventional syntax reflects the poetic license and freedom available in poetry. It highlights how poetry is not restricted by rules. Unlike in prose, this freedom in poetry allows one to break the conventions and restrictions of writing. This power of poetry is itself what enables the poet to break the restraints of

life and explore beyond her limits as pointed out in the poem. And this is the reason why poetry is her favourite genre of writing. The analysis at the grammatical level shows that Dickinson has chosen an unconventional style that complies with the theme of the poem - her advocacy of experimental poetry.

### 4.3. The graphological level

On the graphological level, Dickinson's poem presents various deviations, including irregular and uncommon capitalisations and punctuations. The first letter of every line in the poem is capitalized. Apart from this, the first letter of many words like "Possibility", "Prose", "House", "Doors" and "Cedars" are capitalised. This is done in order to foreground them and bring the attention of the readers to these words which carry the crux of the poem. "Eye" is the only noun in the poem which does not begin with a capital letter. In this way, this word is least emphasised, as the poet believes that eyes are the least important in the context of poetry. Poetry to her is not something that is understood with the help of sight, but through imagination and the greater faculties of the mind. Not everyone who has eyes can see and enjoy the beauty of poetry. Only those with purity of the mind and with poetic sensibility will get the true experience of poetry, which is beyond mere words on a paper.

In addition to unconventional capitalisation, the poem also makes use of dashes and caesura as important stylistic devices. The dashes act as a link between the fragmented sentences used by Dickinson in the poem. They bring about a retarder effect and slow down the tempo of reading the poem. Through this means, the readers are reminded that, unlike prose, poetry should be read and understood at a slower pace in order to be able to appreciate its full beauty. The dashes or caesura also deliberately force the readers to pause in various places to reflect upon what is being said. Dickinson's use of punctuation and dashes creates gaps and multiple sentence possibilities, allowing readers to give various interpretations to the text (Schoerke 2016: 495). These pauses give the readers the freedom to read between the lines and fill in the gaps with their own imagination and sensibility. Dickinson's style is such that, instead of passively enjoying her poem, readers are actively called upon to co-create its meaning (Hagenbüchle 1993: 25).

Another notable feature of the poem is the absence of one of the most common punctuation marks in writing – the full stop. Nowhere in the poem can we see the presence of a full stop and, by extension, a dead end. This in turn implies that the poet can write poetry tirelessly. For her, writing poetry is like a cathartic release of her emotions and feelings through pen and paper. Poetry flows naturally and endlessly from her heart and this is reflected in the technique of enjambment in the poem, where thoughts flow effortlessly from one line to the next, without a break. This shows that Dickinson shares a deep connection with her vocation: poetry lives through her and she lives through poetry. The lack of full stops also signifies this endless, immortal, eternal nature of poetry. It also points to the readers' endless imagination, allowing umpteen interpretations, which is a characteristic of poetry. The last line of the poem is also about how poetry helps the poet to expand, to imagine and grow endlessly beyond her limits: "The spreading wide my narrow Hands/ To gather Paradise –"

(Dickinson 1999b). We find that the poem ends with a dash instead of a full stop to once again suggest the unlimited potential and capability of poetry to take the poet to heights even beyond paradise.

In addition, one can also see a sort of graphological parallelism at the level of the structure in the poem. The poem is organised into three quatrains. The broken sentences look like bricks that are cemented together by the dashes. Overall, it roughly forms a box-like structure that is visually parallel to the rooms of a building or a house. The dashes can also be seen as windows (of interpretation). So the extended metaphor of the house is also reflected in the structure of the poem. Another noteworthy aspect is that the penultimate line of the poem, “The spreading wide my narrow Hands” is lengthier compared to other lines. This expansion is in parallel to the content of this line. The idea of the poet-who spreads wide her narrow hands, i.e. expands herself, is visually represented by stretching the line beyond the length of other lines in the poem. Thus, the graphological features of the poem also support and supplement its content.

#### 4.4. The phonological level

The dichotomous effect created at the level of subject matter while using words in opposition is also extended to the phonological level, by employing opposing sounds, and seemingly alternating meter. There is a repetition of the consonant sounds [s] and [r] throughout the poem. The [s] sound helps to create a sweeping rhythm, while, on the contrary, the [r] sound creates a sense of harshness, thus adding to the contrasting effect. By predominantly employing the iambic foot, which alternates stressed and unstressed syllables, the dichotomy at sound level is further sharpened, thus contributing to the overall contrasting effect of the poem. The meter seems to alternate between iambic tetrameter and trimeter, as can be seen in the beginning lines of the poem.

I dwell | in Pos- | sibi- | lity –  
A fair- | er House | than Prose –

But the meter employed is irregular, as the poet does not always stick to the iambic foot. For example, in the following lines, she deviates and uses the pyrrhic foot as the second foot:

The Gamb | rels of | the Sky –

By employing such deviation, Dickinson shows the ‘possibilities’ available in poetry and reinforces the idea that poetry is not restricted by rules. Different kinds of rhymes are also employed in the poem, such as end rhymes, as in ‘eye’ and ‘sky’ (stanza 2), and internal rhymes, as in ‘house’ and ‘prose’ (line 2). Another type of rhyme employed is the slant rhyme, which uses words that have similar, but not identical sounds. An example of this is ‘prose’ and ‘doors’ (stanza 1). A similar connection can be made between the two genres - of poetry and prose - which this poem primarily deals with: they are similar to a large extent, but also distinct and unique modes of expression.

#### 4.5. The semantic level

At the semantic level, this metapoem contains figurative and metaphoric language. It makes use of several poetic techniques, such as figures of speech, including metaphor, visual imagery, paradox, simile, symbols and hyperbole. A paradox is a statement that may seem contradictory, but can be true. Usually, one feels safe and secure to live in a closed and protected house. The fact that the poet wants to live in a house with multiple openings and with the sky as roof seems to be paradoxical at first. But here, the house that is open to the sky metaphorically refers to the realm of poetry, which simultaneously provides a secure place and offers immense possibilities to the poet and hence it is depicted as a house with several openings (Herd 2022). Further, visual imagery is used to describe the house with its various parts, like doors, windows, chambers and roof. The structure of the poem itself gives an image of rooms or chambers. The imagery in the lines “The spreading wide my narrow Hands” signifies the poet’s growth, liberation and the process of exploring beyond her limitations through poetry.

The use of paradox can also be seen in phrases like “everlasting roof”, “impregnable of eye”, and when the poet talks about spreading wide her “narrow” hands to gather the immense “paradise”. The phrase “everlasting roof” is self-contradictory, as discussed earlier, but when interpreted metaphorically, it suggests the eternal and boundless nature of poetry. The phrase “impregnable of eye” is also paradoxical, because it seems illogical to say that eyes, which are typically used for vision, cannot see something, yet it seems true in the context of poetry, where the greater faculties of the mind are necessary for understanding it, rather than mere physical sight. Other symbols used in the poem are those of the various doors and windows, which signify limitless possibilities. “Windows” and “Doors” are metonyms for the creativity and freedom of expression that is offered by poetry, as against the more straightforward style of prose (Raab 1998: 290, Borovičkové 2009: 17). Also, the hard cedar wood of the chambers symbolises the stability that poetry offers to the poet (Borovičkové 2009: 17). Hyperbole is another figure of speech that is tactfully employed to talk about the limitless house of poetry, with its “everlasting” roof, “fairest” visitors (i.e. readers of poetry) and the unlimited potential of poetry to gather the immense “paradise”. Through these exaggerated and extravagant statements, Dickinson is once again bringing to the forefront her defence of the superiority of poetry over prose and other forms of writing. The figurative and metaphoric style found in this poem enhances the beauty of the poem and adds deeper layers of meaning, thus enriching the reader’s experience.

#### 5. Conclusion

In general, the linguistic and stylistic features of the poem “I dwell in Possibility” play a significant role in complementing and enhancing its meaning. Like traditional poems dealing with the topic of poetry, this poem does not simply explain the features of poetry directly. Instead, the poet explains the concept of poetry through the extended metaphor of a house and other linguistic devices. This style is similar to the conceits used by the metaphysical poets who make a

comparison between two unlikely objects (Eliot 1932: 268). In this poem, a set of random images related to a house (roof, windows, doors) are used to highlight the unlimited possibilities and freedom available in poetry. The structure of the poem is also visually parallel to the rooms of a house.

Dickinson's use of irregular meter, unconventional capitalization, punctuation and dashes represent her notion of 'possibilities' or freedom available in the form, style, and interpretation of poetry. The vocabulary chosen, imagery, metaphor, foregrounding and parallelism are in some way or other used to reinforce the subject matter of the poem. The juxtaposition of the concepts of prose and poetry is also aided by contrasting stylistic elements. The stylistic devices at various levels play a major role in establishing the poet's opinion that poetry is superior to prose; with their help, Dickinson gives credit to her vocation as a poet, which empowers her to explore and transcend her limitations. Further, as the results show, undertaking a stylistic analysis at different levels of language helps to understand the deeper meanings of the text and how they are conveyed through poet's stylistic choices.

Emily Dickinson, like other modern poets, breaks the traditional conventions and rules of poetry in order to express her unique views. Wendy Martin (2007: 33) says that "She abandoned standard meter and rhyme, threw conventional grammar out the window, and forced her readers to work to understand her meaning. The traditional structures of poetry were incapable of conveying the ideas she wanted to express". The deviant and unconventional style of the poem "I Dwell in Possibility" is crafted carefully by Dickinson in order to deal with her unusual metaphor and unorthodox notion of poetry. It suggests that her stylistic choices align with and reinforce the central message or purpose of the poem – that of defending experimental poetry.

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## Annex A

### The full text of "I dwell in Possibility –"

- 1 I dwell in Possibility –
- 2 A fairer House than Prose –
- 3 More numerous of Windows –
- 4 Superior – for Doors –
  
- 5 Of Chambers as the Cedars –
- 6 Impregnable of eye –
- 7 And for an everlasting Roof
- 8 The Gambrels of the Sky –
  
- 9 Of Visitors – the fairest –
- 10 For Occupation – This –
- 11 The spreading wide my narrow Hands –
- 12 To gather Paradise –

## GHOST LIGHT. THE STRANGE FABRIC OF REALITY IN CORMAC MCCARTHY'S *THE PASSENGER*

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**Abstract:** Cormac McCarthy's swan song touches upon the motifs of his whole career, from Melvillian ambition to Southern Gothic imagery, and from western tropes to apocalyptic foreboding. Nevertheless, *The Passenger* (2022) is his most arcane and abstract work. This is due not only to the amount of scientific knowledge around which McCarthy builds his plot, but also to the specific issues that the main characters tackle philosophically, such as one's moral responsibility and capacity to forgive, transgressions in science and in the private life, the nature of reality and the degree to which poetic language may capture it.

**Keywords:** art and science, forbidden knowledge, the Manhattan Project, Cormac McCarthy, *The Passenger*

### 1. Introduction: landscape and melancholia

*The Passenger* (2022), Cormac McCarthy's last and long-awaited novel, has the stylistic eloquence of his previous books, but there is no doubt that it will remain his most abstract work. Albeit less violent than the western novels that have made McCarthy famous, *The Passenger* is no less apocalyptic in its leanings. If the pace of the story might be described as low-key, the vision of the universe and of the place the humans have in this world sustains a deep pessimism, a pessimism that addresses both personal undoing and cosmic holocaust. The main protagonists' efforts to reckon with their own lives are weaved into the narrative and made transparent through scientific ruminations, moral torment, reveries, and hallucinations meant to underline that the very fabric of the universe is beyond our understanding. This obvious premise imbues the novel with a sententiousness which would be terrible in a writer with fewer rhetorical skills than McCarthy, as would be his poetic descriptions of nature, if nature were not the very canvas on which his character's emotions – or lack of emotions – become recognizable to us.

Nature is never a mere background in Cormac McCarthy's novels. The landscape does not serve the sole purpose of locating the characters and their actions; it takes part in the action. McCarthy is the heir to Romantic aesthetics in that the descriptions become philosophical reflections on the cognitive processes and on the emotions that make possible a particular reflection on nature. Angus Fletcher (2006: 51, 53) states that, unlike European poets and novelists for whom nature description is a display of "a wild and disordered *accumulation*" circumscribed as Kant's

idea of the sublime, the American writers, due to the unprecedented scale of their environment, must deal with the landscape's intrusion upon the imagination (idem: 52) According to Fletcher, the American poets and novelists describe the nondescript because their minds and their stylistic means strive to order a chaos of perceptions caused by the large scale:

Clearly, one aim of descriptive glamour and gothic mysteries in verbally drawn landscape was to permit the novel to use actual settings whose gothic disarray was in fact organized so as to provide fictional effects, as if the real could formalize the wildness of the imagined. When nature intrudes upon description, as if it were a demiurgic author who insists on being sublime, the reader is led to adopt a new and quite skeptical view of description. (Fletcher 2006: 52-53)

McCarthy's descriptions of nature are never neutral. They sustain thoughts, sensations, and shadows of human life flickering on rocks or in the prairie. And our reading of McCarthy's descriptions is skeptical as long as we pay attention to his sophisticated rhetoric. Commenting on the horrors of *Blood Meridian, or, the Evening Redness in the West* (1985), Steven Shaviro finds the pessimism of the book in the "incessant horizontal movements" of the characters through the landscape, in weather changes, and "topological displacements" meant to maintain a feeling of never-ending war. Shaviro (2009: 11) concludes correctly: "For there can be no alienation when there is no originary state for us to be alienated from".

When compared with *Blood Meridian*, *The Passenger* feels like chamber music, slow paced, affectionate, and restrained. Although it does not show human cruelty from close range, the feeling of violent alienation pervades *The Passenger* even more than its companion novel, *Stella Maris* (2022). Georg Guillemin (2009: 52) notices that, in McCarthy's writings, the obsession with death and mortality that shapes his narrative melancholia "originates in the biblical image of the agonized prophet on the hill who watches the world from afar on its course toward ruin". My aim is to prove that the pessimism and the Gothic tropes in *The Passenger* are related to the main protagonist being aware of the many transgressions in his family and, by extension, the transgressions – moral, epistemological, political – of the generations who survived the Second World War. *The Passenger* tackles an old conundrum regarding forbidden knowledge: how much should be forbidden?

## 2. Another kind of cautionary tale

The not quite plot driven story of *The Passenger* relies on Cormac McCarthy's fully orchestrated cadences, which confer a predestined-like credibility to his hero's designs, on loquacious dialogues, ripe with colloquialisms, but also verging on mathematical arcane topics, and on the nightmarish imagery, where the disturbing detail of gothic inspiration accommodates an even more disturbing tender disposition. *The Passenger* opens in a frozen landscape:

It had snowed lightly in the night and her frozen hair was gold and crystalline and her eyes were frozen cold and hard as stones. One of her yellow boots had fallen off and stood in the snow beneath her. The shape of her coat lay dusted in the snow

where she'd dropped it and she wore only a white dress and she hung among the bare gray poles of the winter trees with her head bowed and her hands turned slightly outward like those of certain ecumenical statues whose attitude asks that their history be considered. That the deep foundation of the world be considered where it has its being in the sorrow of her creatures. The hunter knelt and stogged his rifle upright in the snow beside him and took off his gloves and let them fall and folded his hands one upon the other. He thought that he should pray but he'd no prayer for such a thing. He bowed his head. Tower of Ivory, he said. House of Gold. [...] When he opened his eyes he saw a small shape half buried in the snow and he leaned and dusted away the snow and picked up a gold chain that held a steel key, a whitegold ring. [...] (McCarthy 2022a: 3)

One notices immediately the eerie fairy tale topoi, such as the golden hair, a hunter without distinct features, the evocation of an Ivory Tower, a mysterious key on a gold chain. These familiar motifs turn out to be something else when the narrator compares the woman's posture to "ecumenical statues" and when, at the end of the description, mentions the detail – thus adding a little bit of colour in an otherwise white and sepulchral landscape – that the hanged woman in the woods carefully provided herself with a red sash, meant to make her body easy to discover. (ibid.) She chose to kill herself during the Christmas holiday.

The woman is Alicia Western, math prodigy and mental institutions patient, who loved only one man in her entire short life; her own brother, Bobby. McCarthy, chose to let Alicia be mainly a ghost in *The Passenger*, where we know her from Bobby's broodings and reminiscences, but also through her own mental theater, populated by the quasi-demonic Thalidomide Kid with an egg-shaped head and seal flippers instead of hands, and his cohort – the "horts" she calls them – of grotesque entertainers. Alicia Western is diagnosed with a list of afflictions – schizophrenia, autism, psychopathy –, but, as Michael Gorra (2022) notices in his review, none fits. Alicia is given a full voice – not a very convincing one, unfortunately – in *Stella Maris*, where one can find more about her abilities and her troubled mind during the therapy sessions with a psychiatrist named Dr. Cohen.

She seems to be a Platonist mathematician from the school of Kurt Gödel and Alexandre Grothendieck, having a gnostic sensibility. She likes to toy – sometimes skeptically – with the idea that "mathematical objects exist independently of human thought" (McCarthy 2022b: 64), while her less scientific intuitions make her guess that what ultimately escapes human understanding are not pure forms, but pure horror. She states that "at the core of reality lies a deep and eternal demonium." (idem: 152) Alicia's belief that every one of us is alone in the world and that the universe has been evolving in darkness and silence without the need of an intelligent observer (idem: 40) echoes strangely a similar tenet upheld by the frightening Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* (McCarthy 2001: 245): "Even in this world more things exist without our knowledge than with it and the order in creation which you see is that which you have put there, like a string in a maze, so that you shall not lose your way".

Being an allegorist, Cormac McCarthy makes Alicia a hieratic presence in *The Passenger*. She has the consistency of thought itself and is mainly a sensual apparition in her brother's memories. McCarthy draws on Catholic iconography – Alicia's golden hair shines like an aura, we see her among her classmates at St Mary's,

their patent leather shoes and prayer books all white etc. (McCarthy 2022a: 188) – but also on pagan imagery, such as that of the chthonian and hellish Medea, whom Alicia played as a teen, walking along black smoking kerosene footlights, wearing a gown improvised from sheeting and a crown of woodbine. (idem: 178-179) Alicia is to Bobby what Beatrice is to Dante, the very reason of his journey, except that in *The Passenger* there is no Paradise waiting at the end. Besides, she does not become a fully accomplished character. As Joy Williams (2023) put it, “Alicia is the sturdy vessel for McCarthy’s thinking. Perhaps too sturdy a vessel”.

The second opening of the novel takes place about ten years after her death, during the early 1980s, in New Orleans, where Bobby Western, a Caltech dropout and former racing driver, has a job as a salvage diver. He and his co-workers try to figure out the bizarre state of a sunken Lockheed JetStar with no signs of crash: the fuselage seems intact, there is no fuel spill in the water, the pilots and the seven passengers in their neat suits look as if they had been already dead at the impact. The third-person descriptions and the lively exchanges between the divers furnish us with lots of technical terms and professional points of view on the state of things, jargon control being one of Bobby’s gifts, no matter what field his knowledge is needed for: planes, guns, oil rigs, motor racing, numismatics, violins, history, string theory, survival techniques. Often, as has always been the case in McCarthy’s fiction, the character and the narrator “virtually share a point of view.” (Guillemin 2009: 55)

A part of the board panel was taken out, and the pilot’s flight bag is nowhere to be found, although nobody seems to have reached the plane before the salvage team. Soon, Bobby receives a visit from agents – are they FBI or something else? – who question him about a missing eighth passenger. The premise might look like a rewriting of *No Country for Old Men* (2005) – an unaccounted killing spree, a missing bag, the wrong man in the wrong place, a dogged pursuer –, but it is far from it. The double opening of *The Passenger* does not build up to a resolution of the two mysteries – Alicia’s suicide motivation, the missing person’s enigma, respectively. It establishes Bobby Western’s solitary pace instead. As his name suggests, he is another “lone and lonesome cowboy” perpetually on the move (Tom LeClair 2023), the typical McCarthy hero, at least since *Blood Meridian* and the Border Trilogy. Harassed by agents, and soon by the IRS (Internal Revenue Service) for suspicion over an undeclared inheritance, Bobby starts to change locations and stays as far from the authorities as possible. He is no less an outlaw than his friends – the con man John Sheddan, the private detective Kline, the sly bartender Janice, the affectionate transgender Debussy Fields – and his many acquaintances among the marginals of New Orleans make his aims not very difficult to accomplish. However, this time the story is not action driven, but boasts a peripatetic and loquacious energy. A boisterous dialectic which usually takes place between convivial interlocutors, jokes, ironies, and digressions alleviates the sense of suffocation and drowning – in water, in remorse, in the enigma of life itself – that pervades Bobby’s strategic evasions and ruminations. It is not the clues pertaining to the eighth passenger’s disappearance that fall into place, but random details concerning Bobby Western’s distress: his father’s stance toward the bombing of Hiroshima, his sister’s incestuous love for him – which he staved off cautiously –, the degree to which his moral actions are in accordance with his sense of reality, and of course, his fear of death.

Bobby Western shares some hard to miss features with Suttree, the outcast whose name gives the title to Cormac McCarthy's 1979 novel. Cornelius Suttree is a fisherman who lives on a decrepit houseboat in Knoxville and roams the shores of the Tennessee River with his no less destitute friends and acquaintances. In the opening of the book, Suttree watches a rescue team taking out from the water the disfigured body of a man who committed suicide. The detail that sticks most dramatically to his mind is the dead man's still running watch (McCarthy 2010: 11, 15). The aquatic motif, thoroughly analyzed by Jay Ellis in relation to Suttree's alcoholism, is also symbolically rich: the river provides fish and turtles to the main characters, but it also drowns them, floods their lodgings, topples dams and so on. (Ellis 2006: 141) Like Suttree's father, who brought his own contribution to the destruction of the environment and the disruptions of human lives along the Tennessee River, Bobby Western's father was involved in a project with planetary consequences: the making of the first atomic bomb.

Calling at Kline's office, in the hope that the detective will help him with a new identity, Bobby Western mentions a childhood incident when, during wintertime, he found a beautiful Laird-Turner Meteor racing plane, which had crashed in the woods of Tennessee. The pilot, "slumped over in the cockpit" (McCarthy 2022a: 217), was the first dead man he had ever seen and the view scared Bobby terribly. Not so much, though, as to stop him taking a souvenir from the crash site, namely a square piece of linen from the fuselage with the number 22 on it. (idem: 219) He used to keep that yellow linen on the wall of his room, in his maternal grandmother's house, like a sports pennant or a poster. (idem: 170) Numbers are significant in McCarthy's novels not because of their purported symbolism, but for the way they stick to the characters' – and by extension, to the readers' – minds. For instance, the unnamed cataclysm in *The Road* takes place at 1:17. (McCarthy 2007: 52) Considering the frequent mentioning of the unconscious in *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, that early experience could be a psychoanalytical explanation for Bobby's coping with the fear of death after finding the sunken plane off the coast of New Orleans. The coincidence is so obvious, that Kline grasps it on the spot:

Coming upon airplanes with bodies in them I'm going to say is a fairly unusual experience. But for you it seems to be commonplace.

Commonplace.

Statistically speaking. Multiple millions of times more than the average citizen might experience.

Am I supposed to be superstitious?

Deep sea diving. Car racing. What. A love of hazard?

I don't know. (McCarthy 2022a: 219)

There are other childhood memories which give weight to Bobby's subsequent decisions and his sense of personal loss. At sixteen, he took part in a competition for the State Science Fair. His project was a complex study of a pond close to his grandmother's house, the meticulous drawing of "every visible creature in that habitat" from gnats and arachnids to fish and birds:

Like Audubon he'd had to draw the great blue heron leaning over the water because it was too big for the paper. Two hundred and seventy-three creatures with their Latin names on three forty foot rolls of construction paper. It had taken him two years to do and it didn't win. (McCarthy 2022a: 164)

The link between art and science is the gist of the book. Conspicuous connections between events coalesce poetically in the story of Bobby Western's life, but one is left to ponder the hidden causality of his many decisions, because a full causality may be intuited only, not proven. Bobby and the reader share the illusion that the present situation might somehow be apprehended through a correct reevaluation of the past. McCarthy's pastoral vision used to sustain a "melancholy equanimity", that is "a pessimistic indifference" that bestowed "an egalitarian existential status on all terrestrial phenomena alike." (Guillemin 2009: 54) This time, the main protagonist's melancholy does not equate to atavistic abilities, mythical features such as horse breaking, as in *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) or wolves taming, as in *The Crossing* (1994), but to the history of the twentieth century.

Born in a Jewish family, Bobby Western understands that "the forces of history which had ushered his troubled life into the tapestry were those of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the sister events that sealed forever the fate of the West." (Cormac McCarthy 2022a: 165) The Manhattan Project made possible his and his younger sister's parents meeting. Their father, a reputed physicist and friend of Oppenheimer, did not regret the Hiroshima bombing and even had a strange view on the catastrophic event, considering it less humiliating for Japan than a straight defeat, a way to give the reconstruction of Japan an unexpected meaning. (McCarthy 2022b: 61) His children's scientific gifts are heavy with this moral burden. There is a constant transition in the novel between the urgencies of daily life – all those enlivened activities and abilities that Bobby boasts – and the abstract reality of the world as described by quantum physics and especially by the uncertainty principle that basically states that we see only those aspects of reality we choose to observe. In Werner Heisenberg's own words, (qtd. in Egginton 2023: 79, 115), "we have to remember that what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our own method of questioning."

Following Immanuel Kant's critical stance on the image we make of the world – namely that we are an important part of the reality we observe –, Heisenberg thought that scientists must always take into consideration the limits of the human cognitive faculties. William Egginton sums up this conviction – which Heisenberg secretly elaborated during the war, when he was involved in Germany's nuclear program, in the "Manuscript of 1942", published posthumously – in a clear phrase: "By presuming we know the ultimate nature of reality, we limit our ability to understand." (Egginton 2023: 25) Heisenberg also confronted the scientific establishment, and especially the particle physicists – who proved that the laws of classical mechanics did not work for quantum mechanics – with the same issue with which Ludwig Wittgenstein puzzled the philosophers: the limits of language. "Science translates reality into thought and humans need language to think", but at the quantum level the physicist has to deal with the impossibility of a complete description of reality. (idem: 22-23)

*The Passenger* sustains the tension between the prophetic and omniscient narrative voice that sermonizes gnomically – “All of history a rehearsal for its own extinction” (McCarthy 2022a: 369) – and the main characters’ beliefs and attitudes that contradict precisely this aspiration to ultimate knowledge. While living like a hermit on the dunes south of Bay St Louis, in the hope of escaping the authorities, Bobby Western meets during a stormy night the hallucination of his dead sister, the Thalidomide Kid himself. In the strange dialogue that ensues in this uncanny and improbable stroll on the beach, the Kid makes clear to Bobby some things about Alicia’s mind:

She knew that in the end you really cant know. You cant get hold of the world. You can only draw a picture. Whether it’s a bull on the wall of a cave or a partial differential equation it’s all the same thing. (McCarthy 2022a: 279)

Another source of conflict in the novel resides in the way McCarthy conceives his characters’ choices as opposed to the necessity that their story must feel like accomplished destinies, round and meaningful. In science, the antinomy between freedom and deterministic laws comes down in the end to acknowledging that our cognition tends to order the world dichotomically – which is an epistemological trap – and that the antinomy “emerges from the very tools we use to study and understand the cosmos.” (Egginton 2023: 210) But the novelist does not do science. She or he is a storyteller or, like Cormac McCarthy, a writer of parables which accommodate the paradox of the ancient oracles: fate is ordained by gods, yet the individual’s choices are not. Thus, fate can be averted to the degree to which a particular person understands that her or his character and actions drive the prophetic answer. (Stoneman 2011: 23) The classicist Richard Stoneman notices that the first poetic forms and the religious impulses were indistinguishable in times of old:

Oracles always work in stories, because that is what it is to be a story. As Henry James wrote, we don’t scruple to invent portents after the event, because that is how we make stories of the series of events that constitute our lives. (Stoneman 2011: 13)

Perhaps this conundrum – namely his ambition to take a complex scientific stance on the most difficult questions concerning the universe and human life while preserving his allegorical designs and religious rhetoric – determined Cormac McCarthy to split his final work in two. *The Passenger* is the typical McCarthy novel: poetic, mannish, mythical, character driven, an ode to solitude. The therapy sessions of *Stella Maris*, which should have been Alicia Western’s story, lack context and character focus, but tackle the scientific and ethical problems related to the fast advancement of knowledge and technology during the last hundred years and to the catastrophes of the twentieth century. Bringing Alicia’s mathematical obsessions into Bobby Western’s story would have ruined the oracular style and the enigma of *The Passenger*. That is why, in the latter, she is either an ill child, or an angelic apparition in dreams and hallucinations, rather than the institutionalized hard-core scientist that Dr. Cohen encounters at the Stella Maris psychiatric facility.

Myths, wisdom literature, and ancient philosophies teach us that humans are granted only partial knowledge of the world, and that unbridled curiosity brings disaster upon those who are guilty of hubris. The discrepancy between our desire to know everything and the limits of what we can fathom is the subject of Roger Shattuck's book, *Forbidden Knowledge*. Shattuck (1997: 29) uses a French word taken from Montaigne and Pascal – *portée*, that is one's reach, the capacity and the limit that defines a particular character – and archangel Raphael's advice to Adam in Book VIII of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, "be lowly wise", (idem: 66, 73) in order to criticize the Faustian and Frankenstein-like excesses of the nowadays ethos. Shattuck does not oppose the advancement of knowledge. He just reminds us of some ancient and modern cautionary tales about the perils of knowledge unchecked by moral reflection. Debunking the idea of "pure research" (the disinterested pursuit of truth) as just a modern myth (idem: 224-225) the scientists enjoy telling themselves, Roger Shattuck choses the Manhattan Project as an example of Frankenstein-like hubris.

J. Robert Oppenheimer seems today a figure out of a Greek tragedy, a "fedora wearing Prometheus", both "hero and scapegoat", a man able to justify rationally the manufacturing and the employing of the bomb. (idem: 174-175) However, in his 1947 MIT lecture, while stressing the value of disinterested research, Oppenheimer also spoke about how physicists had "known sin". This time, Shattuck (1997: 175-176) notices that Oppenheimer, a nonreligious scientist, used a religious term to make clear to his colleagues the difference between scientific knowledge and moral knowledge.

In *The Passenger* Cormac McCarthy employs Oppenheimer's dilemma as an artistic means. Bobby Western spends one night in a motel outside Midland, Texas, close to a refinery. Although it is freezing cold outside, the flames, the oil wells, the diesel trucks, and the creatures slithering in the desert make the place look postapocalyptic. Landscape perception and thinking become the same cognitive process:

The trucks grew fewer. No wind. Silence. The little carpet colored vipers coiled out there in the dark. The abyss of the past into which the world is falling. Everything vanishing as if it had never been. We would hardly wish to know ourselves again as once we were and yet we mourn the days. He'd thought of his father little in recent years. He thought of him now. (McCarthy 2022a: 310)

He thought of his father who considered that the dropping of the bomb was a factor of progress for Japan, a fresh start for reconstruction. Bobby never finds his father's grave, but remembers him on his deathbed, still obsessed with abstractions and fascinated by his boss' intellect:

They sat in the winter sun in the hospital window at Berkeley. His father wore a plastic nametag on his wrist. He'd grown a wispy white beard and he kept touching it. Oppenheimer, he said. It would be Oppenheimer. He would answer your questions before you asked them. You could take a problem you'd been working on for weeks and he would sit there puffing on his pipe while you put your work up on the board and he'd look at it for a minute and say: Yes. I think I see how we can do this. And get up and erase your work and put up the right equations and sit down and smile at you. (McCarthy 2022a: 370-371)

In Cormac McCarthy's novels the sons often inherit the burden to sort out the mistakes of their fathers who were poised to set the world straight. After a get-together with detective Kline, Bobby ponders obliquely the father-son relationship remembering the Manhattan Project-related documents that his father used to hide from the family:

In the coming night he thought that men would band together in the hills. Feeding their small fires with the deeds and the covenants and the poetry of their fathers. Documents they'd no gift to read in a cold to loot men of their souls. (McCarthy 2022a: 289)

It is a poetic description indeed, yet the cold does not refer to air temperature, but to knowledge without heart. The degree to which Bobby Western's father acknowledged sin, in the sense Oppenheimer gave to the word in his 1947 lecture, remains one of the unanswered questions of *The Passenger*.

### 3. Conclusion: a final metonymy

Instantly recognizable as a Cormac McCarthy novel due to its setting, character types, cinematic tropes, and Biblical rhetoric, *The Passenger* also stands apart in McCarthy's canon as a dark fiction, heavy with the history of science and rich in – sometimes abstruse – ethical reflections. The deep pessimism of the book resides in the disproportion between what Bobby Western calls “ghost light”, namely the light that stays constantly on in every theatre when they are empty, a metonymy and a feeble reassurance that the world will never be completely vacated (McCarthy 2022a: 375-376) and the blinding light of nuclear annihilation. *The Passenger* is an accomplished novel which gives prominence to the importance of artistic expression in a culture that has become fond of information technology and scientific truth. As Roger Shattuck put it,

We are often taught to deal with ideas as the highest form of knowledge. But the process of abstraction by which we form ideas out of observed experience eliminates two essential aspects of life [...]: time and individual people acting as agents. At their purest, ideas are disembodied and timeless. We need ideas to reason logically and to explore the fog of uncertainty that surrounds the immediate encounter with daily living. Equally, we need stories to embody the medium of time in which human character takes shape and reveals itself to us, and in which we discover our own mortality. (Shattuck 1997: 9)

Among the contemporary American writers, Cormac McCarthy is perhaps the one who made us most aware of our mortality with his virtuosic prose that, despite its apocalyptic overtones, strongly affirms life.

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**BEYOND ARCHETYPES.  
KATHY ACKER, PUNK AESTHETICS,  
AND THE EVOLUTION OF FEMINIST NARRATIVES**

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***Abstract:** This article proposes a nuanced examination of female identities within the framework of postmodern feminist literature and punk's cultural rebellion, critically engaging with the legacy of Kathy Acker and the punk literary movement. My research transcends traditional analysis and explores the construct of female identities through the lens of postmodern feminist resistance, where Acker's deconstruction of narrative forms and punk literature's radical ethos serve as focal points. The study aligns with Acker's thematic preoccupations with power, autonomy, and societal transgression, drawing parallels with contemporary feminist concerns. This interdisciplinary approach, combining comparative literature analysis, feminist theoretical perspectives, and examining power dynamics in fiction, seeks to articulate how postmodern narratives, particularly within the punk genre, redefine and challenge conventional gender roles. It aims to focus on discourse on gender and cultural studies by offering insights into the complex interplay between historical narrative constructs and their reimagining in postmodern feminist and punk literature, highlighting the evolution of female identities in a continuously shifting socio-political landscape.*

***Keywords:** cultural rebellion, gender identity, narrative deconstruction, punk aesthetics, subversive identities*

## **1. Introduction**

In the landscape of feminist literature and cultural studies, the confluence of postmodern feminist theory, punk aesthetics, and the literary innovations of Kathy Acker represents a pivotal juncture for examining the evolution of female identities and narratives. The present article seeks to dissect the layers of this convergence, tracing the genealogy of feminist narratives from their roots to their reconfiguration within the punk movement, as epitomised by Acker's work. It posits that her literary practice, infused with punk's rebellious spirit, challenges traditional depictions of female characters and redefines the contours of feminist literature: "Howard Mumford Jones identifies four cardinal types of Romantic individualism: the revolutionary, the sufferer, the rebel, and the liberated woman (243). All of these are present in or manifest themselves in Acker's personae" (Hume 2001: 507).

My paper is anchored in a postmodern feminist theoretical framework that views gender and identity as fluid and constructed, challenging fixed interpretations of

female roles in literature and society. By integrating this perspective with examining the punk movement's cultural and aesthetic principles, my research aims to unveil the way these dynamics have influenced the portrayal of female identities, moving beyond conventional archetypes to embrace more complex, contradictory, and subversive characterisations. Acker's novels, characterised by their pastiche of high and low cultural references, appropriation of other texts, and explicit engagement with themes of sex, power, and social transgression, serve as a lens to explore these transformations:

Kathy Acker's engagement with the politics of the first-person narrator in literature derives from her rebellion against her literary "forefathers". Having grown up with the work of the Black Mountain Poets, Acker rebelled against her literary predecessors. This group of postmodern poets was centred around the Black Mountain college in North Carolina. They founded their "poetics of authenticity" on the work of modernists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, who believed that every person has a unique voice and that it is the task of the author to give expression to that voice. Acker found fault with this conception of authorship since "finding your voice" was not as evident for Acker as it had been for her literary forefathers. (Veneboer 2019: 10)

Central to this analysis is exploring how Acker's work embodies punk aesthetics through its form and content, employing disruption, fragmentation, and defiance strategies. Her texts are acts of literary rebellion, tearing down the boundaries between high and low culture, merging the personal with the political, and constantly questioning the construction of identity and reality. Her engagement with punk aesthetics goes beyond stylistic affinity, embodying the movement's ethos of resistance and its DIY ("do it yourself") spirit in literature.

In the latter decades of the twentieth century, a cultural maelstrom brewed that gave birth to the punk movement and ignited a new wave of feminist activism. This era, characterised by a collective yearning for authenticity and a fierce critique of societal structures, forms the historical backdrop against which Acker penned her narratives, and punk music roared its dissent. My article delves into this zeitgeist, uncovering the symbiotic relationship between Acker's literary praxis and the punk movement's aesthetic insurgency.

Acker's oeuvre embodies punk aesthetics not merely in stylistic defiance, but also as a manifesto of literary rebellion. Her works dismantle the barriers between the lofty and the low, blending personal politics with a broader critique of societal constructs, perpetually questioning the fabric of identity and reality. This alignment with punk's ethos extends beyond mere artistic affinity; it is a testament to a shared commitment to resistance, autonomy, and the disruptive potential of creativity:

From its beginnings, whether in terms of personnel, practices, or elements of ideology and discourse, punk had a complex and sometimes productive relationship with feminism: both shared a DIY ethos of cultural production and a political reading of culture, while punk's signifiers and ethos of rebellion influenced certain forms of feminism, and feminist ideology proved attractive to women and girls in punk (O'Brien 187). Acker's work exemplifies this crossover, hence is ideal to explore a gendered and political version of punk. (Henderson 2021: 10)

As I trace the lineage of feminist narratives through the disruptive lens of Acker's work and the broader punk movement, I uncover a landscape where female identities are not fixed, but fluid, not passive, but potent. This exploration reveals how punk aesthetics and Acker have jointly forged a space where narratives of female power, autonomy, and resistance are imagined and vigorously enacted, challenging the archetypal confines of traditional gender roles and offering new scripts for feminist discourse. By integrating punk aesthetics, she creates a subversive narrative environment on the level of ontology, both in terms of content and structural composition. Such subversion allows her to articulate female empowerment, autonomy, and resistive discourses in ways resistant to traditional, patriarchal forms of storytelling. The result is a body of work that captures the radical ethos of punk, constructing a new paradigm for a feminist narrative that refuses female roles in a quiescent position and positions the character as an active, self-determining agent.

My methodological voyage employs a rich palette of comparative literature analysis, thematic exploration, and feminist theoretical inquiry, mirroring the interdisciplinary essence of my study. This approach allows me to capture the dynamism of female identities as they evolve from historical and archetypal echoes to postmodern roars of independence and defiance.

## 2. Kathy Acker's literary universe

Exploring Kathy Acker's literary universe offers a unique vantage point from which to examine the confluence of postmodern narrative techniques and the insurgent spirit of punk aesthetics. Acker, a figure synonymous with literary innovation, embraced the ethos of punk culture, embedding its principles deep within the fabric of her work. Her literature, marked by a radical departure from conventional storytelling, delves into themes of identity, power, sexuality, and resistance, thus challenging and redefining the boundaries of narrative form and thematic exploration.

Acker's emergence as a literary force in the late twentieth century coincided with a significant cultural and intellectual tumult. The postmodern condition, characterised by scepticism towards grand narratives and embracing fragmentation and pastiche, found a resonant voice in Acker's work. Her novels, replete with intertextual references, parodic inversions of classic literature, and a blatant disregard for linear storytelling, exemplify the postmodern critique of authenticity and authority. Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978) is a testament to her innovative approach, blending autobiography with fiction, illustrations with text, and high culture with the vernacular, thus embodying the postmodern ethos of hybridity and bricolage.

Punk's influence on her work extends beyond mere aesthetic choice; it informs her literary and philosophical stance. With its roots in rebellion against societal norms and the mainstream music industry, Punk championed DIY ethics, raw expression, and a sense of community among the disaffected. Acker translated these principles into a literary context, employing a natural, unfiltered narrative voice and a compositional method akin to punk's DIY approach. Her texts are a

literary analogue to punk music's discordant melodies and confrontational lyrics, challenging readers' expectations and the literary establishment's conventions:

In Acker's work, each punk element works to reconstruct writing as an anti-aesthetic object, as did punk with music and other elements of its subculture. The sheer aggressiveness of Acker's texts— their amplification of anger and pain— aims for a visceral impact on the reader to shock us out of any post-1960s complacency or withdrawal. Acker writes a deliberately stupid and antiliterary prose, her fragments roughly sutured together make a brutal, minimalist, and 'amateurish' novelistic form. (Henderson 2021: 34)

At the heart of Acker's literary universe is a profound engagement with themes of rebellion and resistance. Through her characters and narratives, she interrogates the constructs of gender, sexuality, and power, often drawing upon her experiences to question and subvert societal norms. Her protagonists, frequently women navigating a patriarchal world, embody the quest for autonomy and self-definition against oppression and marginalisation. *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (1996), for example, reimagines the pirate narrative, traditionally a male-dominated genre, to explore female agency and resistance in a lawless, alternative reality:

Piracy, in this redefined role, is no mere strategy of theft, but an idealized model of escape which provides the basis for belief in a society beyond the phallus. As Acker says at one point in the Friedman interview, "The myth to me is pirates" (17). But because any attempt to escape the phallus is ultimately "impossible," as Acker concedes, her vision of piracy is also an impossible ideal. Against those who might interpret her new image of the pirate as self-congratulatory, Acker instead employs the pirate myth as a yardstick for her own artistic achievement, where success is measured in terms of rigorous self-consciousness about her writing combined with the ability to challenge phallocentrism. (Kocela 2006: 79)

Acker's exploration of identity is deeply intertwined with the body as a site of autonomy and societal control. Her work frequently delves into the physicality of her characters, using the body as a canvas for exploring themes of desire, violation, and liberation. This preoccupation with the body not only challenges normative notions of sexuality and gender but also serves as a metaphor for the struggle against external constraints, be they societal norms or literary traditions.

Acker's literary universe is a complex multifaceted realm, where postmodernism and punk converge to create challenging, provocative narratives, deeply reflective of the human condition. Her contributions to literature extend beyond her thematic concerns, influencing narrative form and function and expanding the possibilities of what literature can be, while her work remains a pivotal reference point for understanding the intersection of literary innovation, cultural critique, and the relentless pursuit of identity and autonomy in the modern world.

### 3. Punk aesthetics in Acker's literature

Embarking on an exploration of punk aesthetics in Acker's writings reveals a vivid tapestry, where punk culture's rebellious spirit and anti-establishment ethos

are intricately woven into the fabric of her narrative forms and thematic content. Acker, as a literary figure, not only embraced the punk movement's core principles – the DIY ethic, raw authenticity, and vehement opposition to societal norms – but also redefined their application in the realm of postmodern literature, offering a new dimension to the punk aesthetic that transcended its musical and visual origins.

The punk movement's inception in the 1970s marked a cultural and social upheaval, a reaction against the era's perceived decadence and complacency. Its ethos, characterised by a DIY spirit, an embrace of authenticity over polish, and defiance against the mainstream, resonated in Acker's literary endeavours. Much like punk music, her narratives are discordant, raw, and unapologetically aggressive, challenging the reader to engage with the text on a level that defies passive consumption.

Acker's narrative style, particularly evident in works such as *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978), disrupts traditional literary conventions through a deliberate pastiche of genres, texts, and voices. This novel, among other writings, showcases her adeptness at blending fiction with autobiography and high culture with the vernacular in a collage-like structure that mirrors punk's bricolage approach to art. The integration of drawings, handwritten texts, and typographical experiments within her novels challenges the importance of linear narrative and visually embodies punk's raw, unmediated expression aesthetic.

The thematic exploration in Acker's literature further underscores her alignment with punk aesthetics. Themes of rebellion, autonomy, and resistance are recurrent, with her characters often navigating oppressive societal structures in a quest for self-definition and liberation. These narratives delve into issues of gender, identity, and power, interrogating and subverting traditional roles and expectations. Acker's work, in essence, embodies the punk ethos of challenging authority, be it the authority of societal norms, literary traditions, or the concept of authorship itself.

In *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), she extends her punk aesthetic into a dystopian vision that merges elements of anarchism with a critique of imperialism and societal decay. The novel's lawless world, where traditional narratives and identities dissolve into chaos, starkly reflects punk's nihilistic critique of modern society. Acker's use of pastiche in this work - appropriating and subverting texts ranging from historical documents to contemporary literature - acts as a form of literary rebellion, echoing punk's broader cultural resistance.

Acker's contribution to punk literature and her broader influence on the literary landscape cannot be overstated. By infusing her narratives with punk aesthetics and ethos, she expanded the possibilities of literary expression and opened new avenues for exploring themes like power, identity, and resistance. Her legacy, evident in the works of subsequent generations of writers and artists, attests to the enduring relevance of punk aesthetics in challenging the conventions of literature and society.

Through her innovative narrative style and thematic exploration, Acker has cemented her place as a pivotal figure in the intersection of postmodern literature and punk culture. Her works stand as a testament to the power of literature to reflect and actively engage with and challenge the cultural and societal milieu from which it emerges. In her literary universe, punk aesthetics serves not merely

as stylistic embellishments, but as a foundational principle that shapes the essence of her narrative and thematic endeavours:

Her violent, grotesque, pornographic, and uncanny prose reflect punk's core aesthetic ideals, as well as its nihilistic and apocalyptic worldview. Acker's ties to the punk scene were also methodological, evidenced in the self-published beginnings of her literary career. (Griffiths 2020: 39)

#### 4. Cultural rebellion through textual practice

Acker's literature embodies a profound cultural rebellion, not merely through its thematic explorations, but significantly through its textual practice. Her method of engaging with texts - her appropriation, pastiche, and recontextualisation of existing narratives - serves as a radical act of defiance against literary and societal norms. This rebellion is not a mere rejection of traditional forms but a deliberate attempt to dismantle and reconstruct narrative possibilities, offering a critique of culture, power, and identity.

Acker's textual practice is a complex, layered form of resistance that draws upon a rich tapestry of literary, philosophical, and pop culture sources. Her work engages in a dialogue with the past, not to pay homage but to question and disrupt the narratives that have been historically valorised. By appropriating texts from a wide range of authors - from Charles Dickens to William S. Burroughs - Acker performs a literary piracy that challenges the sanctity of authorship and the originality of text. This approach is punk in its ethos, embodying the movement's disdain for authority and inclination towards subversion and disruption.

The act of pastiche in Acker's work is not merely a stylistic choice, but a form of cultural critique. By juxtaposing disparate texts and voices, Acker exposes the constructs of power, gender, and sexuality that underpin narrative traditions. Her novel *Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream* (1986), which reimagines the classic tale within a contemporary feminist framework, exemplifies this method. Acker's Quixote is not the noble, if misguided, knight of Cervantes' creation, but a woman navigating the complexities of identity in a patriarchal world. This recontextualisation critiques the narratives that have shaped our understanding of gender and heroism, revealing the exclusionary practices at the heart of literary canon formation:

The copying and manipulating of texts by others has come to be seen as an evacuation of a fixed meaning, a critique of the traditional notions of originality and authorship and, when Acker and Levine borrow material made by men, a feminist subversion of the male-centred canon. Acker commented that she wanted to do with words what Levine did with her artistic and photographic copies. Considered the culmination of Acker's appropriation technique, *Don Quixote's* middle section, comprising 'Russian Constructivism' and three other texts, was written, Acker notes, 'out of a Sherrie Levine-type impulse'. (Borowska 2019: 137)

Acker's engagement with the body and sexuality further underscores her cultural rebellion. By foregrounding the physical and the visceral in her narratives, Acker challenges the disembodied rationalism that characterises much of Western

thought. Her texts are replete with scenes of sex, violence, and bodily transformation, which serve not only to shock or provoke, but also to question the norms that govern our understanding of the body and desire. In *Empire of the Senseless*, Acker creates a dystopian world, where the traditional distinctions between human and machine, organic and inorganic, are blurred, reflecting a punk rejection of binaries and a quest for alternative modes of being.

Moreover, Acker's textual rebellion extends to the very structure of her novels. She challenges the hierarchical distinctions that define literary value by breaking down the barriers between fiction and autobiography, between high and low culture. Her work, with its collage of genres and forms, reflects a punk bricolage aesthetic, assembling a fragmented narrative that mirrors the fractured identities and realities of contemporary life:

Overall, Acker's formal disassociation with bourgeois capitalism's prescribed values of rationality, frugality, and utility announces her rebellion against a conservative cultural economy and dominant social order. This is articulated through the device of repetition in her texts, which advocates a liberal approach to literary expenditure; her unprincipled 'spending' of literary resources via the device of textual bricolage; and finally, her tangential drawings that 'waste' narrative time and refuse the Puritan time-valuation (the construction of time around industry). All of these devices in some way undermine the set of principles that infuse mainstream society, which is, due to the sustained influence of the Puritan work ethic, predominantly a work society. Acker's 'amoral' texts formally eschew an ethical code that goes to the heart of modern American culture and all that comes with it, including an oversubscription to work. (Griffiths 2020: 102)

Acker's cultural rebellion through textual practice is a powerful act of literary innovation and critique. It is a declaration of the freedom to create, appropriate, and subvert that resonates with the punk spirit of resistance. Through her work, she challenges the conventions of narrative and representation and invites us to reimagine the possibilities of literature itself. Her legacy, marked by a relentless questioning of cultural norms and an unwavering commitment to textual rebellion, continues to inspire and provoke, ensuring her place as a seminal figure in the landscape of contemporary literature.

In exploring Acker's cultural rebellion through textual practice, we encounter a literature that was once a critique of and a tribute to the power of narrative. Her work reminds us that engaging with texts is engaging with the world, questioning it, dismantling it, and ultimately envisioning new ways of being and understanding. Through her punk-inspired rebellion, Acker not only transformed the landscape of postmodern literature, but also offered a radical vision of what it means to write and to resist in a world of entrenched power and pervasive norms.

## 5. Construction of subversive identities

At the core of Acker's literary endeavour lies a profound interrogation and construction of subversive identities. Her work, deeply embedded in the punk ethos of rebellion and resistance, not only critiques societal norms and literary conventions,

but also actively participates in the dismantling and reimagining identities. Through her narrative practices and thematic explorations, Acker constructs characters and personas that defy traditional categorisations, challenging the reader's understanding of identity, gender, and the body.

Her narratives serve as a battleground for exploring identity, not as a fixed essence, but as a fluid, contested space. Her characters, often drawn from the margins of society, embody the punk spirit of defiance and non-conformity. They are rebels, outcasts, and shape-shifters navigating a world that seeks to define and contain them within rigid boundaries. Through these characters, Acker interrogates the constructs of gender, sexuality, and identity, revealing the arbitrariness and violence of normative classifications. Gender and sexuality, central themes in her work, are sites of radical exploration and questioning. Acker's engagement with these themes is not merely descriptive but deeply subversive, challenging the binary oppositions that dominate traditional narratives of identity. Her characters frequently undergo transformations and engage in behaviours that transgress normative boundaries, embodying a fluidity of identity that is both a personal quest for authenticity and a political act of resistance: "The subversive use of drag in *Nymphomaniac* points to the mutability of identity, here challenging not only traditional gender distinctions but also becoming a means of dedication to political subjectivity through giving up on one's ordinary identity" (Borowska 2019: 69).

In *Great Expectations* (1982), for example, Acker dismantles the Dickensian narrative to explore themes of sexual autonomy, identity, and betrayal, weaving a tale that is as much a critique of patriarchal society as it is a reimagining of the possibilities of narrative and identity:

Female characters are depicted handing over the fruits of their labour to male characters, Acker challenges the Puritan work ethic's underlying assumption of the working 'self', or that an autonomous working self even exists to supposedly benefit from work. The notion that individual growth and self-fulfilment are certain by-products of work is debunked in these scenes, where the women's labour is seen to benefit external patriarchal forces, pimps and masters, not the women themselves. Essentially, Acker's female sex worker narratives pose the question: how can work enrich the 'self', particularly the female 'self', when coercion and oppression play such a major role in one's 'call to work'? (Griffiths 2020: 80)

Acker's use of the body as a narrative and thematic focus further complicates traditional notions of identity. In her writings, the body is not a stable, coherent entity, but a site of conflict, desire, and transformation. Her work vividly portrays bodies in flux, challenging the Cartesian dualism that separates mind and body and the cultural scripts that dictate the meanings and uses of the body. Through graphic depictions of sex, violence, and bodily modification, Acker's narratives foreground the body's centrality to the construction of identity, emphasising its potential for liberation as well as its vulnerability to control and violence.

Moreover, Acker's textual strategies - her appropriation of texts, her blending of genres, and her disruption of narrative coherence - mirror the construction of subversive identities in her work. Just as her characters defy easy categorisation, Acker's narratives resist singular interpretation, existing as multivalent texts that

invite the reader to engage in the ongoing meaning-making process. This narrative approach reflects the complexity of identity and acts as a form of resistance against the authoritative, singular voice that dominates traditional narratives.

In constructing subversive identities, Acker does not offer a utopian vision of liberation, but illuminates the struggles and contradictions inherent in the quest for autonomy and authenticity. Her characters, embroiled in battles against external constraints and internal conflicts, embody the tensions and possibilities of identity in a world marked by power relations and cultural norms. Through these characters, Acker articulates a vision of identity as an open-ended, contested process, a continual becoming that challenges the limits of language, narrative, and society.

In conclusion, her construction of subversive identities represents a radical intervention in the discourse on identity, gender, and the body. Her work, deeply influenced by punk aesthetics and ethos, not only critiques societal and literary conventions, but also actively participates in reimagining what identities can be. Through her innovative narrative practices and her exploration of themes of gender, sexuality, and the body, Acker offers a complex, nuanced perspective on identity as a site of resistance and transformation. Her legacy, marked by a relentless questioning of norms and a fearless exploration of the boundaries of self, continues to inspire and challenge, making her work a seminal contribution to the literature of rebellion and resistance.

## 6. Conclusion

Kathy Acker's oeuvre, deeply entrenched in the punk aesthetic and postmodern literary practices, stands as a beacon of radical innovation and cultural critique, casting a long shadow over contemporary literature and the feminist movement. Her influence permeates diverse literary works and feminist discourses, challenging traditional notions of narrative, identity, and resistance. This concluding section aims to elucidate Acker's enduring legacy, examining how her subversive textual practices and exploration of identities continue to resonate within and beyond the literary realm.

Acker's literary contributions, characterised by a relentless questioning of authority and a bold dismantling of narrative and linguistic conventions, have paved the way for a generation of writers and artists committed to exploring the boundaries of form and content. Her pioneering use of pastiche, appropriation, and narrative fragmentation has been embraced by contemporary authors, who see in her work a model for challenging the status quo and experimenting with the possibilities of the text. Acker's influence is evident in the works of writers who traverse the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, as well as high art and popular culture, in a quest to articulate complex identities and critique societal norms.

Beyond literary form, Acker's thematic preoccupations with gender, sexuality, and power dynamics have significantly impacted the feminist movement and gender studies. Her exploration of fluid identities, of the body as a site of contestation, and of the politics of desire has enriched feminist discourses, offering nuanced perspectives on the construction and deconstruction of gender. Acker's work

challenges the feminist movement to consider how narratives and languages shape our understanding of gender and sexuality, advocating for a radical openness that acknowledges the diversity of identities and experiences.

Furthermore, her engagement with punk aesthetics - its ethos of rebellion, its DIY spirit, and its critique of cultural and societal norms - has inspired a cross-disciplinary approach to feminist activism and scholarship. Her example encourages feminists to adopt a more aggressive and creative stance in their engagements with culture and society, emphasising the importance of alternative spaces, practices, and communities in the struggle for gender equality and social justice. Her legacy in this regard is a reminder of the transformative potential of art and literature in advancing feminist goals and challenging oppressive structures.

Her influence on contemporary literature and the feminist movement is also evident in the ongoing debates about the role of the author, the nature of authorship, and the politics of appropriation. Acker's textual strategies, which blur the lines between author and character, original and copy, challenge conventional understandings of creativity and intellectual property. In doing so, she opens up space for critically examining the economic and power relations that underpin the literary world and the cultural industries more broadly. This aspect of her work invites contemporary writers and scholars to reconsider the ethical and political dimensions of textual production and reception in the digital age.

In conclusion, Kathy Acker's influence on contemporary literature and the feminist movement is profound and multifaceted. Her work, embodying the punk spirit of resistance and the postmodern challenge to narrative and identity, continues to inspire and provoke. Her legacy is found in the themes and forms of contemporary literature and the critical and creative approaches to feminist activism and scholarship. By foregrounding the complexities of identity, challenging the norms of narrative and language, and embracing the potential for cultural and societal critique, Acker has left an indelible mark on the literary and feminist landscapes. As we move forward, her work serves as a potent reminder of literature's power to question, resist, and imagine new worlds:

Acker's novels provide some of the most resistant, subversive, and empowering criticisms of intertwined forms of oppression, particularly sexism, racism, heteronormativity, and capitalism. Acker herself lived this resistance, and her work is a controversial, difficult, and discomfiting attack on intertwining oppressions, demonstrating, through their absence, how feminist bonds might contest these oppressions. (June 2010: 132)

Acker's literary and cultural interventions stand as a testament to the enduring relevance of her work. Her legacy, a complex amalgam of punk defiance, postmodern experimentation, and feminist critique, continues to influence and inspire, challenging us to rethink the possibilities of literature and activism. As we engage with contemporary challenges and debates, her work remains a vital source of inspiration, urging us to embrace the narrative's transformative potential and continue the work of cultural rebellion and resistance.

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## MOCKING THE MYTH: FROM PHILIP ROTH TO WORD SMITH

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**Abstract:** Often read together with *Our Gang* (1971) and equally dismissed as a minor and rather frivolous piece in Philip Roth's impressive body of work, *The Great American Novel* (1973) may well be the most intertextual of his writings. The proposed paper will provide insight into the ways in which Roth's farcical creativity, alongside his undeniable erudition, bring forth and challenge the (American) literary tradition and conventional approaches to (hi)storytelling. Given the rather limited critical attention the novel has received in the half-century since its publication, the main aim is to prompt a reconsideration of the status of this book in Roth's oeuvre.

**Keywords:** American Dream, American novel, farce, inventiveness, satire

### 1. Introduction

Philip Roth scholars looking into the author's complete works or researchers just beginning and wondering where to start efficiently might be surprised that his book entitled *The Great American Novel* (from now on, referred to as *GAN*) seems to have gone almost unnoticed. Compared to other titles in the writer's portfolio, which have brought him recognition from critics and readers alike, this piece was relatively quickly and, so far, irredeemably dismissed as ostentatious, labyrinthine, pretentious, offensive, immature, and hard to follow. Ira B. Nadel's 2011 *Philip Roth. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work* is probably the only comprehensive compendium to offer it equal treatment with the rest of the author's works, providing a synopsis, a commentary, a list of characters and a brief set of bibliographical suggestions (most of them page-long reviews or succinct articles, written immediately after the publication of the book, between 1975 and 1978).

Only two of Nadel's selected sources refer to *GAN* alone: Bernard Rodgers' "*The Great American Novel* and the Great American Joke" and Ben Siegel's by now classicized "*The Myths of Summer: Philip Roth's *The Great American Novel**". The latter deplores the obtuseness of many early readers, who saw its choice of main topic (baseball) as "merely another calculated grasp at bestsellerdom" (Siegel 1978: 180), and pleads that "readers should respond with deeper understanding and sympathy than reviewers have evidenced thus far". (idem: 190) Two such attempts can be found in the M.A. theses by Thomas Lazenby (*Philip Roth: The Development of a Contemporary Satirist*, 1973) and David Thomas Holmberg (*Baseball and Literature: The Center Field Cannot Hold. Examining the Failure of the American Pastoral in Postwar Baseball Literature*, 2005).

The 2024 *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Philip Roth*, edited by Aimee Pozorski and Maren Schaurer, includes Mike Witcombe's contribution, "Safe at Home? Philip Roth and Sports", which addresses *GAN*, among other novels under the same umbrella. However, *GAN* still does not benefit from its own extensive analysis, which is part of my motivation for reviving the readers' interest. While the sports-related part has been explored, my scrutiny concerns particularly the literariness that the novel's title, jocular as it may be, conjures up. Although he does not develop his investigation in this direction, beyond Roth's comic exuberance and extravagance in *GAN*, Siegel points out that

even here he strives again for a narrative in the classic American mode – at least one that deals with traditional values and lofty sentiments while laying bare the underlying greed and duplicity; what he wants, in other words, is to reveal some of the ways in which our myths and facts, our romantic fantasies and harsh realities mingle in the national mind. To this end, he focuses his comic vision on that most formidable and elusive chimera of all: The Great American Novel. (Siegel 1978:174)

Paradoxically (or just ironically) enough, the readers' attention has been drawn primarily to the book's engagement with baseball lore and the dissolution of the American Dream, and far less to Roth's provocative demonstrations of virtuosity in the twinned arts of reading and writing.

## 2. American fiction and fantasy: mocking vs. revisiting tradition

"CALL ME SMITTY. That's what everybody else called me" (Roth 1980: 8). *GAN* begins by echoing Herman Melville's famous opening to *Moby Dick* (2002). From this point onwards, the first-person narrator who takes over the convoluted story is Word Smith, an eighty-seven-year-old retiree, who recalls, in retrospect, what he sees as the tragic destiny of the Ruppert Mundys: a baseball team relocated from its stadium in 1943, to support embarkment preparations for American soldiers. As a former sportswriter who travelled along with the team, he claims insight into episodes amounting to a conspiracy against the Patriot League. He decides to put down the supposedly obliterated history of the Ruppert Mundys, which he sees as a victim, much like himself.

In order to have Smith deliver this counterfactual narrative, Roth turns to baseball as a metaphoric representation of American society and politics, as it encapsulates their combination of idealism and competitiveness, irrepressible nostalgia and insatiable desire for upward mobility. He addresses the paradoxical nature and fragile status of the American Dream after the Second World War, analysing the fall of myths and the rise of dubious idols, as the Cold War, the Red Scare, the slide towards the Vietnam War succeed each other. Yet, behind the book's concern with ideology, rhetoric, religious frenzy and world domination, which grasp the reader's attention, its constant dialogue with America's literary icons and their canonic discourses and imagery are undeniable. Surprisingly, they have been mentioned by commentators rather than highlighted *per se*, which my present article succinctly attempts to remedy.

“Smitty” thrives on compulsive alliterations: in his case, symptoms of a disease, rather than a form of style. They take over important parts of his monologues and prove Roth’s prowess at wordplays. Quite early in the novel, the narrator invokes a 1936 fishing trip, where he presumably accompanied Hemingway. A drinking spree and a meeting with a “waitress with a degree in Literatoor from Vassar” (Roth 1980: 40) turn the notoriously moody writer to a subject that haunts and unnerves him: “always that year the conversation came around to the Great American Novel. Hem had it on his brain” (idem: 42). The ensuing dialogue allows Roth to throw in canonic names and works, via the woman’s required suggestions of what she, based on her studies, sees as potential candidates to the Great American Novel distinction. Predictably, they are all countered by a patronizing Hemingway.

The list comprises Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (“Book about catching a whale” – Roth 1980: 44), Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* (“Book about a boy and a slave trying to run away from home. [...] Adventure story for kids.” – *ibid.*), Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (“The book where the only one who has got any balls on him is the heroine” – idem: 46). Ruthless mockery follows from what sounds like a frustrated and neglected writer. By enumerating literary accomplishments that might cause the fictional Hemingway’s resentment, Roth compiles, in fact, a list of compulsory readings in American literature. The raging author screams out uncontrollably whatever titles he feels might jeopardize his own success, among which *The Red Badge of Courage*, *Winesburg, Ohio*, *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Sister Carrie*, *My Antonia*, *Ethan Frome* (cf. idem: 44).

He then moves on to names: an even more acute illustration of professional envy, which finally reveals the gist of the unanticipated problem. The end of the dialogue is particularly relevant, its self-centered irony revealing what America had offered as notable fiction thus far:

“What about our minor poet Francis Scott Fitzwhat’shisname? What about Wolfe and Dos and Faulkner! What about *The Sound and the Fury*, Vassar! A tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing – how’s that for the Great American Novel!”

“I never read it,” she whimpered.

“Of course you haven’t! You can’t! It’s unreadable unless you’re some God damn professor! You know why you can’t name the Great American Novel, Vassar?”

“No,” she moaned.

“Because it hasn’t been written yet! Because when it is it’ll be Papa who writes it and not some rummy sportswriter in his cute little cottage by the lake in the woods!” Whereupon a large fierce gull swooped down, its broad wings fluttering, and opened its hungry beak to cry at Ernest Hemingway, “Nevermore!” (Roth 1980: 47)

For the connoisseurs, the unnamed Edgar Allan Poe indirectly settles this dispute between Hemingway and his exasperated creative self, rather than his actual interlocutors: the literature student and the sportswriter who aspires to prove worthy of his outlandish name. “Papa” (Hemingway’s nickname) appears as the epitome of fierce competitiveness, which may lead to progress and pleasing outcomes, but may also have its drawbacks. The contemptuous attitude towards all rivals (which culminates with ridiculing Francis Scott Fitzgerald), the scornful comments on their achievements, the unwillingness to establish harmonious connections with a

tradition that includes, rather than excludes and marginalizes him, the savage need for a validation of exceptionalism rather than an acknowledgement of personal value are elements that mirror the fierce battle for the laurels of the Great American Novel.

Even more importantly, I believe that Roth's informed account of the general state and inner quarrels of American literature also functions as an analogy with the larger discontents of the American Dream and its supporting mentality. The intricate plot unfolds against a socio-historical background that witnesses the collapse of idealism while the nation wavers in its faith, confused and disappointed by the country's inability to find its balance and consonance in good will. This offers Roth the opportunity for meta- and inter-textual musings, which display his erudition and his preoccupation with the actual and symbolic deep strata of the American mind.

### 3. Sport and literature: a love (hi)story

*GAN* uses the baseball pretext to unleash the author's analytical spirit, but also to display his creativity. Playing upon his own engagement with and affection for both the best loved U.S. sport and American literature as a whole, Roth produces a bewildering satire, a conspiracy-ridden counter history. Beyond its denouncement of social conventions and the pressures of the unrealistic mythology they instate, it also chastises the inflexibility of expectations from fiction writing. As pointed out by Nadel (2011: 104), "with its arrogant and self-mocking title, plus making fun of such classics of American literature as *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby Dick*, the novel is as much about literary conventions as it is about literary language. Comic inventiveness, as Roth himself claimed, is the book's redeeming value".

The major source of amusement lies in the gradual, detailed, sometimes overbearing revelation of the alleged communist infiltration of the Ruppert Mundys and the Patriot League. Beyond this surface level and its philosophical and ideological implications, the intertextual plays upon words and works make the story richer and, admittedly, more rewarding to write for its author. The literariness of the text and its intentional indebtedness to famous predecessors in form and style are undeniable. The reader will quickly notice Word Smith's affinity with 18<sup>th</sup> century narrators and the narrative techniques of Lawrence Sterne or Henry Fielding, reputed for digressions and one of *GAN*'s trademarks: chapter overviews.

Smith adds his own literary preferences and influences, as he meta-textually frames his stories and guides his audience into the lofty meanders of his writing: "Students of Literatoor (as Hem was wont to mispronounce it) will have recognized the debt that I owe to Mr. Hawthorne of Massachusetts. Yes, this prologue partly derives from reading that lengthy intro to his novel". (Roth 1980: 55) Looking at the baseball story he is determined to tell and the manner he chooses to lay it out, Smith acts like a critic who analyses his and others' pieces. He reconsiders and reorders the facts of life into a convenient narrative, while also reviewing his own fiction in context, and confessing his ultimate aim: authenticity. (cf. idem: 56)

Cross-referencing canonic works of early and modern American fiction is constant. Roth skillfully navigates through eras of resonant writing via his narrator's hallucinations and forced comparisons. Parody and pastiche become integral parts of

the manuscript that conjures up unexpected images and associations. Fact and fiction coalesce in Smith's mind and version of events, producing astonishing scenarios such as the following, wherein Mark Twain's legacy literally comes to life: "Since, admittedly, we are seeking out similitudes of all sorts twixt Twain's microcosm and mine, what about Huck Finn's sidekick, the runaway slave Nigger Jim? Who do you think he grew up to be anyway? Let me tell you if you haven't guessed: none other than the first Negro leaguer (according to today's paper) to be welcomed to the Hall of Fame". (Roth 1980: 59)

From Hester Prynne to Huck Finn and Captain Ahab as objects of theoretical observation, and their creators as subjects of admiration and mimicry, Smith offers an outline of what he calls "My precursors, my kinsmen" (idem: 55). Nadel identifies both the explicit and the more subtle, jocular intertextual underpinnings:

*The Great American Novel* is Roth's most convoluted and allusion-filled work, including references to American, European, and Eastern literature, as well as myths from around the world. The names of characters are more literary than individual [...] Mark Twain is the presiding literary spirit of the book as the quintessential teller of tall tales [...] In many ways, the novel is about American history as well as literature. (Nadel 2011: 109-110).

#### 4. National (auto)biography and America's crisis of representation

The jocular, yet unsweetened combination of style and rhetoric is consistent throughout a novel that is relentlessly critical of social realities gone awry. Beyond Roth's well-known and playfully disguised militantism and moralism, one will notice that Roth's provocative, sometimes contested approach to facts via counterfactual narrative, is also fuelled by his enjoyment of toying with literary history and imagination. *GAN* features an intertextual gallop among symbolic discourses across cultures and ages. In his effort to weave the canvas of the complicated postwar era, the author borrows names, places, ideas and reworks them into an inauspicious fantasy that anticipates his darker *The Plot Against America* (2004) or *American Pastoral* (1997).

While taking his topics very seriously and offering his readership solid food for thought, the author takes pleasure in mockery and mimicry, as he plays with genres to echo the great American fiction he converses with. Thus, his novel can be read as a lesson in intertextuality and literary ventriloquism, a piece of evidence as to its author's erudition and craftsmanship. For instance, Derek Parker Royal (2007: 25) notices in the introductory paragraphs of the chapters "the narrative precis reminiscent of the nineteenth-century Victorian novel form". One such example:

Containing as much of the history of the Patriot League as is necessary to acquaint the reader with its precarious condition at the beginning of the Second World War. The character of General Oakhart—soldier patriot, and President of the League. His great love for the rides of the game. His ambitions. By way of a contrast, the character of Gil Gamesh, the most sensational rookie pitcher of all time. His attitude toward authority and mankind in general. [...] The chapter is concluded with a dialogue between General Oakhart and Mister Fairsmith, containing a few surprises and disappointments for the General". (Roth 1980: 69)

As the plot develops (oftentimes contradicting such deceptively prescriptive ‘guidelines’), the coexistence of fact and fabrication anticipates today’s vivid fake news debates.

Hiding deeper, more consequential levels than the obvious sports-related one, *GAN* never ceases to surprise via its vast array of thematic concerns, which, if systematically addressed, could enrich the existing critical literature. The sinuous plotline is a pretext for one of Roth’s earliest investigations of the American mind in the context of crucial mid-20<sup>th</sup> century world events. According to Holmberg’s reading,

The Holocaust-pattern is clearly present in *The Great American Novel*, a past burrowing its way into the consciousness of the present. And the Holocaust-thematic is alive in the structure of the text. There are two truths, Smitty’s and the “real American history” (*Reading Myself and Others* 91). And both are somehow true and somehow false, facts rewritten to serve an agenda: Smitty’s nihilistic agenda of deconstruction and the American government’s agenda of ideologic myth-making. Its [the novel’s] deep involvement with its own historical context should not be underestimated. (Holmberg 2005: 46)

Considering Roth’s identified preoccupation with the Holocaust’s inception, development and horrendous aftermath, alongside the circumstances, discourses, and mentalities which led to unparalleled mass cruelty, one unsurprisingly encounters passages that illustrate the interweaving of History and histories, public confrontations and private dramas. The Mundys saga runs parallel to the Hitler regime. From the international to the domestic spheres, from the frontline of the war to the less important, though comparatively tense sports competitions, restlessness and mounting anxiety cause rhetorical questions: “Adolf Hitler, Franklin Roosevelt, Gil Gamesh. In the winter of ’33–’34, men and women and even little children, worried for the future of America, were talking about one or another, if not all three. What was the world coming to? What catastrophe would befall our country next?” (Roth 1980: 110)

One way to cope with such an ominous background and capture the general(ised) confusion is caricature. Much of the hilarious (and sometimes offensive) portrayal of individuals and situations in Word Smith’s story is meant to expose what he claims to be the truth. The blatant deformations of historical fact or the oscillation between verifiable data and fictionalisation stem from the sportswriter’s insatiable quest for restorative justice, which he believes he can obtain through his ostensibly different, fabricated insights into the rise and fall of the Rupper Mundys, its players, managers, supporters, and benefactors.

Preposterous as many presented episodes may sound, the aim of Roth’s satire lies beyond the case study that forms the axis of this novel. By capturing the absurdity of increasing uncertainty in an America no longer able to define its cardinal values, it addresses the crises of contemporaneity in mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Restlessness, paranoia, manipulation, the rise of Cold War obsessions and aggressive rhetoric are parts of a decaying whole that feeds Smith’s dystopian fantasy. Relativizing traditional ways of understanding social interaction, growth, balance, and wellbeing renders his narrative alternative plausible. Lazenby (1973: 52-53), for instance, rightfully points

out that, in his manic, (self)-delusional drive, “Smith is an intermediary buffoon between the subject matter and the reader. [...] His view is more that of the satirist than that of the comic character, because he is fiercer in his moral intentions; he demands that the truth be heard”.

One may notice a certain resemblance between the narrator and the author, although Smith is not Roth’s habitual type of alter-ego, like Nathan Zuckerman or David Kepesh, in some of his most celebrated novels. The employment of unconventional storytelling by both to draw attention to issues they consider important may be regarded as a creative transformation of the mature writer, an outlet for his vexation with the evolution of the public scene. In *Reading Myself and Others*, Roth recollects his ingenious vengeance against pigeonholing by various reviewers, which he achieved in *GAN*: “In an odd way [...] I set myself the goal of becoming the writer some Jewish critics had been telling me I was all along: irresponsible, conscienceless, unserious.” (Roth 2013: 70) Remembering the motivation he drew from Melville, who he knew referred to his *Moby Dick* as wicked, he goes on to explain: „No matter how hard I tried I could never really hope to be wicked; but perhaps, if I worked long and hard and diligently, I could be frivolous. And what could be more frivolous, in my own estimation, than writing a novel about sports?” (ibid.)

*GAN* is the evident, practical answer to this rhetorical question. To provide it, Roth does not only revisit and rewrite portions of classical texts. Underneath Word Smith’s apparently chaotic, unreliable, and disjointed narrative, Roth places traditional structures, methods, paradigms, to support the mock-anarchy of postmodern fragmentariness. The same appetite for stylistic fusion inspires the frequent encounters between highbrow and unsophisticated references, the descent of elitist literary ancestry among the masses of a new type of agora. The great American novel and the great American sport coexist in a post-World War II American Dream that becomes increasingly vulnerable and permeable.

The novel is an intertextual tour de force that incorporates in its narrative fabric not only Melville and Hawthorne, but also Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, Crane’s *The Red Badge of Courage*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, the *Book of Exodus*, *The Odyssey*, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Song of Roland*. Also featured are such pop culture texts as the headline format from the *Sporting News*, the slogan on the *Wheaties* breakfast cereal, the *Warren Report*, and the film *The Pride of the Yankees*, as well as Egyptian, Hindu, Norse, and Greek mythologies. (Nadel 2011: 110)

The afore-quoted enumeration is simultaneously telling and selective. Roth’s determination for his characters’ background and discourse to be as inclusive and diverse as possible is farther-reaching than this list, while clearly attesting to its relevance. Although disguised as the narrative bewilderment of a retired reporter who dreams of ranking among the top American novelists of all times, Roth’s erudition and deep immersion in the everyday existence and consciousness of the American middle-class are equally impressive and entertaining. On the one hand, Smith seems obsessed with joining the noble circles of the literary high class. He incessantly thinks of himself in comparison with its members and projects his delusions of grandeur

upon the debatable heroes he applauds, whose pompous portrayals resonate his own: “G-a-m-e-s-h.” “First name?” “Gil. G as in Gorgeous. I as in Illustrious. L as in Larger-than-life”. (Roth 1980: 91)

On the other hand, this new kind of V.I.P. is not built on perfection or immutable standards. Gil Gamesh, the brilliant, yet rebellious baseball star, is punished for his behaviour. In sports fans’ eyes, however, his tantrums, immodesty, infidelities and betrayals of other people or causes are excused by his exceptionalism. His appurtenance to the new popular culture pantheon surrounds him with an intangible aura, and *GAN*’s acknowledgement of the rise of pop culture influence in the U.S. is remarkable. Similarly to other Rothian novels, the book incorporates in-depth commentaries or mere allusions to the media, advertising, sports or fashion environments, blending the newspaper columnist’s style with the exquisiteness of fiction-writing as art.

It is, therefore, evident that the novel’s so-called frivolousness is in fact a demonstration of planning and predetermination. Roth’s engagement with humour, irony, satire, all facets of the broad comedic genre, is paralleled by his confessed passion for experiment and entertainment for entertainment’s sake. “The redeeming value is not social or cultural reform, or moral instruction, but *comic inventiveness*. [...] ‘Satyric’, suggesting the sheer pleasure of exploring the anarchic and the unsocialized, is more like it.” (Roth 2013: 62) While the author intentionally downplays his profounder intentions, he emphasizes the playfulness behind his stylistic, grammatical, lexical inventions. The list seems inexhaustible. Suffice it to exemplify by a celebrity of the hypothetical baseball league, whose name epitomizes the game: John Baal.

Roth’s unleashed creativity does not stop at onomastics, the quite spectacular surface level. Surprises are scattered across the pages, waiting to be discovered by the curious reader. The counter-history that Word Smith insists on unravelling is a concoction of conspiracy, manipulation, indoctrination, ideologization that overthrows any traditional expectation from the perspective of the narrative, as well as of any established mythology’s. The book presents the United States’ 1930s-1960s as a timeframe for the accelerated dissolution of many romanticized idea(l)s about itself and its place in the world: an overarching topic in the Rothian oeuvre. Under such circumstances, Smith seems to argue that sport, literature and even religion still rank among the important cohesive elements of the society. At the same time, they are skillfully employed by Roth-the-author as tools in his act of deconstructing an American (folk)lore that no longer stands.

## 5. Historical vs. hysterical

Claudia Roth Pierpont, major Roth scholar and interviewer, points out that the author’s love of baseball and books were comparable: in his childhood, the all-American sport was “one of the uncorruptedly mythic things still going on in the country” (Roth Pierpont 2013: 76). She goes on to point out that, by consequence, “*The Great American Novel* is a sprawling, cheerful, wearying, sometimes funny, ultimately headache-inducing farce, a book that at least

one male, sports-loving writer I know – Scott Raab of *Esquire* – considers an overlooked masterpiece [...]” (ibid.)

Toying with the traditional American narrative of success in literary, socio-cultural and political senses, Roth produces what grows into a farce by accumulation. The revisionist history of an alleged governmental conspiracy against one of the nation’s favourite recreation activities blends fact and fiction with the fanaticism of a narrative consciousness that pretends to be awake and aware but is, in fact, delusional to the brink of paranoia. The entire plotline involving Gil Gamesh’ four years of subversive study in Moscow and his defection back to the United States, where he is suspected of acting as a communist agent, stands out as a combination of fantasy with psychosis: the perfect pretext for Roth to explore the full potential of the ludicrous, the nonsensical, the risible.

For instance: beyond its activities (minutely, yet detachedly described), the invented International Lenin School of Subversion, Hatred, Infiltration, and Terror (with its cartoonish acronym SHIT) echoes the terminology of the non-fictitious Red Scare and its closely associated House Un-American Activities Committee, a laughingstock for the outraged Roth in several of his writings. The American anti-communist fear of betrayal and espionage makes even asinine scenarios plausible, as demonstrated with aplomb by pages upon pages of conspiracy-driven private and public discourses. An example of ideological ventriloquism that will resonate with experienced readers can be found in an eerie, though standardized, reference letter for Gil Gamesh:

To Whom It May Concern: This is to affirm that Gil Gamesh was formerly employed under a variety of aliases by the Kakoola Citizens Action Committee for Americanism and the Kakoola Council to Keep America Free in doing investigative and research work. [...] I have no hesitation in recommending him for any type work in which a thorough knowledge of Communism and Communist methods is necessary. He made an excellent witness in executive session of the statewide Citizens Action Committee for Americanism [...] Yours very truly, Wm. McWiley, President, Kakoola CACA, Legal Director, Kakoola KAF. (Roth 1980: 437)

The cacophony and the puns are evidently intended. So is Roth’s derision of the transformation of a justified concern for the United States into a rudimentary witch-hunt. Conveniently, Smith’s penchant for exaggeration, fabrication, distortion, false appropriation or identification makes such buffoonery unobjectionable in context. The narrator’s megalomania and misplaced affinities go so far that he compares himself to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, whose fate he believes he shares. He sees his baseball-related delirium as a form of bravery and resistance similar to Solzhenitsyn’s, who he claims was persecuted because “his version of Russian history happens not to correspond with the version that is promulgated by the powers-that-be over there. In short, he refuses to accept lies for truth and myth for reality”. (Roth 1980: 509).

While this interpretation may seem legitimate, Roth plays with his narrator’s mind to produce the uncanny continuation, as Smith attempts to persuade Mao Tze-tung to publish his so-called novel. He claims to empathize with Solzhenitsyn based

on a commonality of spirit vis-a-vis dissidence, proclaiming himself an outcast-with-a-cause from a society in denial: "Because I have written a historical novel that does not accord with the American history with which they brainwash our little children in the schools. I say 'historical', doubtless they would say 'hysterical.'" (ibid.). The confrontation of literary freedom with censorship, alongside the agonizing prospect of communist infiltration in the U.S., which appears to loom even over the world of sports, were particularly sensitive issues when the novel was published, given the rise of the Iron Curtain and the widening rift between the Western World and the Soviet Union.

As ominous predictions and conspiracy theories abounded, transparency in public discourse was increasingly harder to accomplish. The confusion of common people, regular citizens facing conflicting notions and altered realities, is perceptively captured by Roth, who, as usual, includes diverse and divergent voices in the comprehensive chorus of Americanness that his work foregrounds. In this sense, although the parallelism has not been clearly indicated by the Roth scholarship, the atmosphere of *GAN* resembles, or rather anticipates that in *I Married a Communist*, the dramatic odyssey of Ira Ringold, activist and media personality. One gets insight into the 'hysterical' perspective of those who deplore the fall of capitalism and blame camouflaged communist assaults for the envisaged catastrophic outcomes for the nation and its symbols.

They are going to take over the free enterprise system itself. How? By installing spies as presidents of great companies, and saboteurs as chairmen of the board! Mark my word, the day will come when in the guise of an American capitalist, a friend of Big Business and a member of the Republican Party, a Communist will run for President of the United States. And if he is elected, he will ring down the curtain on the American tragedy. (Roth 1980: 364)

Contrary to this hastily propagated anxiety, there are voices who denounce it as irrelevant and extreme, pinpointing the lack of information and proof for many ideas circulating in a public space that becomes polluted to an almost unbearable level of toxicity. "I refuse to participate in this lunatic comedy in which American baseball players who could not locate Russia on a map of the world - who could not locate the world on a map of the world - denounce themselves and their teammates as Communist spies out of fear and intimidation and howling ignorance". (Roth 1980: 501) The various types of positionings and discourses behind them become clearly discernible in such passages. So does Roth's determination to use his text, humorous and disconcerting as it may be, to expose deeper fundamental truths about the workings of the American mind and its vulnerability to manipulation, based on precarious knowledge or education, romantic innocence or mere lack of access to reliable sources.

As prefigured earlier, the social and cultural obscurantism of the counter-climactic counternarratives the novel provocatively puts forth, the propagation of falsehoods and the adulation of improbable idols are boldly associated by Roth with religious frenzy. The novel captures baseball's quasi-mystical appeal to its fanbase, as sports and religion are purposely connected in addresses to devotees in times of war:

“He began by reminding them that even as they were playing their baseball games on the road, American boys were bleeding to death in jungles halfway around the globe, and being blown to bits in the vast, uninhabited skies. [...] Then he reminded them of the sufferings of Our Lord.” (idem: 186).

Such parallelisms between baseball and religion are inserted into the characters’ public speeches and stand out as indispensable to the description of the American mind’s need for exemplariness and (spiritual) guidance. As Holmberg points out,

His [Roth’s] vision of America by way of baseball reveals the sport as so integrated into the national consciousness that, like apple pie and Elvis Presley, baseball becomes part of the unquestioned facade of the American consciousness. But even more than most institutionalized American symbols, the idealized model of baseball suggests a sacred national relic and, in the realm of religion, becomes a secularized Church of America. (Holmberg 2005: 38)

## 6. Conclusion

The representation of baseball in mystical terms is recurrent throughout the novel and might easily constitute the topic of a separate study on fanaticism, since “baseball is this country’s religion” (Roth 1980: 130). For the time being, however, the point about *The Great American Novel*’s complexity, inventiveness and ensuing intellectual stimulation has been sufficiently amply illustrated to invite further readings.

Although not having reached the highest point of his career yet at the time the novel was published, Roth delivers an intoxicating, thought and laughter provoking *mise en abyme* of the American experience and some of its 20<sup>th</sup> century conundrums. He puts his wordsmith abilities on generous display, showcasing his scholarly knowledge of American literature and the practical artistry of his own writing, in conversation with and contemplation of the remarkable works of others. He thus invites further comparative, contextualized interpretations of the textual and metatextual *divertissement* he proposes, alongside its underlying critical and philosophical strata.

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**THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF PARODY  
IN POSTMODERN LITERATURE:  
THE CASE OF THOMAS PYNCHON'S *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*\***

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***Abstract:** The paper examines Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* through the prism of postmodern literary parody and the social processes that produced parodic language in postmodern literature. The paper investigates the ways in which technological and cultural progress in globalized societies resulted in the problem of inauthentic perception of reality and its articulation, which are the reasons why parody, with its ability to revive old texts in a new context, became one of the chief discursive strategies that provide critique in postmodern literature.*

***Keywords:** postmodernism, parody, society, culture, language*

## **1. Introduction**

Critical allusiveness in literature always implies a dynamic relationship with the socio-historical circumstances of the era in which the work is produced, a relationship similar to that established between the parodic text, which parodies, and the precursor (previous) text, which is parodied. These relationships exist to open questions that are, at a given historical moment, still insufficiently or unwillingly raised due to the dominance of the ruling discourses. The modern problem of the inauthenticity of language or, rather, the inauthentic experience of reality resulting in the problem of expression, is deeply rooted in the socio-historical circumstances of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These have seen the culmination of the imperative of progress that began in the nineteenth century and brought enormous progress to the USA in all spheres of society. Invention and technological progress led to democratization – the consumerist availability of things to broad masses – the possession and use of which in earlier periods was unattainable for the majority of people. In the eyes of the bearers of these changes, which took on a global character during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the most efficient (and most profitable) use of time in the production of goods, their availability and, finally, the individual's free will to consume the desired goods indicated the highest stage of development.

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Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* tackles modern progress as a kind of spiritual cataclysm, parodying America's immersion in late-capitalist consumerism and media hypnosis with all that, in Richard Poirier's words, has caused human beings to become things. This paper deals with the way in which literary parody is embedded in the socio-historical context of the second half of the 20th century and the ability of parody to generate social commentary, with a focus on several postmodernist phenomena such as the decline of the individual subject, the socio-ideological conflict between the dominant thought and its marginalized alternatives, the phenomenon of corporate business, as well as of sensationalism in public space.

## 2. Sixties, post-sixties and postmodernism

In his essay "Postmodern America: A New Democratic Order in the Second Gilded Age", which stands as one of the introductions to the collection *The World the Sixties Made: Politics and Culture in Recent America*, the historian Van Gosse (2003) points to the lack of available historiographical data as a problem faced by every researcher who intends to deal with American history from the 1960s onwards. Highlighting the previous fifty years as a period when the study of history saw constant changes as well as considerable challenges, Gosse wonders how it is possible that there is so little "serious history" written about an extremely eventful historical period in terms of diplomacy, politics, culture, society, business, women's rights, etc. Gosse cites three processes in the American society as instrumental in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the largest wave of immigrants in the entire twentieth century, the transition to a post-industrial economy, and the dissolution of the family as the basic unit of society based on patriarchal principles. He sees the lack of generally accepted periodization as one of the reasons for the lack of written history, noting that he and other historians "get by with makeshift phrases" such as "post-Sixties", "late" or "post-Cold War" America, but that these phrases lack "explanatory weight" and "carry no evident associations" that can be found in the phrases such as "Great Depression" or "Cold War". Gosse concludes that, because of this "historiographical limbo", the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were treated as "the present", which, according to Gosse (2003: 2), is the best way to discourage historians, given that they do not want to get contradicted by events that turn out to be the present, not the past.

Gosse then turns to the use of "the ubiquitous, much-abused" descriptive adjective that he also uses in the title of his introduction: "postmodern", pointing out that both positive and negative connotations are appropriate, and continues by distinguishing between the historical periods of modernism and postmodernism: "Whereas the modern age assumed a driving imperative of industrial development and progress, 'postmodernism' has come to signal drift, fragmentation, and the sense that no center can hold" (idem: 3). In his essay "Postmodernism and Politics", Stanley Aronowitz (1988: 46) explains the differences (and similarities) between modernism, modernity and postmodernist discourse. He interprets modernism and modernity as "similar but non-identical aspects of 20th-century life", whereby modernity is both political and economic, with the idea of development as dominant, and refers to "growth-oriented planning and production, with a pluralist political system in which

class politics is replaced by interest-group struggles, and with a strong bureaucracy that can regulate relations among, and between, money and human capital". On the other hand, the postmodernist discourse deals with the deconstruction of modernist myths and narratives. Gosse (2003: 3) cites the example of the US after the Vietnam War as "the epitome of a postmodern capitalist democratic state, where an extreme liberalism regarding personal liberty coexists with a rigorous corporate-driven regime of consumption" Such societies, he continues,

plunder its own past for styles and cultural artifacts that can be marketed to precisely defined niches of the public. [...] Much that was authentic or at least 'local' has faded fast in the past generation under the onslaught of Wal-Mart and other chains. Nor is this sense of commodified uniformity and vulgarity restricted to what we see, hear, wear, buy, and eat. (ibid.)

On the other hand, Gosse affirms that the postmodernism of late twentieth-century America had positive aspects to it, primarily because of the distinctly postmodern phenomena, such as the diversity that is "more than a slogan". And although, in the postmodern pluralist frame of "fragmentation and alienation", Americans come first as consumers and only then as citizens, Gosse (idem: 4) perceives postmodern America as "more democratic than any America that came before", referring to democracy as the platform for exercising rights, but also as an access to goods and services that had been unavailable to previous generations. He does not deny that, from the 1960s onwards, conservative currents undermined movements that fought for civil and minority rights, but no matter how "mindlessly partisan and trivialized" these movements may seem today and despite all the conservative obstructions, he argues that "we live in a world the Sixties made" (idem: 4-5). Gosse sees the key to disillusionment with the achievements of the revolution in the Sixties in the fact that the changes, although extensive, were not radical. Instead of being dismantled, "late" capitalism proved capable of accommodating, absorbing, and even welcoming revolutions in racial, sexual, and gender relations" (idem: 6). Literary and artistic production became just one of the segments that got absorbed by the system and adapted to the rules of the market.

### 3. Postmodern individual and construction of identity

In her study *Thinking Politics: Perspectives in Ancient, Modern and Postmodern Political Theory*, Leslie Thiele (2002) emphasizes the postmodernists' claim that institutions and the economic sector, being under the direct control of dominant political structures, are not the only ones that have the power to shape everyday life. Postmodernists, he continues, put discourses in the foreground, defining them as "(systematized collections of mores) that permeate society and generate social identities" (idem: 79). Unlike the structuralists, the postmodernists see the examination and understanding of unsystematic singularities of discourses as the only way to study (and deconstruct) them:

One must begin with individual practices, particular institutions, and singular events that are themselves the products of the sorts of power being investigated. In turn, one's investigation must originate from one's own particular standpoint, a standpoint that is also largely a product of social power. (ibid.)

The importance of one's own point of view lies in the fact that "identities, desires, and predilections are the products of social power" and "investigations will only reveal the effects of particular relations of power as they are theorized from a particular vantage point" (ibid.). In the case of the postmodernist understanding of discourse, where "even basic individual desire and will are less the trademarks of individual autonomy than the constructs of a social environment" (idem: 81), a vantage point within the very discourse one is deconstructing provides greater leverage. In terms of identity politics, Thiele (idem: 80) emphasizes that "(i)dentities are not just roles people whimsically choose to play, roles that can be exchanged or given up at will from one day to the next" but "complex patterns of norms and desires, modes of thinking and behaving, that are formed over time owing to the integration of individuals within dense social networks". As such, individual and collective identities are intricate constructions that defy dismantling.

Hans Bertens (2005) addresses the opposition to the discourses that are socially dominant and, as such, create reality. He sees mimetic representation as a great ally of dominant discourses, stating that "[t]o control representations, which now no longer reflected reality, but instead had come to actively constitute it, was to wield power", while "to attack representation was to attack that power" (idem: 80). Postmodern literature has resorted to various discursive strategies and rhetorical figures, with parody being one of them, that diagnose, attack, and deconstruct dominant discourses and their creators, pointing to their role in fabricating reality.

Patricia Waugh's (2001) study on metafiction distinguishes between the modernist and postmodernist treatment of identity construction. While in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction we find "the struggle for personal autonomy" reflected in the "*opposition* to existing social institutions and conventions", where

the individual is always finally integrated into the social structure (usually through family relationships, marriage, birth or the ultimate dissolution of death), in the twentieth- and twenty first centuries we encounter the power structures that are more diverse, mysterious and overall difficult to detect, which challenges the postmodern writer to first determine the very object of the individual's opposition in order to be able to give it a literary treatment. (Waugh 2001: 11)

Waugh (ibid.) explains that postmodern writers, in search of a solution to this situation, turned to idiosyncratic expression as opposed to "everyday" language that "endorses and sustains such power structures through a continuous process of naturalization whereby forms of oppression are constructed in apparently 'innocent' representations." Waugh points out that the language of the traditional novel with all the associated realist conventions is the equivalent of "everyday", "common sense" speech, while the metafictional turning of the text's focus on itself and its internal workings – a process similar to parody – is a form of "an opposition, not to ostensibly

‘objective’ facts in the ‘real’ world, but to the language of the realistic novel which has sustained and endorsed such a view of reality” (ibid.). Parodic writing as a form of metafiction bridges the gap between a very tangible crisis, alienation and oppression on the one hand and established literary conventions that no longer have the ability to produce an appropriate expression of the contemporary state on the other (idem: 11-12).

According to Waugh, the problem that appears when writers adhere to traditional literary conventions and, at the same time, try to write about a world that is rapidly changing is the triviality of produced work and its ephemeral value. She (idem: 12) argues that the author should write while keeping in mind the balance that must exist between the unknown (innovative) and the known (conventional or traditional). The parodic text, which functions as a signifier and takes over the previous text in a new context, maintains precisely the balance that Waugh talks about. Parody enables the reader to encounter a familiar – previous text, but also makes it innovative through parodic reworking.

#### **4. Daniel J. Boorstin: Democratization of experience in modern society**

Efficiency, which Boorstin (2002: 555) calls “an American gospel in the twentieth century”, meant “packaging work into units of time”. After time “became a series of homogeneous – precisely measured and precisely repeatable – units”, work, in order to have maximum output achieved, had to be organized into smaller parts as well (ibid.). Boorstin (2002: 556) mentions Frederick W. Taylor, “the Apostle of the American Gospel of Efficiency”, who regarded any expenditure of time and mental and physical strength invested in work that could be done more effectively if broken down into parts and delegated to a larger number of people an individualistic show-off, resulting in a waste of time and money. The imperative of standardization and mercantilism also spread to the economic sector that dealt with sales, which was primarily reflected in the emergence of corporations, which will have a key importance in both the economic and the political spheres in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Like Gosse, Boorstin emphasizes the individual’s transition from the citizen to the consumer, conditioned by the development of corporations:

Instead of haphazard personal enterprise, the American consumer found standardized, market-tested, nationally advertised brands of all products and services. He became the beneficiary, as he was the target, of the most sophisticated market research, product research, and sales know-how. His neighborhood world was flattened into the national consuming landscape. (Boorstin 2002: 663)

The expansion of consumerism and general development of technology and mass production were also transferred from the industrial to the cultural sphere. Boorstin (idem: 568) states that, by the mid-twentieth century, Americans “had perfected many new techniques for repeating sights and sounds at their own convenience”. And this segment of progress, he points out, represents an attack on the uniqueness of experience:

Uniqueness had once been the hallmark of experience. Each moment of life was supposed to be unrepeatable; the visible body and gestures, and the voice of a man, lasted during the brief span of his life and then dissolved with his death. Images of the past required the artistry of painter or sculptor; bygone actions could be recaptured only by the mimicry of the actor. The most vivid accounts of the dead were the work of men of letters. Now without anyone having so intended it, a host of inventions and innovations, large and small, were beginning to add up to a whole new grasp on past experience. (ibid.)

Boorstin calls this phenomenon of repeated experience *democratization*, as technological development allowed a huge part of the population to have access to previously unavailable forms. The early 1900s were marked by a variety of technological inventions in all domains, music being one of them. Boorstin points out that “(t)he machines that brought a vast new stock of repeatable experience into everyone’s living room or automobile had the power both to enrich musical experience and to trivialize it” (idem: 591). The trivialization of experiences – yet another step towards the collapse of unique experience – essentially stemmed from repetition, as well as from the market overload with products that sold well. Such circumstances started to slowly take away the exceptionality of both the artistic production and consumption, including tragedy and melodrama (idem: 594). These are forms whose cathartic function provides emotional discharge, and their overuse could only numb their consumers, especially when combined with a very questionable quality of their content. Boorstin (idem: 687) states that art forms increasingly sought to appeal to the common citizen, but that he, on the other hand, “became less certain than ever whether what he saw really was art, and if that wasn’t art, what it really was”.

### 5. *The Crying of Lot 49*

Margaret A. Rose (1993: 1) speaks of “several different understandings, and misunderstandings of (the) background, functions and structure” of parody. Abrams (1999: 26), for example, characterises parody as one of the varieties of high burlesque, in which the relationship between the antecedent text and the parodic imitation is nothing other than that between the “serious” and the “lowly and comically inappropriate”. Rose (1993: 1) argues that this view of parody as a low form persisted over a very long period of time, which is evidence of a lack of awareness of the power that intertextuality or allusion has in parody. Parody harbours its critical potential through the act of mentioning, even if comedy and humour often conceal it. As pointed out by Prince (1997: ix), Genette’s palimpsestic view of texts sees parody as a form of transformation in language that is ludic and lacking critical acuity. In much of her work Hutcheon takes the same view, but, in “The Politics of Parody”, she (2002: 90) states exactly the opposite, namely that postmodern parody is “a value-problematizing, de-naturalizing form of acknowledging the history (and through irony, the politics) of representations”. In this book chapter, Hutcheon (2002: 89) speaks of the “parodic reprise of the past”, which “is always critical”, and of the fact that the juxtaposition of two representations, the present and the past, is where the critical commentary of parody emerges from.

Pynchon's novel deals with the repressed subjectivity of the modern individual and the socio-ideological and cultural construction of their identity as a major theme. Opposite the main character Oedipa Maas, who, although lonely, fiercely resists the loss of her subjectivity by choosing to remain "in relative paranoia", where she, just like Dr. Hilarius, at least knows "who I am and who the others are" (Pynchon 1996: 104), there is Oedipa's husband Wendell "Mucho" Maas, whose own self is irretrievably lost in a bifurcation of the identities he adopts. The parodic workings of *The Crying of Lot 49* point to the collapse of subjectivity in the modern world: the band Paranoids and its lookalike members "Miles, Dean, Serge, and/or Leonard" (idem: 131), young men uniformed and styled in a way that makes it hard for Oedipa to tell them apart; Miles's clumsy sexual insinuations (idem: 16) as well as Nefastis's inappropriate invitation to sexual intercourse that the narrator says he "had doubtless learned from watching the TV" (idem: 81); Roseman's romantic outpour of emotions, articulated as a common romantic trope and therefore lacking any authenticity (idem: 9), etc. These are light, isolated episodes that have the power of parodic deconstruction with a comical effect. The decay of Mucho Maas's subjectivity, on the other hand, is progressive; his downfall culminates when Oedipa learns that he has fallen under the influence of Dr. Hilarius, her psychiatrist who, at the beginning of the novel, tries to drag her, along with many other suburban housewives, into a medical experiment with the drug LSD.

Mucho Maas is introduced to the reader as a salesman of used cars he "believes in", and as a person who, feeling great anxiety, tries to resist resembling a car salesman. Being formed in a society in which everything is "prefabricated, packaged, predictable, repeatable" (Boorstin 2002: 626), the individual loses the experience of authentic life, and is only capable of living its "manifestations" ("a life that bifurcates into nocturnal, sexual, public, new, other, personal, military, sweet, etc." (Basara 2008: 161)). Mucho's revulsion at the very thought that he might look like a car salesman indicates a premonition of identity loss. Still, Mucho, as a true American,

had believed in the cars. Maybe to excess: how could he not, seeing people poorer than him come in, Negro, Mexican, cracker, a parade seven days a week, bringing the most godawful of trade-ins: motorized, metal extensions of themselves, of their families and what their whole lives must be like, out there so naked for anybody, a stranger like himself, to look at, frame cockeyed, rusty underneath, fender repainted in a shade just off enough to depress the value, if not Mucho himself [...] (Pynchon 1996: 4)

In a consumer society marked by technological progress, Mucho Maas feels reverence for "the human penetration of the Thingness of this country, the signatures we make on the grossest evidences of our existence" (Richard Poirier (1966) on Pynchon's prose). People laid bare through their cars is a sort of melancholic parody of the moment in American history in which a used car salesman understands the phenomenon of emotional baring - a traditionally intimate and complex act going from one human being to another - as technologically mediated. The narrator lists what could be found in the purchased cars:

[...] coupons promising savings of .05 or .10, trading stamps, pink flyers advertising specials at the markets, butts, tooth-shy combs, help-wanted ads, Yellow Pages torn from the phone book, rags of old underwear or dresses that already were period costumes, [...] (Pynchon 1996: 4-5)

Only a segment of the list of things found is quoted here; that list continues in the novel, as evidence of atomized reality reduced to lists of fragments as the only possible whole. The news of Inverarity's death finds Oedipa and Mucho at the time when he is working as a DJ at a radio station, and the narrator parodies Mucho's experiences as a seller of used cars by comparing them to the things "older husbands" went through in the Second World War and the wars in Korea. Like them, Mucho wakes up "pouring sweat", "crying out in the language of bad dreams", which makes Oedipa wonder: "when was Mucho going to forget?" (idem: 5) Set in the time of "mutation" of the post-1945 period into the period defined as the late 60s (1966-1974), the character of Mucho Maas reflects the identity anxieties of the great changes this transition brought about. Leaving his job at the car lot, which provided Mucho with at least indirect contact with human experience, and switching to the radio alludes to an even further departure from human interaction. The radio job implies assuming identities that will, at the given moment, provide better ratings: either "horny", or "a young father", or "a big brother", which will later in the novel push him into hallucinations and madness. The novel ironizes Mucho's sexuality; on the radio, "naked lust ... throbs" in every word he says when "little chicks" (idem: 6) call in with requests, while, on the other hand, he retreats completely when he learns that his wife Oedipa was named executrix of the will of her former lover, Pierce Inverarity. Their dialogue can be read as a parody of romantic literary conventions, when the husband experiences an outburst of jealousy at the very thought that a man from his wife's past reappears in his beloved's life. In the case of Oedipa and Mucho, she is the one who assures him that there is nothing to be jealous about, while he assures her that he is not capable of it anyway:

She showed him the letter from Metzger. Mucho knew all about her and Pierce: it had ended a year before Mucho married her. He read the letter and withdrew along a shy string of eyeblinks. "What am I going to do?" she said. "Oh, no," said Mucho, "you got the wrong fella. Not me. I can't even make out our income tax right. Execute a will, there's nothing I can tell you, see Roseman." Their lawyer. "Mucho. Wendell. It was over. Before he put my name on it." "Yeah, yeah. I meant only that, Oed. I'm not capable." (ibid.)

Talking about television and the kind of influence it had on the Americans, Boorstin (2002: 605) refers to the fact that television, whose influence had become immeasurable, did not provide any opportunity for feedback except through indirect means such as public opinion polls. The Americans had to rely on the telephone, which, again, could not guarantee an answer, or "a venerable nineteenth-century institution, the post office". Oedipa's trip to San Narciso and her encounter with Mike Fallopian is also her first encounter with the word Tristero, the central mystery of the novel tied to the conflict between the US state and independent

postal services back in the mid-nineteenth century. Fallopian's character provides a kind of historiographic insight into the mystery of Tristero, which will torment Oedipa so much:

Turned out Fallopian was doing a history of private mail delivery in the U.S., attempting to link the Civil War to the postal reform movement that had begun around 1845. He found it beyond simple coincidence that in of all years 1861 the federal government should have set out on a vigorous suppression of those independent mail routes still surviving the various Acts of '45, '47, '51 and '55, Acts all designed to drive any private competition into financial ruin. (Pynchon 1996: 37)

The narrator continues with a comment on the deeper meaning of the postal service conflict: "[Fallopian] saw it all as a parable of power, its feeding, growth and systematic abuse, though he didn't go into it that far with her, that particular night" (ibid.). The novel's conflict between the two postal services, with Thurn and Taxis being historically recorded, while Tristero is fictitious, is metafictional as it is instrumental for the reader, who will navigate the text knowing that Oedipa's quest can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the continuous socio-ideological conflict between the dominant forms of thought and their marginalized alternatives. The conflict between the state postal service and Thurn and Taxis is a kind of binary opposition characteristic of modernist literature; however, the introduction of Tristero as a dark, undefined force that is both epistemologically and ontologically problematic – does Tristero exist at all, and if so, how to uncover it – is a problem inherent in postmodernist literature. As Waugh (2001: 11) puts it, one first needs to establish who the opponent is, and then to find an appropriate linguistic expression to articulate the object of their opposition.

Becoming the executrix of Inverarity's will, Oedipa enters the world of the elusive relationships of corporate business. Speaking of the democratization of experience, of which the rise and expansion of corporations is part, Boorstin (2002: 386) writes about the fears that the American fathers had of them. That fear stemmed from the "immortality" of corporations – their indifference to the human factor – and the fact that, as a creation of the US government, they could be given as much power as lawmakers determined. Boorstin (ibid.) cites the example of Sir Edward Coke, seventeenth century champion of common-law rights, who warned that corporations "cannot commit treason, nor be outlawed nor excommunicated, for they have no souls". Oedipa's visit to the bar *The Scope*, where she meets Fallopian and learns about Tristero for the first time, takes her further, in search of answers, to the high-tech company Yoyodyne. One of the first scenes Oedipa witnesses at Yoyodyne is "a Yoyodyne songfest" held by "the shareholders and proxies and company officers" who sing and swear "undying loyalty to [Yoyodyne] ... to the end" (Pynchon 1996: 61). By presenting the corporation as a kind of church of modern America – in other words, comparing the "soulless" corporate system focused solely on profit with the church as an organization whose task is to help people save their soul, Pynchon parodies their evident equalization in the American society. Boorstin (2002: 607) also talks about this equalization and includes the influence of television, pointing out that "(i)n this supermarket of surrogate experience, the old compartments were

dissolved” and that “[g]oing to a church or to a lecture was no different from going to a play or a movie or a ball game, from going to a political rally or stopping to hear a patent-medicine salesman’s pitch”.

Dealing with the phenomenon of television, Boorstin (2002: 618) notes that modern Americans, exposed to the “increasingly repeatable packaged experience” marketed by television, were “eagerly, sometimes desperately, looking for unique, spontaneous, and exciting episodes with which to spice their lives”. In this need, he sees the root of sensationalism, extremely present in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in every media form. Boorstin states that sensationalism “was not the product merely of the greed of newspaper publishers or the morbidity of public taste” (ibid.), but precisely the product of exposure to predictable television content and formats. Sensationalism was a response to the human need for surprise, and it meant “a new prominence and vividness for crime, disaster, sex, scandal, and monstrosities” (idem: 619). The novel addresses the problem of sensationalism by taking its heroine Oedipa Maas to a theatrical performance of the fictional Jacobean tragedy *The Courier’s Tragedy* by the fictional playwright Richard Wharfinger, thereby alluding to the socio-cultural similarities between the postmodern American audiences of *The Courier’s Tragedy* and sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Jacobean theater spectators. Watching the play, Oedipa “found herself after five minutes sucked utterly into the landscape of evil Richard Wharfinger had fashioned for his 17th-century audiences, so preapocalyptic, death-wishful, sensually fatigued, unprepared, a little poignantly, for that abyss of civil war that had been waiting, cold and deep, only a few years ahead of them” (Pynchon 1996: 46).

Jacobean tragedy as a genre abandons all subtlety in leading its spectators to the moment of catharsis; extreme and violent, overflowing with blood, brutal crimes and fornication, Jacobean tragedy tends to achieve an effect by sensationalistic and violent plot developments that will hold the viewer’s attention with shock. The novel introduces metafictional parallels between the plot of *The Courier’s Tragedy*, specifically Angelo’s mysterious mentioning of the bones of the slain knights, and the events that represent extra-linguistic reality for the novel’s characters. Namely, Oedipa and Metzger learn from Manny Di Presso that mobster Tony Jaguar intends to file a lawsuit against Inverarity’s estate, because he claims that Inverarity never paid him for the human bones he supplied him with, intended for the production of filters for Beaconsfield Cigarettes. The bones were collected from the bottom of Lago di Pieta in Italy, where several American troops died tragically during the Second World War, and whose bodies were later thrown to the bottom of the lake by the Germans. Manny Di Presso narrates the historical event in a lofty tone that takes on a lyrical quality, different from the dialogue he has had with Oedipa and Metzger until then:

Lago di Pieta was near the Tyrrhenian coast, somewhere between Naples and Rome, and had been the scene of a now ignored (in 1943 tragic) battle of attrition in a minor pocket developed during the advance on Rome. For weeks, a handful of American troops, cut off and without communications, huddled on the narrow shore of the clear and tranquil lake while from the cliffs that tilted vertiginously over the beach Germans

hit them day and night with plunging, enfilading fire. [...] They did what they could to break out; failing, they clung to life as long as they could. But they died, every one, dumbly, without a trace or a word. (idem: 43)

Di Presso goes on to say that Tony Jaguar, who was a corporal in the Italian army during the war, knew that weapons and other combat material had been thrown in the lake, and, driven by the possibility of profit, decided to recover as much as possible from the bottom of the lake. He manages to extract only bones, which he then “unloads” to Inverarity. Somewhere towards the end of this story, consisting of narratively extremely intricate relationships typical of *The Crying of Lot 49*, there is information that the bones, in fact, were never bought by Inverarity in the first place, but by Beaconsfield; still, Oedipa will go to the performance of *The Courier's Tragedy*, in search of (the word) Tristero. Di Presso's story has no relevance for the compactness and causal consequence of the novel's plot, however it points to the complexity of corporate relations, which abolish historical relations and are interested only in profit. The former wartime enemies, Americans and Italians, unite for the sake of profit, desacralizing the memory of those who died in the war by exploiting their remains. And hence the seemingly naive, but still allusive question that Oedipa's character poses: “How,” inquired Oedipa, “are road builders in any position to sell bones, pray?” (ibid.) “No bribes, no freeways”, di Presso insists, with the novel's message that even the bones of honorably fallen freedom fighters are not to be thrown away: first they are bought by an import-export company and sold to a fertilizer company, which “may have used one or two femurs for laboratory tests but eventually decided to phase entirely into menhaden” and left the bones to a joint-stock company from which Beaconsfield later buys them (idem: 44). With a thorough reasoning behind Tony Jaguar's conclusion that the bones of American soldiers could have a marketable value, the novel ironically suggests that even a potentially noble outcome – marking the place when soldiers died in battle – is initially motivated by postwar profiteering.

## 6. Conclusion

With the cultural and historical context of the second half of the twentieth century as the basis for examining parody in postmodern novel, this paper deals with the ways in which numerous individual parodies in *The Crying of Lot 49*, embodied in the discursive exchanges between the characters, their experiences of reality, and the linguistic expression of that reality reflect the problem of lost subjectivity. It is similar to the great parodies of the genre (general parodies), primarily through the parodied absence of the omniscient narrator as a reliable mediator and final authority, whose unreliability leads the reader to attempts at having a direct, subjective experience of a literary work – to interpret and understand a defamiliarized text – and to abandon passive faith in the narrator. Parodic reworkings, i.e. the act of either serious or ludic reference to past texts, permeate “The Crying of Lot 49” and simultaneously point to tectonic structural and political changes that postmodernism has identified in both fiction and real life. The paper addresses the socio-ideological and cultural construction of identity by examining the character of Oedipa's husband

Mucho Maas, the pervasive clash between dominant and marginalized discourses through the conflict between the postal services Thurn and Taxis and Tristero, the problematic nature of corporate intrusion into American society embodied in Yoyodine, and the overall legacy of Pierce Inverarity and the late capitalist system that desacralizes historical memory for the sake of profit. A genuine parody of the genre, interspersed with a multitude of individual parodies, *The Crying of Lot 49* disguises its deconstructive seriousness through the confusion and anxiety of its plot, events, and characters. And although often comedically chaotic in the way it conveys the message, the parody in Pynchon's novel is serious in that it gets to the heart of the changes in postmodern societies with the utmost seriousness.

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**TWO FATHERS:  
COMPARING ITALIAN AND AMERICAN FATHERHOOD  
IN WALLY LAMB'S *I KNOW THIS MUCH IS TRUE***

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**Abstract:** *This essay examines the complex dynamics of fatherhood in Wally Lamb's novel I Know This Much Is True (1998) through the lens of three distinct paternal figures: the abusive stepfather Ray Birdsey, the idealized yet oppressive grandfather Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, and the protagonist, Dominick, himself, grappling with the loss of his infant daughter and the subsequent challenges to his own paternal identity. The analysis explores how cultural factors, including American masculinity and Italian patriarchy, shape these paternal figures, contributing to their respective approaches to child-rearing and interpersonal relationships. The study draws upon sociological theories of masculinity, family dynamics, and cultural studies, to understand the impact of these influences on the characters' experiences and the enduring consequences of intergenerational trauma. Ultimately, the essay examines Dominick's journey towards self-discovery and the possibility of rewriting his own narrative, transcending the limitations imposed by his familial and cultural heritage.*

**Keywords:** *fatherhood, Italian-American experience, patriarchy, Wally Lamb*

## **1. Introduction**

Wally Lamb's novel *I Know This Much Is True* (1998) is a complex family saga, centered on the challenging relationship between identical twins Dominick and Thomas Birdsey. Thomas develops a personality disorder at a young age, which culminates on October 12, 1990, when, at the age of forty-one, he enters a library and cuts off his own hand as an act of protest against U.S. foreign policy, specifically Operation Desert Storm in the Persian Gulf. Following this event, Thomas is committed to a mental hospital, while Dominick, acting as a father figure, does everything he can to protect and free his increasingly fragile twin. The present of the story is the frame for flashbacks that reveal the second—and perhaps more pervasive? - theme of the novel: fatherhood. The twins have never met their biological father, nor known anything about his identity. They have been raised by Ray Birdsey, their mother's husband, a "five-foot-six-inch [...] giant" (Lamb 1998: 9) who has never been kind to them or to their mother Connie. The violent pattern seems to be deep-rooted in the story of the family, as Connie's father Domenico, a Sicilian immigrant, used to behave in the same oppressive way with his daughter and wife. Yet the detailed story of 'Papa' remains a mystery until, right before her death

from cancer, Connie gives Dominick the manuscript of an autobiography in Italian written by Domenico, which she is not able to read, as she has forgotten, and actually never spoken fluently, the language of her ancestors. Dominick has the manuscript translated in order to provide his mother with a memorable last gift before she dies, but the translation gets completed too late, when the woman is already dead, and her son finds himself reading the autobiography years later, while struggling for Thomas's freedom.

The novel explores three distinct father figures: the man who raised the twins, the romanticized figure of their maternal grandfather, and Dominick himself, who acts as a surrogate father to Thomas, after his opportunity to be a father was tragically cut short by the death of his infant daughter, three weeks old Angela. These three father figures each represent different parenting styles, shaped by their cultural backgrounds and their notions of masculinity. Ray and Domenico, in particular, embody the traditional patriarchal role, acting like monarchs who demand the same allegiance and obedience from their family members that one would expect from subjects (Buchbinder 2013: 105). As Sofia Aboim (2010: 61) notes, the family is "a key site of power", where the oppressive and dominating nature of masculinity - though sometimes tempered by familial bonds of affection - finds its most potent expression. This raises the question: how does culture influence the power dynamics between fathers and children? Is Ray's distinctly American form of domination truly different from Domenico's Southern Italian approach? And can one rewrite their narrative - as both son and father - despite the traumas and cultural influences inherited from their parents and grandparents? This essay will attempt to answer these questions.

## **2. Ray Birdsey, the American stepfather**

To understand Ray's character and the protagonist's deep-seated hatred toward him, it is essential to address a long-debated question: is biology the only thing that makes a father? Throughout much of the novel, the central issue revolves around Ray's lack of a biological connection to the twins. Dominick, the protagonist and narrator, repeatedly emphasizes that Ray is not the twins' real father, suggesting that the ideal man who contributed to Thomas' and his conception should be "anyone but Ray" (Lamb 1998: 93). What makes Ray an undesirable father figure is the atmosphere of terror and abuse he inflicts on his household. His frequent temper tantrums lead to the destruction of objects and the physical abuse of his adoptive children and wife, all under the guise of toughening up the twins, to prepare them for the harsh realities of the world. Ray's behaviour and severity seem to stem from various factors that have shaped his concept of fatherhood, ultimately leading to his children's rejection of him. The first factor to consider is the man's idea of masculinity as something devoid of feelings and weaknesses. It is the same notion he tries to instill in the twins, especially in Thomas, who is always the weaker child, the one with a closer and almost exclusive relationship with his mother. Ray's violent demeanour seems to suggest a convergence with the Kantian concept of authority applied to the family, which implies that fathers should show no emotions and should keep a distant attitude

towards their offspring (Seidler 1988: 276). For this reason, the abundance of feelings shown by Thomas seems to elicit the stepfather's most violent reactions, especially when Connie gives the impression of seconding her son's attitude by playing with him and creating a sort of private universe, where only she and Thomas exist. A similar tendency, according to sociologist Nancy Chodorow, can be deeply harmful not only for the relationship between fathers and sons, but also between husband and wife. Chodorow (qtd. in Seidler 1988: 289) argues that boys tend to separate from their mothers, rejecting their primary love and empathy, because these traits are often perceived as feminine. When this separation fails, husbands may see this closeness as a reminder of something they relinquished long ago, potentially leading to feelings of jealousy and rejection that can trigger violent reactions. This theory aligns somewhat with sociologist's Talcott Parsons sex-role theory, which posits that the identification of daughters with mothers, and sons with fathers, is essential for maintaining the gendered division of labour within the Western family, with deviations from this norm seen as aberrant (Heward 1996: 35). Similarly, political studies scholar John Beynon (2002: 20) connects the professional conditions of certain men with their violent outbursts at home. For example, working-class men like Ray, a typical blue-collar worker, often lack power in the workplace and may adopt "macho identities" to conceal their powerlessness, compensating by dominating at home. The link between social class and child-rearing becomes evident when the twins decide to attend college after high school. Ray expresses his disdain for college professors, dismissing them as "all communists," and struggles to understand why "two able-bodied young men out of high school couldn't work for a living or enter the Navy" as he had done (Lamb 1998: 131). This judgment proves partially correct in Thomas's case, as he ends his first year of college with disastrous grades. Ray's reaction is one of mockery and rage: "What's the story here, Einstein? You been taking a joyride up there? First you flimflam me out of my hard-earned money, and then you can't even bother to study?" (idem: 257). Ray's understanding of college dynamics is limited, given that he only completed his third year of high school. Yet, he emphasizes his own experiences by ironically stating that he "only fought in two wars" (idem: 259). Even Dominick's good grades fail to impress him, as he dismisses all subjects as either "happy horseshit" or beyond his comprehension.

Another factor that shapes Ray's approach to fatherhood is his intense Americanness. The author highlights Ray's patriotism at several points in the novel - mentioning that he fought in World War II and Korea, recalling his enthusiasm for the American moon landing as a victory over the Russians in the space race, and noting his suggestion that Dominick buy an American truck instead of a Japanese one. This strong sense of being purely American, along with other previously discussed factors, may contribute to Ray's obsession with toughening up his stepsons. As literary scholar Elizabeth Abele (2003: 142) notes, the twentieth century saw a rise in American imperialism and corporate business culture, which influenced the very concept of American masculinity. Men were expected to be tough, obedient, loyal, reliable, and willing to sacrifice themselves. To instill these qualities in the next generation, new child-rearing techniques were developed to counteract the softening influence of mothers and "discourage crying and other forms of emotional

expression" (ibid.). This is precisely the kind of upbringing Ray imposes on the twins. However, years later, when Thomas cuts off his hand and is hospitalized, Ray realizes that all his efforts to counteract Connie's protective ways have failed, and he blames her for Thomas's mental illness. Ray also compares his life and experiences to those of the twins, reinforcing his belief that exposure to life's hardships should make people stronger:

"But Jesus Christ, what did you have to go and cut off his hand for? I don't care how crazy he is. That's what's eating me up... you two were lucky. You never had to go to war like I did. It changes you: being in a war. You come home, you don't want to talk about it, but... it just changes you. That's all. The things you see, the things you do, and then you come back into civilian life and... when I was stationed over in Italy? I have seen a guy get blown apart right in front of me. Cut in half, right at the waist... so every time I think of him going over there to the house and taking my knife off the wall. Taking his hand off voluntarily.... At the library, of all places. I know he's crazy. I know he can't help it... but Jesus..." (Lamb 1998: 470)

Ray also realizes that Connie's flattery was exclusively directed at Thomas, not Dominick, a circumstance highlighting their divergent personalities, despite their identical appearance. Ray informs Dominick that, had Connie allowed him to raise Thomas with a focus on preparing him for the outside world, their current predicament might have been avoided (Lamb 1998: 62). Paradoxically, despite his apparent disdain for Thomas's perceived weakness, Ray considers him his child, repeatedly addressing him as "my kid," a behaviour Dominick finds perplexing (65). However, the twins never view him as their father, addressing him instead by his first name.

This paternal assertion extends beyond mere nomenclature. The narrator recalls the stepfather's attempts to forge a bond often rebuffed by the stepson, such as providing condoms when Dominick begins dating his future wife, Dessa. Dominick struggles to "accept [that] sudden father-son stuff" (309). This paternal inclination is further evidenced in the present, when Ray is upset that Dominick did not call for help after a car accident, insisting that as "his kid," he should have informed him (467).

Thomas exhibits a markedly different approach to his stepfather, perpetually seeking his approval and affection. Dominick recalls that every year, on Ray's birthday, Thomas would meticulously prepare presents, wrapped a week in advance, along with homemade "best dad in the world" cards, carefully tucked away in his bureau drawer. In contrast, Dominick would hastily assemble gifts minutes before church, wrapping candy bars in repurposed newspaper comics and adorning them with a rapidly scrawled "happy birthday" note. Despite these contrasting efforts, the stepfather's reaction was consistently one of embarrassment, seemingly oblivious to the disparity in their endeavours.

Ray's actions become a focal point of Dominick's conversations with Dr. Patel, the psychiatrist treating Thomas. To understand the genesis and progression of Thomas's illness, Dr. Patel seeks information from the healthier twin. Dominick details Ray's physical abuse, noting a particular cruelty reserved for Thomas. The stepfather's punitive measures, often resembling military-like tactics, such as taping hands or forced kneeling on rice-covered floors, were prolonged and intensified when inflicted upon the weaker twin, whose pleas for mercy were met with indifference.

When questioned about Connie's response to these torments, Dominick confesses her complicity, admitting she was "more scared of Ray than [they] were" (125). Paradoxically, despite the evidence, Connie insists that the absence of a biological bond did not preclude Ray from being a considerate father, a notion Dominick vehemently disputed:

"The only thing that makes him my father is some stupid piece of paper he signed. What kind of father would bully his son the way he bullied Thomas tonight? What kind of father wants his sons to go off to war and get wasted?"  
 "He didn't say that, Dominick. Don't put words in his mouth. He loves you boys".  
 "He can't stand us and you know it. He resents everything about us. He's been that way all our lives" (Lamb 1998: 262)

Connie attempts to mitigate her son's resentment by revealing a potential explanation for Ray's behaviour. She disclosed her husband's troubled upbringing, describing his mother as a "no-good tramp" (263). Unimpressed, Dominick seeks information about his biological father, a query Connie deftly evaded. Years later, following Thomas's tragic suicide, Dominick publicly denounces Ray's failings as a stepfather at the funeral reception. Dessa, his ex-wife, offers a poignant perspective, emphasizing the significance of the "real father" label (777). These revelations, coupled with extensive therapy, initiate a process of acceptance and objective analysis for Dominick.

Ray's subsequent health crisis, necessitating a leg amputation, creates a parallel to Thomas's ordeal and prompts introspection. Dominick grapples with the complex figure of his stepfather, realizing that the abusive man who had raised him was also the one who planted tulips at the grave of his infant daughter Angela. Even Ray's fervent patriotism took on new meaning as Dominick contemplates the man's unwavering duty to his country. Dr. Patel's assertion that Ray's consistent presence constituted a form of fatherhood offered a fresh perspective. Ultimately, triggered by illness, Ray exhibits a glimmer of remorse, acknowledging his past mistakes:

"I know I made mistakes with you two," he said. "With him especially. The day of the funeral there? Afterwards back at the house? You weren't accusing me of anything that I hadn't already accused myself of... I just never understood that kid. Me and him, we were like oil and water... I hadn't grown up with a father, see? All I knew was that it was a tough world out there. I figured that was the one thing I could do for you two: toughen you up a little, so that you could take whatever soccer punches life was going to throw at you... 'They're just little boys, Ray', she used to say to me all the time. But I didn't see it. I was pigheaded about it, I guess. And, of course, I knew neither of you two liked me that much. Had me pegged as the bad guy all the time. The guy who wrecked everyone's fun. Sometimes you three would be laughing at something, and I'd walk into the room, and bam! Three long faces."  
 "It was your temper" I said. "We were afraid of you." (Lamb 1998: 857)

And there comes a further admission on Dominick's side: that they were all "a little screwed up, Ma included" (857). Connie's story had already been filled with violence well before she met Ray, as domestic abuse had been part of her family history, in the person of her father of Italian origins: Domenico Onofrio Tempesta.

### 3. Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, the Italian grandfather

The figure of Domenico Onofrio Tempesta, the maternal grandfather who died in 1949, looms large, not only in the numerous photographs of him, cherished by Connie, but also, as Dominick observes, in her “life of service to him” (15). This devoted daughter idolized him as a paragon of success, embodying many patriarchal stereotypes that reinforced his position as the unquestioned head of the household. Connie’s accounts portray Domenico as a self-made man who emigrated to the United States from Southern Italy in 1901, working tirelessly to amass wealth and purchase land. As the first Italian immigrant to own property in Three Rivers, Connecticut, he built the family home on Hollyhock Avenue with his own hands.

Connie draws parallels between Ray’s strict demeanour and her father’s, asserting that Domenico was even more severe. She illustrates this claim with anecdotes of his harsh disciplinary tactics, such as forcing her to consume a cigarette as punishment for smoking (18). A potential explanation for the convergence of Ray and Domenico’s personalities lies in the 1930s theory positing that fathers serve as models for sons and ideal mates for daughters (Griswold 2003: 163). Indeed, Domenico was unquestionably his daughter’s hero, as Dessa later acknowledges (Lamb 1998: 783).

While Connie’s recollections offer insights, they pale in comparison to Domenico’s self-authored manuscript, intended as a guide for aspiring Italian immigrants. Titled *The History of Domenico Tempesta, a Great Man from Humble Beginnings*, the text transcends mere self-aggrandizement, aligning with a broader trend among Italian immigrants of documenting their experiences. This shift from oral to written narratives emerged as a response to the disintegration of “Little Italy” communities across the United States. As literary scholar Fred Gardaphé (2004: 21-23) observes, “only when the present interacts with the past can we say that a tradition is being created,” and these personal histories served as crucial vehicles for intergenerational heritage transmission.

Dominick’s discovery of the manuscript challenges his preconceived notions of his grandfather. The enigmatic figure, previously confined to photographs and maternal anecdotes, is revealed as a complex individual beyond the idealized image cherished by Connie. Domenico’s untimely death while completing the manuscript, a project shrouded in secrecy, further deepens the mystery surrounding him.

Dominick’s reading of the manuscript reveals a far less idealized grandfather, instead portraying Domenico as pompous, misogynistic, and reprehensible (Lamb 1998: 35). Similar to Ray’s actions being rooted in American cultural norms, Domenico’s behaviour is often shaped by traditional Italian values. His profound disappointment in not having a male heir aligns with the culturally prescribed role of Italian men as providers and protectors (Gardaphé 2003: 242). Domenico’s tumultuous relationship with his wife, Ignazia, is exacerbated by her inability to produce a male offspring, a failure he deems a personal disgrace (Lamb 1998: 528). Despite the initial pregnancy resulting in twins, a boy and a girl, the boy’s stillbirth casts a long shadow over Domenico, haunted by the fear that the symbolic baptism he performs on the dead child condemned it to eternal damnation (670). The loss of

his only male heir, coupled with Connie's perceived unmarriageability, leads to a despairing realization that the "proud name of Tempesta" will perish with him (526). The Tempesta family name is synonymous with pride, rooted in Domenico's Sicilian heritage and his self-made success in America. He attributed his fortune to "hard work and seriousness of purpose" (557), embodying the quintessential immigrant dream of escaping poverty through westward migration. As Gardaphé (2004: 13-14) suggests, America represented a realm of "complete freedom, real equality, absence of persecution, and unlimited potential", ideals that Domenico wholeheartedly embraced. His conviction that his labor contributed to America's greatness is evident (Lamb 1998: 557).

The family home on Hollyhock Avenue serves as a microcosm of the immigrant experience, blending old and new worlds. While the front facade reflects American architectural styles, the backyard evokes Sicily with its tomato and pepper plants, a space for Domenico to indulge in nostalgic reverie (587). Yet, a poignant irony emerges as Dominick realizes that the house is now occupied by Ray, a non-Italian outsider (173), symbolizing the displacement of the original family and their cultural heritage.

Like Ray, Domenico adheres to rigid gender roles, defining the male as the sole provider of material support (722). This perspective informs his paternal approach, devoid of affection and marked by an expectation of filial servitude. The tragic death of Ignazia, fleeing a loveless marriage (836), intensifies the insular dynamic between father and daughter. Dominick's subsequent discovery of the manuscript fuels a disturbing suspicion of incest, potentially explaining Thomas's psychological turmoil (844).

Ultimately, Dominick learns that Henry Drinkwater, part African American and part Native American, who died in the War of Korea, is the twins' biological father. Ray's revelation of Domenico's deep-rooted racism sheds light on Connie's refusal to reveal her pregnancy to her father, aligning with the patriarchal Italian honor code: "The Italians needed someone to feel better than, I guess. Lots of them were prejudiced as hell when it came to the coloreds. The Indians, too. Her father, for instance. He would have murdered her if he'd known" (874). As Gardaphé (2018: 552) and Mangione (1992: 95) elucidate, Italian fathers exerted absolute authority over their families, vigilantly safeguarding female chastity. While Connie exhibited moments of defiance, the patriarchal imprint remained indelible, influencing her subsequent choices and perpetuating the cycle within her own family.

Domenico's figure is despised for most of the novel by his grandson, but he recognizes there is at least one thing they share - besides the name - and this is the loss of a child, which in Dominick leaves a denied fatherhood which he tries to recreate in several ways, as it will be shown in the next section.

#### **4. The denied fatherhood: Dominick Birdsey**

The protagonist and narrator, Dominick Birdsey, emerges as the novel's third paternal figure. As previously explored, he navigates a life shaped by the violent temper of his stepfather, Ray, and the imposing specter of his absent grandfather,

from whom he inherited his name. The elusive ideal father, a figure superior to his upbringing, remains a constant aspiration. These formative experiences could have predisposed Dominick to become a less-than-ideal parent himself. However, before he could demonstrate his paternal abilities, his and Dessa's infant daughter, Angela, succumbs to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

This tragedy shatters their marriage, as SIDS inflicts a pervasive grief that encompasses "a multitude of second losses," including "the loss of hopes and dreams, of future potential, of parenthood, of being able to nurture and protect a child" (Mahat-Shamir 2022: 1186). Dominick grapples with the unique and profound sorrow of losing a baby at such a tender age (Lamb 1998: 514). As behavioural scientist Michal Mahat-Shamir observes, the early occurrence of SIDS hinders the formation of enduring bonds, rendering the loss "ambiguous" and the deceased child's psychological presence "not defined or established" (idem: 1190). Parents in such circumstances mourn the unrealized future, the "wishes, hopes, and fantasies about one who could have been but never was" (ibid.). This profound sense of powerlessness and insecurity strains the marriage, culminating in divorce.

To prevent future loss, while Dessa is traveling to Greece - the country of her family's origin - Dominick undergoes a vasectomy, a decision that he explains years later to Doctor Patel as something provoked by "partly a not-wanting-to-get-into-it: the baby's death, the divorce - partly a male ego thing" (Lamb 1998: 431). Even a subsequent relationship with Joy, who shares his desire for childlessness, solidifies his commitment to this new romantic interest (433). Yet, despite these efforts to escape fatherhood, Dominick's innate protective instincts persist. He channels this paternal energy into caring for his troubled brother, Thomas, whom he views as a perpetual child in need of protection. This role intensifies after promising his dying mother to safeguard his twin (612). Tragically, Thomas's subsequent death denies Dominick the opportunity to fulfill this paternal duty, leaving him a victim of a seemingly inescapable cycle of loss and longing.

A third opportunity for fatherhood arises when Joy becomes pregnant. Confident of his vasectomy's effectiveness, Dominick grapples with the ethical implications of fathering a child that he did not conceive. Initially considering a charade as the child's biological father, he ultimately rejects this path, haunted by the specter of repeating Ray's role. As he contemplates, "And I was supposed to just live out this charade with her? Act the part of the chump and pretend I was this baby's father? Become Ray, the substitute dad I'd hated all my life?" (496), Dominick asserts agency, informing Joy of the child's true paternity and ending the relationship.

Fate intervenes, providing an unexpected path to fatherhood. Ray's declining health necessitates a caregiver, a role thrust upon Dominick. This reversal of roles fosters a reevaluation of their complex relationship, culminating in forgiveness and acceptance. Their shared watching *The Little Mermaid*, a children's film, symbolically encapsulates the shift in dynamics, as Dominick assumes paternal duties (853).

Concurrently, Dominick reunites with Dessa and learns of Joy's terminal illness - AIDS - and her desire for her former partner to adopt her daughter, Tyffanie (868). This presents a renewed opportunity for fatherhood alongside Dessa, offering a chance to redefine the role and surpass the negative paternal models of his past.

### 5. Conclusion: Rewriting the fatherhood narrative

The novel's conclusion offers a profound sense of resolution, as Dominick achieves a previously unattainable peace. The discovery of his Native American heritage, symbolized by the visit to his father's grave, proves pivotal in this transformation (879). By incorporating this third cultural element into his identity, Dominick constructs a more complete and harmonious self-image. This newfound wholeness, as he terms it (822), allows him to transcend the limiting narratives imposed by his Italian and American upbringings.

The novel underscores the potent influence of culture in shaping familial relationships and individual identities. The patriarchal structures inherent in both Italian and American societies contribute to the oppressive dynamics within the family. Dominick's recognition of this power imbalance, exemplified by his grandfather's tyrannical behaviour, marks a crucial step towards personal liberation (897).

This is a lesson that applies to Domenico as much as to Ray, whose oppression of his family had made its members distant and scared of him, but had also frustrated his attempts at being a father for a long time. So, the cultures of the two men makes them different - because, as stated by Beynon (2002: 2), masculinity is not biological, but cultural - but definitely not when it comes to considering their oppressive tendencies. Yet, as stated in the opening of this conclusion, and according to the author of the novel, rewriting one's own narrative is possible, despite the traumas and the obstinate mental constructions of childhood. Dominick's admission is that being willing to think "beyond sperm and egg" he is definitely not fatherless at all, because "if one defined one's father as the male elder who attended one's passage from childhood to adulthood" then his father was definitely Ray, the one who had been there all along and borne witness (Lamb 1998: 845), and this goes way beyond either biology or culture.

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**THE POST-TRUTH WORLD IN LORRIE MOORE'S  
*I AM HOMELESS IF THIS IS NOT MY HOME***

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyses how the post-truth phenomenon shapes an individual living in an era in which emotions often feel more truthful than facts. Post-truth creates a society in which nothing seems certain or definite. In Moore's novel, as the main character Finn tries to navigate through the pain of losing his loved ones, the readers follow him on a strange road trip in a perplexing world, where nothing appears to be factual or tangible – not even historical events or death. Finn wanders through the past and present in his search for meaning and understanding of life and death.*

**Key words:** *motivated reasoning, post-truth, self-deception*

## **1. Introduction**

Lorrie Moore is an American author who has published five story collections, four novels, and a children's book. She is best known for her short stories, for which she has received many awards. Her latest novel, *I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home*, was published in 2023, and, the same year, it was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction.

In *Understanding Lorrie Moore*, Alison Kelly (2009: 4) describes her as a writer who is committed to writing literature about America and Americans. Although her fiction is mainly focused on personal relationships and private emotions, it is deeply rooted in the specific context of the USA (idem: 4-5). Moore deftly captures the inner lives of her characters and the moment in history in which they live (ibid.). It can be justifiably asserted that American society is not just a background, but an important part of her storytelling.

Although *I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home* is a novel about grief and, dealing with the loss of loved ones, its primary story is, notably, set in the specific context of the 2016 presidential election. Parts of the novel are also in the form of letters written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from a woman who runs a boardinghouse and addressed to, as readers eventually discover, her dead sister. And while the two stories have many interesting parallels, this paper focuses only on the part of the novel set in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the year Oxford Dictionaries declared *post-truth* as its international word of the year, reflecting what it called a "highly-charged" political 12 months (BBC: 2016). Although it is believed this adjective was used in 1992, its frequency of use increased by 2000% in 2016, when compared to the previous

year (ibid.). Moore's protagonist exposes the complexity of living in a post-truth world, where nothing and no one can be trusted and there are no absolute truths, only different interpretations. The very title suggests a strong sense of uncertainty, which dominates the novel. In this chaotic landscape, nothing is for sure - so much so that even our home might not be our home. In *I Am Homeless If This Is Not My Home*, post-truth is a qualifier that can be used to describe not just the political and social trends of the period, but also the private life of the main character.

## 2. The post-truth world

Contemporarily, the concept of post-truth is often tied to the overwhelming power of emotions to shape opinions and perceptions. The Oxford Dictionary has famously defined post-truth as "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief (Oxford Languages 2016)." Also, both Cambridge and Collins online dictionaries inextricably link the definition of post-truth to emotions.

Stuart Sim (2019: 11) has written that post-truth is "a critically important factor in contemporary life" and that this situation will not change anytime soon. Thomas Zoglauer (2023: 27) points out that a post-truth world is a world in which facts and empirical evidence are no longer important, consequently making it impossible for us to distinguish between true and false statements. There are some scholars who have welcomed such changes in the public discourse; for example, Fuller (2020: 1) regards post-truth as a path to a more democratic society. Nevertheless, it is not surprising that many feel troubled and alarmed at the prospect of a society where everyone has their own interpretation of reality that is based on the person's emotions and beliefs. For example, C. G. Prado (2018: 2) labels this phenomenon as "a negative sociopolitical development", describing it as dangerous and asserting that the use of post-truth implies the personal appropriation of truth (idem: 7).

Juan Pablo Bermúdez (2018: 91) posited that post-truth is based not on deliberate deception, but on self-deception. According to him, post-truth is a phenomenon that occurs when someone hides the truth from themselves, while perceiving themselves as truthful (ibid.). He claims that emotions are not crucial for this process, arguing that it is triggered by what psychologists call motivated reasoning (ibid.). Through motivated reasoning, individuals unintentionally interpret facts and evidence in such a way that it does not contradict their preexisting motivations and preferences (ibid.). In 2018, Bermúdez (ibid.) concluded that "motivated reasoning is arguably at the core of many faces of the post-truth phenomenon".

Motivated reasoning is structured into five phases: prior motivations; facing the evidence; sensing the costs; rationalising it away; and, finally, believing against the evidence (idem: 99). In Moore's novel, this very structure is easily recognised in the protagonist's approach to the difficulties and hardships he has to face. Finn is forced to confront fateful changes he is not ready for. As he cannot accept that his ex-girlfriend, Lily, has left him, nor her eventual suicide, and that his brother, Max, is on his deathbed, he instead chooses to create his own truth and reality that give him a false sense of security and of being in control of his own life.

### 3. Finn's post-truth

In the novel, the tumultuous period before and after the presidential election in 2016 seems like a mere backdrop to Finn's trials and tribulations. However, Finn's personal life reflects the overall sense of uncertainty and instability permeating American society. His perception is clouded by deep feelings of distrust and doubt.

Finn questions everything. He wonders what kind of person his mother really was (Moore 2023: 46) and if his dad was his biological father (idem: 17). He distrusts "official versions" (idem: 37), as he calls them, of many historical events. For example, he questions whether Americans really landed on the Moon. The only thing Finn appears to be certain about is that Donald Trump will never become president (idem: 53, 55-56).

Finn is a history teacher, but he spends part of his class time teaching math because, as he claims, no one in the school knows how to do that. Officially, it is because of this that he has been suspended from his job, but he believes the true reason is that he rejected the advances of the headmaster's wife, Sigrid, who is also Lily's friend. Besides teaching math in his classes, he teaches what he calls Alt-Consensus History (idem: 37). He teaches his high school students to doubt explanations of certain historical events, like, for example, famous assassinations: "You got to teach kids that if it adds up too neatly it probably isn't correct (idem: 39)."

It must be very exhausting for Finn to doubt everything and not have anything solid in his life to rely on. However, Finn can be seen as the everyman who is overwhelmed by today's fast-paced world, cluttered with opposing opinions and different interpretations of the same events. The reality for many people today is constant, daily exposure to an incredible amount of information, which makes it increasingly difficult to know what is true. In the past, stars were used for navigation. Finn often reflects on his not being able to understand the stars in the sky (idem: 60, 105). There is an ever-present sense of not being able to find anything that can help people steer through this bewildering world. Bermúdez (2018: 100) argues that it "makes perfect sense" that people resort to motivated reasoning in such circumstances as a way to reassert who they really are. Finn believes that everyone is "narratively rewritten", because memories are often reshaped and remodelled (Moore 2023: 45). Although he is aware of the capacity, and even tendency, of human beings to deceive themselves, Finn's urge to keep his perceived identity safe from the unbearable reality pushes him into a world of illusions. Finn's brother is dying in hospice care, and he has not seen his ex-girlfriend, Lily, for almost a year. Finn cannot let go of her even though she is in a new relationship.

When Finn is talking to his brother, he tells him that she only thinks she wants to be with Jack, her current boyfriend; he is sure that Lily and Jack will not be together for long (idem: 29). It is obvious that Finn is propping up his interpretation of Lily and that he is not willing to accept the uncomfortable truth. At one point, it becomes apparent that he is actually well-aware of the true nature of his relationship with Lily, but he chooses to live in denial all the same:

Did it matter to him that she was with another man? This person named Jack? He actually used to like the name Jack but now it was a nail slammed into his temple. Did

he have any choice but to go back to her if that's what she wanted? He was unable to love anyone else. He had tried. But always he missed her. He was like a dog, not seeing colors, chasing his own sepia-colored tail, sepia because it was all in the past, one's own tail when chasing it, was in the past, but hey that's where everything he wanted was. (Moore 2023: 31)

As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that Finn is going through all the phases of motivated reasoning. He somehow decides that acknowledging the truth is not good enough for him or that it is, simply, unbearable. For example, while he is visiting Max in the hospice center, he sees his brother, who is actually bound to his bed, right next to him, standing in a hallway. Soon, he realises that Max has been in his room the whole time, unable to move (idem: 44). Here, the reader gets a hint that Finn might be losing his grip on reality.

During his visit, he gets a text message from Sigrid, in which he is told there is an emergency concerning Lily. Finn knows that if he leaves, he will probably never see his brother again, but chooses to ignore this:

He knew people were often quite accidentally not with family members when they died. They were out taking a brief walk. Or getting a bad snack in the awful cafeteria. Then they come back upstairs and the beloved had passed. He would try to get lucky and not have this happen. (...) He knew the average number of days in hospice care was seventeen and that most people died after three. But he left Max and headed for the elevator with an illogical sense of hope. Max would have to wait to die and Max, Finn felt sure, would do his best to wait. In a way, Finn thought foolishly, he was handing Max extra time. (Moore 2023: 57)

When he comes to Sigrid's house, he finds out that Lily committed suicide and that he was not invited to the funeral. In her will, she designated that she be buried at a green cemetery (idem: 74). For Finn, Lily is the most fundamental ever-present force in his life, and he feels terrified when he learns that she will no longer be part of it:

When Lily was alive he could forget about her for a bit and know he'd see her sometime soonish, but now that she was dead she filled up the space of his head like fumes. She was inescapable. But no she was not dead! This all was an enactment of some kind, as it had been once or twice before. This was once more one of her inscrutable whims. (Moore 2023: 74)

He would not allow himself to contemplate this new life without Lily: when he gave a thought in that direction, there was no light and nothing growing in it. (Moore 2023: 76)

Sigrid's words are very telling when she warns Finn that Lily is not his own invention, not a mere character in his play (idem: 76). And yet, despite all the obvious evidence pointing in the opposite direction, Finn chooses to create his own truth. He refuses to accept that Lily is dead, just like he refuses to acknowledge that their relationship was troubled. He is angered by Sigrid's comments regarding Lily and him that do not fit into his own idea of the two of them (idem: 71-72). He sees Lily and himself as if they were meant for each other – he compares them to water birds

who mate for life (idem: 71). However, Finn knows deep down that their problems were such that they could not escape them – they would bring their unhappiness wherever they went (idem: 67). Still, as acknowledging the truth would hurt him too much, Finn chooses to delude himself.

What happens next is not clear. Finn goes to the green cemetery where Lily is buried, and, out of nowhere, Lily appears. She is not a ghost or apparition. She looks like she has just been dug up – her mouth is full of dirt and there are worms in her hair. Readers do not know if Finn is hallucinating or if he has dug her up from her grave, just like Heathcliff did in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. At one point, just like Heathcliff when he opens Catherine's grave (Brontë 2012: 293-294), he reflects that "Crazed death had not yet made a stranger of her." (Moore 2023: 78)

Finn and Lily start a road trip in order to bury her at a forensic farm, because they used to talk about how they would like to be buried there and dedicate their bodies to forensic science. This road trip with the goal of burying a loved one is evocative of William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. During their stay at a boardinghouse, Lily says she is a fish and that her mother is a fish (idem: 133). This is a direct allusion to Vardaman, the protagonist of *As I Lay Dying*, who says that his deceased mother is a fish (Faulkner 1957: 54). In that novel, this comparison helps Vardaman to understand death, because his mother stops being alive just like a fish that has been caught. But, unlike Vardaman's rationalising his unbearable pain, Finn believes he has managed to trick death and has a chance to make things right with Lily. He refuses to admit Lily has changed her state and is no longer alive.

The living-dead Lily that accompanies Finn is the Lily Finn wants. She says she is sorry for not being able to feel simple happiness every day (Moore 2023: 96). She realises that she did not really want to be buried at the green cemetery, as she had stipulated in her will, but at the designated forensic farm, where he has decided she should rest after taking her own life. Finn has chosen to ignore reality and to lose himself in a labyrinth of self-deception, which allows him to spend time with Lily, who now is exactly who he would like her to be, not who she really was. Thus, in essence, we, the readers, do not really know anything about her; we only see her through Finn's desires and wants. He does not respect her choices in life. He ignores her will and that she was in a relationship with another man. He chooses to live in the reality he creates, while disregarding anything that points in another direction. Sim (2019: 14) claims that post-truth implies exertion of power and control over others and that it can lead to silencing the group that holds opposing opinions. Lily is silenced in this relationship. Her view of their relationship and her choices are no longer relevant. Finn has her under his complete control in his own interpretation of reality. She is just a mere character in the play of his making.

During this macabre road trip, Lily tells him she is sorry to be taking him away from his brother and that Finn will blame her for distracting him (Moore 2023: 106). Since Lily's words are actually Finn's, they unveil that this strange journey serves as a way for him to avoid being with Max. Finn is well-aware that his brother does not have much time left and that he will almost surely die while he is away from his side.

Finn is obsessed with remodelling his relationship with Lily, who is dead, and ignoring the relationship with his brother, who is on his deathbed. He is consumed

with changing something that cannot be changed, while hiding from the knowledge that he is making a decision that he will regret. By the end of their road trip, Finn is certain that his brother has died, and he blames Lily for not being with Max:

“Why, Lily? Why at this time? Why did you do all this? Everything! You knew my brother – my brother was dying! –” And here he started to choke, for he could feel now that his brother was dying right then at that very moment, just as he uttered these words; in his mind’s eye he saw his brother’s gaze fasten on him sharply but with kindness, then vanish. He could hear the last pounding of Max’s heart on the hard door of time. (Moore 2023: 169)

“He was my only brother, Lily! You have smashed my life to bits! Look! Everything is at your convenience! You’re going to bury yourself of course – that is unfortunate. But the sky has helpfully arranged the full moon and other fancy lights for you to do it by!” (Moore 2023: 171)

Finn blames Lily, who has not been part of his life for a year already, for the choices he has made. He uses his concocted version of her to avoid facing the losses that come his way.

Guilty conscience drives Finn to be present at the crematorium, where his brother’s remains were sent, while the body of a homeless man is being burned, since he was not there for his brother. Later, Finn again tries to rewrite this part of his life by saying at the funeral that, even though he was not present at Max’s deathbed, he felt like he had been with him (Moore 2023: 184). Afterwards, Max’s colleague says that it seemed like he had been waiting for Finn to show up till the very end. These words expose the truth Finn is trying to ignore and they hurt him deeply. Nonetheless, while at the ceremony, he recognises the basic human need to tell stories, to narratively rewrite our lives, though he fails to acknowledge this process when he does it himself:

The service seemed to bear no resemblance to the story of his brother’s life. He supposed these things were spiritual gestures for the self and to the extent it kept widows and children company, who was anyone to judge this moral puppet show? Did anyone really know what the story of a human life ever was? There were so many competing and intersecting and sometimes parallel and obliterating narratives. (Moore 2023: 182)

As the story unfolds, it becomes more and more difficult for Finn to avoid the increasingly harsh reality, with the only two people who had loved him no longer alive (idem: 187). In the end, Finn does eventually accept his losses and learns to live with them. For a long time, he talks to Lily in his dreams, but ultimately the woman he loved ceases to exist like that in his life. He acknowledges that she has taken a new form (idem: 191). In addition, he takes up volunteering at a local hospice, holding the hands of strangers leaving this world, in seeming compensation for his abandonment of his dying brother.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although Moore successfully writes a novel about deeply personal feelings, she manages to depict a society that does not want to face harsh truths, one that is at the same time overwhelmed with contradicting information and polarising views. Her work reinforces the concept that it is easy to hide inside narratively rewritten versions of truth by using protective mechanisms like motivated reasoning.

In today's post-truth world, individuals go astray without knowing it. If there is not anything or anyone that can be trusted, if there are no stars that can steer us through life, it seems inevitable that one can easily lose one's way. If everything is open for interpretation, it is getting more and more difficult for anyone to make sense of life and accept some uncomfortable truth. Even death becomes something that can be ignored and interpreted differently. Finn finds his way out of the labyrinth of a self-imposed world of illusions, but not without consequences. Ignoring truth and embracing self-deception have their price. Finn has to come to terms with failing to do justice to his beloved brother by trying to avoid the unfathomable pain of losing the two people he loved so dearly in such a short time. Ignoring facts will not change them. Readers follow Finn's struggle to avoid what he does not want but has to eventually accept, while being reminded of the presidential election happening at the same time.

Moore masterfully and accurately portrays the difficulty of living in the post-truth era, while writing a story not about politics, but about coming to terms with the death of the loved ones. Her novel mirrors the confusion and self-deception of contemporary American society in a story about an individual struggling to make sense of harsh and bewildering circumstances.

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## CRIMSON CHRONICLES: PROBING ILLNESS AND POLITICS IN DAN SIMMONS' *CHILDREN OF THE NIGHT*

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**Abstract:** *Dan Simmons' Children of the Night (1992) weaves together medical research, vampire mythology, and political intrigue against the backdrop of post-Ceaușescu Romania, a country that has violently freed itself from decades of communist dictatorship. The narrative centres around Dr Kate Neuman, inadvertently drawn into a mystery involving numerous deaths affecting children in Romanian orphanages. She uncovers a blood disorder in one of the children whom she adopts, and her further investigations conducted in the US seemingly link his condition to the legend of vampires. Particularly noteworthy is the intermittent narrative presence of Dracula himself - a perennial figure in both Romanian and global political landscapes. As he engages in the process of re-memembering his past deeds, Dracula contemplates a long-awaited demise. This study, while recognizing the predominantly Gothic features of the narrative, posits its proximity to an illness narrative, akin to 'pathography' - an autobiographical account of illness, or memoirs by partners, children, or caregivers - an academic form that gained prominence during the AIDS crisis of the late 1980s and early 1990s (Luckhurst 2008:128). The analysis further contends that the personal vampiric tale, horrific in its essence, metaphorically signifies the bloodshed inherent in both historical and contemporary political struggles.*

**Keywords:** *Dracula, Gothic, horror, narrative medicine, politics, vampire*

### 1. Introduction

While early Gothic literature portrays victims suffering in isolated settings like castles perched on improbable slopes, in the nineteenth century the settings shift to urban environments and the narratives start to reflect anxieties about medicine and law, then emerging professions. Many classic Gothic tales revolve around the exploration of the ethical dangers of unleashed medical ambition; thus, clearly the connection between medicine and Gothic literature runs deep (Wasson 2015: 1). The focus on the body cements this connection and ensures its continuity to the present day. As Punter (1998: 9) claims, Gothic literature fundamentally identifies the vulnerability and fragility of the human body; consequently, medicine becomes a natural subject for Gothic exploration. For example, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* depicts the horrific costs of unrestricted scientific pursuit, while Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Jekyll and Hyde* draws its substance from the investigation of the moral complexities of pharmaceutical self-testing (Wasson 2015). Furthermore, Gothic narratives are filled with metaphors of disease and contagion;

Mary Shelley's apocalyptic *The Last Man* (1826) builds on the devastating outcomes of a 21<sup>st</sup> century bubonic plague, as does Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842) (Haffele-Thomas 2021: 265). Bram Stoker's mother's stories about the 1832 cholera outbreak in Sligo, which caused multiple premature burials of the sick, influenced his depiction of Count Dracula (Douglas 2013).

According to Stephanou (2014: 61) in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a notable association emerged between vampirism and AIDS in literature and film, exemplified by the publication of several vampire novels, such as Brian Aldiss' *Dracula Unbound*, Dan Simmons' *Children of the Night*, Patrick Whalen's *Night Thirst*, and Jewelle Gomez's *The Gilda Stories*, which specifically addressed AIDS, illness, and corrupted blood. These narratives depicted various aspects of the connection, including diseased vampires (*Dracula Unbound*), vampires consciously feeding on infected blood (*The Gilda Stories*), and even instances where vampires offered a supposed cure for AIDS (*Night Thirst*, *Children of the Night*). Cultural views on blood differ, stretching from Homer's Odysseus who revitalized the dead with blood (Homer 1945: Book 11, lines 136-162), while the Bible specifically prohibited the practice (Lev. 17: 11). More recently, scholars (R.P.P.W.M. Maas and P.J.G.M. Voets 2014: 945-946) argued that the features of vampirism closely resemble three rare medical conditions: porphyria, rabies, and pellagra. Drawing inspiration from this thematic intersection, my inquiry focuses on Dan Simmons' novel, where vampirism is portrayed as a manifestation of a medical condition. This will entail a dual examination: one that scrutinizes vampirism on its surface as a medical phenomenon and another that interprets it metaphorically as representative of the ailment afflicting the political body.

On this basis, this study will have two parts; the first part will dwell on the portrayal of the political 'sickness' of Romania, as seen through Western and Romanian eyes, in the first years after the collapse of Ceaușescu's regime. The second segment will focus on Dracula's narrative voice, which articulates a deeply personal and politically fraught historical backdrop. I will therefore frame the vampiric tale as belonging to a 'wounded storyteller' (Arthur W. Frank's (1995) concept), who needs to tell his story as he faces his much-awaited death. As such, I will explore the thematic phases of chaos, restitution, and quest of the wounded Dracula's story.

## 2.1. A survey of the image of Romania as Dracula's country

In fiction, as Crișan (2013: 60) elaborates, Romania's image abroad centered around the Dracula trope can be divided into two major categories. The first – and arguably still the most popular – is the sensationalist and stereotypical approach, represented by the spin-offs of Stoker's novel, while the second gives precedence to more nuanced and realistic portrayals of the country, challenging certain stereotypes in novels, travel memoirs and anthropological studies. The sensationalist mode became most obvious post-1989, with the association between Dracula and the executed Romanian dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu (shot on Christmas day); the bloodshed that preceded and followed it confirmed for many the savage, uncivilized and brutal nature of the country. According to Brînzeu (1997: 171) there were "rumours that

Ceaușescu asked for frequent transfusions of young blood to keep his body in good condition”; furthermore, “due to Ceaușescu, the two themes – that of the political tyrant, desirous to rule through terror, and that of the vampire sucking the blood and energy of his victims – have merged into the common topos of the vampire-dictator”. The Romanian historian Lucian Boia (2001: 10) claimed that although the country might have once displayed alluring exoticism - such as in the work of Paul Morand (and I might add Patrick Leigh Fermor (1977 and 2013)) – that was replaced by somber depictions, where Dracula’s legacy and Ceaușescu’s extravagant communism are prominent; thus, a mysterious revolution, devastating expeditions of miners in Bucharest, and troubling social issues like the indescribable plight of the abandoned children in the streets or those sick with AIDS, have further tarnished Romania’s image.

Most recently, journalist Paul Kenyon published his own *Children of the Night: The Strange and Epic Story of Modern Romania* (2022). All throughout his book, Paul Kenyon drew connections between major 20th century figures (such as King Carol II, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Ion Antonescu, Ana Pauker, Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej) with dictatorial or criminal tendencies and Vlad the Impaler, so that they all appear to continue the latter’s legacy. In the book, the pervasive spectre of Vlad the Impaler, generally acknowledged as Dracula in Western discourse, casts an ominous shadow over the nation, and the ubiquitous blood imagery conveys a lingering presence that has helped perpetuate a debilitated and decaying body politic, rendering Romania susceptible to the predatory machinations of dictatorial regimes throughout different epochs.

## 2.2. Dan Simmons’ portrayal of Romania

Dan Simmons’ novel originated in the author’s response to the appalling plight of orphans in post-revolution Romania during the early 1990s. As he explains it, the strict birth control policies enforced by the communist regime had left over 600,000 children abandoned, relegated to crowded warehouses, and confined to steel cribs, where they endured severe deprivation of affection and care; caregivers resorted to injecting the orphans with adult blood, thus exposing them to life-threatening diseases such as Hepatitis B and AIDS (qtd. in Ramsdell, 2013). Significantly, although laudably prompted by a humanitarian crisis, Dan Simmons also opted to capitalize on the Dracula myth, employing the horror genre to shed light on this real-life tragedy and its harrowing implications.

The novel’s hypotext mirroring is obvious from the very first page, when the readers encounter a team of six Western semi-officials (academics, a doctor (Kate Neuman), a minister (Father O’Rourke), entrepreneurs) who arrive in Romania “almost as soon as the shooting stopped [...] landing at Otopeni Airport just after midnight on December 29, 1989” (Simmons 1992: 9), a chronological precision that marks the emergence of a post-communist body politic, inviting scrutiny from the West. The six Westerners are shown around by Radu Fortuna, a mysterious guide who somehow cynically and proudly displays the unimaginable wounds that have been plaguing the country under Ceaușescu. A whole catalogue of horrors is cunningly

aimed at stirring the foreigners' generosity and casting them as healers of a nation having suffered under a harsh dictatorship. The settings are decisively (Ceașescu, or post-communist) Gothic: "dreamlike, almost hallucinatory [...] maze stone tunnels", stretching for miles, "storerooms with automatic weapons on shelves, gas masks hanging from hooks [...] command centers [...] some destroyed as if madmen with axes had vented their wrath on them", with "blood on the walls and floors [...]" (idem: 15). In the Timișoara morgue, the Westerners are shown "rows of corpses across the tabletops [...] at least three of four hundred bodies", "a young woman" who lies with "the red-rimmed wall of her opened belly and abdomen", on top of her a "seven-month foetus" of a boy looking like a "discarded doll", a boy "about ten", arms and ankles tied with barbed wires, "layers of eggs that made it look as if the child were wearing white goggles" (idem: 18-19).

Horrific as they are, the dead bodies on show are but a mere preamble to the real nightmare of the plight of the surplus of Romania's children, the consequence of Ceașescu's deranged policy of forced births. In Sebeș, the next destination of the Western group, orphan children in the thousands are kept in unhygienic "warehouse"-like compounds (idem: 22), in actual "low metal cages", in a state of advanced weakness, on their "excrement-smear rag", while the orphanages of Sibiu host the well-kept secret of the AIDS infected children, in a country where the disease does not officially exist (idem: 24). Accompanying this institutionalized exercise in the agony of the physical bodies of the most vulnerable of Romanians, the small town of Copșa Mica, the next destination of the foreigners details the wounds inflicted on both workers' bodies (suffering from lead intoxication) and the environment, by a demented exploitation of natural resources. The sight that welcomes the Westerners is that of natural and human landscapes chromatically distorted, with snow-covered hills and icicles hanging from buildings turned black, under a visible haze of black air; people with soot-covered faces move soundlessly through inches of ash and soot, reminiscent of active volcanoes of faraway geographies (idem: 28); the uncanny *Bleak House* imagery of environmental sickness adds layers of signification to the macabre realities of post-Ceașescu Romania.

As the narrative proceeds, the real cause for the profound and veiled horror that has befallen Romania's orphans is disclosed as the proliferation of vampirism, characterized by an escalating demand for human blood. Remarkably, its *modus operandi* and organizational structure bear striking resemblance to that of established entities such as the Mafia or the feared Romanian Securitate, into which it has infiltrated. Furthermore, the novel portrays the vampires' penetration into Romania's political framework as a much older phenomenon, with their influence stretching as far back as the Romanian principalities, potentially predating the reign of Vlad the Impaler. Interestingly, when viewed from a scientific and objective perspective, vampires themselves - subjected to scrutiny by the American haematologist Kate Neuman, who diligently seeks a cure for her adopted son Joshua's mysterious ailment, that appears to stem from his time in a Romanian orphanage - are portrayed almost sympathetically; they are no more the "fanged creatures of the night", but "members of a family who did have to ingest human blood in order to survive their own faulty immune systems [...] explaining how "secrecy, solidarity, inbreeding"

would cause increased “recessive traits”, “much as with the haemophilia which plagued the royal houses of Europe” (idem: 136). In Nietzschean terms, as discussed in *The Gay Science* (Nietzsche 1972: 349), the desire for self-preservation is a symptom of suffering or limitation in the fundamental concept of life, which is truly about seeking to increase one’s power and capacity; thus, in Simmons’ novel, when survival is ensured and vampirism becomes institutionalized, such as during the communist dictatorship, the basic instinct for survival transforms into a Nietzschean *will to power* and domination.

The narrative builds on the gradual disclosure of the result of pervasive, non-human, vampiric social and political manipulation. Bereft of agency over their own existence, Romanian citizens - inclusive of physically capable adults, not only the vulnerable demographic of orphans - find themselves relegated to a state of political inertia. They either assume the role of passive agents, conforming to Foucault’s notion of “docile bodies”, or are reduced to mere reservoirs of sustenance for the non-human entities that govern their fate. At the same time, in line with Esposito’s (2008) argument, albeit in a different context, vampires (or at least some of them) despite their intrinsically horrific nature, imperviousness to ‘humanity’, and lethal disposition toward humans, may paradoxically serve as catalysts for fostering human solidarity against a non-human threat. In the novel, Ceaușescu’s surprising deficiency in political acumen, which precipitated his execution, is attributed to an enigmatic figure lurking in the shadows, a Dark Advisor, none other than Dracula himself (Simmons 1992: 12).

The fictional spread of vampirism during both the communist and post-communist eras depicted in the novel serves as a metaphorical representation of the enduring presence of the Securitate and *apparatchik* systems, which persisted even following Ceaușescu’s downfall. Even the recently established political authority is depicted as culpable for the violence and insatiable appetite for bloodshed, mirroring the unsettling echoes of the clashes between anti-communist demonstrators and the loyalist forces of the dictator in the waning days of the regime. The CBS Evening News broadcasts images of:

Miners running amok in Romania, commandeering trains to take them to Bucharest, where the rioting continued in some sort of unfocused protest against the government [...] many of whom were Securitate agents in miners’ coveralls—to brutalize their own people [...] men smashing windows, tossing Molotov cocktails at buildings, using crowbars against doors. (Simmons 1992: 133)

This is a political landscape with Hobbesian undertones of a *war of all against all*, as Father O’Rourke (the ally of the American haematologist Kate Neuman), comments:

I don’t think we have any real understanding of the power struggles going on here [...] We’ve got the government versus the protesters versus the miners versus the intellectuals, and the strigoi seem to be pulling most of the strings on each side. Maybe they’re fighting among themselves, I don’t know. (Simmons 1992: 301-302)

This assessment of Romanian politics recalls Gelder's (1994: 8) "paranoid consciousness", that is "the belief in a deeper 'reality' in Romania, of events ultimately manipulated by vampires", "the sinister aphorism which defines Ceaușescu's regime for McPherson, one of the Westerner visitors as 'what you see is not true . . . and what is true you cannot see'". The idea of secrecy, of the impenetrability of the brutal realities that affect the physical and political bodies of post-Ceaușescu Romania, as they appear to a bewildered Western observer also resonate with a certain type of physical "contingency" which Frank (1995: 31), albeit in a different context, describes as "[...] the body's condition of being subject to forces that cannot be controlled"; for example, the infantile body is seen as contingent, that is "burping, spitting and defecating according to its own internal needs and rhythms" but socially benefitting from a grace period for the acquisition of control over their actions. On the other hand, when adults experience a loss of control, societal expectations dictate that they presently reclaim it, or at least adeptly conceal any such lapse in control. In the Romanian context, as the narrative details it, the surpassing of the state of political infantilism is a tenuous process, because it is fraught with inner struggles and conflict.

Father O'Rourke's puzzled Western perspective finds its counterpart in the Romanian diagnostic of recent politics, portrayed as unproblematic and lacking in mystery; this interpretation is rooted in the cultural context of Romania, where the population is conditioned to acknowledge dark traditions, signifying the divergence in perception between Western observers and those immersed in the cultural intricacies of Romanian society. For example, Stelian Tănase argues that communist elites, shaped by their underground past, continued clandestine operations even when in power, remaining alienated and illegitimate in the public eye. He portrays them as "eternal creatures of darkness", perpetually trapped in their past (qtd in Nicolescu and Bucurenci 2008: 277-278). Thus, Simmons' portrayal of vampires, depicted as foreign entities preying upon and exploiting the robust bodies of Romanians, finds parallelism in the historical reality of Romanian Communist apparatchiks.

This recent historical perspective is enhanced by the analysis of what can be called the "Dracula text," particularly the private episodes titled *Dreams of Blood and Iron*. Consequently, in the third section of this study, I will provide a more thorough historical and personal evaluation of vampirism and its impact on both the afflicted individuals and the broader population.

### 3. Dracula as the wounded/ wounding narrator

[...] the natural length of human life is put down at one hundred years [...] only people who exceed the age of ninety who attain euthanasia [...] simply cease to live rather than die. To come to one's end before the age of ninety, means to die of disease, in other words, prematurely.' (Schopenhauer, qtd in Bauman 1992: 19)

Schopenhauer's insights on life, old age, and death are also valid in the context of fictional vampires, although, since they are cursed to live for centuries, their lifespan exceeds the "natural length of human life"; but they can also decide to "simply cease to live rather than die". The narrative voice of the vampiric self

in Simmons' novel thus depicts what Karaman (2023: 1159) described as "one of the most intriguing objects of horror", "the uncanniness of his situation trapped in between life and death, as a monstrosity in existence", which underscores "the very impossibility of dying or annihilation". The episodes titled *Dreams of Blood and Iron* explore the inner world of the dying Dracula, as he is determined to cease being a villain (a Shakespearean, *Richard III* reversal) and ultimately cease altogether. Here, I am suggesting the positioning of the reader as a clinician, adept in what Charon (2006: 4) calls "*narrative medicine*", that is "medicine practiced with these narrative skills of recognizing, absorbing, interpreting, and being moved by the stories of illness". These episodes frame an illness narrative, wherein Dracula assumes the role of the (lifelong) patient. Paradoxically, his dreamt memories foster odd moments of empathetic connection that mark the collapse of the grand narrative surrounding the ruthless blood seeker archetype. Instead, the quintessential vampire emerges as an embodiment of *Everyman*, intimately intertwined with humanity's fate, destined to confront, and endure its inevitable demise. The construction of his illness narrative as a life narrative reinforces Dracula's role as a witness to both his tumultuous past and his status as a terminally ill patient. Drawing from May's (1991: 131) assertion, albeit within a different context, it prompts an ethical examination of how he rises to the challenges presented by his circumstances, markedly in terms of assuming responsibility for his past actions.

Illness narratives can be categorized as *chaos* (Frank 1995: 97), *restitution* (idem: 75), and *quest* (idem: 115). The first depicts suffering as chaotic, confusing, and lacking resolution, the second aims to re-establish a sense of normalcy and equilibrium post-illness or trauma, and the third marks a journey of self-discovery, and a search for meaning in the face of adversity. Dracula's narrative comprises them all, although they frequently overlap. Nevertheless, the chaos narrative appears to be markedly absent, since his condition is revealed early in his life and internalized as a symbol of power over others, rather than a lack. He recalls his first 'consecration', the Ceremony of the Chalice, at the age of four, when surrounded by his father and other members of the family he tastes blood for the first time, after witnessing his first executions ordered by his father. From that moment on, he becomes entangled in a regime of sovereign power centred on 'sanguinity,' where blood embodies both vitality and familial ties, while also serving as a harbinger of grotesque acts committed to uphold political authority and familial lineage. Historically, as Bynum (2007: 187) notes:

Sanguis and cruor, blood was ambiguous because profoundly bipolar. Each term had both positive and negative connotations in the fifteenth century: the shedding of cruor could be heroic, healthbringing, criminal or polluting: sanguis could be congested and unhealthy, or the very stuff of life itself...blood – all blood – signified life and death.

In the novel, Dracula makes his narrative entrance on the very first page, disguised as the aging philanthropist Vernon Deacon Trent. Symbolically, when he reaches Sighişoara, the place of his birth, he reveals his identity to Radu Fortuna (also a vampire), as he confines himself in a room, prepared to face his death, among other aging members of his "Family of the Night" (Simmons 1992: 35). As subject,

as well as maker of history, in this contemplation of the “future”, Dracula envisions a slow death, marked by the traumatic dreams of his memories. This decision to refrain from consuming human blood parallels the choice made by cancer patients, who, having endured chemotherapy to delay the inevitable, ultimately opt to discontinue treatment, and enter a state of pseudo-‘living’ characterized by relinquished control and reduced mobility.

But by then, I will no longer be the aged but vital Vernor Deacon Trent; I will be only a mummified caricature of the man with the strange face in the portrait above my bed. I lay back deeper into the pillows, my yellowed fingers frail above the bedclothes. I do not open my eyes as—one by one—the eldest Family members in the room file by to kiss my ring a final time and then to stand, whispering and murmuring like peasants at a funeral, in the hall outside (ibid.).

Dracula’s narrative voice in the episodes titled *Dreams of Blood and Iron* has a double function. Initially, it impartially chronicles events within their contemporary environment, characterized by widespread bloodshed and retaliatory acts against adversaries and perceived threats. Nevertheless, more importantly, his illness narrative encapsulates significant personal traumas from his extensive existence, such as his father’s surrender of him and his brother Radu to Sultan Murad II, as a gesture of submission to Ottoman power, the harrowing memories of his father’s execution, and his brother’s burial alive by a rival contender for the throne. Thus, gradually, as it delves farther into its memories, this voice evolves towards reaching an “ethic of recollection”, when the sharing of memories of past actions means “taking responsibility for what was done” (Frank 1995: 132).

Despite the harrowing nature of his recollections, they bear witness to the ‘rationale’ behind reciprocal destruction, where armies are driven to unleash unimaginable brutality upon their adversaries. The traumatic memories are shaped by a certain Gothic aesthetic of horror, arguably pairing fiction with Francisco de Goya’s series of eighty-two engravings known as the *Disasters of War* (1810), which frequently depict scenes of individual bodies undergoing horrible mutilations. Similarly, Dracula initiates an exploration of the darker recesses of his psyche as he recalls the litany of horrors he has inflicted upon tens of thousands – including impalement, disembowelment, and agonizing torture – of Turks, Saxons, and his own subjects. One notably gruesome episode entails the macabre strategy of outfitting dying lepers in Turkish garb before dispatching them to the Sultan’s encampments to mingle with his troops, and coercing individuals afflicted with syphilis and the Black Death into joining the Turkish ranks, incentivized with generous rewards for disseminating these deadly diseases (Simmons 1992: 278). There is hardly any sensationalism in this strategy; as Stephanou (2014: 54) claims, allegedly Zygmunt Korybutowicz’s forces, during the 1422 siege of Carolstein Castle in Bohemia, utilized biological warfare tactics, catapulting decaying corpses and manure onto defenders, and thus potentially causing a fever outbreak.

Other chilling scenes of unimaginable tortures depicted by Dracula evoke parallels with Artaud’s artistic expressions, as commented on by Kristeva (1980: 25), who claims that such vivid and visceral descriptions not only provoke intense emotional

reactions, but also serve as manifestations of underlying psychophysiological tensions within the individual psyche; they originate in the realization that the ego's intrinsic past and prospective future are intricately intertwined within the unsettling depths of corporeal existence. Dracula's amalgamation with the historical figure of Vlad Țepeș, still revered as a heroic leader by many Romanians, yet considered a monster by the Saxons, Turks, and Wallachians of old, profoundly influences his perspective on contemporary conflicts. The present-day events interpreted through the lens of his historical legacy appear to him as mere parodies of his own past actions, especially when contemplating their environmental repercussions. Concurrently, he also engages in ethical reflection, grappling with the moral dimensions of his past deeds and their implications for his sense of responsibility in perpetuating violence:

the roads [were] swollen with weeping refugees from our own cities and villages, oxen carts and plow horses and entire clans on foot, carrying their meager belongings, while behind us the flames lighted the horizon while the skies darkened with the smoke of our self-immolation. I lay here this winter just past and eavesdropped on the Family housekeepers talking on the stairs and landing—my hearing is still that good when I wish it to be—and they whisper to each other about Saddam Hussein's war with the Americans and about the oil fires he lit in his wrath blackening the desert skies. They mutter about the fighting in Yugoslavia to the west and shake their kerchiefed heads about how terrible modern war is. Saddam Hussein is a child compared to Hitler and Hitler was an infant compared to me. I once followed Hitler's retreating army into his heartland and was amazed at the artifacts and infrastructure he left intact. Saddam set fire to the desert; in my day, I took some of the lushest land in Europe and turned it into a desert. (Simmons 1992: 277)

Dracula's dreaming of his horror filled memories conveys a message resonant with Canetti's (1978: 249) perspective on humanity as survivors: "the most elementary and obvious form of success is to remain alive," despite the immense bloodshed it may entail. Murder looms at the other spectrum of survival: "He wants to kill so that he can survive others; he wants to stay alive so as not to have others surviving him" (idem: 247). Whether facing a single enemy, a pack, or a whole crowd, survival is paramount, with higher-ranking individuals, particularly generals, perceiving survival as their exclusive entitlement, equating victory with their own survival, whereas battles result in a mixture of fallen comrades and enemies, rendering the battlefield a "neutral" ground akin to epidemics. Behind this logic, there lies the survival of the Patriarch, "always imagined alone in his own generation", the initiator of a new race who, "as long as he has grandsons and great-grandsons alive it does not matter if some of his sons have died before him" (idem: 249).

Furthermore, Canetti's insights on death, survival, disease, and epidemics resonate with Dracula's life-long strategy of not only survival but preservation of power. Although long confined to a state of perpetual decline, given his enduring resilience honed over centuries, and his body's sustained attempts to repair itself, he remains sceptical of his impending demise, despite abstinence from the Sacrament; his musings also reflect on the perennial underestimation he has faced from his adversaries, a recurring theme in his long history (Simmons 1992: 249). In this disclosure of his declining powers thinly veiling the underlying threat of violence

against enemies and incompetent followers, Dracula's is, to use Frank's (1995: 46) words (emphasis in the original text), "the dominating body [that] defines itself in *force*"; there is a fundamental distinction, though, as "most people do not tell stories about themselves dominating others". Moreover, "the dominating body assumes the *contingency* of disease but never accepts it", as in the case of a real patient who lived with leukaemia for three-and-a half years of which for twenty-seven months he was in remission, and who "insisted he was not afraid of death but of the wait. It was never knowing that had haunted him" (idem: 47).

Dracula's prolonged illness mirrors in fiction the experiences of real patients. There is an overwhelming sense of anxiety pervading his recounted dreamt memories, and moments of awakening, specific of chaos narratives which, in the case of real patients are clinically dismissed since they are perceived as merely "documenting 'depression'" (idem: 110). Growing ever more desperate at his eluding death, Dracula considers refusing "food or water" although he knows that his "body would cannibalize itself over a period of months rather than die willingly", and he is not prepared "to face that torture" although he has "known more pain in my single lifetime than most generations of families have known cumulatively" (idem: 276). Nevertheless, it is specifically this accumulated suffering that has inspired in him what Frank (1995: 132) called, albeit in a different context, an "ethic of solidarity and commitment"; hence, he allowed for his son, Joshua, to be adopted by the haematologist Kate Newman in the US, so that his blood can provide the cure for cancer, AIDS, and many other diseases. One of the most significant moments in the narrative depicts the encounter between Dracula and Kate Newman, who presents him with a cure that he himself had amended, and which signifies the shift from pain, anxiety, and depression to hope for a healthy continuation of life, divorced from acts of aggression (albeit still vampiric). Read through Frank's (1995: 110) lens, therefore, the previously prevalent chaos in Dracula's diagnosis can be reduced to a "treatable condition", which restores the "restitution narrative", with the "clinical staff [...] once again in comfortable control" and the reality "classified as either amenable or resistant to treatment", no longer representative of "an existential treat".

Dracula's illness narrative also displays the characteristics of an "ethic of inspiration" (Frank 1995: 133); stemmed from woundedness, not concealing the agony of history carved on the body and mind, it can inspire others – like Lucian, his non-vampiric son, to whom he has been a secret protector and "mentor" (Simmons 1992: 333) - to carry on his ultimate plan of ridding the world of all the other vampires. This grand gesture of final, fully assumed responsibility for the incalculable damage caused by his vampiric destiny paradoxically isolates him from his own. It also signifies the challenge posed by quest stories, usually represented via the metaphor of the Phoenix bird; such narratives can "present the turning process as too complete, and they can implicitly deprecate those who fail to rise out from their own ashes" (Frank 1995: 135). In Simmons' novel, the final encounter place of all the vampires, the citadel of Poenari will be blown up, while a triumphant and rejuvenated Dracula, having destroyed his own extended greedy family, will fly away in a helicopter – a symbolic overturn of Ceaușescu's failed attempt. As a result: "In the meantime, I have given up thoughts of dying soon. Such thoughts were the products of illness,

age, and bad dreams. I no longer have the bad dreams. Perhaps I will live forever.” (Simmons 1992: 379). The ultimate proof of his embracing his new, ethical destiny, in Levinas’ (1988: 159) words “the possibility of a half-opening to the other” is his decision not to retrieve his son Joshua from his adoptive mother and instead “let the woman doctor raise him and learn from him”, the price to pay for his having been “a source of terror” to his “people and employees”, when he would actually “have welcomed being a savior” (Simmons 1992: 379).

#### 4. Conclusion

Simmons’ *Children of the Night* transcends genre limitations, while adeptly employing Gothic tropes, to explore the “political sickness” of post-Ceaușescu Romania. Vampirism serves as a potent metaphor for the nation’s ailments, concurrently reinforcing and subverting the traditional association of Romania with the land of Dracula. By framing the episodes titled *Dreams of Blood and Iron* as an illness narrative and positing Dracula as a “wounded storyteller” who embodies disease and mortality, I suggested that the phases of chaos, restitution, and the quest for meaning can be read as features of a nation grappling with post-totalitarian recovery. Conversely, I examined the blurring of the lines between political manipulation and monstrous predation to question the efficacy of calculated power games, revealing their true nature as acts of overt violence and aggression.

On a more personal note, writing from the perspective of a Romanian who has a deep-seated interest in both Gothic literature and political dynamics, I witnessed firsthand many of the violent episodes depicted by Simmons. The “dreams of blood and iron” (subtracting the vampiric undertones) were dreamt by many in my generation, who, as youths, sought to navigate the labyrinth of political manipulations and aggression that paradoxically intensified in the post-Ceaușescu era. Confused, hopeful, and angry, we were, I can confidently claim, frequently ‘haunted’ by Eminescu, the Romanian national poet’s invocation (Eminescu 2017: 366): *Cum nu vii tu, Țepeș doamne...* (“Why don’t you come, Lord Țepeș...”, *my trans.*), while struggling to exorcise the national and personal darkness within us and put the phantoms of the human body politic to a well-deserved rest.

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## POSTHUMAN PREDILECTIONS AND PROTEAN VISIONS IN STEPHEN KING'S *BILLY SUMMERS* AND *LATER*

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyzes Stephen King's Later (2021a) and Billy Summers (2021b) in the context of posthumanism and protean identity to reveal the incorporation of controversies about human nature, ethical norms, and AI in modern literature. Employing textual analysis, it scrutinizes the protagonists' moral complexities and evolving identities, highlighting their posthuman tendencies. In Billy Summers, the protagonist's shifting identity, molded by environmental demands and personal ethics, reflects the adaptability found in AI discourses. Later explores Jamie Conklin's protean abilities, blurring the boundaries between life, death, and the supernatural, offering new perspectives on identity and ethics. This research elucidates the evolving nature of humanity in the context of technological and existential challenges.*

**Keywords:** *adaptive identities, AI centrism, existential framework, posthumanism, protean identity*

### 1. Introduction

Stephen King is an internationally acclaimed author, famous for his horror and suspense novels, and he still delves deeper into the themes in modern works such as *Later* (2021a) and *Billy Summers* (2021b). Despite the considerable differences in the plots of these novels, they both bear possession of serious philosophical concerns of the present epoch with regard to posthumanism and protean self. In *Later*, the main character Jamie Conklin is a young boy who can see the dead and speak with them and is drawn into the world of crime and spirits, and personal ethical questions. Reflecting on his unique power, Jamie observes, "Dead doesn't mean gone. That's the trouble with the dead, they're like phones that never stop ringing; you want to ignore them, but you can't" (King 2021a: 12). In this ability, the life and death questions and concerns become the focus in which Jamie feels exposed to the experience. Similarly, *Billy Summers* tells the experiences of a soon-to-be retired contract killer facing moral dilemmas regarding his profession's changes, as he completes his last job. Billy perceives himself as a "good bad man", struggles with the moral implications of his past and future actions (King 2021b: 45). Both novels center around posthumanism, and respond to the aspects that question human nature by framing human experiences in ecological and technological frameworks. As Mark

Browning's (2009: 74) analysis further illuminates, King's work often "subverts the conventional boundaries of humanity, forcing readers to reconsider the limitations and possibilities of the human condition".

Our study seeks to fill a gap in existing scholarship by exploring the intersection of posthumanism and protean identity in *Later* and *Billy Summers*. While much of the academic discourse on King's work has traditionally centered on themes of horror and American cultural anxieties, there has been relatively little exploration of how these themes intersect with contemporary discussions on human nature and ethics within a posthuman framework. Through a close textual analysis, this study investigates the language, themes, and character development in both the novels, focusing on how the protagonists navigate ethical dilemmas and redefine the human experience. In *Later*, the analysis centers on Jamie Conklin's unique abilities and how they influence his identity, creating a tension between the human and the supernatural. Billy Summers is different again: whereas the protagonist bootlegger Stillman is an embodiment of evil and virtue depending on the context. In this way, using a comparative analysis, this research paper aims to reveal the common narrative and theme in the two novels as to contribute to the discussion on posthumanism and new dynamics of identity in postmodern fiction. Finally, this paper presents new avenues of reading for further understanding the notion of the human being as depicted by King through his characters in the twenty-first century.

### 1.1. Overview of *Later* and *Billy Summers*

In *Later*, Jamie Conklin emerges as a young character whose supernatural power enables him to observe and communicate with dead entities. His mother first protects him from understanding the consequences of his supernatural gift, before outside entities, including law officials and criminal interests, discover his powers. Through his dead encounters, Jamie faces the total breakdown of his reality base, which leads him to travel within a deathless reality. Through the plot development, Jamie finds himself in perilous situations which pressure him to face the burden of his power. The novel shows Jamie's path through moral ambiguity, because he faces choices that make it difficult for him to distinguish self-determination from societal obligations.

The novel *Billy Summers* showcases the chronicles of a contract killing professional, who plans his future after retiring. Billy operates distinct from traditional assassins, because he develops multiple roles to keep himself unidentifiable. The reveal of betrayal in his last job forces him to reevaluate everything about his career as an assassin. Through Billy's narrative, King examines the relationship between deception techniques and personal development and ethical conduct in dangerous situations. Billy's mastery of self-transformation has led to persona shifts, which create ethical and psychological consequences for his identity, while questioning his authentic nature.

Although their main themes differ in supernatural elements and criminal schemes, the novels unite through their analysis of human flexibility under extreme

situations. King uses Jamie and Billy to create characters whose identities change under duress, therefore questioning the standard beliefs about the personal sense of self, as well as human choice and the extent of personal evolution.

## 1.2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Exploring the situations of the characters in *Later* and *Billy Summers* requires an understanding of posthumanism and protean identity theories. Analyzing these novels requires posthumanist analysis because it challenges traditional humanist perspectives. Cary Wolfe (2010: 47) asserts that “Posthumanism forces us to rethink what we mean by ‘human’ and to consider the broader ecological and technological contexts in which we exist”. The idea directly explains how to understand the character Jamie Conklin from *Later*. Jamie exists outside usual states because his ability to talk to dead people places him between life and death. King captures this tension in the line: “We all exist in the space between the real and the unreal, a place where the boundaries of what is possible and impossible are constantly being tested” (King 2021a: 14). Throughout the novel this character demonstrates his ability to traverse human and posthuman domains, while advancing the narrative’s exploration of posthuman theory. The central character in *Billy Summers* portrays a person with protean identity through his flexible and changeable nature as a hitman, whose moral code keeps shifting. Billy himself acknowledges this transformation, stating, “I am who I need to be, not who I was. My past is a tool, not a burden” (King 2021b: 78). The protean self describes this personality trait because an individual adapts their identity in response to different situations. In Rosi Braidotti’s (2018: 92) perspective that “the posthuman condition urges us to acknowledge the fluid and transformative nature of our subjectivities”, the author solidifies this thought by discussing both ethical and existential aspects that arise during the process of self-reinvention. A. J. Palko further expands on this idea, noting that

“King’s protagonists often find themselves in existential crises that force them to confront the fluidity of their identities and the impermanence of their moral compasses. These crises are not merely personal but are reflective of larger societal shifts, where traditional notions of good and evil, right and wrong, are no longer sufficient to navigate the complexities of modern life.” (Palko 2009: 89)

King’s portrayal of Billy shows that identity exists as an ongoing process of transformation. The main characters in the analysed novels struggle between humanist principles and emerging technology and supernatural elements, which are posthuman experiences that challenge their self-identity and moral values during a time of dramatic change. Andrews (2007) explores changes in culture which demand constant adjustments to prove the ever-changing nature of the self. In addition to posthumanism and identity fluidity, the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and technological intervention must be considered in these narratives. Posthumanist discussions often examine the tension between human autonomy and technological determinism, raising essential questions about moral responsibility. In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle (2011) explores the effects of AI on human relationships

and self-conception. She showcases the moral challenges technology creates, as it continues to dominate day-to-day activities. Through Billy Summers, the reader sees how Billy utilizes intelligence gathering, together with digital surveillance and deception techniques, which demonstrate the effective precision of AI-driven systems. Through third person limited narration, King captures Billy's meticulous approach: King (2021b: 52) describes his meticulous planning: "Weeks, sometimes months, of research went into a job". This level of calculated precision parallels the notion of continuous self-optimization in an age of algorithmic intelligence. As Zygmunt Bauman (2000: 12) argues in *Liquid Modernity*, contemporary identity is marked by "constant self-renewal, self-reinvention, and self-transformation", a principle that underscores both Billy's adaptability and Jamie's evolving self-awareness.

Scholarly investigations of posthumanism and protean identity together with AI in literature show minimal interest in studying King's later works, while devoting more attention to his earlier works, centring around horror fiction. Few critics have studied how King handles the evolution of identity through human-machine integration and conceptual changes in his *Later* and *Billy Summers* novels. This research fills this gap by investigating how these novels improve discourse about identity together with ethical matters as well as technological effects in posthuman realms.

### 1.3. The structure of the paper

Our paper adopts a structured analysis to study *Later* and *Billy Summers*; it makes use of posthumanist theory alongside protean identity examination and technological-cum-ethical evaluation. The discussion begins by exploring Jamie Conklin and Billy Summers as posthuman figures, emphasizing how their experiences challenge conventional understandings of selfhood. The natural boundaries Jamie defies with his abilities push Billy into an endless cycle of adapting his identities alongside dealing with morally ambiguous situations. The subsequent analysis discusses the ethical challenges pertaining to existential issues that emerge from these posthuman states, through Jamie's responsibility battle with his supernatural ability and Billy's ethical considerations in his line of work. The following analysis examines Billy's development process, as Jamie experiences a suspended state of life and death. External forces shape their identities, until they are confronted with identity changes because of self-evolution. The paper examines artificial intelligence by connecting Billy's operational tactics with modern AI-based decision systems during his planning process and deception operations. It analyses how surveillance and data-based control procedures erode human freedom and explores his works against the recent debates on technology and self-organization. King presents Jamie and Billy in the concluding segment as characters whose identity shapes through both supernatural forces and technological elements. Our research establishes the relevance of *Later* and *Billy Summers* to current discussions about morality, along with adaptability and human transformation, through a posthumanist lens. Further the research establishes how posthumanism is akin to protean identity and AI ethics, before presenting an expansive understanding of selfhood change in King's works.

## 2. Posthumanism and protean identity

*Later* and *Billy Summers* explore the intersection of posthumanism and protean identity through their protagonists, whose extraordinary abilities and shifting moral perspectives challenge traditional understandings of selfhood. Breaking the posthuman elements with the help of technology, parapsychology, and improved human abilities the paper deconstructs the posthumanism of conventional human nature. The supernatural power in *Later* turns the normal course upside down, and poses the dilemmas of death and post- mortality, consent, and rights to a soul's peace to Jamie thus: "I didn't want to use my ability to help her do something bad. Still, did I have an option? Could I just ignore what I saw, knowing it could stop something terrible? But where does it end? How do I draw the line?" (King 2021a: 143). This dilemma demonstrates how *posthumanist* undermines the standard ethical paradigms, since they entail scenarios where boundaries of ethical normativity are vague.

As Lunceford (2012: 15) observes, "Posthumanism opens up new ways of thinking about identity and ethics by questioning the very boundaries that define humanity. In a posthuman world, the lines between human and non-human, natural and artificial, become increasingly fluid". This aspect is best seen in Jamie's case and having to question his humanness with the existence of such abilities. Similarly, in *Billy Summers*, the protagonist is rooted in a posthuman milieu conceptualized with the help of skills and morality. Billy is experienced in his profession, which combined with his self-observational ability, alienates him from everyday human life. His last assignment, which he takes with the purpose of it being his last one acts as the trigger for his awakening on the existential and moral plane. Throughout the novel, Billy questions the value of life and the justifications for taking it, pondering: "Does killing people have to be my job just because I'm good at it? Is that all there is to me? I want to believe I can be more than the sum of my worst deeds. But what if that's all I am?" (King 2021b: 215) This introspection aligns with posthumanist concepts, which challenge the boundaries of human morality and emphasize the potential for transcendence through personal growth. Rodríguez (2014: 629) argues that "In navigating traumatic experiences and moral ambiguities, characters are forced to confront their fractured identities, often leading to a reevaluation of their ethical frameworks".

King (2021b: 38) portrays Billy as a man capable of assuming various personas, each tailored to the demands of his profession: "He could wear a hundred faces, each one more convincing than the last. But behind every mask was the same man, wrestling with the same questions. Could he ever be more than what he pretended to be? Was there any part of him that was real?" This flexibility is not without its consequences, resulting in an existential kind of frustration: "Part of him, a big and important part, longed for a life where he wasn't constantly looking over his shoulder, waiting for the next job, the next kill. He wanted something real, something that wouldn't slip away when the mask came off" (idem: 112). This reflection shows the difficulty of defining a protagonist and his/her subjectivity as the result of protean living, especially when it comes to finding consistency in such a fluid context

concerning an identity. Lunceford (2012: 20) observes that “The posthuman condition is characterized by a constant tension between fluidity and stability, as individuals navigate a world where identity is increasingly fragmented and contingent”. Billy is also very consistent in his character fluctuations as how he goes about accomplishing tasks. Thus, one can consider his detailed research of targets as a way to maintain control in a highly unethical occupation. Billy’s progression towards adopting a more ethical way of thinking is discernibly observable, especially when it comes to his behaviour concerning “Buffalo Bill” in Harris’s *The Silence of the Lambs*.

### 3. Posthuman context and moral implications

The ethical dilemmas faced by the characters possessing powers or traits beyond typical human standards situate these narratives in the posthuman realms, where distinctions between the human and the non-human, natural and artificial, become increasingly blurred. For similar reasons, Jamie Conklin finds himself in a complicated and rather eerie middle-ground between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. Jamie reflects:

“He was not dead yet, but he was not exactly alive either. Someone caught him in the middle. He existed in that narrow space between life and death, where the rules of the living didn’t quite apply, and the whispers of the dead were the loudest sounds. It was as if he was a shadow, neither here nor there, moving in a world that no one else could see or touch.” (King 2021a: 14)

This quote reiterates the fact Jamie finds himself in a middle ground between the living and the dead, whereas the book presents readers with new forms of dying that do not fit in with the human experiences. This aligns with Katherine Hayles’s (1999: 2) concept of the “posthuman,” where “the distinction between human and machine is no longer self-evident”. Jamie relives the shades’ world and is thus placed in a state where boundaries of the human world are challenged. The ethical aspect of employing power is very significant when it comes to Jamie’s case. This gift makes him face unresolved issues of the dead, thereby creating a moral dilemma that is continuous. In a conversation with his mother, Jamie reveals: “They never left. Not really. In my mind, the dead piled up like a graveyard in chaos” (King 2021a: 11). This illustrates that the decision for a way of living with the undead is put on Jamie’s shoulders; he has to be the one to determine it.

Jamie’s spiritual and emotional growth is most evident through how he sees life and death. To some extent, he becomes compassionate to death in that he starts identifying the ghosts as people with their own stories and unresolved issues. King captures this shift with: “He was not just seeing dead people anymore” (idem: 128). This change is important when it comes to the growth of Jamie’s moral compass as he deals with the dead and comes to embrace more complexities in life.

The versatility and systematic approach to one’s work as a hitman is the best illustration of how AI affects human individuality. Billy, patterned after the nature of his work, was able to become somebody else each time he needed, which is like learning and updating like the new artificial intelligence systems of the world

today. King (2021b: 52) portrays Billy's preparation for assignments with: "Weeks, sometimes months, of research went into a job". His logical and strategic approach to each task mirrors that of a chess player, meticulously analyzing every move and adjusting his tactics to meet specific objectives-much like the programmed logic and adaptability of AI systems. Billy's ability to reinvent himself for each job is a form of self-preservation in a morally ambiguous profession. In this respect, King's portrayal of semiotic uncertainties between man and the machine, life and death in both novels contributes to the current literary discourses on posthumanism and AI centrism. Thus, King makes the readers think about the evolving nature of life in the twenty-first century.

#### **4. The chameleon assassin and the ethical quandaries of the supernatural**

Billy represents a complex character who embodies various persona, changing them in accordance with the requirements of his activity as a hired killer. King (2021b: 42) depicts Billy as a fluid character in the novel through the use of the following lines: "He was a cipher, a ghost who could inhabit any life for a brief, deadly performance". Such representation draws attention to Billy's self-uncertainty; however, he is good at playing different parts. His skills are not limited to his career, but they also reflect his need for normalcy inside of him. This internal conflict is poignantly expressed when he reflects that "He ached for a life where the world was not in a constant state of hypervigilance, a life where looking over his shoulder was not a reflex" (idem: 87). This craving for a normal life evidently proves that he is a man, who is even, to some extent, torn between his corporate self and the simpleton who wants a life without upsetting encounters. Initially, Billy is reluctant to interact with the target, because the latter is too young to show the ethical values of the hero. This internal struggle exemplifies the muddiness of the ethical dilemma that Billy possesses and the constant battle between his personal code of ethics and situations expected from him for different tasks.

Being an intercessor, Jamie Conklin becomes a figure that operates between life and death. King (2021a: 37) vividly describes Jamie's experiences with the supernatural, emphasizing the disruption of natural order: "The silence of the house was shattered by a chorus of voices, a spectral murmur that sent chills down his spine. The dead weren't supposed to talk, were they?". Through the above words, the author emphasizes the spooky aspect of the story as far as the conversations between Jamie and the dead are concerned, since their voices disrupt the contemporary perception of life and death. The supernatural powers that endow Jamie compel him to solve the most unexceptional ethical questions. His power to see and communicate with the dead creates a burden of responsibility, encapsulated in his reflection: "There are times when I simply wish I could block it all out... However, what about the rest of the population? Individuals who require my assistance?" (King 2021a: 42). The internal struggle that systematically embodies Jamie is the conflict between his selfishness and a desire to help the dead cross over. His caring is just another source of ethical dilemma about the legitimacy of his role and relevance of having such capacities. Moreover, Jamie's encounters with the dead provoke existential angst about his own

place in the world. King's (2021a: 8) description of the spectral presence of the dead captures the unsettling nature of Jamie's interactions: "The dead shuffled around him like a ghostly parade, their faces etched with an otherworldly hunger. Were they lost, or waiting for something?" The symbolic vagueness of the dead carries certain existential motifs, on which the nature of the afterlife, the reality of its characters are questioned as well as Jamie's role as a witness of the presence of the specters. This sense of death reflects the change Jamie's powers brought about regarding his ideas of the world, life, and self.

## 5. The technological and ethical dimensions

King explores technology, ethics, and self in order to provide human stories of choice in contrast with mere machinery. Billy's use of advanced surveillance tools and the black web show how technology is slowly and gradually seeping into the lives of people. This dependency is vividly illustrated when King (2021b: 48) describes Billy's meticulous planning: "He had devoted the previous two weeks to meticulously examining the architecture of the apartment building...acquiring blueprints from the unauthorized corners of the internet via a cryptic international network". This proves the traits of the modern AI systems, which are adaptive and improving with time, just like human beings. As Guga (2015: 45) notes, "The reinvention of the human in the Information Age necessitates a reconsideration of identity as increasingly intertwined with technology". Billy's decision-making process and predictable patterns of actions and behaviours are often reminiscent of programmed robots and artificial intelligence throughout the novel, thus posing questions regarding the intersection of human life and AI in the twenty-first century. Conversely, in *Later*, Jamie Conklin struggles with the ethics that can be derived by using his powers, which enable him to communicate with the dead people. In contrast with the technological issues with which Billy struggles, Jamie mostly encounters ethical challenges. His interactions with spirits force him to confront the ethical implications of his powers, especially when tempted to use his abilities for personal gain or altruistic purposes. King (2021a: 92) registers Jamie's internal struggle with the moral dimension of his talents: "There was a moral dilemma associated with accepting payment for this task. It diminished its value in some way, giving it the impression of being a mere spectacle at a carnival". This ethical introspection contrasts sharply with Billy's moral quandaries as a hitman, who must navigate a complex landscape of professional duty and personal beliefs. Billy's reflections on whether to complete his final mission or defy his employers to save innocent lives illustrate the complexity of his moral identity emphatically: "I'm not saying it's right... but it's what I do. It's what I've always done" (King 2021b: 112).

King's creation of Billy as a central character with mechanical movements, yet driven by an internal struggle with his conscience, allows it for a contrast between the mechanical dependency and the humane compass. Even though Billy's behaviour can be described as being driven by an almost mechanical-like efficiency, there exists an undeniable and complex humanity in his dilemmas. Another facet

of his personality is revealed in his interactions with Alice, a young woman that he helps; this demonstrates his ability to care, as well as the ability to protect. These are the aspects that AI systems have not been able to mimic. As Sollora-Romero et al. (2020: 159) argue, “The menacing digitalization of subjectivity complicates our understanding of identity, as characters navigate the tension between their human emotions and machine-like roles”. This dynamic nature indicates the ever-active human traits like compassion, remorse, and ethical self-consciousness, which cannot be simulated by machines. Interestingly, King’s novels explore how technology and the supernatural abilities influence human identity, morality, and agency. Billy’s technological adeptness and Jamie’s ethical dilemmas reflect broader themes of posthumanism, where the boundaries between human and machine, or human and supernatural, are increasingly blurred. Through these characters, King explores the idea of what it is to be a person in the modern, technologically focused world, to be human when technology and morality intermingle in ways that are rather disquieting. As Azcárate (2017: 23) suggests, “The fusion of ghosts and machines in modern narratives complicates our understanding of humanity, forcing a reevaluation of the self in relation to technology”. The blurring of the spectral and the mechanical in King’s works thus speaks to the shifting definition of humanity in the contemporary milieu.

## 6. Redefining human experience: protean abilities in *Later* and *Billy Summers*

Jamie Conklin is in the middle ground between the living and the dead, which makes the two states more relative than comparable. King (2021a: 11) vividly captures Jamie’s experience with haunting imagery: “The dead built up in my head like a disorganized cemetery”. This image shows that the dead people have not left Jamie’s mind; rather they force him to come face-to-face with the spirits. Unlike the other mediators, or even mediums, Jamie assimilates the preoccupation of the dead — altering his perception of human life. This resonates with N. Katherine Hayles’ (1999) posthumanism where the posthuman is not a sign of the complete annihilation of human beings, but their evolution. Many of these conflicts involve interactions with the dead, something which takes them beyond the human realm mentally and physically, causing Jamie to question his own identity and sanity. The “deadscape” in *Later* - a “shifting landscape” filled with “the echoes of a million lives” (King 2021a: 152) - symbolizes the ongoing presence of the deceased, suggesting that death is more of a transition than a terminal end.

On the other hand, *Billy Summers* presents another aspect of posthuman subjectivity in the one-man-technology tool that is Billy Summers. As a hitman, Billy is a quintessential shapeshifter, who creates and assumes several personalities, pertinent to a given task at hand. His usage of technology in the form of surveillance, shielded communication, and thorough research over the internet portrays Hayden’s version of posthumanism, in which human beings become hybrids of both biological and technological elements. But this flexibility does take its toll, and what one sees in Billy is not only the cracks in his professionalism, but also the conflict in his ethical reasoning. Meese et al. (2015) argue that digital media affordances contribute to the

evolution of identity, blurring the lines between life and death, which is mirrored in Billy's complex relationship with technology. The characters in the novels reflect broader themes of posthumanism and the complexities of identity in a technologically advanced world. King's portrayal invites reflection on the philosophical implications of these evolving identities, particularly in the context of AI and digital media's influence on human experience (Palko 2009).

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, Stephen King's novels *Later* and *Billy Summers* are analyzed with the help of posthumanism, protean identity, and an AI-focused approach, which supports the conclusion that the author looks at the development of the human being in a world enriched with technology. In *Later*, Jamie Conklin, an apparently superhuman young man who has an ability to speak to the dead, turns into a posthuman character, who exists beyond the human experience of existence and non-existence. His unique ability shows that there are no clear lines between the phases of human life and the afterlife, and that there is always a place in existence for a human being. Similarly, Billy Summers' dependence on technological means and his use of various personas in *Billy Summers* explore the sphere of human and AI interactions. His exactness and his ability to improvise demonstrate that a future society in which technology becomes intertwined with human life is possible, thus posing the question of what it means to be the best self with the coexistence of AI. Both characters embody the posthuman potential for transformation, as theorized by scholars like N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Donna Haraway (1991). Jamie's experiences with the dead and Billy's use of technology challenge the stability of human identity, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of selfhood in a posthuman era. At the same time, the narratives of both novels also focus on the subjective effects of such transformations and seem to imply that superhuman capabilities are not without their consequences. King's works therefore serve as a rich commentary on the moral questions and metaphysical questions that arise from the coming together of people, technology, and the supernatural. Through constructing intricate and paradoxical narratives and plot lines about Jamie and Billy, King enters the protracted conversation about the future of humanity's identity; and challenges us to think about how humanity would exist in the context of the current technological progression.

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**WRITING THE COVID PANDEMIC:  
THE POLITICS OF STORYTELLING IN *FOURTEEN DAYS*  
(EDITED BY MARGARET ATWOOD  
AND DOUGLAS PRESTON)**

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***Abstract:** The paper aims to reveal the complex strategies of storytelling (a politics that is, at the same time, a biopolitics) in *Fourteen Days. A Collaborative Novel*, edited by Margaret Atwood and Douglas Preston. While Hannah Arendt connects speech and deed to storytelling in order to preserve their impact and coherence, Gayatri Spivak warns that not all voices that tell stories are heard in the public sphere, therefore their role must be acknowledged and renegotiated. I shall integrate the volume into the vaster corpus of pandemic literature and I shall identify its distinctive features as a humanist endeavor, in contrast with the posthumanist critical environment often dominant in today's debate concerning the historical significance and impact of the Covid pandemic. The aim of this approach is to challenge the dominant perspective of posthumanism and its evident symmetries with the dynamics of the pandemic. The stories about this crisis could be seen as instruments meant to reshape the dominance of posthumanism in the intellectual climate of the pandemic.*

***Keywords:** contagion, pandemic literature, biopolitics, Covid, storytelling, posthumanism*

**1. Introduction: the literature of the great pandemic of two thousand and twenty**

Humanities scholarship has mobilized significant resources to investigate the complex meaning and impact of the 2020-2023 coronavirus pandemic. Comprehensive theoretical approaches (Ağın, Horzum: 2023; Manoj, Saeed, Patton (2024) attempted to understand the varied social and cultural phenomena manifested during the pandemic by connecting its historicity to a solid corpus of philosophical theories already circulating, from authors such as Michel Foucault (1975), Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari (2005) or Giorgio Agamben (2020). In its turn, literature echoed the sense of crisis and profound change triggered by the pandemic on a vast scale, projecting the individual and collective effects of the global health emergency against the background of unprecedented social transformations. However, a new dimension emerged: one of cultural clarity and cohesion, and the relatively new genre of pandemic literature reflects it consistently.

Numerous recent titles can be easily included into this emerging genre - *The Sentence* by Louise Erdrich (2021), *Companion Piece* by Ali Smith (2022), *Joan is Okay* by Weike Wang (2022), *Delphi* by Claire Pollard (2022), *Violeta* by Isabel Allende (2022), *The Fell* by Sarah Moss (2021), *Emergency* by Daisy Hildyard (2022), *The Pandemic and Me* by Debbie Quinn (2024). They are part of a vaster framework that includes classical works such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Albert Camus' *The Plague*, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Gabriel García Márquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*. Others, such as Lauren Beukes' *Afterland* (2020), also qualify as pandemic literature, although the novel had been several years in the making before the COVID pandemic unfolded. One of the most anticipated titles was the collective novel *Fourteen Days*, edited by Margaret Atwood and Douglas Preston, reuniting thirty-six American and Canadian writers from a wide spectrum of literary styles and genres\*.

I shall explore the politics of storytelling, that is the ways in which storytelling is instrumentalized as a social connector in this pandemic-themed collective novel, while also relying on a theoretical background articulated by contemporary authors, who reframe pandemic-related preexisting concepts already naturalized in the critical vocabulary of poststructuralist theory. They refer to the 2020 pandemic as to an event that had a major impact on all areas of life, from the medical and physiological, to the social, psychological and political. Moreover, this event proved disruptive and destabilizing, with long-term consequences, many of them still visible today. NY Manoj's (2024: 13) arguments for a "Posthuman ontology" emerging from the cultural and political climate imposed by the restrictive codes of the pandemic. This new understanding of the human/posthuman dichotomy should be integrated into a wider, "revolution of our understanding of life and the human" (Manoy et al. 2024: 2).

Literature has constantly been a medium of reflection and resonance for the new global reality since the early months of the pandemic, as the first projects, aimed at exploring the individual and collective experience of the pandemic, started to gain consistency and shape. The specific aim of these projects was, among other potential ones, to create a sense of community between literary imagination and objective experience. Capturing history as it unfolds, reflecting the endless forms in which a major crisis impacts individual lives, rendering the workings of a creative consciousness alerted by disaster, all these elements could articulate the purpose of an immediate literature mirroring the present time. However, for the purposes of this paper, a necessary conceptual anchoring of the analysis requires an itinerary into a terminological field, reuniting biopolitics, posthumanism and the revival of the essential locus of all stories – the humanist dimension. Saima Saeed, for example, in a chapter titled "COVID-19 and the Production of Knowledge: Communication, Control, and the Citizenry" in the volume edited by Manoj, Saeed and Patton (2024: 79), focuses on the representations and discourses about the pandemic in the public sphere, where we can argue that biopolitics and narratives collide. The implementation of power (thorough restrictions and an often contradictory and unreliable public discourse) was managed by institutions having the authority to adapt measures intended to control the multiple layers damage of such a remarkable

crisis. The result was a “misrepresentation of the pandemic” (idem: 80). This calls for an incisive conclusion – the public discursive misrepresentation of the pandemic can be balanced by stories and fiction that aim to identify and reveal concise, objective acts that value the human element under virological attack.

In an explanatory “Note from the Authors Guild Foundation” (that is “the charitable and educational arm of the Authors Guild” (Atwood, Preston 2024: viii), to which the proceeds of this equally charitable book project were redirected), the authors of this collective novel stated their intention to present it as a collaborative enterprise mirroring the embedded values of the Foundation itself – diversity of background, genres and styles, democratizing the literary craft, promoting the social value of writing and literary art. Moreover, this is reflected in the diversity of characters aligned in a seemingly endless parade throughout the novel – a wide cultural, racial and demographic spectrum is involved in creating the fictional melting pot that contains the essentialized melting pot of the building, and that of the city, too. The creative device that makes these worlds visible and accessible to the fictional characters inscribed into the fictional world and to the readers is an ingenious reinterpretation of the classical frame narrative, although its manifest “novelty” (the authors of this introduction insist on defining it as “an epic novellus in the ancient and truest sense of the word”, that is “a story that was not the reworking of a familiar tale, myth or Biblical parable, but something new, fresh, strange, amusing and surprising” (idem: vii)). Early reviewers praised the book’s originality as a work of popular entertainment – “an immensely enjoyable product of an immensely unenjoyable time” (Clark 2024), but also deplored its problematic eclectic nature– “The book is a marvel of organization but unavoidably uneven and funky” (Jacobs 2024). The volume’s connection to Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, although instantly recognizable, is also a problematic benchmark of the transgressive nature of storytelling in pandemic times. It is an act of protest against the norm of social distancing and a negation of the symbolic attenuation of voices behind face masks, and it is also a postulation of freedom - of speech, thought, feeling, affiliation and dislike. The condensed social universe of the Fernsby Arms building is wider and more diverse than Boccaccio’s famed *brigata* - it is a reflection not only of its time, but of its sensibility and quest for political balance. Much like the plague figuratively lying at the core of Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, Covid imposes its paradoxical destructive and rehabilitating authority on the micro-society of the building. On Day One, as she was preparing the stage for the first story, Yessenia Grigorescu, the superintendent, draws the wider frame of the context. The social fabric reverberates the immense strain of the crisis, exposing fractures, inequality and resentment: “Naturally, anyone who could had already left New York. The wealthy and professional classes fled the city like rats from a sinking ship, skittering and squeaking out to the Hamptons, Connecticut, the Berkshires Cape Cod, Maine – anywhere but New Covid City. We were the left-behinds” (Atwood, Preston 2024: 9).

The superintendent takes the role of a metanarrator, whose omniscience is supported textually by the building’s Bible, a descriptive text written by the former superintendent about the Fernsby Arms apartment block and its tenants. This element is pivotal in arguing for the essential narrator/text relationship as fundamental to the

articulation of this fictional world that also functions as a world of fiction, of stories and narratives that have a unifying, defensive role in the difficult context of the first weeks of the pandemic. The volume itself, readers are warned on its front page, was “transcribed from an unclaimed manuscript found in storage at the property clerk division, New York City Police Department, 11 Front Street, Brooklyn, NY 11201. Archived on April 14, 2020, retrieved and published on February 6, 2024” (idem: xii).

Set within fourteen days, between March 31 and April 13, 2020, this “novellus”, tries to embody the story of the first weeks of the pandemic, with their often irrational, exacerbated fear of illness and death, its new routines – pot banging at 7 o’clock in the evening to salute and encourage first-line workers, mask wearing, social distancing. Despite its obvious similarities with classical literary works such as the *Decameron*, *Fourteen Days* aims for originality and authenticity. Although it relies heavily on the mannerisms of popular fiction, the volume elevates the narrative tone by projecting the fast-paced dynamic of stories and characters against the backdrop of collective drama. As each of the storytellers reveal their tale, “the super”, like an omniscient consciousness presiding over the nightly gathering, intervenes to administer a blunt dose of reality by mentioning the day’s grim record – the number of new Covid cases, hospitalizations, intubated patients and deaths: “I looked up the numbers so I could record today’s daily statistics. I don’t know why I find this calming when the numbers themselves are anything but – I guess they delimit the catastrophe in my mind” (Atwood, Preston 2024: 47).

The Covid pandemic has been understood by humanist scholars as a paradox that challenges our common understanding of concepts and matters pertaining to the public/private divide, to rights, obligations and priorities. In their comprehensive *Introduction* to their edited volume of *Critical Reflections on Covid 19, Pandemic, Event and the Immanence of Life*, NY Manoj, Saima Saeed, and Paul Patton (2024: 2) argue that the paradoxical nature of the pandemic became visible on all levels of social and individual life. “On many levels, the pandemic confronted us with irreconcilable demands”, they wrote, referring to the unsurmountable contradictions of the global crisis. The principles of modern governing state the primacy of human life, as outlined by public health policies meant to regulate social interaction in times of contagion and major health risks. Social disruption has significant economic consequences, and this clash of principles posed one of the most significant and apparently unsolvable challenges of the 2020 pandemic. Distancing, masking, and vaccination mandates represent significant issues concerning individual rights, despite their collective implications. It is obvious that the pandemic put a major strain on the limits between individual choice and collective consequences and, ultimately, on the very relationship between the individual and the social environment. The alignment of characters in *Fourteen Days* mirrors these dichotomies clearly. As if isolated in their private bubble, the participants to the 7 o’clock rooftop gatherings are initially shy and reluctant to interact with fellow participants. The space of the roof is an exit to freedom (the fact that it was actually illegal to sit and spend time on the roof amplifies its role as a space of transition to a different reality) and the wish of the tenants to be there attests to their need to escape the bewildering new context of everyday life during a pandemic.

## 2. The quarantine of fiction

The politics of storytelling in this collective narrative project is grounded in the principle of participation and active validation – as each speaker tells their story, the others react, share their impressions, express emotion freed from the restrictive social codes and mannerisms of former times – like Boccaccio’s plague, the pandemic unearthed and unlocked tempestuous feelings and violent emotions. But unlike the fourteenth-century scourge, the Covid pandemic paralyzed the global community instead of projecting it into frenzied celebrations of life and lust. By carefully articulating the connective parts that hold all narratives together, Douglas Preston sought to unify the stage onto which the storytellers perform. Although their stories are unequal in consistency and style, they all reach for a deeper, universal level of emotion, one that could galvanize the small narrative community out of the stillness of fear and lack of perspective brought on by the pandemic. There is also a spatial politics derived from the contextual limitations imposed by public health regulations. By placing the action on a rooftop, the narrators draw a clear boundary between the outside world – where the ravages of the pandemic were evident and unsurmountable – and the protective ecosystem structured around stories and the need for a sense of belonging and togetherness. The building’s superintendent, Yessenia Grigorescu, an immigrant woman who anxiously tries to contact her father living in a retirement home, acts both like a connector and an archivist – she “governs” the micro-universe of the building, while, at the same time, secretly recording the stories rooftop visitors tell. The volume’s classical frame includes Boccaccio’s *Decameron*, the *One Thousand and One Nights*, *The Canterbury Tales* and elements derived from the historical tradition of the novel in the Western canon – an original, hidden manuscript that reads as a palimpsest (the superintendent received a “Bible” from her predecessor, a “book” in which he had written the nicknames and a short biographical description of the building’s inhabitants), the notion that narratives defend and preserve life, as cohesive social elements that reunite people even in dire times and the authority of oral literature and narratives to create specific chronotopes that facilitate an escape from perilous circumstances.

A brief analysis on the significance of *contagion* is also relevant, as the volume clearly proposes a particular dynamic of negotiating behaviours meant to protect the participants against contracting the virus. The tenants of Fernsby Arms “who had discovered the roof came up and hung out” (Atwood, Preston 2024: 9), although “in the beginning, no one talked” – “they spent their time flicking at their phones, pounding down beers or glasses of wine, reading books, smoking weed, or messing with a laptop” (idem: 10). This designates a typically urban mode of behaviour, with strangers brought together circumstantially, each remaining in their protective bubble. The first ice-breaking interaction occurred between two tenants who disliked each other – the talkative, outgoing Florida from 3C and Vinegar, the misanthropic artist from 2B. “Aren’t you going to join us?” (idem: 11) Florida asked Vinegar, prompting a narrative line that marks a shift from individual isolation to communicative participation. Their reciprocal animosity remains unaltered throughout all fourteen days of storytelling, establishing one of the active tension poles of the novel.

It is relevant to observe that *Fourteen Days* marks a deviation from the standard of a narrative style Priscilla Wald (2008: 3) called “the outbreak narrative”, a rather standard formula meant “to designate those epidemiological stories”. Her 2008 analysis of the HIV epidemics of the 1980s and the SARS epidemic of 2003 focuses on the traits that define this particular literary code. Imagined as narratives, outbreaks and epidemics configure specific models that guide specialists in identifying patterns that may lead to establishing public health measures and diagnostic instruments. Wald (2008: 12) also invokes the etymological meaning of contagion (from the Latin *con-tangere* – “to touch together” in order to designate a reunion of individuals and communities that are brought together by the unavoidably equalizing effects of an epidemic. It is important to note that, in the case of this particular novel, the collective dimension permeates all levels of the narrative poetics, revealing a complex allegory of togetherness that binds structure and meaning in an overarching projection. Textual identities are intentionally blurred - writers, narrators and characters are superimposed like old manuscripts bearing multiple strata of fictional life. Moreover, the tales told during the rooftop gatherings are often fashioned as essential tales of life, death, loss, survival, longing, mourning, strength, grit, etc., bearing a certain parabolic value that makes them relevant and significant at a time when symbolic anchors promise some of the stability and certainty that have been wiped out by the pandemic.

It is also significant to observe that, despite the abundance of medical jargon that flooded everyday speech since the March 2020 debut of the pandemic in Europe and the West, this novel tries to maintain a neutral climate that only allows common, unavoidable elements to penetrate its atmosphere. Social distancing, masking, intubation, daily reports, ICU wards, life-support systems, SARS-COV2 and the supremely reigning Covid form the fundamental vocabulary of the pandemic adopted by the nighttime gatherers of Fernsby Arms. Although less obvious than in other books detailing the dystopian world of the pandemic, the notions of surveillance and control, as theorized by Michel Foucault’s philosophy of biopower and biopolitics need to be brought forth. Discipline and restrictions have been enforced in plague times in order to contain the spread of pathogens, and their direct effects, as Foucault (1976) outlines in his seminal *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, can be integrated into the semantic area of punitive power. Drawing on Foucault’s theory of the regulatory power of biopolitics, Daniele Lorenzini (2021) connects its ramifications to the ever-shifting epistemic landscape of the Covid pandemic – as medical science proved hesitant and unprepared to intervene efficiently to combat the ravages of the virus, it is possible to assume that one of the immediate effects of the global health crisis was to equalize differences and level out certain inequities. All humans were, at least ontologically, equally vulnerable to the virus’ ferocious initial rate of attack. It is not coincidental, though, that the politics of storytelling reveals the uniformity of fate and biology rather than unrealistic models of social equity. Two tales could be invoked for this purpose as revelatory examples. A rather casual and ironic evocation of the post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) the pandemic was most like going to trigger on a mass scale was picked up by a young tenant, “a woman in her thirties [...] I recognized her from the book as Merengüero’s daughter” (Atwood,

Preston 2024: 13). She tells the extraordinary story of a woman, her father's friend, who found the great love of her life when fifty years old and had his child, defying all social norms that might condemn such extravagance. Eva fell in love with a much younger Dominican man, in spite of the common fear of "el qué dirán" ("What will the neighbors say?"), but, on September 11, 2001, she had an appointment in New York, in the Wall Street area and witnessed the first plane crash into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. She subsequently finds herself struggling with a severe form of PTSD and decides that her husband and son should temporarily move to Santo Domingo, so she could recover in peace for a while. They carefully avoid embarking on a plane on November 11, as she thought "there's no way that I am letting my family travel on any eleventh of any month ever again" (Atwood, Preston 2024: 20). Flight 587, with her son and husband on board, crashed ninety seconds after takeoff. Indeed, the pandemic had a powerful fateful component, at least in the beginning, when medical protocols relied on empirical data, in the absence of concrete experience with a respiratory virus of that degree of infectiousness. This first story sets the tone of the novel by placing it under a specific tragic sign – that of inevitability, a fate that one cannot control or rationalize, even while carefully avoiding it. The initial phase of the Covid pandemic was largely perceived as a fateful event, a large-scale medical incident that spiraled out of control, escaping definitions, recent precedents, guiding patterns and any kind of predictability. This allusion to fate subtly foreshadows the ending, with all tenants haunting the building, ghost-like and confused, suspended between worlds.

The second symbolic narrative that alludes to the uniformizing effect of the pandemic as fate is the story told by a medical doctor from apartment 2C, who seemingly sabotages with her unannounced presence the recently settled comfort and familiarity of the daily meetings. Upon hearing she was a doctor, the participants suddenly felt uneasy, scared they might be infected by one of the first line covid fighters they applauded every night from the shelter of their building's roof. A declared rationalist scientist, the doctor did not intend to deliver a lecture on the virtues of medical progress, nor on the widely acclaimed faith that salvation would necessarily come from medical science, as it had happened with other plagues, from the Middle Ages to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century outbreaks of polio. Jennifer, as she introduced herself to the small crowd, told them a story about a nun, Sister Mary Francis, who worked at a Catholic hospital, where she would bizarrely feel death approaching, thus she would briefly sit outside the hospital room of the doomed patients, sealing their fate with a short prayer and a blessing. Her presence on the corridor would always signal someone's end, although those patients seemed in good health, on their path to recovery. Sister Mary could not explain her strange gift as an angel of death, as she was not a disguised killer euthanizing her victims. Confronted by the doctor/narrator, she simply answered that "Death has an odor. [...] I can't really describe it. [...] It smells like the earth. Like wet leaves" (Atwood, Preston 2024: 98). If still alive, she'd be an old woman now, and she would certainly feel death approaching her, when the time comes. "And she will smile" (idem: 99). The doctor's tale implies her clear intention to re-center the absurdly imploded order of death amidst the chaos of the pandemic. Large-scale death, ominously announced by the ceaseless sound of

ambulance sirens, previewed by the sinister nighttime trucks carrying dead bodies to overflowing morgues, became part of everyday life in big cities like New York. Nobody, not even medical professionals and the science they served could predict who would survive and who would die.

Another significant element of the volume's policy of storytelling is its wide-ranging interest in mapping crisis, disaster, and the confrontation with suffering and death. The tales cover a vast area of conflict, from personal dramas to wars and other epidemics (such as the polio epidemic of the 1948-1955 interval). The social diversity of the narrators imprint the stories with a dynamic that apparently aims to reveal the necessary survival not only of stories, but of the human element itself. This calls for a critical inquiry of the humanist/posthumanist divide, frequently invoked in commentaries concerning pandemic biopolitics.

Posthumanism and the posthuman are terms that often enter the terminological sphere associated with pandemics and contagion. Posthumanism calls for a revision of universalist humanism (and of the concept of Man, as a generic term) and of the ways in which the human element interacts with non-human elements coexisting on the planet. This includes the microbiological world, viruses and bacteria, as competing forms of life that greatly outnumber humans. Technological creations and artificial intelligence are also integrated into this conceptual frame. The pandemic was the result of an unfortunate, uncontrollable form of contagion between the human and the animal world. Their boundaries had been violently broken by abusive commercial practices and a long-lasting negation of the effects of environmental neglect. To aid the conceptual background that structures human action in relation to other forms of life and technological models simulating it we could also invoke the notion of the anthropocene, designating a distinct era in the history of life on our planet, during which the human presence left a potentially permanent mark on nature and the environment. This period, theorists have remarked, is "born of anthropocentric illusions of our ontological separation from nature" (Newman, Topuzovski 2021: 2). However, *Fourteen Days* is a composite creation, delimiting a humanist core within a posthumanist frame. As the virus closed the world and forced humans to retreat to interiors, a vertical, in-depth perspective prevailed. The substance of the forty stories is, in a larger sense, human nature, but, upon closer inspection, it is the human element, in its essential complexity and vulnerability. Humanism postulated the centrality of the human element as a strategy of discovery and perpetual inquiry and narratives have historically provided the adequate tools for this endeavor. The clear, uncomplicated substance of these stories, resorting to simple narrative devices – framed stories, autofiction, ghostwriting, recycling classical tragic conflict, among other forms – pave the way for the articulation of multiple answers to the riddle of human nature.

The volume's grim ending, meant as an obvious unexpected twist, is the final accent of its popular literature status. On the fourteenth day, the final one, Yessie saw her father miraculously appear among the storytellers on the rooftop. He was in better shape than the last time she had seen him, and even the ravages of dementia seemed attenuated. He told the audience a story about his wife's depression and suicide (a direct allusion to the immense psychological strain brought on by the pandemic)

intertwined with a more hopeful story about his daughter's attachment and friendship with a bird, whom she ultimately set free. In a rather tragic turn of events, Yessie and her companions realize the meaning of their liberation from the fear of disease and death – they were all already dead: "...the haunted feeling of the building – it all suddenly made sense. We were the haunts. Covid had taken us all. The lightness and even relief that had taken hold in me was spreading to the others. We didn't need to be afraid of each other anymore, terrified of the danger of human contact, worried about breathing or touching or sharing" (Atwood, Preston 2024: 352). The ending reconfigures the inner core of the volume by operating an essential mutation in its fundamental ontology – presences dissolve into ghosts, thus negating the specters of absence and death defining the first deadly wave of the pandemic. "I imagined the ghosts of Covid all around us, everywhere, and I knew: There were so many, many more stories" (ibid.). The volume's circular dimension is certified by another official statement, similar to the one opening the book. This one is from the NYC Fire Incident Data and shows that a fire was reported on the rooftop of the abandoned building at 2 Rivington Street, the possible cause being unattended burning candles. A manuscript was found on the premises: "No identification recovered except for one (1) large, bound, handwritten manuscript, name and address on inside cover: Yessenia Grigorescu, 48-27 Poyer Street, Queens, NY 11373" (idem: 353).

The ending also postulates the supremacy of narratives, memory and imagination in times of death and hopelessness, but it simultaneously acknowledges what would probably lie at the center of the massive denial emerging in its aftermath – the pandemic took the lives of seven million people, and its effects would ripple for many years to come through the lives of many others. This collective novel reflects the canonic belief that stories, as a literary quintessence, transcend the crisis they help humans overcome and echo further beyond the limits of its historical moment. *Fourteen Days* reunites forty stories in a symbolic reflection of the initial meaning of the Italian term "quaranta" (forty), implemented in the fourteenth century as an institutional measure meant to contain the plague epidemic in 1377. The fourteen/quarantine implicit wordplay also suggests that, although the number of stories that can be told in a given period of time is limited, their "spread" goes beyond the limits of a given interval. The novel is, therefore, a trigger of stories: it tells the ones connected to survival and death and it also stimulates others, still untold, that could be part of mourning and, ultimately, healing.

### 3. Conclusion

As one of the protagonists of *Fourteen Days*, a woman aptly nicknamed Hello Kitty, remarked, the pandemic would be an endless topic of discussion, confession and remembrance for a long time after it actually ended: "*Let me tell you all about how I survived the Great Pandemic of Two Thousand and Twenty.*" She ignores the less enthusiastic warning of the more reserved Therapist, who calmly declared that trauma is the subject of psychological analysis not of social open talk. In a twist of tragic irony, nobody in the building survived. As Elizabeth Outka (2020: 14) detailed in her exploration of the literature about the 1918-1919 influenza pandemic, difficult

issues such as these are surprisingly rarely the subject of literary fiction. Although it was a massive event that partially coincided with the Great War, this first pandemic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is dramatically underrepresented in literary thought and imagination. The major trauma of the 2020 pandemic is still acute in public consciousness, which could explain its apparent fading from immediate attention and interest. Unlike the *Decameron*, where narratives are anchored in a specific genealogy that stipulates an ethical and moral dimension (Farneti 2009), *Fourteen Days* relies on fictional speculation to reveal that storytelling is an instrument of knowledge and exploration, reconfiguring social and humanistic projections that could articulate a policy of survival and transcendence.

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***SITUATED BEYOND THE SELF***



## **HOTELS, ROOMS AND BEDS: A JOURNEY INTO CAROL ANN DUFFY'S HAUNTED PLACES**

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**Abstract:** *In this article, I will dissect four poems written by Carol Ann Duffy in order to highlight the theme of “hauntedness” – unheimlichkeit, which engulfs the stories and personae presented in the poems. By analysing the disturbing presence of “ghosts” and the merging of past, present and future into one haunting repetitive space-time, I will reveal all the uncanny elements featured in these brilliant poems by Carol Ann Duffy.*

**Keywords:** *Duffy, ghosts, haunted, house, unheimlich*

### **1. Introduction**

What confers the very quality of “hauntedness” to a place? Professor Montague in *The Haunting of Hill House* (Jackson 1959), for example, summons some volunteers to prove the house is haunted. According to Sigmund Freud (2003:148), “the German phrase *ein unheimliches Haus* [‘an uncanny house’] can be rendered only by ‘a haunted house’”; this will be the focus of this study. Starting from the word’s meaning, I shall explore the concept of “hauntedness” experienced as a dwelling in the uncanny, as the awareness of the ‘iterability’ of past experiences – ours and others’ – into a haunting present and within unhomely places.

According to dictionaries, “to haunt” means to appear in a place repeatedly, to cause repeated suffering or anxiety. As a noun, it stands for a place often visited. Haunting involves both time and space; therefore, it involves repetition, overlapping presence, and excessive abundance; and yet what haunts is not easily graspable and thus not easily destroyable. Indeed, Freud (2003: 144) again believes one of the features of the “uncanny” is repetition itself. In this regard, I quote one of the brilliant stories written by Algernon Blackwood (2020a), “The Woman’s Ghost Story”, as an example of uncanny repetition. The female protagonist tells the story of her night visit to an allegedly haunted house in the middle of London. There, she meets the ghost, a man who was “frightened to death” (Blackwood 2020a: 178), and she releases him by showing love and kindness and kissing him. But before that, he explains why he keeps appearing in every room she goes to: “I’m in different space, for one thing, and you’d find me in any room you went into; for according to your way of measuring, I’m all over the house. Space is a bodily condition, but I am out of

my body, and am not affected by space. It's my condition that keeps me here." (idem: 179-180). Indeed, "the ghost... is a paradox. Though non-existent, it nonetheless appears." (Castle 1993: 46) The ghost's repetition both in terms of his appearing again and again in different rooms of the house and his staying there day after day is precisely what makes the house "haunted".

Haunted places such as castles, secret rooms, spooky cities, and misty graveyards have always featured in haunting gothic stories and science fiction books. They proved charming settings for poems and detective and horror stories since pre-Romanticism. Yet, as Hogle (2002: 123) pointed out in his *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, hauntedness is much closer to us than we might suspect: "Domestic, industrial and urban contexts and aberrant individuals provided the loci for mystery and terror. Haunting pasts were the ghosts of family transgression and guilty concealment; the dark alleyways of cities were the new villains, cunning, corrupt but thoroughly human". Indeed, it is within city walls, in hotels, inside rooms, and in pubs that we experience a haunting atmosphere in some of Carol Ann Duffy's poems. Villains, heroes, or just tormented people are not necessarily imprisoned in old castles or creepy manors; they travel, they move from house to house, from room to room. They drag haunted suitcases, they rent insidious rooms, and they are chased by their own lives. As far as the relationship between haunted people and haunted places is concerned, in the introduction to their study, Buse and Scott (1999: 9), interestingly point out: "Whether property is a Gothic ancestral home, a Romantic heroine's inheritance, a loft space in downtown Manhattan, or a sacred site in Australia, it is never free of ghostly vicissitudes, contrary to all rhetoric of property and possession which would exorcise past struggles over it".

Displacement and the longing for/escaping from the past are triggers for the characters' haunting experiences: "Duffy's frequently occurring 'something', 'somewhere' and 'somewhen' contribute to the shared human sense of displacement, of not being at home" (Smith 2008:118-119). Time is not linear. Past seeps back into the present through space and the present peeks into the future. It is precisely the haunting feeling of homelessness caused by a peculiar relationship between the personae and space-time that this paper studies.

## 2. Homelessness

The title of the first poem analysed, "Away from Home" (*The Other Country*, 1998), already preludes the experienced *unheimlichkeit*: the comforting presence of home is broken by the preceding adverb "away". Since this poem deals with travel, separation from home, and loneliness, I decided to compare it with what can be considered its 'twin' poem: "Never Go Back" from Duffy's *Mean Time* (1993). Here again, an adverb is used to create distance: the adverb of time "never" exhorts the persona not to go back (home). For the sake of clarity, I refer to "Away from Home" with the abbreviation AFH and to "Never Go Back" with NGB. AFH has a very precise structure, as it consists of twelve tercets, divided into four sections, almost depicting the twelve months of a year, divided into four seasons; while NGB consists of six octonaries, divided into three sections. While the former poem talks about a

person basically longing for home, the latter presents a person who has returned to a place where she used to live and feels uncomfortable now. Distance and uncertainty are the main themes in both poems: indeed, AFM starts straightforward: “Somewhere someone will always be leaving open / a curtain as you pass up the dark mild street, / uncertain, on your way to the lodgings.” (Duffy 1998: 49). But while the use of two consecutive indefinite words – an adverb and a pronoun – conveys complete uncertainty about the place and social context, creating a state of expectation, the future continuous and the adverb “always” that follow confer certitude about the person’s continuous travels, as if she were undoubtedly expected to walk towards new lodgings for good. A similar contrast is expressed in NGB: while the two negative words in “a journey into nowhere, nowhen” at the end of the poem provide no hope, it is also true that “Already / the fires and lights come on wherever you live” (Duffy 1993: 31) draws the relieving picture of a warm and bright home. The use of time and place adverbs or nouns is crucial in creating the feeling of hauntedness: “never”, “always”, “away”, “already”, “wherever”, “nowhere”, “nowhen”, are used to provide a powerful contrast in terms of time and space distance-proximity.

Another specular element in both poems is the train carrying the personae. In AFH “the train unzips the landscape, sheds fields / and hedges” (1998: 49), opening up possibilities and hope; in contrast, in NGB, it “sighs / and pulls you away, rewinding the city like a film / snapping it off at the river” (1993: 30) giving a melancholic and bleak hue to the journey. The train is, therefore an agent, not just a means of transportation: it is in charge of unzipping new places and getting closer to new experiences; however, it sadly puts a distance between people and places, rewinding cities, too.

Then “Treacherous puddles lead to the Railway Hotel. *No bar / till 7 pm*. At the first drink, a haunted jukebox / switches itself on, reminds you, reminds you.” (1998: 49); in AFH, the puddles recall those “rains” mentioned earlier in the poem emphasising the passing of time. They are “treacherous” too and this is not only because they hinder the traveller’s way, but also because they lead to the “Railway Hotel”. A hotel is a liminal place par excellence, with its anonymous – yet haunted by past visitors – rooms and corridors. Here the sense of liminality is reinforced by the fact that this hotel is near a train station. We know that the traveller waits until the bar opens; after the first drink, a jukebox starts playing music, reminding her of something.

In NGB, though, there is a jukebox with a reminding function too – “a jukebox reminisces in a cracked voice / there is nothing to say” (1993: 30) – but this is only to reinforce absence; instead of being silent, the jukebox speaks just enough to rebut its own voice. As a matter of fact, this jukebox is haunted too. Everything in NGB is haunted and upsettingly alive; things acquire human qualities: the jukebox “reminisces”, the streets “tear litter”, the smoky mirrors in the pub “flatter”, the house “prefers to be left alone” and its window is “myopic with rain”, then the sums of money in the cab “wink” and finally the train “sighs”. Things become alive, but, in contrast, people seem pretty much dead: in the pub there are “living dead drinking all day”, the persona is basically a “ghost”, the driver of the taxi “looks like death” (30-31). The very definition of “ghost” is controversial as a ghost is not a dead

person; it is its apparition to the living people: “Ghosts are neither dead nor alive, neither corporeal objects nor stern absences. As such, they are the stock-in-trade of the Derridean enterprise, standing in defiance of binary oppositions such as presence and absence, body and spirit, past and present, life and death” (Buse, Scott 1999: 10). The persona’s return to her – presumably – hometown is an uncanny event and haunting experience: she is a ghost making her apparition in her old town. Indeed, “the idea of a return fractures all traditional conceptions of temporality. Therefore, the temporality to which the ghost is subject is paradoxical, as at once they ‘return’ *and* make their apparitional debut” (idem: 11).

Disturbing uncertainty emerges fully in the next stanza of AFH (Duffy 1998: 50): “Anonymous night. Something wrong. The bedside lamp / absent. Different air. Against the hazarded wall / a door starts faintly to be drawn”. At this point, we witness a change, something is wrong there, it can be inferred that the bedside lamp is either missing or not working, the air might smell different or be colder/warmer and the wall is unexpected. The traveller cannot see her way, as the following stanza confirms: “you mime your way ineptly to a switch” (ibid.). This is a turning point: though she faced darkness, anonymity, now she is struggling towards the light. Indeed, in his essay, Freud (2003:144) presents a very similar situation as an example of the feeling of the uncanny, when one is “groping around in the dark in an unfamiliar room, searching for the door or the light-switch and repeatedly colliding with the same piece of furniture”. The repetition of the same action over and over again in order to reach something, in the dark, is upsetting, as it almost feels like the environment is changing around us without our realising it.

In the next tercet, we hear the traveller’s own voice trying to reassure herself: “Calm yourself. By dawn you will have slept again / and gone. You have a ticket for the plane. Check it. / The flight number. Your home address. Your name.” (Duffy 1998: 50). Despite the scary anonymity and her ongoing journeys, the traveller looks for homely elements by trying to focus on certain things, facts she can actually check: a ticket, an address, even her own name. Like a sort of zoom into a picture, we share her point of view, we become auditors of this truth: she really has got a ticket, with the correct flight number, the address, and the correct name on it. Instead of the future continuous, the future perfect is used here to suggest certainty, future completeness.

Then, instead of puddles, “urinous broken phone booths” lead her to the last one, which “unbelievably” works (ibid.). “With a sense of luxury” though, the persona lights a cigarette as “there is time yet” (ibid.). The desired call she wanted to make is distanced, the accomplishment of the aim is delayed, as if she wanted to linger in the unhomely liminality, to taste her loneliness a bit longer. The traveller eventually dials the number in the final tercet: “Tomorrow you return. Below the flyover / the sparkling merging motorways glamorise / the night. The telephone is ringing in your home.” (ibid.) This tercet contains several contrasting elements: on the one hand, the certainty of her return is expressed through the positive statement “you return”, adjectives such as “sparkling” and “glamorise”, on the other hand, the threatening adverb “tomorrow” implies that something might still happen, it is still “night”; and, finally, no one is actually answering the phone. This last verse

is quintessential in the poem as it embeds the safety and reassuring presence of her home and the ringing telephone; yet, at the same time, we have no certainty that someone is actually at home or will answer the phone. As Freud (2003: 124) claims: “the uncanny is that species of frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar”. Therefore, this is no end to the *unheimlich* journey. On the contrary, the fleeting property of life is maintained and a happy ending is questionable since whenever there is a home, something unhomely is likely to be found around the corner.

Moving on to NGB, a sense of actual wrongness pervades the entire poem: the persona is not sleeping in a hotel room, but in a proper ‘haunted house’ which “has cancer. It prefers to be left alone / nursing its growth and cracks, each groan and creak / accusing as you climb the stairs to the bedroom” (Duffy 1993: 30). Then a bleak warning voice warns the persona: “You shouldn’t be here. You follow your shadow / through the house, discover that objects held / in the hands can fill a room with pain.” (idem: 31). Her former house is the perfect example of “haunted house”, and yet the house is haunted precisely *because* she has come back to it. The persona is the ghost which reiterates all the past sorrow experienced in it. Since she shouldn’t be there, her presence is “wrong”, she takes on the characteristics of a ghost as “anachronism might well be the defining features of ghosts, now and in the past, because haunting, by its very structure, implies a deformation of linear temporality” (Buse, Scott 1999: 1).

When she actually decides to leave, it is a very different aura that accompanies her, since in “a taxi implying a hearse” she gets to the station where she is an “emigrant / for the last time” (ibid.). This phrase is very ambiguous and it might imply that this is the end of her haunting journey as a “ghost” and that she is therefore free. This sort of freedom is maintained by the sudden change of tone at the end of the poem. After the bleak atmosphere, we are told that “Already / the fires and lights come on wherever you live” (ibid.). From darkness to light, and from a haunted house to a bright “wherever” home, the woman has apparently ended her ghostly journey, but, “wherever” she lives, she might be exactly the haunting shadow next to fires and lights.

### 3. Rooms

We are now going to zoom into a “Room”, where an anonymous character is supposed to live for some time. The poem consists of four tercets and the narration covers one evening. Here the room in its bleakness represents the uncertain, the estranged, *unheimlich* experience of dwelling in a place inhabited by ghosts from the past and expected ghosts from the future. The very renting of a room already arouses issues about its past lodgers, the used furniture bearing the ghostly marks of others; yet at the same time one is aware that someone else will be staying there after we leave. When we think about a rented room, its being haunted is inevitably both horizontal and vertical in that we can see the tangible disturbing marks left by others surrounding us, so we can imagine these people before but also after us. In order to support this idea, I am using Algernon Blackwood’s words once again, since in his

story “The Occupant of the Room” (2020b: 543-544), he describes a similar situation - “the whole room was pervaded with a curious sense of occupancy that he found exceedingly distasteful. One moment the atmosphere seemed subtly charged with a ‘just left’ feeling—the next it was a queer awareness of ‘still here’ that made him turn cold and look hurriedly behind him”. I strongly believe the feeling described by Blackwood is an intriguing example for our analysis of the “hauntedness”: when we feel there is something wrong, something that we cannot actually grasp, something not there and yet there, then we are approaching the *unheimlich*.

In the poem “Room”, the author emphasizes that the persona is alone in a room located in the town’s poor area, where even the dusk is greasy, recalling dirty and wrongness. In this room there is “one chair to sit in, / a greasy dusk wrong side of the tracks, / and watch the lodgers’ lights come on in the other rooms” (Duffy, 1993: 50). At twilight, one by one, other lodgers switch the lights on, but it is not night yet. We stay in this rather gloomy atmosphere as “a cool lightbulb” is waiting for a “moth” and the silence is “hard” to bear. The image of the lightbulb’s cool light is very powerful, as it is that of the awaited moth which reveals the lightbulb’s projection towards death.

The threatening idea of spending a long time in that room is conveyed by the words “The roofs of terraced houses stretch from here to how many months”; time and space merge into one, imprisoning the persona into a repetitive, *unheimlich* present. It is almost as if the persona’s thought about the stretch of those terraced houses turned into wondering about the duration of her stay. The third stanza then provides the theme of death, by drawing our attention to the bed: “Room. One second-hand bed / to remind of a death, somewhen. Room.” (ibid.). Others have slept there, someone might have even died there. In the poems analysed before, the function of reminder was carried out by the haunted jukebox; here, it is the bed that fulfils this function.

Indeed, in *Hotel World*, a book by the Scottish writer Ali Smith, the young protagonist, the chambermaid of a hotel, who died falling from a dumbwaiter, conjectures about beds:

I go from room to room here and see beds wrecked after love and sleep, then beds cleaned and ready, waiting again for bodies to slide into them; crisp sheets folded down, beds with their mouths open saying welcome, hurry up, get in, sleep is coming. The beds are so inviting. They open their mouths all over the hotel every night for the bodies which slip into them with each other or alone; all the people with their beating hearts, sliding into spaces left empty for them by other people gone now God knows where, who warmed the same spaces up only hours before. (Smith 2001, 7)

Beds are among the most haunted places: people sleep there in all their vulnerability, people have sex and dirty them, people die in them. Beds *embed* bodies: fragile, naked, and dead bodies. Duffy’s room lies in the liminal space between past and future deaths, which are respectively represented by the bed and the moth. While the indifferent light bulb is waiting for future death and the bed reminds of past death, the room itself embraces both: we can notice how Duffy brilliantly repeats the word “room” at the beginning and at the end of the sentence, as if she was talking

about two different rooms: one room for the past and one for the present. Derrida, in his *Specters of Marx* (1994), analysed “ghosts” and he claims that, when we deal with ghosts, we deal with “inheritance, and generations, and generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain others who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us” (Derrida 1994: XVIII).

The night finally falls in Duffy’s “Room” in the last verse: “Night now; the giftless moon and a cat pissing on wall. £90pw” (Duffy 1993: 50). The “greasy dusk” has finally turned into night, yet not even the night shows mercy, as her moon is apparently “giftless”. The bleakness culminates with the price of the room: ninety pounds per week, to pay for “how many months”. The room here has a more temporal connotation rather than a spatial one: it locates the person as a “Being-towards-death”, haunting it, transcending past and present. The room provides the persona with the possibility of a suspended state, a limbo.

With the last poem that will be analysed here, we are getting even closer to the hauntedness seen as *unheimlichkeit* in time and space. The poem is “Close”, and with it, Carol Ann Duffy leads us into a more private room. Positive that “close” means both “near” and “lock”, I accept the invitation and will go into the last haunted room of our journey.

In this poem, once again in a precise structure (five quintains), the poet builds a powerful haunting story. The reader is welcomed by an almost morbid scene: “Lock the door. In the dark journey of our night, / two childhoods stand in the corner of the bedroom / watching the way we take each other to bits / to stare at our heart” (Duffy 1993: 37). The door needs to be closed to prevent impending menaces from getting in and therefore “closer”; yet in that journey, that is the night, a menace is already inside the room: two childhoods staring; ghosts from the past are trapped wherever the personae in the poem are.

Proxemics is hauntingly pivotal in this poem: intimacy must be protected from what lies outside, and yet, unfortunately, ghosts are already in. Moreover, the safety of the home is undermined by a lover coming closer, which in fact makes that home not a home any longer. Indeed, the speaker confesses: “I tell myself where I live now, / but you move in close till I shake, homeless, further than that” (ibid.). The keyword here is “homeless”: the speaker acknowledges where she is living now – as if this was something strange and unexpected – and as a person moves “close”, she becomes homeless. The idea of lovers being homeless is conveyed in another poem as well, “The Lovers” (*Rapture* 2005), where they have “no country to sail to” (Duffy 2005: 32).

Referring again to Freud, in his essay he talks about female genitals as the former entrance to a *heimlich* place that turns into *unheimlich* because of repression; love has something to do with this transformation as he says – quoting a saying – “Love is a longing for home” (Freud 2003: 151).

Indeed, love seems to be extremely powerful and dangerous: “Love won’t give in. It makes a hired room tremble / with the pity of bells, a cigarette smoke itself / next to a full glass of wine, time ache / into space, space, wants no more talk. Now / it has me where I want me, now you, you do” (Duffy 1993: 37). Rather than a limbo, the room of this poem seems to represent a heart: it “tremble(s)” with love, it must

be locked, it can be a home, but also a non-home if a lover invades it. The power of love here coexists with death: while it makes a room tremble, bells are presumably announcing a death out there. It is love that makes “time ache into space”, possibly meaning that past, present and future are merging and penetrating space. The fact that love will not give up does not necessarily mean something positive; on the contrary, in this case it seems to be more like a haunting presence.

However, it is the final stanza that reveals to us the scariest hauntedness: “Put out the light. Years stand outside on the street / looking up to an open window, black as our mouth / which utters its tuneless song. The ghosts of ourselves, / behind and before us, throng in a mirror, blind, / laughing and weeping. They know who we are.” (ibid.) The poet here resumes the image of time pervading space by drawing this picture of personified Years spying on the lovers from the street, as past and future ghosts crowd in the mirror. The lovers find themselves literally engulfed by their own ghosts which are haunting them from the past and from the future (as projections). Indeed, “In the figure of the ghost, we see that past and present cannot be neatly separated from one another, as any idea of the present is always constituted through the difference and deferral of the past, as well as anticipations of the future” (Buse, Scott 1999: 10-11).

#### 4. Conclusion

At this point, I would like to reassure the readers that, although our ghostly journey into Carol Ann Duffy’s hauntedness has finally come to an end, I strongly believe that they will be tempted to read some paragraphs again, read these poems once or twice more and wonder about all those eerie repetitions, all those strange feelings triggered by the impression that they have already been to a certain place or have already done something referred to in the poems. This is because we all experience “hauntedness” during our lives. After having dissected the poems, it is possible now to point out that “hauntedness” has definitely to do with our perception of repetition in space and time. Moreover, it is our own and others’ presence in that space-time that allows us to experience the uncanny: the impression that something or someone is where or “when” they shouldn’t be. So, wherever or whenever you are, the uncanny is always around the corner.

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## PARENTAL INFLUENCE AND THE ELECTRA COMPLEX IN ALASDAIR GRAY'S *POOR THINGS*

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**Abstract:** *The paper examines the portrayal of parental dynamics and their impact on the psychological development of the main protagonists in Alasdair Gray's Poor Things through a psychoanalytic lens. Drawing on the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, the analysis explores the complex relationships between creators and their creations, as well as the themes of identity formation, autonomy, and the search for parental love. In Poor Things, Bella's unique status as both creator and creation sheds light on Freud's Electra/Oedipus complex and Lacan's mirror stage, as she grapples with issues of agency, autonomy, and the desire for both maternal and paternal figures. By examining the parental dynamics in the novel, the paper aims to illuminate the psychological complexities of the character and the broader thematic concerns of the texts.*

**Keywords:** *Bella Baxter, identity formation, Electra complex, parental dynamics, Poor Things*

### 1. Introduction

In a similar vein to Shelley's *Frankenstein* not being science-fiction *per se*, so too does Gray's novel not focus on the science behind the reanimation of the dead. The work that has since its publication been labeled "Frankenstein set in Glasgow," rather gives a portrayal of a different kind of monster while providing still a unique perspective on the human condition and the intricacies of creator–creation relationship. Bella Baxter is the name of the monster in question, the female alter-ego of Frankenstein's monster, a woman who was brought back to life by being given the brain of her unborn child. Herein lies Bella's "monstrous aspect", being at once both her own mother and daughter. Her physical beauty remains untouched, which largely sets her apart from her counterpart in Shelley's novel. However, Bella's physical beauty, as opposed to The Creature's ugliness, does not make her any less of a "monster". As Cohen writes:

The monster is born (...) as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy, giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. (Cohen 1996: 4)

While there are arguments to support that Bella is undoubtedly a product of her time, place, and culture, she is a monster not born, rather created through her creator's need for a female companion. This approach to her creation potentially has effects on her overall development, as the creator's attitude and actions shaped her identity and behaviour. Godwin Baxter's excessive protectiveness borders on obsession, resulting in a stifling environment for Bella. This overbearing paternal influence, driven by a sense of paternal duty, impedes Bella's ability to assert herself and define her own identity. We are thus able to conclude that Bella is ensnared by her creator's overprotective embrace which illustrates the profound impact of parental influence on the character's psychological development.

There certainly is an evident influence that the role of a parent has in shaping the psyche of the child. At the moment of her creation, Bella has the brain of a child, despite being grown physically, and as such, requires the nurturing of a parent for any further mental developments. Bella Baxter, in the most literal sense, has the mental capacity of an infant, having been given the brain of her unborn child. She is, essentially, a newborn baby in the body of an adult. Therefore, her creator, the aforementioned Godwin Baxter, is to play the role of the paternal figure. The distinct yet complementary perspectives on the role of parents (or parental figures) are offered by two influential figures in the field of psychoanalysis, namely Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. While Freud's theory emphasizes the primacy of early childhood experiences and the resolution of unconscious conflicts, Lacan's theory introduces concepts such as the mirror stage and the Symbolic Order to elucidate the formation of the self within the familial and societal context. On the one hand, Freud emphasizes the role of unconscious conflicts and early childhood experiences in shaping the child's personality; Lacan, on the other, highlights the significance of language and symbolic interactions in the formation of the self. However, both agree that parental influence is the most influential aspect in the development of a child.

## 2. Bella Baxter and the quest for identity

As established, Bella Baxter is a reanimated woman with the brain of her unborn daughter. She comes into this state of being after an "attempted" suicide, drowning her pregnant self in a river, which is where Godwin Baxter finds her. Using advanced medical techniques, he performs a series of surgical procedures on her, which ultimately result in her resurrection. However, Godwin Baxter decides to remove the child from her body, and give its brain to Bella. In doing so, he gives the unknown woman another chance to life, as her resurrection comes with no knowledge of her previous one. Bella is, therefore, *tabula rasa*. She is void of any previously learned notions and free to discover the world anew.

This reanimated Bella lacks any knowledge of her previous experiences (including motor skills and language), and as such, may be described as being a newborn in the body of an adult. Her creator, therefore, allows her to be in a controlled environment only, perhaps as a form of protection from external harm, or simply to track her mental development, considering she is, ultimately, an experiment. However, this means that Bella spends her formative "years" with only

her father/creator, which makes her miss out on opportunities for exploration, social interaction, and independent learning. Namely, it is established in the novel that Bella develops mentally in an impressive rate, and that a time span of merely a couple of weeks equals to years in her mental age. Godwin follows Bella's progress by her evolving speech patterns, which are, at first, characterized by simplicity and innocence, reflecting her sheltered upbringing and limited exposure to the outside world. Her vocabulary and syntax are relatively basic, mirroring her youth and lack of worldly experience. Bella's speech, therefore, serves as a narrative device through which her character development and psychological journey are conveyed to the reader, and, as Bella becomes more exposed to new experiences, ideas, and relationships, her vocabulary and language skills start to gradually expand. She ends up using more complex words and expressions, reflecting her growing curiosity and intellectual development. Initially, her social interactions are limited to Godwin, his associates, and the medical and intellectual circles he frequents. This provides her with a sheltered, even idealized, understanding of society. However, a key shift happens when Bella is introduced to the larger social fabric through a series of experiences outside of Godwin's direct influence. During the course of the novel, especially after she elopes with Duncan Wedderburn, Bella meets a wide range of new characters and is exposed to a variety of social contexts. Her decision to run away with Duncan marks a significant shift, as it takes her out of the controlled environment created by Godwin and thrusts her into a more unpredictable and complex world. These experiences push Bella to rethink the innocence and simplicity that defined her early speech and worldview, and further enrich her understanding of the world, expanding her vocabulary, emotional range, and intellectual depth, all of which mark her development as she becomes increasingly aware of the multifaceted nature of human existence.

Therefore, this linguistic progression mirrors her cognitive growth and increasing self-awareness. Just as her speech evolves, so does her understanding of herself and her place in the world, culminating in a moment of self-recognition akin to the pivotal stage in human development described by Jacques Lacan's concept of the mirror stage. The mirror stage is a crucial stage in human development during infancy when a child first recognizes their own reflection in a mirror and forms a sense of self-identity. Lacan (2010: 1164) writes: "The child, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such his own image in a mirror". Lacan further believes this moment may occur between six and eighteen months of age. However, Bella has already passed this mental age as soon as a couple of days after her reanimation – therefore her moment of experiencing her own reflection – is not untainted. That is, Bella is unable to fully bridge the gap between her internal sense of self and her external reality, so much so that she states: "I have eyes and a mirror in my bedroom, Candle, I SEE I am a woman in my middle twenties and but nearer thirty than twenty, most women are married by then—" (Gray 1992: 74). Lacan (2010: 1165), furthermore, writes that "the important point is that this form situates the agency known as the ego, prior to its social determination, in a fictional direction that will forever remain irreducible for any single individual or, rather, that will only

asymptotically approach the subject's becoming". This means that the formation of the ego, or sense of self, occurs before it is influenced by societal factors. In Bella's case, having the body of a grown woman and the brain of a child influences the formation of her ego, of the self. Moreover, this seems to further influence the exploration of her sexuality, which plays a big part in Bella's character development. The formation of her ego and the exploration of sexuality seem to be occurring at the same time.

Although this may be seen as a natural and multifaceted process shaped by her interactions with various characters and her own internal desires, it may also be a reflection of her progression as seen by the Freudian psychosexual stages. Freud (1905: 90) writes that "One occasionally comes across remarks upon precocious sexual activity in small children – upon erections, masturbation, and even activities resembling coitus. But these are always noted only as exceptional events, as curiosities, or as horrifying instances of precocious depravity" and continues:

It seems certain that the germs of sexual stirrings are already present in the newborn child and that these continue to develop for some time, but then become subject to a progressive process of suppression, which can itself be ruptured in turn by proper spurts of sexual development, and delayed by individual peculiarities. (Freud 1905: 92)

Bella, however, is not stifled in the exploration of her own sexuality, nor is there any suppression of the same, as Bella has the body of an adult, and therefore no period of latency that may arise from the deferment of her reproductive functions. Her creator so states: "Her menstrual cycle was in full flood from the day she opened her eyes, so she has never been taught to feel her body is disgusting or to dread what she desires" (Gray 1992: 91). In fact, from the latent period of childhood to the onset of puberty and adolescence, she experiences a range of emotions and desires as she seeks to understand and define her own sexuality. Her interactions with parental figures, romantic interests, and societal expectations do contribute to her evolving understanding of herself as a sexual being. In Coe's (1992: 2) reading of the novel, for example, he believes that "for the purposes of Gray's imagination ... women are only defined, only made real, by their relationship with men".

Freud (1905: 109) states that "with the arrival of puberty, changes set in that are supposed to lead infantile sexual life to its final, normal shape. The sexual drive has hitherto been predominantly autoerotic; it now finds the sexual object." Bella redirects her sexual desire towards the closest friend of her creator, who is likewise a doctor and a scientist. In other words, Bella seems to look to the closest image of her creator. Her exploration of her sexuality may also be understood within the context of Freud's Electra complex. The Electra complex is a term used to describe a daughter's unconscious desire for her father, coupled with a sense of rivalry or jealousy toward her mother. Godwin is her creator, father, and primary caregiver, and Bella's early attachment to him is not merely one of filial love, but also an intense psychological dependence. Godwin, as the controlling figure in her life, fulfills both the roles of protector and intellectual guide, and Bella's emotional attachment to him grows as a result of this. Additionally, Bella's interaction with her creator/parental figure, as well as romantic interests, paired with the societal expectations, may reflect

her attempts to reconcile her unconscious desires with societal norms. Moreover, as the Electra complex may be used to analyse the character of Bella, her creator seems to exhibit traits of its counterpart – the Oedipal complex. Freud (1905: 123) states that “a man, especially, seeks after the image of his mother as it has prevailed in his memory since the earliest childhood”. Bella’s creation was, in part, due to Baxter wanting a female companion who would substitute the love of a mother he had never met. This is what the readers are told:

[He] dreamed of a fascinating stranger – a woman [he] had not yet met so could only imagine – a friend who would need and admire [him] as much as [he] needed and admired her. No doubt a mother supplies this want in most young creatures, though rich families often employ a servant to take the mother’s place. (Gray 1992: 64)

Therefore, the purpose of Bella’s creation was for her to fulfill the role of a mother, a purpose she may as well have fulfilled as soon as Baxter reanimated her with the brain of her daughter. However, he states that his feelings are overpowering any other feelings he may have towards her. On the other hand, Bella herself may also grapple with unconscious desires rooted in her relationship with her creator. Freud’s assertion that individuals seek after the image of their parent can be applied to Bella’s complex dynamic with Godwin Baxter. Bella’s existence, born out of Baxter’s desire for companionship and maternal love, further complicates their relationship. While Baxter may have envisioned Bella as a surrogate for the mother he never knew, her autonomy and identity as a separate individual challenge this paternalistic expectation. Her exploration of her sexuality and desires may involve navigating the complexities of her relationship with Baxter, including feelings of dependence, resentment, yet also a longing for independence. At first, we see her innate desires manifest in her wish to marry the man who is the image of her creator, and then a sort of rebellion against her creator takes place in her elopement with a man who is the opposite. However, being away from her creator means that Bella experiences progress in her mental development the most.

This period of separation from Baxter is crucial for Bella’s individuation process. It allows her to explore her own desires and identity outside the shadow of her creator. Initially, her romantic entanglements represent an unconscious attempt to resolve her feelings towards her creator-figure, Baxter. Her elopement and subsequent relationships signify a rebellion against, and a search for an identity separate from the paternal figure’s control. Yet, she does return to Baxter and becomes a doctor of her own, showing a sort of integration of her past with her newfound sense of self.

### **3. Bella Baxter and Victoria McCandless**

There seems to be a general disagreement on the level of agency Bella has in the novel, with some scholars, such as Ibáñez (1999), arguing that Bella’s identity is formed through her interactions with the men around her, particularly her creator, while others, such as Kaczvinsky (2001: 775-779), argue that Bella is, by the end of the novel, a fully liberated woman. Being away from the influence of her creator does prove to be a critical period in her development as an independent individual.

Bella's transition from the Lacanian mirror stage identity – dependent on Godwin's validation – to an autonomous subject navigating the Symbolic Order of society, allows her to confront aspects of life and death that were previously hidden from her, significantly influencing her psychological, and most especially, emotional growth.

The pivotal moment during her travels is when Bella encounters the grim reality of dead babies, a stark contrast to her sheltered life she led under Baxter's care. This exposure forces her to confront the fragility of life and the harshness of the world outside the protective bubble created by Godwin Baxter. The sight of dead babies is particularly poignant for Bella, as it echoes her own unique existence, being brought back to life with the brain of her own dead child. Experiencing such a sight also finally alters Bella's immature language and vocabulary. Up until this point, Bella was using the form of a Shakespearean sonnet to write letters to Godwin, still reflecting her inexperience and child-like behaviour. However, this confrontation with death and the ephemeral nature of life deepens Bella's understanding of her own identity, as well as the complex nature of her creation. This ultimately leads to her finally altering her speech which resembles that of a grown adult. When Bella finally leaves Godwin, she enters what Lacan labels the Symbolic Order, where she encounters the broader social structures and realities of the world. Strecher (2002: 114) writes: "According to Lacan, then, the Symbolic Order (though constituted by ourselves) always intervenes, steps between ourselves and the Other, the object of our desire. This process is always grounded in language, in the intervention via language of symbols between us and the object of our desire." In his seminar *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, for example, Lacan furthermore writes:

Next time, I propose to introduce you to the essence of scopic satisfaction. The gaze may contain in itself the *objet a* of the Lacanian algebra where the subject falls, and what specifies the scopic field and engenders the satisfaction proper to it is the fact that, for structural reasons, the fall of the subject always remains unperceived, for it is reduced to zero. In so far as the gaze, *qua objet a*, may come to symbolize this central lack expressed in the phenomenon of castration, and in so far as it is an *objet a* reduced, of its nature, to a punctiform, evanescent function, it leaves the subject in ignorance as to what there is beyond the appearance, an ignorance so characteristic of all progress in thought that occurs in the way constituted by philosophical research. (Lacan 1998: 76–77)

The *objet a* refers to the object of desire, and is a central part of the subject's experience of lack and desire. The *objet a* represents a "punctiform" or fleeting lack in the subject, linked to the notion of castration, symbolizing an absence that the subject constantly strives to fill. Bella's confrontation with death and her subsequent decision to become a prostitute whilst in Paris can be seen as her attempt to assert her identity and autonomy within the Symbolic Order. Her actions reflect a rebellion against the identity imposed on her both by Godwin and society, as she strives to define herself on her own terms. The Symbolic Order, in Lacanian terms, represents the domain of societal rules, language, and law – structures that dictate an individual's place within society. Bella's choice, therefore, to engage in prostitution is not merely an act of defiance, but rather a conscious rejection of the roles and expectations

imposed upon her, thus carving out her own space within the Symbolic. By stepping outside traditional constraints and engaging with this realm, Bella challenges the societal norms that seek to define her, attempting to reconcile her own desires with the external reality that seeks to shape her. However, Bella's quest for autonomy and identity may still be driven by a sense of an unattainable desire. For example, her relationships with men, specifically with Godwin Baxter, might not be about the men themselves, but about what they represent – an elusive ideal of freedom, love, or self-understanding that she herself seems to never be able to fully grasp. There seems to be a perpetual state of desire and dissatisfaction in Bella's life, as she moves from one experience to the next, seeking fulfillment that always seems just out of reach. Her experience as a prostitute represents a radical departure from her past and a critical stage in her journey toward self-realization. It is a period marked by intense challenges and personal transformations as she moves closer to understanding and asserting her own individuality, beyond the shadow of her creator. However, even this experience seems not enough to satisfy Bella. She starts attending open lectures of anatomy, which echoes the environment she was raised in, then upon learning of her creator's illness, decides to come home, to her safe and nurturing environment. Her return to Godwin could be seen as a way of confronting and negotiating her ideal self in relation to the symbolic father figure, as well as an attempt to resolve her character arc.

Krupka (2018: 40) asserts that "all the romantic attractions in *Poor Things* have some level of the *object petit a* in them, yet for most of the characters, their *object petit a* stems from the Other's desire. Arguably, neither of the characters end up actually satisfying their desire." *Object petit a*, as previously mentioned, represents the unattainable object of desire, therefore, the Imaginary Order. It's the "little other" (as opposed to the "big Other," which represents the symbolic order, language, law, etc.). Lacan introduces this concept to explain the elusive nature of human desire – how what we desire is not a specific object but rather the idea or fantasy of fulfillment that the object represents. Godwin Baxter seems to be Bella's ultimate *object petit a*. In fact, it is only when she finds out Baxter is sick that she exclaims: "I will become a doctor on the world's account! [...] I will save some people's lives, if not yours. I will replace you! I will become you!" (Gray 1992: 267). This final decision of becoming a doctor, a one just like her creator, is what brings Bella's search for identity to its final resolution. The influence of her creator father seems to persist, and she follows in his footsteps. Godwin and Bella decide together she needs a husband, therefore she marries his friend, and her first romantic interest, Archibald McCandless, then enrolls into medical school under the alias Victoria McCandless, where she studies to become a doctor. It is clear, however, that Bella does not hone much romantic feelings towards her new husband, though he helps her achieve the idealized image of herself.

One way of resolving internal conflicts and desires, according to Freud's concept of identification, involves adopting the traits or roles of significant figures, in this case a paternal figure. Bella's choice to pursue a medical career and adopt the alias Victoria McCandless illustrates a form of sublimation, where she channels her unresolved desires and identification with Godwin Baxter into

a socially acceptable role. There unresolved desires, however, do not refer to any sexual desires, but to the desires one's *object petit a* represents, in Lacanian version of the same. This, moreover, mirrors the Freudian idea of sublimating one's desires into productive activities. Freud (1905: 93) writes "... the influx of these stirrings does not cease even during this period of latency, though their energy is diverted, wholly or in great part, from their sexual application and directed to other purposes." We have already established that there was no period of latency for Bella, as we see her remain sexually active throughout the novel, therefore her decision to dedicate her life to becoming a doctor in her own right may be seen as a resolution of the Electra complex. Freud's Electra complex involves a girl's desire for her father and eventual identification with her mother. Bella's very creation places her in a position where she simultaneously represents both parental figures, adding a layer of complexity to her development, as well as the resolution of these early conflicts. Having detached herself from Godwin's influence by her travels and inserting herself within the Symbolic Order, Bella does form, to a certain degree, her own sense of identity unrelated to her upbringing; and by choosing a career that aligns with Godwin's ideals, Bella is not only sublimating her desires but also integrating the paternal attributes she admired into her own identity. This aligns with Freud's concept of resolution where the child identifies with a parent after resolving earlier desires. In the case of Bella and her unorthodox creation, which precludes the traditional presence of a maternal figure, means that Bella is compelled to fully forge her own identity, ultimately becoming a distinct and autonomous individual, shaped by her creator's influence yet defined by her own choices and self-determination. This is also reflected in the change of her name, from Bella Baxter, which is given to her by her creator, to Victoria McCandless, a woman in her own right.

#### 4. Conclusion

The subject of my paper was to explore the role a parent, or rather, a parental figure has on the development of the child. Through a psychoanalytic lens, using the theories of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan to analyse the multifaceted character of Bella Baxter in Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things*, my aim was to showcase her journey from creation to self-discovery. Similarly to the science fiction of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Gray's novel eschews the focus on the science of reanimation, instead presenting a narrative centered on the complexities of creator-creation relationships and the human condition. We examined Bella's "monstrous aspect" as both her own mother and daughter, using Cohen's perspective to argue that Bella represents a cultural embodiment of fear, desire, and anxiety. Bella's development is influenced significantly by her creator, Godwin Baxter, whose overprotective role parallels Freudian concepts of parental influence and Lacanian ideas of the mirror stage. Bella's formative years, spent under Baxter's control, reflect her need for parental nurturing and the resultant stifling impact on her autonomy.

Through a Lacanian lens, Bella's progression aligns with the mirror stage, as she struggles with the disjunction between her internal sense of self and external

reality. Freud's psychosexual stages and the Oedipal/Electra complex further contextualize Bella's exploration of sexuality, which seems inseparable from her identity. Her period of separation from Baxter, including her experiences as a prostitute and exposure to harsh realities, signifies a crucial phase in her individuation process. We also discussed Bella's transition from her creator's shadow to autonomy, culminating in her adoption of the alias Victoria McCandless. This change represents Bella's sublimation of her unresolved desires and identification with Baxter into a productive and socially accepted role. Freud's concept of the Electra complex is used to illustrate Bella's resolution of early conflicts and her development into an independent individual, defined by her own choices rather than her creator's influence. In conclusion, Bella's evolution from Bella Baxter to Victoria McCandless highlights her journey towards self-definition and autonomy, demonstrating the ever-profound impact of parental influence and the complex interplay of psychoanalytic theories in shaping her identity.

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## THE ROLE OF FEMALE AGENCY IN BIOFICTION: THE CASE OF MAGGIE O'FARRELL'S *HAMNET*\*

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**Abstract:** Both the so-called “historical turn” and “ethical turn” have proved fundamental critical trends in the development, in recent decades, of the historical novel and the biographical novel in English. Historical revisionism of major and minor characters and events have opened new approaches to the discourses of history and biography, providing alternate views of the past and raising ideologically motivated themes and personages that had been hidden or ignored by traditional historiography. This paper is an attempt to tackle some of the features of biographical fiction or biofiction by discussing the character of Shakespeare's wife in Maggie O'Farrell's novel *Hamnet* (2020).

**Keywords:** biofiction, biographical novel, female agency, presentism, Shakespeare's wife

### 1. Introduction

The development of biographical fiction or biofiction, even if its origins can be dated back a hundred and fifty years ago (Lackey 2022: 4, 9), has spread widely in the last three decades, as a subtype of – but also, for some scholars at least, in opposition to – the historical novel (on this controversy, Novak and Ni Dhúill 2023: 3-7). However, the use of the term *biofiction* itself is more recent, as Michael Lackey (2016, 2021) has explained. Many authors and titles come easily to mind if we think of how the fictional retelling of the lives of some historical figures have become popular and have drawn the readers' interest worldwide. Not only in English: in addition to the works of acclaimed English-speaking writers like J.M. Coetzee's fictionalised account of Dostoyevsky in *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), David Lodge's and Colm Tóibín's biographical fictions on Henry James (*Author, Author* and *The Master* respectively, both in 2004), as well as Tóibín's more recent novel on Thomas Mann (*The Magician*, 2021), Hilary Mantel's trilogy on Thomas Cromwell (*Wolf Hall*, 2009, *Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012, and *The Mirror and the Light*, 2020), and Julian Barnes's portrait of Shostakovich in *The Noise of Time* (2016), there are also conspicuous and recognised writers in other languages, such as Spanish Javier

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Cercas's *Soldados de Salamina* (2001) and *El impostor* (2014), or Peruvian-Spanish Mario Vargas Llosa's *El sueño del celta* (2010) on the Irish patriot Roger Casement.

All the historical characters mentioned so far are men, even if they belong to different nationalities and historical periods. This paper however is not concerned with the likes of great men from the past (Dostoyevsky, Henry James, Thomas Mann, Thomas Cromwell, Shostakovich...), but it deals with a neglected historical woman from the early modern period. She is Agnes or Anne Hathaway, the 16<sup>th</sup>-century protagonist of the acclaimed novel by Northern-Irish writer Maggie O'Farrell, *Hamnet* (2020). Not that O'Farrell's case is exceptional or unique. On the contrary, as Marisol Morales (2024: 149) states, "In Ireland, the number of biographical novels that have engaged with the unearthing of the lives of forgotten and silenced figures from the past, including women, nobodies and marginal others, or that have offered alternative perspectives to official narratives, clearly abound". The names of Marita Conlon-McKenna, Martina Devlin, Emma Donoghue, Anne Enright, Henrietta McKerverey, Lia Mills, Mary Morrissy, Julia O'Faolain, or Nuala O'Connor are good examples (see also Lackey 2021: 6). This is precisely the critical domain in which this paper has been written, i.e. how historical women have been silenced, forgotten, neglected or marginalised in the writing of history. What these writers have been doing is to place those female historical figures "at the centre of narratives from where they recover their own agency and visibility" (Morales 2023: 22).

## 2. Historical novel, literary biography and biofiction

One of the aesthetical and ethical issues involved in the historical novel, and in biofiction particularly, as Lackey has widely discussed, is undoubtedly the lack of biographical and historical accuracy, especially in the cases where so few or reliable documents have survived about those silenced women; which inevitably compels writers to use their imagination and inventive ability to make up for the lack of true testimonies. This has led some critics, from Georg Lukács in his pioneering *The Historical Novel* (1937) onwards, to condemn "the biographical novel as an irredeemable aesthetic form that necessarily distorts and misrepresents the objective proportions of history" (Lackey 2016: 3) or as "an unethical genre" (Lackey 2021: 2-3), because writers, so to speak, "steal" the identity and voices of their characters. Some scholars in fact talk about "identity theft", apparently forgetting that we are dealing with fiction, with novels, not with biographies.

Literary biography is something different, a genre that, as one of the great English biographers of our time, Michael Holroyd (1973: 26), has put it, "fuse[s] an imaginatively kindled re-creation of the inner lives of [...] characters with the rigorous documentation and exactitude of strict biographical method". For him, according to his experience in the writing of the biographies of, among others, Lytton Strachey and George Bernard Shaw, that "rigorous documentation" implies examining thousands of letters, diaries, conducting interviews with hundreds of people who met or corresponded with the subjects of his biographies (Holroyd 1973: 25-31). He claims, however, that good biographies are not to be judged exclusively

by the new documents they provide, as if “non-fiction” were necessarily equivalent to “non-creative” (idem: 104-105).

This paper however does not deal with biographies, but with biofictions, in the clear terms defined by Lackey (2016: 4-9). It is healthy in this respect to recall Colm Tóibín’s claims (quoted in Lackey 2021), about his use of the factual and the empirical in his novels: “I live in an imaginative country which is defined by the concrete”; interestingly enough, the writer himself admits, as Lackey (2021: 91) quotes, that “‘facts’ are something that authors of biofiction ‘have to deal with,’ but the facts are ‘nourishing as well as restricting.’” Tóibín (qtd. in Lackey 2021: 91) uses a maritime metaphor to clarify what he means, by stating that the author gets “an anchor from certain facts, and that anchor is not merely factual but emotional, and it brings a great deal with it, it carries you. And because it carries you, you can get a great deal of energy from it”. In short, facts cannot be the whole story in fiction, an argument which would take us back, in another context, to the fundamental issue of Charles Dickens’s *Hard Times*, as caricaturised in the character of Mr Gradgrind. Lackey’s distinction (2016: 7) is certainly illuminating:

What we get in a biographical novel, then, is the novelist’s vision of life and the world, and not an accurate representation of an actual person’s life. Put differently, biographical novelists differ from biographers because, while authors of traditional and fictional biographies seek to represent the life (or a dimension of a life) of an actual historical figure as clearly and accurately as possible, biographical novelists forgo the desire to get the biographical subject’s life “right” and, rather, use the biographical subject in order to project their own vision of life and the world.

Besides the indisputably ethical dimension concerning truth and facts, there are also others which need some consideration and clarification, as Novak and Ní Dhúill (2023: 20-22) have pointed out. But I wish to focus on the fact that biofiction has become an alternative to silence and to the ideologically distorted views of the past we have inherited from traditional historiography. It could even be asserted that it is a sort of medicine against amnesia, as those biofictional accounts of women provide a new ethical dimension about the level of their silences, misrepresentation, invisibility and vulnerability. This paper addresses some of those questions in dealing with a narrative about Agnes or Anne Hathaway (Shakespeare’s wife), whose position in society – even if it cannot be termed as marginal in terms of social class – can be described as decentred and manifestly neglected. I will try to show how O’Farrell has managed to present her character as possessing the sort of agential living that traditional historiography never thought she had. In the case of Anne Hathaway or William Shakespeare we do not have personal diaries or correspondence which might illuminate their feelings. When Holroyd (1973: 171-175) praises, as an excellent instrument for the biographer, the correspondence between Thomas Carlyle and his wife Jane, which covers even the period of their courtship prior to their marriage, we must be fully conscious that nothing similar exists in the case of Shakespeare and his wife. Thus, the writers of biofiction need to invent, to imagine what might have happened.

One of the key ingredients of biofiction, according to Lackey (2022: 13-16), is precisely agency, understood in relation not only to the author, but also to the biographical subject and the reader. That feature gives a greater richness and flexibility to this type of fiction in comparison with traditional 19<sup>th</sup>-century historical fiction, thus making the acts of writing and reading more powerful and fascinating. Lackey (2021: 8) writes that agency is “the stuff biofiction is made of, and it is one of the primary features that distinguishes it from historical fiction”. There are some other theoretical and ethical implications which are somewhat controversial and which I cannot discuss here now, like his discussion of the ethics of fictionalising a life (Lackey 2022: 111-125). Another key issue of biofiction for him is that the Irish have been instrumental in the development of this type of fiction, “because – he says – its history so incisively expresses the yearning for and the ever-evolving reality of what it means to be an agential being and many Irish men and women could so easily be converted into symbols or metaphors of a more universal and comprehensive form of emancipation” (Lackey 2021: 11).

Paradoxically, however, he admits that authors of biofictions do not need to be Irish. The case of Mario Vargas Llosa’s *El sueño del celta* is an example Lackey mentions. He (2022: 50-53) also adds that not even the topics and characters are to be necessarily restricted to an Irish focus, although by the end of the day those characters encapsulate the essence of Irishness in their desperate search for personal agency and political autonomy, in close association with the decolonisation of the mind. My contention in this paper follows some of those ideas, because the novel I will be discussing does not deal with Irish characters, even though the author is a Northern Irish writer brought up in Scotland.

### 3. Agnes Hathaway, from a neglected wife to a modern woman

In the last few years there have been a number of biographies and biographical novels about women who lived very close to great contemporary writers, but have been generally neglected by critics. In connection with Joyce, for instance, those on Nora Barnacle by Nuala O’Connor (*Nora*, 2021) and Mary Morrissey (*Penelope Unbound*, 2023), as well as those on Lucia Joyce by Annabel Abbs (*The Joyce Girl*, 2016), Joyce Garvey (*Lucia: The Girl Who Danced in the Shadows*, 2017) and Alex Pheby (*Lucia*, 2018). Also Orwell’s first wife, Eileen O’Shaughnessy, has been the subject of Sylvia Topp’s biography *Eileen: The Making of George Orwell* (2020) and Anna Funder’s fictionalised account *Wifedom: Mrs Orwell’s Invisible Life* (2023). Maggie O’Farrell’s novel *Hamnet* on Shakespeare’s wife (Agnes Hathaway) clearly belongs within that group of books on women who have been omitted or forgotten when the lives of the great writers have been told and retold. As reviewers said when the book was published, this novel is focused “on the everyday, domestic life of [Shakespeare’s] family”, where Agnes, instead of her husband, “is the celebrity, known in the town for being unconventional, free-spirited, a gifted herbalist who trails rumours of other, stranger gifts” (Merritt 2020). Also John Mullan (2020), writing for *The New Statesman*, asserts that “it is Shakespeare’s wife who dominates” to the extent that “[h]er husband is never named”, because this is “a novel about wifedom and motherhood”.

Historical documentation about Shakespeare's wife is certainly scanty. Even her real name is subject to some controversy, since she is usually known as Anne Hathaway, although her father, Richard Hathaway, refers to her, in his will, as Agnes. The reason for that is, as Germaine Greer explains (2007: 12), that both names were interchangeable at the time and Agnes was pronounced "Annis". Apart from the few mentions in the church archives at Stratford of her own wedding, or the baptisms, deaths and weddings of her children, no other relevant document that throws light on her personal life has survived. In Shakespeare's will there is just a very brief allusion to her, when the writer says that he bequeaths his "second-best bed with the furniture" to his wife, not even mentioning her name. This lack of documentation may account for the existence of only one full-length biography of her (Greer 2007). This is a highly controversial book, criticised for its high level of speculation and imagination, unsupported by documentary evidence, as well as by Greer's combative feminism (see reviews by Katherine Duncan-Jones 2007 and Charles Nicholl 2007). Greer, very much against the grain of traditional Shakespearean scholarship, presents her protagonist as an independent and influential woman.

What Maggie O'Farrell has done in her biofiction *Hamnet* is to fictionalise this character, whom she prefers to call Agnes Hathaway instead of Anne. O'Farrell (2020: 371) acknowledges the use, among other books on Shakespeare, of said Greer's biography, and many of the details of her character's everyday life follow the descriptions made by Greer about women living in a provincial setting in Elizabethan times. As Duncan-Jones (2007) has remarked, Greer presents Anne Hathaway's son-in-law, John Hall, who was a physician, as someone useless "except in so far as he may have learned a little bit about herbal medicine 'from women like Ann Shakespeare'". This view lacks documentary support, according to Duncan-Jones. But the idea that Shakespeare's wife was knowledgeable in medicinal plants is followed and extensively exploited by O'Farrell in her novel.

Certainly O'Farrell's characterisation of Agnes emphasises her agency, making her a wholly independent and strong woman, who cares for those in sickness and provides them with herbs and concoctions to cure them. She is presented in the novel as an expert in that field, someone who is familiar with nature, including animals such as bees and a hawk, and also grows and classifies a great diversity of plants and flowers (O'Farrell 2020: 16-18; 26; 36-40; *passim*). She receives in her home all sorts of people – mostly women – who come to her "from all over town, all over Warwickshire and beyond" (60), instead of visiting the physician. Curiously and paradoxically enough, considering how women who did that sort of healing were treated as witches and sorceresses, O'Farrell presents her heroine as a modern woman. When her own daughter Judith falls ill with the bubonic plague and the local physician is called to treat her, Agnes strongly opposes the superstitions shown by that man, as he prescribes the use of a dried toad to cure the girl (148-149). She furiously rejects that and instead prepares her own herbal medicines (122-130). The association of some women to this cultivation of herbal medicine is not unusual in the modern period, as Naomi J. Miller (2022) has recently recalled, when explaining the practice of alchemy and chemical and herbal remedies prepared by her character, the noble lady Mary Sidney Herbert, Countess of Pembroke and

sister to Sir Philip Sidney. This protagonist of Miller's biofiction *Imperfect Alchemist* (2020), in addition to her influential role in literary circles, also practised what was then considered science by some, and sorcery by others (Miller 2022: 131-132, 134).

Thus O'Farrell clearly decides to make Agnes Shakespeare a modern; independent woman in that sector, closer to science and to men's professions. She might have followed Greer's proposal in her speculative biography in which Shakespeare's wife, like other contemporary women of her class, was a sort of entrepreneur business woman, who made malt and lent money to others (Greer 2007: 276; 329; 333 *passim*); or even someone whose main productive activity was sewing and knitting, as she might have collaborated with Shakespeare's younger brother Gilbert, who was a haberdasher (idem: 170-184). However, O'Farrell prefers to take the option of presenting Shakespeare's wife as an independent woman in a different position, surely a much bolder and provocative hypothesis, far from the usual female roles. It is true that Greer also points occasionally to the possibility that Agnes Shakespeare was familiar with herbs and, like many other women of her class and time, used them to assist those who are ill (Greer 2007: 244-245; 247-248), but O'Farrell makes this issue of herbs a central concern of her novel and her depiction of the protagonist.

#### **4. A herbalist, a freethinker and a compassionate mother**

It seems logical that O'Farrell chose to follow this path, if we consider that the novel pivots around the death of the protagonist's son, Hamnet. As Lackey (2021: 107) has written, "one of the standard practices of biographical novelists [...] is to take something significant from the life of someone and then to build a fiction around that event, trait, or character". That "something significant" is undoubtedly the central trauma of Agnes Shakespeare's life, the death of her infant child Hamnet. She, who was so well recognised by many as a proficient healer, thanks to her knowledge of herbal medicine, was however unable to save her young son when he was attacked by the bubonic plague. Initially the plague affected Judith, the weaker twin, but her mother managed to cure her (O'Farrell 2020: 122-130). However, when the plague was passed on to Hamnet, who was so close to his sister, nothing could be done, even though she tried all sorts of remedies, including those in which she did not believe herself, such as those prescribed by physicians (idem: 248-252). Hamnet's death is crucial in her life, altering her capacities to act and to perceive reality. She initially reproaches herself for not being able to foresee her son's death, for not curing him, and abandons her herbs and patients (idem: 262-263; 278; 298-299).

Agnes's familiarity with herbs and plants permeates the whole narration, not only the episode of her child's death, to the extent that on their wedding night she holds a book that her husband gently takes from her hands, discovering that it is a treatise on plants: "Their uses. How to recognise them. How they heal certain illnesses and distempers" (idem: 136), and which surprisingly is written in Latin. She explains to Shakespeare that a neighbour gave it to her when she died; the book had belonged to her neighbour's husband, an apothecary, and she adds that, as a child, she used to help her neighbour with the garden. Once that neighbour told Agnes that

“she and my mother used to consult it together” (ibid.), thus making Agnes’s mother and that anonymous neighbour members of a female saga of herbal healers. Agnes can barely read (idem: 65), and of course has no Latin, so the playwright promises to read and translate it for her on another occasion (idem: 137).

What O’Farrell does in her novel goes beyond this central issue of Hamnet’s illness and death and Agnes’s agency as a healer. The protagonist is shown in the novel as possessing other qualities that make her a very special character. One of them is, for instance, her power of divination, which she exerts when touching other people’s hands, or through smells, a capacity that allows her some foresight into their futures, most notably what lies in her husband’s future as a playwright and writer (idem: 53; 55-58; 81; 142-143; 152; 162; 182-185; 210; 213 *passim*). That puts her in closer relation to some usual superstitions at the time, clearly making her look like a witch or sorceress. Her mother-in-law, Mary Shakespeare, is well aware of that, to the extent that she looks at her as a sort of devilish creature who has bewitched her son to make him fall in love with her: “This creature, this woman, this elf, this sorceress, this forest sprite – because she is that, everyone says so, Mary knows it to be true – bewitched and ensnared her boy, lured him into a union. This, Mary can never forgive” (idem: 207). When Agnes is absolutely desperate after her son’s death and fears she is also going to die, she implores her mother-in-law to take care of her two daughters (O’Farrell 2020: 235):

Mary is chilled, discomforted, her skin crawling with horror. She refuses, for the main part, to believe what people say about Agnes, that she can see people’s futures, she can read their palms, or whatever it is she does. But now, for the first time, she has a sense of what people mean. Agnes is of another world. She does not quite belong here.

In fact, Agnes seems to belong in that respect to our days, instead of to the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Those features that make her look like an alien to Mary Shakespeare and her contemporaries are rather examples of the female agency, freethinking and independence of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century woman. We appreciate it, for instance, in the way she contrives to have sex with the young “Latin tutor” (no other than Shakespeare himself), who visits her home to teach her younger half-siblings, and ultimately to marry him. It is she who takes the initiative, not the young and inexperienced Shakespeare, as also Duncan-Jones and Greer believe (qtd. by Greer 2007: 42), but that is not presented by O’Farrell as a negative trait (O’Farrell 2020: 83-84). For the novelist, Agnes is not a manipulator, contrary to what many Shakespearean scholars (particularly from the Victorian period onwards) have thought. For them she was a 26-year-old woman desperate to get married who managed to seduce and get pregnant by an 18-year-old boy, thus compelling him and his family to repair the damage through marriage (Greer 2007: 48). O’Farrell follows more closely Greer’s ideas in this episode, thus claiming a sort of proto-feminist personality for Agnes Hathaway.

Also against the opinion held by many Shakespearean scholars, the Agnes Hathaway O’Farrell has created in her novel is not abandoned by Shakespeare, a husband who allegedly dislikes and hates her for having ensnared him, and who departs for London to start a new life away from his wife and children. For O’Farrell,

it is precisely Agnes the person who devises, plans, and encourages Shakespeare's departure from home, his parents, and particularly his father. She is convinced that his family cannot understand what he is like and what his literary ambition represents. In fact, she manages to indirectly persuade Shakespeare's father to send his son to London, making him believe it was his idea rather than hers (O'Farrell 2020: 190-194; 205-209). So the implication is clear: without Agnes Hathaway's agency, Shakespeare's genius would not have existed. Nothing of what the "great man" produced would have been possible without that female agency.

Agnes's agency is moreover enhanced at the end of the novel, when she hears about the success her husband's play *Hamlet* is obtaining on the London stage only a few years after Hamnet's death. She is shocked and angry when her stepmother hands her a playbill announcing the play, since the names Hamlet and Hamnet are equivalent, sound alike, and wonders how her husband has been able to write a play on their dead son. That makes her leave Stratford for the first time, in the company of her brother Bartholomew, and go to London to watch the play herself and ask her husband about it (idem: 344-347). She is initially furious, thinking that her husband has no feelings for their dead child, that "he has taken the most sacred and tender of names and tossed it in among a jumble of other words, in the midst of a theatrical pageant" (idem: 363). But she changes her mind and experiences a beautiful epiphany when she attends the performance of the play. She is astonished when watching and listening to the young Hamlet on the stage, because the actor moves and speaks exactly like her son Hamnet, and she can't understand how Shakespeare has been able to find and train the young actor to behave like Hamnet. She suddenly sees the fantastic paradox of it all: the dead Hamlet is not her son Hamnet, but the ghost of the old king, whereas the young Hamlet is alive, what she would have wished her son to be (idem: 366):

Her husband has brought him back to life, in the only way he can. As the ghost talks, she sees that her husband, in writing this, in taking the role of the ghost, has changed places with his son. He has taken his son's death and made it his own; he has put himself in death's clutches, resurrecting the boy in his place. [...] He has, Agnes sees, done what any father would wish to do, to exchange his child's suffering for his own, to take his place, to offer himself up in his child's stead so that the boy might live.

In this respect, it is relevant to echo Jonathan Gil Harris's (2011: 618) reflections in his essay "Four Exoskeletons and No Funeral", when he talks about the ethical dimension evoked in the famous phrase by Marx and Engels "a specter is haunting Europe". For this critic, the ghost in *Hamlet* "has a dissident potential" because that ghost is "the sign of a body that has died, that belongs properly to another age. Moreover, the call to justice that the ghost utters is also a request that all appropriate rites should be performed so the dead might rest and time might advance once more into a better future" (idem: 619). Considering these words, and applying them to O'Farrell's novel, it is precisely Agnes Hathaway who favours this interpretation by reading and advocating in Shakespeare's text the future life of her dead son Hamnet (the future-to-be). This takes place through art, thanks to her husband's capacity to transcend death; Horace's verse *non omnis moriar* and many

of Shakespeare's sonnets about the power of poetry to transcend decay and death are certainly witness to that.

Finally, another important evidence of Agnes's agency in the novel is represented by the episodes of the labour and childbearing of her own children. Marisol Morales (2023: 35) has referred, in relation to Emma Donoghue's historical novels *The Wonder* and *The Pull of the Stars*, to the usual "absence of literary works devoted to pregnancy and the experience of labour, a unique female experience", which she considers "inexcusable, especially if we compare it with the visibility of mothering and motherhood". O'Farrell depicts in detail how Agnes Shakespeare favours natural birth, avoiding in the labour of her first child, Susanna, all the typical arrangements surrounding childbearing in her time. She leaves her home and escapes to the forest, as if following an enigmatic call from her dead mother. There, in the seclusion of a "shelter" of branches in the forest, where nobody can disturb her, she successfully performs her first labour all by herself, without any mid-wife (O'Farrell 2020: 152-160). She has assisted other women in labour before and has of course seen animals do it many times, helping her father on several occasions "when lambs were stuck" (idem: 155). So she feels safe and sure about the process and is not afraid. She experiences the throes of labour next to the trees, the plants and flowers she loves, and thus her baby is born free and pure, like an animal or an extraordinary creature, a fantastic mere-child, from the forests. The description of Agnes's emotion when she contemplates Susanna, her first baby, is powerfully poetic (idem: 159-160):

Agnes turns her on to her side, as her father always did with lambs, and watches as the water – from that other place where she has been, these long months – leaks out of her mouth. Her lips become tinged with pink and then the colour spreads to her cheeks, her chin, her eyes, her forehead. She looks, suddenly and completely, human. No longer aquatic, a mer-child [*sic*], as she did when she emerged, but a small person, very much herself, with her father's high forehead, his bottom lip, his swirl of hair at the crown of her head, and Agnes's sharp cheekbones and wide eyes.

This episode of her first labour contrasts sharply with that of the labour of the twins, Judith and Hamnet. Although Agnes tries to do the same as she did in the case of Susanna's birth, she is stopped by her mother-in-law and other members of the family. She is forced to stay at home and the labour takes place there, in the Henley Street cottage she shared with her in-laws, with the help of a mid-wife and Mary Shakespeare (O'Farrell 2020: 227-230). The implication of this change of scenario seems to be the ruin of the future development of those twins, and particularly Hamnet's dramatic death at a very early age, as if he could not be protected by the natural forces that had helped his elder sister Susanna (later Susanna Hall) in her long life (she died at 66).

## 5. Conclusion

What we have seen so far shows how O'Farrell favours, at least in this biographical novel, "presentism", a concept usually dismissed by scholars. However, as Rita Felski (2011: 576) has pointed out, some scholars of the Renaissance are now

particularly reclaiming the term “as a badge of honor [...], unabashedly confessing their interest in the present-day relevance rather than historical resonance of Shakespeare’s plays”. *Hamnet*, in fact, invites to be read from the context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, because this is a novel obviously written and addressed to readers living now and not in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Those values associated with female agency and other issues currently in the public debate in our contemporary society are evidence of that. As Felski (2011: 579) also notes, we as readers need to question ourselves how those issues, which are now ours – but must have also been relevant in the past –, “change our understanding of temporality”, challenging the artificiality of historical and literary periodisation: “Cross-temporal networks mess up the tidiness of our periodizing schemes, forcing us to acknowledge affinity and proximity alongside difference, to grapple with the coevalness and connectedness of past and present”.

It is appropriate to recall Lackey’s (2022: 17) emphasis on the agency of readers (not only of writers or of the biographical subjects) in biofictions, in opposition to what – he says – happens with historical fictions, at least those in the 19<sup>th</sup> century:

[h]istorical fiction gives readers deterministic truths of how we came to be as we currently are, but biofiction transports readers into the world of agential possibilities so that they can create themselves into something unique, original, and new. That biofiction came into being in order to counter the determinism and even fatalism of the historical novel partially explains why agency is one of the primary features of the literary form.

Although contemporary historical fiction is probably not affected so severely by that determinism Lackey mentions, it seems obvious that O’Farrell’s novel transcends that. What she has accomplished through her creation of Agnes is a defeat of that sense of determinism and fatalism, thus erasing the traditional view of Shakespeare’s wife as a shadow.

Martin Jay (2011) has written about the text and context and the limits of contextualisation in relation to Derrida’s well-known notion that “there is nothing outside of a text”, pointing to the idea that deconstruction is essentially a “radically textualist method”, although he remarks that Derrida “has also been called a ‘contextualist *par excellence*’ because of his dissolution of texts in a boundless sea of intertextuality” (Jay 2011: 568). Maggie O’Farrell’s *Hamnet* is clear evidence of that as well, of the “boundless sea of intertextuality” shown in this paper: O’Farrell’s merit, we might say, consists of presenting an important episode in the life of a 16<sup>th</sup>-century woman (the death of her son) by putting her in context with the texts – literary and non-literary – which conform her life. Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* – we can say – provides one of the contexts to interpret the protagonist of the play in the light of Agnes’s dead son in *Hamnet*, but also in the context of what surrounded that death and what possibly that death meant for Shakespeare and his family, and more specifically for his wife. As John Mullan (2020) put it, asking whether “people in the past [were] more stoical about infant mortality, when it was such a frequent fact of life”, the answer O’Farrell gives us is very clear: “no, no, no [...] *Hamnet*’s mother has no reason to expect her children to live, no right to feel appalled if any of them die. Yet incredulous and desolate she feels”.

In short, biofiction and female agency in this case constitute a powerful mechanism to prove Derrida right in his notion that “there is nothing outside the text”, no matter if the text and the context – real or invented –, in their complex intertextual intermingling, look apparently so distant and for some readers perhaps somewhat far-fetched. Because it is ultimately the agency of readers, and not only that of Maggie O’Farrell the author, or that of Agnes Hathaway/Agnes Shakespeare the biographical subject, what infuses meaning and significance to the myriad of texts and contexts.

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## TO THE BARE BONE: ANATOMIES OF (DIS)EMBODIMENT IN SHAKESPEARE

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**Abstract:** *This article studies references to bones in a small Shakespearean corpus so as to identify their role in shaping an anatomical imaginary with symbolic valences. As part of a larger project meant to study whether or not Shakespeare's anatomical imaginary is peculiar to the Bard, the article closely reads such occurrences, in tandem with the head terms' lexico-symbolic legacy. Furthermore, I compare some anatomical images in Shakespeare with those peppering Middle English biblical drama, to trace a likely continuum, if any, between the late medieval collective imagination of the body and violence and that permeating the Elizabethan age.*

**Keywords:** *anatomy, bone, memento mori, Middle English theatre, Shakespeare*

### 1. Introduction

When, in *Richard II*, Northumberland kneels before the king with an embassy from Bolingbroke requesting to see him, allegedly in order to surrender arms, Northumberland's speech (III.3.102-117) abounds in references to body parts. Kneeling (III.3.112) and hand kissing (III.3.103) are instantly recognisable gestures of submission, in this case compounded by (feigned) fealty pledging. Bolingbroke (through Northumberland) takes an oath on the bodily parts of Richard – and, through kinship, of his ancestors, identified synecdochically as bones (III.3.105, III.3.108). Bolingbroke also swears his allegiance “by the royalties of both your bloods,/ Currents that spring from one most gracious head” (III.3.106-107). *Blood* is a traditional shorthand metaphor for descent or ancestry (*Middle English Dictionary* [MED] 2001, s.v. “blōd”) and *head* for “kingship, authority” (Vries 1976, s.v. “head”) or importance (MED 2001, s.v. “hēd”). To bolster his claims of post-surrender fealty, Bolingbroke pledges his *heart*, metaphorically “the true self as opposed to the outward persona” (MED 2001, s.v. “herte”), and likewise the *spiritual* centre (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1982, s.v. “cœur”; Vries 1976, s.v. “heart”) qua *soul* (Vries 1976), hence also the seat of *emotion* (MED 2001; Vries 1976).

This study is part of a larger ongoing project which examines references to body parts in Shakespeare's plays. My overall project aims to go beyond identifying Shakespeare's medieval legacy (Cooper 2010; Schreyer 2014; Perry, Watkins (eds.) 2009; Morse, Cooper, Holland (eds.) 2013). It probes whether or not there is a mentality continuum between the anatomical imagination of medieval western (Catholic) Europe and that of Elizabethan (Protestant) England. For convenience,

here I closely read a small Shakespearean dramatic corpus of references to bones (and only passingly to other body parts), which I organise in accordance with functional/discursive contexts.

## 2. Elizabethan medievalism

As mentalities and religious sensibilities cannot change overnight, Elizabethan culture and religion were pervaded by the “deep structures of medieval culture” (Cooper 2010: 1), which also “affected [...] the way [Shakespeare] conceived his plays” (idem: 2). The biblical plays, in particular, although forbidden through the Act of 16 May 1559 and also suppressed by ecclesiastical authorities in the 1560s and 1570s, “remained vitally present to the next generation of theatergoers, even those who could not have experienced them directly” (O’Connell 2009: 201). Overall, the Reformation afforded “a cultural re-formation and re-membling of bonds between early modern subjects and medieval artifacts” (Schreyer 2014: 2).

Stratford’s location permitted young Shakespeare to watch performances at Coventry in the 1570s, as suggested by “scattered references in his plays” to biblical drama (O’Connell 2009: 200). (Unfortunately, too little of the Coventry corpus – the Shearmen and Taylors’ and the Weavers’ pageants – is extant, for us to gauge what Shakespeare could watch.) Fascinated by biblical drama and “the ways in which he [could] transmute it in his own theatre” (idem: 199), Shakespeare created plays which “paradoxically distinguish [themselves] from the mysteries precisely through transformative incorporation of elements of that dramatic tradition” (Schreyer 2014: 2).

How medieval is Shakespeare’s body imagery and what body is that, especially considering the “incarnational aesthetic” of medieval and Elizabethan drama? (Gail McMurray Gibson 1989, qtd. in Cooper 2010: 240, note 21, uses “incarnational aesthetic” to describe medieval drama). *Staging* – not simply reporting rhetorically – *the action* (Cooper 2010: 48) focuses on the body and, I contend, reveals its cognitive-epistemological potential. The latter aspect thus tallies with the fundamental ambiguity – and comprehensiveness – of the Elizabethan name for the playhouse: *theatrum mundi*, “encyclopaedia of the world” (idem: 52). The aptly named Globe became “a new kind of social and cognitive space – a material realization of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor” (Montrose 1996: 210).

## 3. The rheumatic body in pain

Many of Shakespeare’s characters demonstrate a lot of common sense – often of the earthy type – regarding body/health. Indeed, some of their remarks sound like clinical studies of sorts.

Having been in the sea during the tempest will affect/afflict his bones forever, Trinculo fears: “I have been in such a pickle since I saw you/ last that, I fear me, will never out of my bones” (*The Tempest*, V.1.285-286). Trinculo’s ‘pickled’ bones – unlike Falstaff’s in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* – risk developing a rheumatic condition.

The Elizabethans used *rheum*-related terms loosely and could ‘diagnose’, if not yet name, rheumatism (Chung 2016: 708) in their ailing bodies. In Shakespeare, “rheum”-derived words appear in diverse contexts: for a “raw, rheumatic day” (*The Merry Wives of Windsor*, III.1.44), possibly *humid*; or for Falstaff as “rheumatic” (*Henry V*, II.3.35), likely choleric, in “handl[ing] women” (II.3.34) (Shewmaker 2008, s.v. “rheumatic”).

Andrew Boorde’s *The Breuiarie of Health* (1547) (qtd. in Norri 2016, s.v. “rheum”), ascribed rheum to either a condition in the head or exposure to cold: “Reume is ingendred in the heed, which is a viscus humour, and it is ingendred of takynge colde in the fete and in the heed & necke” Indeed, the Middle English noun *reume* (first recorded c. 1398) named any “[w]atery bodily humour thought to drain from brain and cause sickness in lower parts” (Norri 2016, s.v. “rheum”; see also MED 2001, s.v. “reume” n.).

*Rheumatism* names nowadays “a group of conditions often with vague or non-existent physical signs”: aches and pains, polymyalgia rheumatica, myopathy and “soft tissue (nonarticular) rheumatism” (Golding 1981: 17). However, “the commonest type of rheumatism” is actually *referred pain*, i.e., pain which does not originate in the aching area (ibid.).

In Shakespeare, not ‘pickling’, but age causes bone-aches. Gonzalo (*The Tempest*, III.3.2) and the Nurse (*Romeo and Juliet*, II.4.26) seem to be afflicted by rheumatic pain. Notwithstanding, the condition begs for remedy: “Is this the poultice for my aching bones?” (II.4.63), the Nurse enquires.

Old Pandarus complains about bone-aches (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.3.108) alongside “phthisic” (V.3.104-105), a condition related to pulmonary tuberculosis, and “rheum in mine eyes” (V.3.107-108), humid matter in or discharge from his eyes (cf. *Hamlet*, II.2.201; *Henry IV, Part 2*, I.2.181). In the alternative Quarto ending (Shakespeare 2005: 776, Additional passage B), Pandarus complains, in his soliloquy, about the “goodly medicine” ([V.11.4]) – Troilus’s blow – for his “aching bones” (ibid.), before vowing to retaliate so that Troilus’s bones will ache worse ([V.11.18]). Pandarus’s latest bone-ache is social in origin: it owes to his disreputable business to procure his niece, Cressida, for Troilus. How could the kind-hearted Gonzalo or Nurse have been made to complain about “phthisic” and “rheum in [their] eyes”, alongside the virtue-neutral bone-ache which plagues the elderly?

#### 4. What’s in a bone?

Unlike his predecessors, yet like Galen in the second century CE, Andreas Vesalius did not organise his anatomical treatise *De humani corporis fabrica* (1543) by replicating the order of dissection (which started with the fleshy parts most easily yielding to decay). Rather, he preferred to ‘build’ his treatise on the solid ‘foundations’ of bones (Book 1) and their ‘springs’, the muscles (Book 2), as if it were an edifice. Another novelty was Vesalius’s presentation of whole-body images from the front, side and rear, shown in exemplary actions: the full skeleton plates on three consecutive pages (Vesalius 1543: 163-165) depict animated bones in a

Christian-melancholy posture (idem: 163) – including the proto-Hamletian *memento mori* (idem: 164) – or praying (idem: 165).

Mutatis mutandis, Shakespeare uses references to the bones hardly differently. (This is not meant to suggest Shakespeare's familiarity with Vesalius's tract.) Shakespeare's bone references recur as the paradigmatic synecdoche for the living (cf. MED 2001, s.v. "bōn"), often corresponding to our modern "flesh and blood". The latter is itself a phrase of medieval origin, e.g. *flesh and blod* (c. 1275), for the human body as a whole, or *blod and bon* (c. 1300), for "the body, physical nature" and "the bodily appetites" (MED, s.v. "blōd" n. 1).

In the simplest – quasi-Vesalian – terms, human beings can be identified synecdochically as bones. On being deposed, Richard II invokes his divine right to the throne (*Richard II*, III.3.76-77) by reference to God's hand (III.3.76) that has granted it. He avers that no *human* hand – couched metonymically as "blood and bone" (III.3.78) – could depose him without thereby committing a criminal offence (III.3.80).

Bassanio encourages Antonio not to despair regarding the latter's contract with Shylock. He does so by using a fairly comprehensive anatomical conceit: "The Jew shall have my flesh, blood, bones, and all,/ Ere thou shalt lose for me one drop of blood" (*Merchant of Venice*, IV.1.110-112). Bassanio sounds intent on laying down his life – "my flesh, blood, bones, and all" (IV.1.111) – rather than let the Jewish usurer exact his payment: a pound of Antonio's flesh. Precisely Bassanio's "one drop of blood" (IV.1.112) phrase – of racial ill repute in the post-Civil War US – will be used by Portia/Balthasar to revoke the infamous contract (IV.1.302-309).

When Achilles orders Hector killed, he uses the bone-for-person synecdoche compounded by the Hector-as-Troy metonymy: "Now, Troy, sink down./ Here lies thy heart, thy sinews and thy bone" (*Troilus and Cressida*, V.9.11-12). Achilles's discursive anatomisation of his enemy functions as a *blazon* of sorts. (The very verb "anatomize" appears in *King Lear*, III.6.34-36 and *Henry IV*, Part 2, Introduction, 21.) Achilles sees Hector as Troy's heart, i.e., the "centre of life, vitality, or energy" and "the seat of courage or determination" (MED 2001, s.v. "herte"), and a valiant warrior, the sinew-and-bone 'mechanism' of Troy's defensive warfare. (Besides denoting tendons, muscles or even nerves (MED 2001, s.vv. "sineu", "nerve"; Norri 2016, s.v. "sinew"), "sinew" also connoted the "source of power or strength" (Shewmaker 2008, s.v. "sinew")). Ulysses used a similarly complex conceit earlier in his address to his commander-in-chief, Agamemnon. Like "thy sinews and thy bone", mentioned of Hector in relation to Troy (V.9.12), "nerve and bone of Greece" (I.3.54), of Agamemnon, connotes Agamemnon's military, not just political, stewardship of his country and his spiritual containment of his warrior countrymen.

Besides synecdochically naming the human being, bones reflect one's condition. Being work-exhausted can be felt in the bones, Claudio states (*Measure for Measure*, IV.2.64-66). His simile demonstrates the (Vesalian) obvious: that bones bear the literal and figurative burden of life.

Destitution, psychological turmoil and impiety alike can result in emaciation. Romeo purchases the lethal potion from an apothecary with "[m]eagre [...] looks" (*Romeo and Juliet*, V.1.40), whom "[s]harp misery had worn [...] to the bones"

(V.1.41). Timon conjures the flesh-less bones image in his misanthropic advice to his compassionate servant Flavius: “let the famished flesh slide from the bone” (*Timon of Athens*, IV.3.529). Alcibiades curses the uncompassionate senators: “Now the gods keep you old enough that you may live/ Only in bone, that none may look on you!” (*Timon of Athens*, III.6.102-103). Lucio slights the First Gentleman: “thy bones are hollow, impiety has made a feast of thee” (*Measure for Measure*, I.2.54-55). The interlocutor can escape criticism about his impiety-induced bone erosion only by feigning an interest in Mistress Overdone’s ill health: “How now, which of your hips has the most profound sciatica?” (I.2.56-57). Ironically, her condition also alludes to lack of ‘virtue’: the Elizabethans regarded sciatica as “a symptom of venereal disease and an affliction among bawds” (Shewmaker 2008, s.v. “sciatica”). If to be but skin and bone is to be reduced to bare essentials for survival, bone and ache often appear to be unwholesome, yet virtually – if not always virtuously too – inseparable bedfellows, as much in life as argumentatively.

When Macbeth swears: “I’ll fight, till from my bones my flesh be hack’d” (*Macbeth*, V.3.33), he envisages his death as disincarnation – albeit not emaciation – through the un-fleshing of the bones in battle. The image recalls King Herod the Great’s massacre of the Innocents in Middle English plays, such as the so-called N-Town collection (henceforth NT). In *The Slaughter of the Innocents and the Death of Herod* (NT20), Herod orders: “Hewe the flesch with (*through*) the bon” (NT20, l. 26, qtd. in Ciobanu 2018: 48-49). Likewise, evoking the dragons (NT29/35) that feed on the flesh of the Christians (NT29) driven, upon his order, into dungeons (NT35), King Herod Antipas exclaims, in *Herod; Trial before Annas and Cayphas*: “To me is very plesauns/ [...] To rend flesche and bonys” (NT29, ll. 34, 36, qtd. in Ciobanu 2018: 89). However different superficially, revengeful punishment of the undesirable in the two Herods’ case, and valiant death in combat, in Macbeth’s, point in the same direction: that of a collective imagination permeated by violent corporeal disintegration.

*Bone* references work even more appositely as the paradigmatic synecdoche for the dead (MED 2001, s.v. “bōn”), in a traditional empirically-based conceit. The medieval practice of bone relocation from the grave into the charnel house could only boost the synecdoche.

The ossuary features prominently in Juliet’s retort to Friar Laurence. Determined to commit suicide rather than marry Paris, Juliet learns about a “remedy” (*Romeo and Juliet*, IV.1.76) to feign death and embraces the possibility:

Or hide me nightly in a charnel-house  
O’ercovered quite with dead men’s rattling bones,  
With reeky shanks and yellow chapless skulls;  
Or bid me go into a new-made grave  
And hide me with a dead man in his tomb  
(IV.1.81-85)

Being with the dead – covered by bones and putrefying body parts – is preferable for Juliet, to betraying her beloved husband. However, on preparing to drink the potion, Juliet fears that, should it fail her, she will either die or experience

The horrible conceit of death and night,  
 Together with the terror of the place –  
 As in a vault, an ancient receptacle  
 Where for this many hundred years the bones  
 Of all my buried ancestors are packed; [...]  
 O, if I wake, shall I not be distraught,  
 Environèd with all these hideous fears,  
 And madly play with my forefathers' joints [?]  
 (IV.3.36-40, 48-50)

Juliet evokes, in late medieval *danse macabre* fashion, the grisly ludic opportunities an early awakening presents. Mad with terror, she can “madly play with [her] forefathers' joints” (IV.3.50) in the crypt so as to tame her “hideous fears” (IV.3.49). A handful of ancestors' bones can furnish Juliet a sui generis toy for alleviating her dread of death and the dead – not unlike in artist Michael Wolgemut's prancing-skeletons dance of death (*The Nuremberg Chronicle* 1493: 261). (Shakespeare was familiar, albeit not necessarily first-hand, with *danse macabre* and *transi* tombs representations (Cooper 2010: 28-30).) Yet, Juliet also wonders rhetorically if she wouldn't “dash out [her] desp'rate brains” (IV.3.53) “with some great kinsman's bone/ As with a club” (IV.3.52-53).

A comparable conceit is used by Portia, in a similar context to Juliet's: “I had rather be/ married to a death's-head with a bone in his mouth/ than to either of these” (*Merchant of Venice*, I.2.49-50). In Portia's death emblem (I.2.50), the skull virtually cannibalises its own body or perhaps another's.

Ancestors are typically referred to as “bones”. Macduff answers Rosse's question about the whereabouts of Duncan's body in terms of the late king's guardianship of his predecessors' “bones” (*Macbeth*, II.4.36) in the “sacred storehouse” (II.4.35) at Colme-kill. As we have seen, Bolingbroke, through his envoy, Northumberland, refers to the ancestor of Richard II as “your royal grandsire's bones” (*Richard II*, III.3.105). Invoking the ancestors' tomb, in his oath, gives further legitimacy to Bolingbroke's claims (III.3.104-105).

Bone references can evoke death and the dead in relatively restrained terms. So do Mutius's brothers (*Titus Andronicus*, I.1.366, I.1.384-385) or Leonato (and later the bereaved Claudio) vis-à-vis Hero's alleged burial: “Hang her an epitaph upon her tomb,/ And sing it to her bones, sing it tonight” (*Much Ado about Nothing*, V.1.276-277). Annoyed that his speech as Hector is being interrupted, during the performance of the Nine Worthies, Armado demands: “The sweet war-man [Hector] is dead and rotten. Sweet/ chucks, beat not the bones of the buried” (*Love's Labour's Lost*, V.2.653-654). Referring to Chaucer, whose “The Knight's Tale” (in *The Canterbury Tales*) inspired *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, the speaker of the Prologue commends Chaucer's bones (Prologue 17) to “sweet sleep” (idem 29). In the play proper, the First Queen, alongside the other two, complains to Theseus about Creon's uncharitable decision to forbid the burial of their vanquished husbands (I.1.43-44, I.1.49-50). Even if, pragmatically, it would be too early to refer to the dead as “bones”, nonetheless the force of the traditional image sanctions the Queen's (I.1.43, I.1.49) and Theseus's (I.4.7) imagery.

Under the force of the-dead-as-bones trope, sometimes the living too imagine their (or others') time of death or burial by evoking bones. King and clown alike do so. Such is the case of Richard II (*Richard II*, III.2.149-150; cf. Griffiths 2022: 45) or Henry V (*Henry V*, I.2.228-229) and of Feste (*Twelfth Night*, II.4.61). When the Duchess of York invites Queen Elizabeth to sit down, the latter contemplates the prospect of rather hiding her own bones – being dead – in a grave (*Richard III*, IV.4.31-34). Enraged that Othello has slandered Desdemona, Emilia curses him: “A halter pardon him, and hell gnaw his bones!” (*Othello*, IV.2.140). For Emilia, Othello deserves an eternity in hell.

From the synecdochic bones-qua-body it is only a short step to contemplating “the way of all flesh” (Samuel Butler’s phrase) and/or appraising life in the medieval religious terms of *memento mori* and *vanitas*. At the ironic end, Falstaff chides the prostitute Doll Tearsheet for acting like a *memento mori* incarnate: “do not speak like a death’s-head,/ do not bid me remember mine end” (*Henry IV, Part 2*, II.4.236-237). In her turn, Doll excoriates the emaciated First Beadle as a merciless Death figure: “Goodman death, goodman bones!” (V.4.28). At the commonsensical end, Ulysses notes the decay of persons, relationships and feelings alike over time (*Troilus and Cressida*, III.3.165-168), in an adroit summary of *Everyman*. In doing so, he also reframes Hamlet’s “yet to me what is this quintessence of dust?” (*Hamlet*, II.2.309-310), the anti-climax of his “What a piece of work is a man!” monologue (II.2.305-312).

Confronted with the burial at sea of his wife, Thaisa, Pericles mourns being unable to erect “a monument upon thy bones” (*Pericles*, Scene 11.60). Rather, “the belching whale/ And humming water must o’erwhelm thy corpse,/ Lying with simple shells” (Scene 11.61-63). Pericles’s imagery shares little of the (post-)medieval depictions of rottenness, preferring instead the poise of the (absent) mausoleum. Its benignness foreshadows Ariel’s song, in *The Tempest*, which describes King Alonso’s alleged death by drowning:

Full fathom five thy father lies.  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes,  
Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.  
(I.2.399-405)

In Ariel’s song, the image of classic rottenness is transmuted, indeed, sea-changed, into one of beautification-qua-mineralisation – a reverse *vanitas* (or quasi-sanctification). Shakespeare’s “benthic imagination” (Brayton 2012: 53), i.e., imagination of the depths (Greek *benthos*, “bottom of the sea”), typically “bring[s] the reader into their murky otherworldliness” (idem: 68). However, in this imaginary “benthic metamorphosis” decay becomes *poesis* (ibid.).

By contrast, in *Richard III*, Clarence’s account of his nightmare about his death by drowning bears all the trappings of medieval horror:

Methoughts I saw a thousand fearful wrecks,  
 Ten thousand men that fishes gnawed upon;  
 Wedges of gold, great anchors, heaps of pearl,  
 Inestimable stones, unvalued jewels,  
 All scattered in the bottom of the sea.  
 Some lay in dead men's skulls; and in those holes  
 Where eyes did once inhabit, there were crept –  
 As 'twere in scorn of eyes – reflecting gems,  
 That wooed the slimy bottom of the deep  
 And mocked the dead bones that lay scattered by.  
 (I.4.24-33)

Clarence's is a *memento mori* which depicts the aquatic decay of shipwreck victims in nightmarishly graphic terms compounded by apparent mockery (I.4.31, I.4.33). His "sights of ugly death" (I.4.23) are cast in the medieval dream-vision tradition, which often shows the fate of the sinful dead in hell (cf. Brayton 2012: 41, 71-73).

Indeed, in Shakespeare, many references to the dead are either soberly admonitory or downright macabre, in true medieval vein. Occasionally, though, they may partake of the spirit of both. Such is the case of Richard II's answer to Aumerle, when his cousin enquires about the whereabouts of his father's body:

Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs [...]
 [...] For within the hollow crown  
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
 Keeps Death his court; and there the antic sits,  
 Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
 Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
 To monarchize, be feared, and kill with looks,  
 Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
 As if this flesh which walls about our life  
 Were brass impregnable; and humoured thus,  
 Comes at the last, and with a little pin  
 Bores through his castle wall; and farewell, king.  
 Cover your heads, and mock not with flesh and blood  
 With solemn reverence. [...]  
 (Richard II, III.2.141, 156-168)

*Vanitas* and *memento mori* underpin Richard II's recognition of royal vulnerability, indebted to the iconography of Death depicted as a crowned skeleton (Cooper 2010: 30). His sarcasm is matched, even outclassed, by Hamlet's, when the Danish prince reveals the fate of dead Polonius (*Hamlet*, IV.3.17-36) as the would-be feast of "politic worms" (IV.3.21).

Unlike Hamlet (*Hamlet* III.1.70-90), Timon ascribes impediment to progress in life to disease, which consumes body and determination alike. For the Athenian misanthrope, the human body is but a receptacle and display case of wasting diseases qua moral rotteness, "[c]onsumptions" (*Timon of Athens*, IV.3.151), i.e., often "venereal disease" (Shewmaker 2008, s.v. "consumption"). He envisages syphilis planted into men's "hollow bones" (IV.3.153) and the crippling resulted from kicking

their shins (IV.3.151-153). In Timon's quasi-apocalyptic speech, the punishment of the priest who publicly vituperates about carnal pleasures, yet privately pursues them himself (IV.3.155-157), is to be struck by leprosy, so that his nose rots off (IV.3.157-159). Sin will have eroded his living body just as decay does the corpse – as the medieval *transi* tombs showed (Hallam et al. 1999: 25).

Unsurprisingly, the anatomy of dreaded ghosts takes after that of the dead (or of Timon's picture of the dead in life). When Macbeth endeavours to drive away Banquo's Ghost, his description of the immaterial body – "Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold./ Thou hast no speculation in those eyes" (III.4.93-94) – recalls emaciated or dead bodies.

### 5. The body in pieces in threats, curses and oaths

Shakespeare's characters do not shun either physical or verbal abuse, and the latter – framed as threats or curses – often invokes the former. Deliberately aggressive actions – punishment or revenge, and, less typically, trials – demonstrate the vulnerability of the body frame.

An interesting case occurs in *The Tempest*. Whilst Caliban himself curses Prospero (I.2.323-326, I.2.366-367, II.2.1-3), Prospero's threats (I.2.327-332, I.2.370-373), followed by action, command Caliban's grudging obedience. Furious that Caliban is plotting with Stephano and Trinculo against his life, Prospero orders Ariel:

[...] charge my goblins that they grind (*torment*) their joints  
With dry convulsions (*stiff spasms*), shorten (*tighten*) up their sinews  
With agèd cramps, and more pinch-spotted make them  
Than pard or cat o'mountain.

(IV.1.256-259)

Caliban and his Neapolitan accomplices are thus doomed to the painful existence of the elderly, afflicted by rheumatism (IV.1.256-257; cf. I.2.372), cramps (IV.1.258; cf. I.2.327-328, I.2.370), unsightly spots caused by torturous pinching (IV.1.258; cf. I.2.330-332) – and terror. Prospero's recourse to magic converts the body into a weapon that doubly punishes the victim: both through pain-inflicting torture (Scarry 1985: 47) and through his virtual transformation into an old, decrepit person.

Torn between the demands of his elder daughters to downsize his retinue and his urgent need to be housed by either one, a rejected Lear curses Goneril: "Strike her young bones,/ You taking airs, with lameness!" (*King Lear*, II.2.336-337). Lear's tongue-inflicted suffering, for her demand "struck me with her tongue" (II.2.333), 'calls' for the presumptuous daughter's bone affliction (II.2.336-337).

On seeing Ferdinand's forced labour of piling up logs, Miranda compassionately volunteers to shoulder his task. The prince gallantly refuses her help: "I'd rather crack my sinews, break my back" (*The Tempest*, III.1.24). Ferdinand's oath recalls the imagery of the snapping sinews and broken bones central to the Middle English Crucifixion plays. In the York *Crucifixion* (henceforth, Y35), after driving the peg

through “bones and senous (*sinews*)” (Y35, l. 103; qtd. in Ciobanu 2018: 133) to pin Jesus to the cross, the soldiers realise that his left hand, with shrunken sinews (idem: Y35, l. 108), cannot reach the hole. Accordingly, they haul him into position with ropes, “Yf all his synnous go asoundre” (Y35, 132), even if all his sinews were to be torn asunder.

Few Shakespearean characters, irrespective of their social standing, are completely invulnerable to physical violence. Some experience beating due to the ruler’s madness: “I feel’t upon my bones” (*Timon of Athens*, III.7.114). Others brag about inflicting it. Although constantly hit and/or threatened by Ajax, Thersites mentions reciprocal beating: “I have bobbed his/ brain more than he has beat my bones. I will buy nine/ sparrows for a penny, and his *pia mater* is not worth/ the ninth part of a sparrow” (*Troilus and Cressida*, II.1.71-74). The more battery in punishment or revenge Shakespeare’s plays threaten or describe, the more it recalls the spectacle of punishment and scorn of the Middle English Passion plays. In York’s *Christ before Pilate 2: The Judgement* (henceforth Y33), for instance, Jesus’s profuse bleeding at the hands of his tormentors looks as though his brain were pouring out from the armour of his skull: “it helde to his hede þat þe harness (*brains*) out hailes (*pour*)” (Y33, ll. 399, 401, qtd. in Ciobanu 2018:131). The description virtually foreshadows Thersites’s boast (*Troilus and Cressida*, II.1.71-73) that Ajax’s skull cannot protect his brain well, on meeting Thersites’s blows.

For the Romans, outstanding war prisoners are meant for sacrifice before the tomb of the dead – “this earthly prison of their bones” (*Titus Andronicus*, I.1.99) – to *appease* them (I.1.100). Lucius demands to be given “the proudest prisoner of the Goths,/ That we may hew his limbs and on a pile/ *Ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh” (I.1.96-98). His verb “hew” (I.1.97), of Anglo-Saxon origin, meant in Middle English to “chop (sth.), cut, hew” and to “dismember or mutilate (sb., a part of the body)”, hence also to “cut or strike with a weapon in combat” (MED 2001, s.v. “heuen” v.1). The horrifying image conjured by Lucius’s “hew his limbs” echoes the terms in which Deus, in York’s *The Building of the Ark* (henceforth Y8), warns Noah he will destroy humankind in punishment for unmentioned/-able sins: “þai shall be shente (*destroyed, damned*)/ And fordone (*destroyed, damned*) hoyly, hyde (*rejected, forsaken*) and hewe (*stricken*)” (Y8, ll. 21-22; qtd. in Ciobanu 2018: 88). As we have seen, N-Town’s Herod the Great orders his soldiers to butcher the infants: “Hewe the flesch with (*through*) the bon” (NT20, l. 26). In both Shakespeare and the Middle English plays, the atrocity of this image of destruction is augmented by the speaker’s association with tyrannical power.

In an age when the revenge tragedy was thriving, Shakespeare could depict the dismemberment of enemies in revenge. Perhaps the best known scene of threatening followed by its enactment is Titus Andronicus’s punishment of the rapists of Lavinia, Chiron and Demetrius:

This one hand yet is left to cut your throats,  
Whiles Lavinia ’tween her stumps doth hold  
The basin that receives your guilty blood. [...]

Hark, villains, I will grind your bones to dust,  
 And with your blood and it I'll make a paste,  
 And of the paste a coffin I will rear,  
 And make two pasties of your shameful heads,  
 And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,  
 Like to the earth swallow her own increase. [...]

And now, prepare your throats. Lavinia, come,  
 Receive the blood, and when that they are dead  
 Let me go grind their bones to powder small,  
 And with this hateful liquor temper it,  
 And in that paste let their vile heads be baked.  
 (V.2.180-182, V.2.185-190, V.2.195-199)

This graphic description of the impending execution-revenge has long been noticed for its cruelty not only, physically, towards the two Goth brothers, but also, emotionally (and also physically, through straining), towards Lavinia. (Critics seems to ignore Tamora). Inspired by Seneca's *Thyestes*, the envisaged bloody "banquet" (V.2.192, V.2.201) intended to fool Tamora into feasting cannibalistically, if unknowingly, on her own progeny magnifies – through repetition – the atrocity of the utter destruction of the body, bone grinding and all.

In sickness (or death) as in health, bones appear to be much more crucial than the very flesh they 'bear'. Paradoxically, though, such solid matter can be crushed so easily – to indicate the vulnerability of the body to violent actions, disease and decay at any stage in life (and also after death, the latter).

## 6. Conclusion

The above inventory of bone references in some of Shakespeare's plays is not meant to be exhaustive. Nor is it sufficiently elaborated on so as to furnish a strong case study of the mentality continuum between the anatomical imagination of medieval Catholic Europe and that of Protestant England, which my overall project investigates. Where possible, I have indicated Shakespeare's medieval legacy either at the lexical level or in *memento mori* imagery or in relation to Middle English biblical drama. Determining to what extent Shakespeare included 'original' anatomical topoi – apart from Ariel's description of Alonso's envisaged "sea-change" bea(u)tification – is tantalising, yet hardly my goal here. I would argue, provisionally, that body references belong to a full-fledged *collective* (rather than idiosyncratic) anatomical imagination.

From a theatrical perspective, what such references accomplish on the stage is the characters' humanisation and experience of embodied cognition. From stock characters and two-dimensional speakers, the characters become relatable three-dimensional 'beings', whose (fear of) ailments, fatigue, extreme passions, old age or death the actors can make visible – embody – all the more convincingly. Vulnerability can conceivably be regarded as the lowest common denominator of being "flesh and bone", and the characters may reach cognitive depths with an undeniable philosophical tinge by merely invoking bones in *danse macabre* fashion to describe the human condition.

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## A CITY OF CONTRASTS: THE UNDERBELLY OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LONDON

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**Abstract:** *The present article examines London not as the largest and most magnificent capital in Europe by the dawn of the eighteenth century, but as a sordid and dangerous city, in which poverty, starvation, crime and prostitution were in full swing. Although a considerable body of eighteenth-century English literature reveals the latter view of the city, I choose to focus on Edward Ward's The London Spy (1698-1700) and Tom Brown's Amusements Serious and Comical, Calculated for the Meridian of London (1700), two satirical representations of the dark side of London written by non-elite authors, and on John Gay's Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London (1716), a guide to the modern capital of Britain.*

**Keywords:** *configuration of space, literary representations, the underbelly of London, urban imaginary, walking*

### 1. Introduction

In a poem entitled “A Description of London” (1738), John Bancks portrays the hustle and bustle of the city seen as a kaleidoscopic space catering to all walks of life. However, his image of London is far from being majestic: streets that “are unpleasant in all weather” (Ford 2015: 280) are rife with rogues and crime, “gaudy things” (ibid.) are deceiving and lawyers, poets, priests, and physicians of all ranks hide their wickedness under the guise of worth and humility. Although a city of possibilities, Bancks’s London unravels its dark side marked by poverty, corruption and vice: “Many a beau without a shilling, / Many a widow not unwilling; / Many a bargain, if you strike it: / This is London! How d’ye like it?” (ibid.). The direct question is highly suggestive of London as a city of contrasts, inviting the reader to muse on its magnificence and grubbiness alike.

Labelled by many historians as the largest and most elegant capital of Europe at the dawn of the eighteenth century, London has been tackled in tandem with the rise of modern institutions, as well as refined sociability, politeness, taste and genius. Recent studies, however, have focused on representations – be they historical, cultural or literary – of London as a filthy and dangerous city, highlighting a multifaceted capital that had been subject to major architectural and socio-economic changes since the Great Fire of 1666. Such is the case of Jerry White who, in his book entitled *A Great and Monstrous Thing: London in the Eighteenth Century* (2013), performs

a well-documented analysis of London divided by class, geography, politics and religion. According to White (2013: xix-xx),

[...] when we think of England in this century it is really London we have in mind, for London led the nation in genius, elegance and manners to an overwhelming degree. There is a great deal of truth in this characterisation, but a proper balance needs to be struck. For this was a city (and an Age) of starving poverty as well as shining polish, a city of civility and a city of truculence, a city of decorum and a city of lewdness, a city of joy and a city of despair, a city of sentiment and a city of cruelty. We might truthfully summarise it as a city of extremes. In Daniel Defoe's epigram of the early 1720s, London really was 'this great and monstrous Thing'."

Although Defoe's oxymoron best characterises the British capital in the early eighteenth century, my aim is to zoom in on three literary representations of "the monstrous", or the underbelly of eighteenth-century London, as perceived by three authors who act as walking spectators of the city. I will discuss two satires, Edward Ward's *The London Spy* (1698-1700) and Tom Brown's *Amusements Serious and Comical*, and John Gay's *Trivia: or, the Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716), the first guide to London meant to instruct newcomers on how to avoid the pitfalls that lurk in the city in the wintertime. What holds the three texts together is the authors' immersion in the city as engaged – not blasé – walkers, who configure the topography of London through the act of writing and the representation of the dark side of London as an alternative, multifarious, and dynamic urban imaginary, predicated on first-hand experience. In the case of Gay's *Trivia*, one can add the pedagogical dimension, whereby the fictionalised world of the real intersects with the world of the reader, who either empathizes or becomes conversant with the places described. As Catharina Löffler (2017: 142) has cogently observed, "after the fire, London was virtually erased and other modes of perception were demanded". Concerned with applying the concept of "literary psychogeography" to eighteenth-century literary representations of London, Löffler argues that the walker paradigm implies a form of subjectivity that "was part of this new discourse of perception [...] and that resulted in the creation of different urban imaginaries of London" (ibid.). In what follows, I will connect the walker trope – which is not to be understood as a synonym for the picaresque – with Edward Soja's (2000: 11) coinage of "Thirdspace", a term he defines as "fully *lived space*, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual, locus of structured individual and collective experience and agency" (original emphasis). Read in this light, the texts under scrutiny have a potential for unravelling "collective experience and agency" in the city through the lens of authorial observation, perambulation through the crowds and, most notably, construction or fictional configuration of the "lived space". In the words of Löffler (2017: 142), "Thirdspace" "creates spaces 'in-between,' spaces where reality and its subjective literary representation come together and form a new space". Last but not least, as a new epistemology of the urban, "Thirdspace" allows us to grasp "the infinite complexity of life through its intrinsic spatial, social, and historical dimensions, its interrelated spatiality, sociality, and historicity" (Soja 2000: 12).

## 2. A guide to vicious London

Although published earlier than Joseph Addison and Richard Steele's fashionable *The Spectator* (1711-1714), Edward Ward's *The London Spy* (1698-1700), published in eighteen monthly instalments, represents the counterpart of the former, in that it provides a grisly description of the metropolis. Unlike *The Spectator's* mission to cultivate taste, manners, politeness, sociability, gentlemanly or gentlewomanly decorum and the reformation of vices, *The London Spy* is a sample of eighteenth-century popular culture which reads like a foray into a squalid London, where poverty, crime and prostitution ruled supreme. It is worth mentioning that Ward's negative account of London belongs to the subculture produced in Grub Street, an emblematic street in London, which harboured hack writers and a variety of publishing houses as well. Located outside the city walls, "the close geographical proximity to Moorfields and Bedlam linked Grub Street to prostitution and madness, contributing to its dubious reputation" (Löffler 2017: 215).

Designed as a satirical guided tour of London, meant to exhibit its "vanities and vices" (Ward 1955: 2), *The London Spy* foregrounds a country philosopher eager to experience and understand life in the city. He is the "spy", the spectator who, taking random walks guided by a former schoolmate, is bewildered by the hustle and bustle of London. Ward establishes the rural-urban dichotomy through the two characters in order to show the spy's feeling of alienation in the city in which he remains a mere walking spectator who fails to appropriate the sense of urbanity. Befuddled by the city's lights and noise, and struck by its stink, "his ability to present the city accurately is compromised" (O'Byrne 2014: 58). Appearing as "a traveller to exotic, and perhaps dangerous, regions" (Mullan and Reid 2000: 31) and averse to coach or water travel, which he finds very dangerous, the country philosopher chooses to ramble about the city that reveals "the sight of sunder curiosities" (Ward 1955: 146). Concurrently, the philosopher's friend, a good connoisseur of the city, acts as an interpreter of social "rites of initiation", i.e. urban eccentricities and low life scenes they encounter on their way. According to John Mullan and Christopher Reid (2000: 33), the philosopher's guide to the metropolis "relies on the reader's implicit trust that the author (as opposed to the narrator) is in fact well versed in the city's habits and peculiarities, especially those which offend against property". In doing so, Ward depicts popular yet unpleasant London sites as "lived spaces" (Soja 2000: 11), since he was an author well aware of indigence who "understood that London was as much shaped by its inhabitants and their struggles as by its topography and architecture" (Löffler 2017: 230). For instance, notwithstanding London's magnificence, the spy is appalled when he comes across all sorts of vagabonds at Wapping, close to the Thames. Also, he is surprised to see how hard the life of the workers rebuilding St. Paul's Cathedral is or to hear that many beautiful stories about the city are in fact deceptive. Such is the case of the iconic Monument projected "as a memorandum of the Fire" (Ward 1955: 42), which the philosopher's guide considers an architectural work born out of judicial corruption: "It gave those corrupted magistrates that had the power in their hands, the opportunity of putting two thousand pounds into their own pockets whilst they paid one towards the building" (Ward 1955: 42).

Always in search of vivid settings and urban environments, the two protagonists offer the reader the chance to get familiar with unknown locations abounding in social injustice or with the cruel treatment of the unprivileged. Their visit to Rag Fair allows Ward to inveigh against the despicable conditions in which London's most impoverished inhabitants live. On the whole, their tour of the metropolis does not fail to disclose dangerous lanes and alleys, vulgar language, as well as neighbourhoods where "theft, whoredom, homicide, and blasphemy" (idem: 120) are the order of the day. Although they are eye-witnesses to unorthodox pleasures experienced by underclass dwellers, they remain spectators who, however, never adopt the reflexive or philosophical attitude of the *flâneur*. Thus, Ward's aim is to describe the underbelly of the city inhabited by various classes of people who unveil their character not only in accordance with their rank and profession, but also in physiognomic terms. As Löffler (2017: 234) contends, "the majority of his [the walker's] sketches remain focused on lower-class Londoners or shady figures". Bartholomew Fair is a case in point. Here, more than anywhere else, the philosopher and his guide are detached observers of a carnivalesque atmosphere, which, in their eyes, appears as "the epitome of hell" (Ward 1955: 201) upheld by the deafening music played by pick-pockets and the bawdy pastimes cultivated by the boisterous crowd.

Interested in rendering a satirical – rather than morally instructive – image of "the City's Imprudence, Impatience, Intemperance, and Inhumanity" (idem: 226), *The London Spy* – at odds with Steele and Addison's reformist project advocated via *The Spectator* – is the successful artefact of a hack writer who played a significant role in the proliferation of popular culture in eighteenth-century England. Ward's London's underbelly stands for a mosaic of subcultures, a strategy employed by the author in order to make the country philosopher appear as a foreign traveller in the metropolis. Written by a tavern keeper with a sound knowledge of both the topography of London and its inhabitants, *The London Spy*'s "gritty realism" (Briggs 2011: 78) counterpoises the elite accounts of the rise of the metropolis in the early eighteenth century.

### 3. Defamiliarizing London

Patterned after Ward's *The London Spy*, Tom Brown's *Amusements Serious and Comical, Calculated for the Meridian of London* (1700) is another Grub Street piece of hack writing, although Brown's education at Christ Church, Oxford could have recommended him for the position of clergyman. Generally known as a satirical writer and translator, Brown was a tavern-goer who led a dissolute life. *Amusements* have only recently caught the attention of scholars, because the work bears a striking resemblance to Ward's *The London Spy* in terms of narrative technique, style, and structure. However, *Amusements*, like other writings about London penned by Brown, are "a storehouse of vivid sketches and witty comments upon London life in his day" (Boyce 1939: vii).

Written in imitation of Charles Rivière Dufresny's *Amusements sérieux et comiques* (1699), Brown's text employs the walker trope with a view to excoriating

the follies of the polite, on the one hand, and to capture London's busy life and crowded streets, on the other. Nevertheless, unlike Ward's rural-urban dichotomy embodied by the country bumpkin and his former school friend, Brown creates a perambulating couple of narrators, in which one, an Indian, is the figment of the other's imagination. Such a strategy enables Brown to present London as a defamiliarized space seen as new and culturally different from the perspective of the Other, i.e. the Indian. Moreover, it enables Brown to perform an imagological exercise by referring to the national character, i.e. the self-image of England, through the eyes of an inexperienced foreigner, for whom the urban – and urbane – English narrator reads or decodes the signs of the modern city:

I am resolved to take upon me the Genius of an *Indian*, who has had the Curiosity to Travel hither among us, and who has never seen anything like what he sees in *London*. We shall see how he will be amazed at certain things, which the Prejudice of Custome makes to seem Reasonable and Natural to us.

To diversify the Style of my Narration, I will sometimes make my Traveller speak, and sometimes I will take up the Discourse myself. I will represent to myself the abstracted Ideas of an *Indian*, and I will likewise represent ours to him. In short, taking it for granted that we two understand each other by half a Word, I will set both his and my Imagination on the Ramble. (Brown 1700: 19; original emphasis)

The native versus the Other narrative ambivalence also points to the colonial power of Britain in the eighteenth century, when the discourse of otherness mainly consisted of derogatory terms. Exposed to the bustling city, the Indian proves unable to adapt to the new, chaotic urban environment in which he “is carried down the Stream” and “Swims upon his Elbows to get to Shoar” (Brown 1700: 46).

Brown's London is diverse, dynamic, abuzz with activity and, ultimately, a cosmopolitan metropolis made up of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983: 6): “London is a World, by it self. We daily discover in it more new Countries, and surprising Singularities, than in all the Universe besides. There are among the *Londoners* so many Nations differing in Manners, Customs, and Religions, that the Inhabitants themselves don't know a quarter of them” (Brown 1700: 18; original emphasis). It is “a Hodge-Podge” (idem: 29) perceived as an agreeable amusement induced by the act of walking and carefully observing the Court, Westminster Hall, St. Paul's Cathedral, parks, public walks, coffee houses, brothels or gaming houses. However, the walker's mood changes according to the scenes observed, as is the case of the impertinent rag-sellers in Long-Lane, who determine him to change direction. The urban setting abounds in new things worthy of being discovered, which not only explains Brown's goal “to continue his serialization” and “to react to the taste of the readership or to latest events” (Löffler 2017: 250), but also the massive urbanisation of London at the time, as well as its rapid population growth. As Darryl Domingo (2016: 19) suggests, “motion and mobility fascinated the eighteenth-century imagination, and, as a means of moving freely and without an intended destination, the London ramble served as a particularly useful means of chronicling, organizing, and narrating the life of the metropolis”. In *Amusements*, however, the walking narrator makes no bones about stressing the poor quality of streets, the polite people's hypocrisy and, above all, the misleading signs which lead

an inexperienced visitor into error. For example, the narrator, unlike his Indian alter-ego, knows how to discriminate between a coffee house and a brothel: “Where the Sign is painted with a *Woman’s Hand in’t*, ’tis a Bawdy-House [...] but where it has a *Star* in the Sign, ’tis Calculated for every Leud purpose (Brown 1700: 115-116; original emphasis).

*Amusements* configures an urban imaginary in which an Indian fictitious interlocutor may pass for any naïve newcomer to London. Similar to the walkers in *The London Spy*, the ones in Brown’s work are reflective spectators who satirize the vices and follies of the city, offering the reader an insight into a motley gallery of human types, ranging from paupers to affluent Britons. The pluriperspectivism provided by London “as a World by it self” (Brown 1700: 18) has a great impact on the walkers’ frame of mind, which determines them to perceive the city in emotionally different ways, thus giving birth to “a highly subjective representation of London that nonetheless does not fail to convey a sense of verisimilitude” (Löffler 2017: 262). Brown’s London, more than Ward’s, focuses on a defamiliarized version of London, not only because of the invented Indian observer, but also because of the new sights, or signs, that need to be learnt or properly decrypted. But, despite their anti-elitist, comic and vulgar style, both Brown’s and Ward’s texts exerted a huge influence on Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, and Samuel Johnson, who promoted the discourse of taste and civility.

#### 4. Walking as an artful practice

Walking the streets in eighteenth-century England was inextricably linked to the expansion of the city and its busy life, providing accessibility to all age groups and social ranks. As an act undertaken for leisure or pragmatic purposes, walking, unlike other means of transportation, enabled pedestrians to perceive the ongoing heterogeneity of the city, as Ward’s and Brown’s texts suggest and, above all, to grasp the sense of place, i.e. the micro-level, via first-hand experience. For newcomers to the city, London was rather a “mental map” or a “symbolic representation” (Soja 2000: 11) which required social and topographical guidance and instruction. Be they residents or strangers, walkers “made sense of a city that needed to be explained, presented, revealed, discussed, and questioned” (Löffler 2017: 95).

John Gay’s poem, *Trivia: The Art of Walking the Streets of London* (1716), attests to eighteenth-century England’s preoccupation with street life. As the title suggests, Gay chooses Trivia, the Roman goddess of crossroads, to be the poet’s muse and also the guardian of inexperienced citizens who might fall prey to the maelstrom of city life. Although written in a burlesque tone, *Trivia* is a didactic text whose structure echoes Vergil’s *Georgics*. It represents “a crucial moment in the history of urban literature” (Rogers 1978: 220) due to the rise of the metropolis in which pedestrians, especially middle-class and upper-middle class individuals, display an artful, that is, well-mannered and decorous, way of walking. According to Flavio Gregori (2005: 72), *Trivia* is also an “‘art’ of living in the great, new, exciting and dangerous, also morally and politically, world of the metropolis, i.e. the world of modernity”.

Gay's purpose – stated from the outset – is to provide useful advice on how to walk the London streets by day and by night in the winter:

Through Winter Streets to steer your course aright,  
 How to walk clean by Day, and safe by Night,  
 How jostling Crouds, with Prudence, to decline,  
 When to assert the Wall, and when resign,  
 I sing: Thou, Trivia, Goddess, aid my Song,  
 Thro' spacious Streets conduct thy Bard along;  
 By thee transported, I securely stray  
 Where winding Alleys lead the doubtful Way,  
 The silent Court and op'ning Square explore,  
 And long perplexing Lanes untrod before.  
 (Gay 1716: 1-2)

Subtly enough, Gay refers to the middle-class polite practice of walking “clean by Day” in slippery or slushy conditions. Also, he is a *proto-flâneur* (cf. Gregori 2005) who never becomes one with the crowd, although his goal is to cultivate politeness and, furthermore, in Book I, to teach readers what coats, canes, and shoes to wear, what walking routes to take, how to interpret the weather, how to avoid dangerous places or situations. Labelled as “a town georgic” (Nokes 1995: 206), the poem concentrates on urban life, which, according to the georgic tradition, is at loggerheads with “the harmonic relationship between man and nature visible in the fields” (Gregori 2005: 75). This explains *Trivia*'s ironic mode endorsed by an urban imaginary, according to which London appears as a mythical place or as the copy of the Rome of Juvenal, whose satires are a source of inspiration for Gay's parodic scenes.

In terms of dangers, presented in Book II, or night life in dimly-lit streets full of thieves and drunken people, detailed in Book III, Gay's walker-narrator expresses his concern with traffic, namely horses and coaches, and people of inferior rank, such as peasants, apprentices, beggars, street-sellers, and harlots. Thus, the walker detaches himself from the vermin or the labouring class, for his goal is to teach walking as an artful practice. At the same time, his fashionable clothes are highly indicative of his snobbish attitude towards the poor, and also of the big gap between “them” (plebeians) and “us” (the polite), reinforcing the walker's belief that walking the streets should be an art in itself. The spectator's haughtiness, as well as many of the exaggerated descriptions of various places, such as Drury Lane, the Strand, Covent Garden or Pall Mall, and stimuli – triggered by the sense of touch, smell, and hearing – make *Trivia* both a real and a fictional account of London. Throughout the text he remains unempathetic with the low classes, yet actively immersed in the life of city, recommending that pedestrians should choose “close Abodes” and “the long uncrouded Way” (Gay 1716: 24) so as to avoid crime, prostitutes, and noisy streets. In the vein of Edward Ward and Tom Brown, the walker's itinerary is always chaotic, passing from ill-reputed places to posh areas as rapidly as the reader who seeks to configure the city as “a mental map” (Soja 2000: 11). As Löffler (2017: 141) rightfully remarks, “the reader conducts a journey in the mind, figuratively in the walker's footsteps, which is not only

geographical, but also psychological". Importantly enough, the walker's journey is shaped by his individual experience with the city streets which, in turn, shapes his subjective vision of the city.

John Gay's *Trivia* remains a canonical literary cartography of the streets of London in the early eighteenth century. It is a subjective account of the metropolis described in the winter, a season which Gay sees as windy and full of mud. Besides, it is, as Clare Brant (2008) argues, a description of London "perceived through movement, energy, collisions and clashes of values" filtered through the walker's panoramic view of the modern city. By providing advice, explanations and comments, the walker in *Trivia* explores a multifarious London that invites – and entices – the reader to create a mental map of the city at a time when urbanization was in full swing. In a nutshell, Gay's poem is an exercise in "writing" the tumultuous city (Certeau 1984: 93) via walking as an artful way of decoding it.

## 5. Conclusion

As I hope to have shown, the three texts discussed here foreground the image of London as "a great and monstrous Thing" (White 2013: xx), an oxymoron which should be understood in tandem with the historical context in which London developed as a modern metropolis after the Great Fire of 1666. Although the biggest and most spectacular city in Europe at that time, London witnessed a massive urbanization process, with profound social and cultural effects on its almost half a million citizens at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Informed by Jerry White's argument, I have chosen to consider the underbelly, or the dark side, of the British capital in order to understand the variety of its people, places, and social conditions explored by Edward Ward, Tom Brown and John Gay through the act of walking. By using Edward Soja's (2000: 11) concept of "Thirdspace", my purpose was to show that *The London Spy*, *Amusements Serious and Comical* and *Trivia* represent, each in its own way, an urban imaginary of "the monstrous" experienced first-hand by walking spectators, who are seduced by, or react to, the stimuli of the city. In doing so, they offer the reader a perspective on London that is at once real and imagined, always subject to change, discontinuous or fragmented. Anticipating the *flâneur* that Charles Baudelaire portrays in his 1839 essay "The Painter of Modern Life", the walkers in these writings acquire an ambiguous status, in that they refuse to blend with the crowd, but are always curious to see what happens in the city. Hence, their vivid description of the seamy side of London life is a major contribution to the static – and majestic – accounts of an affluent London. Built on the interplay between place/space and the walkers' subjectivity, social rank, and frame of mind triggered by the urban environment, Ward's, Brown's, and Gay's literary representations of London are three instantiations of "literary psychogeography" (cf. Löffler 2017), according to which the underbelly of London is observed, revealed, read, interpreted, explained and contested as a "lived" (Soja 2000: 11), rather than static, space. Ultimately, such writings about London deconstruct the grand narrative of the modern and grandiose eighteenth-century city.

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**SENSE AND SENSIBILITY REWRITTEN:  
REVISING LOVE AND MARRIAGE  
IN JANE AUSTEN AND JOANNA TROLLOPE'S SEQUEL**

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**Abstract:** While most discussions of marriage in Jane Austen primarily dwell on *Pride and Prejudice* and its treatment, marriage is also central in *Sense and Sensibility*, which illustrates the penury that may befall young, single women with limited financial means. This essay analyzes *Sense & Sensibility*, a rewriting of *Sense and Sensibility* by Joanna Trollope (2013), which is set in twenty-first century England, paying close attention to how Trollope approaches love and marriage (its desirability or the obligation to get married), especially under the light of changing social mores in the twenty-first century and taking into account Austen's own views on both issues as presented in *Sense and Sensibility*.

**Keywords:** Jane Austen, Joanna Trollope, marriage, *Sense and Sensibility*, sequels, young women

## **1. Introduction**

Maybe attempting to compensate for the paucity of Jane Austen's literary production, novels inspired by her works abound, from continuations after the happy ending (*Elinor and Marianne* by Emma Tennant in regards to *Sense and Sensibility* or *Pemberley* and *An Unequal Marriage* by the same author, both prolonging *Pride and Prejudice*) to rewriting the novels in other contexts (*Eligible* by Curtis Sittenfeld moves *Pride and Prejudice* to American TV shows), parodies mocking Austen, loose rewritings (*Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* by Helen Fielding off *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* respectively) and derivative works (including fan fiction). For clarity's sake, to simplify terminology, any Austen-inspired work will be called "sequel" in this article. Generally, sequels obey a writer's decision to continue a beloved work; the "Jane Austen Reimagined" initiative (also known as the Austen project), was rather unusual in that six contemporary American and British writers were commissioned by the publisher Borough Press to rewrite Austen's six novels. The first four sequels in the project, *Sense & Sensibility* (2013) by Joanna Trollope, *Northanger Abbey* (2014) by Val McDermid, *Emma* (2015) by Alexander McCall Smith and *Eligible* (2016) by Curtis Sittenfeld received a lukewarm reception. This, along with very discreet sales (for example, in the U.S.A, *Sense & Sensibility* just sold 5,100 copies (Alter 2016: n.p.)), caused the publication of the sequels for *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion* to be canceled.

This essay analyzes *Sense & Sensibility*, set in twenty-first century England, paying close attention to Trollope's approaches to love and marriage (its desirability or as an obligation), especially under the light of changing social mores in the twenty-first century. Additionally, Austen's views on both issues as presented in *Sense and Sensibility* are also examined.

## 2. Sequel writing and changes in Trollope

In sharp contrast to the readers' uncertainty when reading a novel for the first time, turning to a sequel involves previous expectations. Already knowing the ending, readers want to discover how their beloved characters behave in a different situation. Most sequels can be classified into one of two groups – novels that continue the original plot after the ending; or novels that transport the characters into another setting (usually, the twentieth or twenty-first centuries). *Sense & Sensibility* falls into the latter.

In Trollope's *Sense & Sensibility* (written with an ampersand to tell it apart from Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*), the action takes place in the twenty-first-century, beginning with Isabella "Belle" Dashwood and her three daughters, Ellie, M., and Mags, inheriting 200,000 pounds after the death of the girls' father (Trollope 2013: 18). Ellie, who wears Converse boots, will qualify as an architect in a year (idem: 19), M. plays the guitar and is a big fan of Taylor Swift and Mags is often fiddling with her iPod, her Nintendo DS and her laptop, the typical bratty teen.

Ellie acutely feels the burden of making ends meet, given their mother's inability or reluctance to face matters – "for four women with laughable earning power, one of whom is still at school, one is unused to work, and one is both physically unfit and as yet unqualified to work. Which leaves me! Me, Elinor Dashwood, who has been living in the cloud cuckoo land of Norland and idiotic, impractical dreams of architecture" (idem: 67). Still, instead of resigning herself to this role, she grows tired of it, showing a reluctance that Elinor did not voice – "I can't always be the one who does all the bits of life you don't want to be bothered with" (idem: 278).

As in the twenty-first century women are not prone to fainting like in the past, in order to mark M. as a delicate woman, the author makes her suffer from asthma, "which made Marianne so dramatically, alarmingly fragile" (idem: 5). Still, because asthma is rarely fatal nowadays and easily treatable, it often gives the impression that this fragility is a pose. M. shares with their father their asthma and a "propensity for depression" (idem: 57), which explains the depths of her despair when Willoughby disappears.

The Dashwood women, or at least Belle and M., seem to have a flair for the dramatic to the extent that Ellie "sometimes wondered how much time and energy the whole Dashwood family had wasted in crying" (6). In contrast, Ellie is well aware of her own lack of romantic inklings: "she supposed, a little sadly, that her temperament just wasn't designed to believe that nothing mattered in the world besides romantic love" (129). This causes that "sometimes over the years she had looked at Marianne and envied her ability to abandon herself ecstatically to music, or place, or literature or ... to love" (129) whereas M. seems "to react to every single thing that happened as if you were obliged to respond on behalf of the whole feeling world" (7).

The differences between the sisters have much to do with their vision of love, as Ellie remarks: “M, I don’t believe in a one and only love, like you do” (265). Additionally, Ellie advocates for women’s action instead of women’s passivity when waiting for men to declare their love – “I’m just trying to make you see that your future happiness depends upon what you do for yourself and not on what some guy you hardly know” (184).

To update the novel, some nods to technological advances are made – Mags’ fondness for her gadgets, Belle snooping on M.’s phone (113) or technology moving the plot forward. Because of technological advances, Ed’s silence is more deafening: Ellie is shattered because Ed has not been in touch – “not a text or a call or an email. Nothing” (130). Instead of relying on hearsay or local gossip, Facebook lets the Dashwood girls know what their beloved are up to, and so does Twitter, where Lucy Steele’s tweets mislead them to believe it was Ed she married (319) and not Robert. M.’s public humiliation at having been duped by Wills is much more public than in the original, as her jealous scene and asthma attack after being rejected by Wills at a wedding go viral (202).

Given the Dashwoods’ economic difficulties, Sir John “Jonno” Middleton comes to their rescue, as he made a fortune manufacturing sportswear. His neighbour and close friend is Colonel William “Bill” Brandon, who, after serving in the military in Bosnia, runs Delaford, a center for drug addicts and alcoholics. A single man, he was in love with Eliza, a girl he compares to M., and who eventually married his brother, an alcoholic. Her story is as tragic as in Austen, but it is doubly related to addiction – first her husband’s alcoholism and then her own drug addiction. She is the mother of another Eliza, by her first dealer, who was put into foster care (212-213).

Other changes involve the two elder Dashwood sisters’ love interests. John “Wills” Willoughby, “a perfectly strange and godlike young man” (91) appears in an Aston Martin to fulfill M.’s romantic desires, but he hides a secret – he introduced the younger Eliza to drugs, who has had “one crisis after another” as well as an abortion (214-215). Edward Ferrars, as portrayed by Austen, was scarcely appealing, and readers, like Marianne, failed to see his charm. In his initial characterization, he “appears not to conform with any standard of gentlemanliness or even eighteenth-century masculinity” (Toma 2020: 30). However, some of his less attractive traits for contemporary readers, were more appealing to nineteenth-century readers. For instance, his shyness and inarticulateness owe much to the notions about Englishmen at the time. The idea of English masculinity in the eighteenth century was closely related to the need to create it in opposition to a French identity and

French visitors found the Englishmen to be, not only silent, but also blunt and unwilling to please others in conversation. The necessity then to base the nature of conversation and politeness upon the French and women caused a tension in the creation of an English masculinity, since women and the French embodied the femininity and effeminacy men sought to separate themselves from. To solve this problem, Englishmen had to establish their own manliness ... by embracing their taciturnity and blunt sincerity. ... Therefore, ... it became manly to be sincere rather than pleasing in conversation. The bluntness and taciturnity became critical traits for English gentlemanliness. (Landin 2017: 3-4)

Edward certainly lacks the gentlemanliness or the attractive conversation of Willoughby. To make him more attractive to contemporary readers, Trollope has “Ed” as a sensible man who was “thrown out of Eton” (Trollope 2013: 22) and has now decided that “I want to do community work” (idem: 23), despite his mother’s ambitions. While Edward considered becoming a parish priest, nowadays, as religion no longer occupies a dominant position in society, Ed is considering social work. The core characteristics of the priesthood and social work are rather similar – caring for others, low pay... Yet, it is not a completely positive portrayal – Ed, instead of being a man torn between a secret engagement and his true love, is presented as “a classic two-timer” (idem: 176).

Despite his noble intentions, Ed has been turned down by Amnesty International and Oxfam (33), which results in his being unemployed at the moment and with poor career prospects. This is an echo of Austen, as “apart from marriage, no Jane Austen heroine has a career at all, or ever wants to. It is less often noticed that the same is largely true of the men. Until *Persuasion*, no hero chooses his vocation in life voluntarily or practices it ambitiously” (Clausen 1999: 92). Ed, apart from applying to two charities, does not do much to promote his career and Wills apparently has no employment history. When it comes to women, Ellie, who drops out of college to get a job, does not seem to be very career-driven either and neither are her mother or M., who have no intention of working. Thus, “except for Elinor, the female characters are portrayed as rather helpless and seem to be unable to take care of themselves” (Svensson 2017: 51). Ed’s fiancée, Lucy Steele, has a career as a reflexology therapist but “I don’t make enough money to support both of us” (Trollope 2013: 171).

There are other similarities between Austen’s and Trollope’s characterization of men. In Austen’s novels, to assess the behaviour of a perfect gentleman, “the active life of service to others should be most valued” (Margolis, 2003: 22). Trollope’s novel, up to a certain extent, conforms to this expectation, as Bill runs a center treating addicts and Ed aspires to a career in social work. As portrayed by Austen, Colonel Brandon, Edward, and Willoughby, all fail to conform to the social expectations of a well-established man – to be economically independent and the head of a family. While money is not an issue for Colonel Brandon, his single status mars his social standing. Even worse, he is unable to prevent the calamities that befall both Elizas, as he is an absent paternal figure (Seeber 1999: 227). Also single, Edward and Willoughby are financially dependent on female relatives. In *Sense & Sensibility*, the same patterns are followed – Bill, despite running a center for addicts, has been unsuccessful in helping both Elizas, while Ed and Wills depend on female relatives. All in all, the *Sense and Sensibility* male characters are no paragon of masculinity (ibid), and neither are their twenty-first-century counterparts.

None of the male protagonists of *Sense and Sensibility* are virtuous men, but readers, like Marianne and her mother, are dazzled by the more obvious and appealing physical characteristics of Willoughby and are “too inclined to ignore Jane Austen’s specific descriptions of Colonel Brandon’s competence and worth” (Sutherland 1996, qtd. in Landin 2017: 15). They also overlook the fact that Willoughby lacks a key masculine trait, namely “self-control and the restraint of reckless impulses” (Mosse 1996, qtd. in idem: 16). “Austen was also perfectly capable of creating

heroes whose attractive qualities are spiritual and intellectual rather than physical: Edward Ferrars and Colonel Brandon” (Perry 2003: 226), but Willoughby’s dashing good looks blind M.

### 3. Marriage in Trollope and Austen

Austen was painfully aware of women’s acute need to get married in Regency England. Marriage decisively defined women’s status and their social standing. Since their lives were mostly restricted to the domestic sphere, marriage had a more profound impact on women than on men: “while the future happiness of a young man may rest with the outcome of the marital stakes, his economy and status will probably abide as it is” (Dabundo 2011: 42). Austen and her sister Cassandra were perfect examples of single women’s dependence on male relatives. At the time, “the only sources of income ordinarily available to a gentlewoman were marriage portions, inheritance, and the estate of her husband” (Bentley 2016: 231). Women’s prospects of getting an education or finding employment were severely restricted and Austen acknowledged that “single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor — which is one very strong argument in favour of Matrimony” (qtd in Bailey 2015: n.p.). But, desirable as marriage was, women with limited economic means and without prestigious family connections saw their marriage chances dwindle.

Austen is careful to show that, apart from the financial impact of Mr. Dashwood’s death, Mrs. Dashwood genuinely grieves for her husband’s death. In Austen’s times, “people started to think about the loss of a spouse more as an emotional than an economical issue” (Wiesner-Hanks 2008, qtd in Chalupová 2012: 19). Remarriage was not always a pleasant prospect for widows: “wealthy or comfortable widows may have seen no advantage in remarrying, for this would put them under the legal control of a man again, and poor widows ... found it difficult to find marriage partners” (ibid.). Despite the novel’s focus on marriages and the proximity in age between Mrs. Dashwood and Colonel Brandon (“a man five years younger than herself” (Austen 2013, chapter VIII, n.p.)), he is not presented as a potential suitor.

For Trollope’s Belle, the loss of her (common-law) husband is as crushing as for Mrs. Dashwood. Not only does it cause their financial ruin, but Belle feels lost without his guidance. Nevertheless, given the social changes about remarriage, at the end of the novel, Belle is open to embarking on a new relationship (Trollope 2013: 276). The characterization of Mrs. Dashwood follows the fact that “Austen, while giving her heroines family lives, rarely provides them with a good supportive mother” (Sturrock 2008), which Trollope continues in that Belle cannot prevent her daughter’s relationship with Wills. Still, Belle is a more worldly person and claims that “I just have this little nag inside me that she’s riding for a fall, and she’s going to get hurt” (Trollope 2013: 113).

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, the companionate marriage emerged – young people (instead of their parents) chose their future spouse, replacing marriages made mostly for financial concerns (Dobošiová 2006: 8). Additionally, the marriage age and the number of people who remained single throughout their lives

both increased (idem: 10). Still, despite this greater laxity and freedom in choosing one's life partner, financial concerns were crucial. Not only were incomes factored in, but also inheritances (or the prospects of inheriting). The centrality of money when discussing marriage in Austen is evident: "it is a truth universally acknowledged that in Jane Austen's novels it may be wrong to marry for money, but it is silly to marry without it. We are consistently made aware of the financial status of her heroes, and it is always an issue, to a greater or lesser degree, in the heroines' choice of them" (Hopkins 1994: 76). The difference with *Sense & Sensibility* is that the novel does not end with the protagonists getting married, but just in a romantic relationship. Consequently, money does not feature so largely in the relationships between Bill and M. and Ed and Ellie, respectively (although money reasons prevented Ed and Lucy from getting married on her salary (Trollope 2013: 171)).

In Regency England, women could inherit property and entails may be placed on women, but women were often passed over in inheritances out of fear that they might fall prey to fortune-hunters (Redmond 1989: n.p.). Austen does not cite this as the reason why their beloved uncle's inheritance bypasses the Dashwood sisters, though:

The whole was tied up for the benefit of this child, who, in occasional visits with his father and mother at Norland, had so far gained on the affections of his uncle, by such attractions as are by no means unusual in children of two or three years old; an imperfect articulation, an earnest desire of having his own way, many cunning tricks, and a great deal of noise, as to outweigh all the value of all the attention which, for years, he had received from his niece and her daughters. (Austen 2013 n.p.)

As a result, the Dashwood sisters' financial situation drives them to seek a good marriage, but also hinders a good match.

In Trollope's novel, the idea of ancestral estates being inherited by the male child persists, as John receives the lion's share, Norland, which will become "an upmarket bed and breakfast" (Trollope 2013: 17). This anachronistic division is because Mr. Dashwood had failed to arrange his inheritance: "was it an adventure not to leave a responsible will that would secure the future of the person you'd had three daughters with – or was it feckless?" (idem: 11). That the late Mr. Dashwood abandoned his first wife (John's mother) for his common-law wife, Belle, helps explain John's animosity for his sisters (7). It is unclear whether the girls were discriminated against because of their parents' unwed status or on the grounds of gender (11). Thus, "the decision to let the male heir inherit the estate is portrayed as an act of will rather than a social restriction" (Svensson 2017: 51). According to Svensson (ibid.), this is to criticize how men are unfairly and rather randomly privileged over women, but this unequal inheritance, along with other details, makes *Sense & Sensibility* feel anachronistic.

Finances perform a key role in the relationships Austen's characters embark on; "Austen's novels suggest an understanding of the world in terms of people's connections with each other. Most if not all of those connections are regulated by determining economic factors" (Margolis 2003: 35). Financial matters were a decisive factor when wanting to get married in the nineteenth century; for instance,

Edward's lack of an income prevented his starting a family. These economic factors are also very important in Trollope in that they affect the Dashwood women's daily life, but money matters do not weigh so heavily when considering a relationship. As Ellie points out, "Ma, ... this isn't 1810, for God's sake. Money doesn't dictate relationships" (Trollope 2013: 135). Mrs. J. is similarly accused of being "like those nineteenth-century novels where marriage is the only career option for a middle-class girl" (idem: 356). Actually, the most marked departure from the original is that the sequel does not force the sisters' to get married in order to provide financially for their family.

Money issues as well as family connections were very valued assets in the marriage market; not less was a woman's reputation. In Austen's times, "pre-marital sex was a risky activity for women in Regency England" (Bailey 2015: n.p.). It sullied a young woman's reputation and ended her opportunities in the marriage market, even worse if she had a baby out of wedlock. The two Elizas' stories may be read as a cautionary tale for young women who are easily influenced by undeserving people. In *Sense and Sensibility*, Brandon's "account of Eliza 1's short life ... is a hackneyed tale of an orphaned heiress forced into a cruel, loveless marriage that led to every conceivable bad end: adultery, divorce, prostitution, destitution, an illegitimate birth, illness, and death" (Nelson 2012: 164). Because premarital sex or having children out of wedlock is no longer frowned upon in Britain, in Trollope the two Elizas' problem is drug addiction. The story of the second Eliza serves the purpose of revealing "that Marianne's idealized first love is actually a heartless seducer. In eighteenth-century fiction, the discovery that a gentleman has seduced and abandoned a young woman is usually enough to eliminate him from a romantic plot" (Nelson 2012: 168-169). In *Sense & Sensibility*, he is revealed to be the person who first introduced the younger Eliza to drugs (Trollope 2013: 214), a fact only revealed after M. discovers that Wills is already in a relationship with a Greek heiress.

For Trollope, an online reputation can damage a person's social standing as much as nineteenth-century unwed motherhood. While Elinor and Marianne had to "navigate their romantic hopes within the stridently classist, gossip-saturated climate of British society" (Cote 2019: n.p.), now it is even perilous because humiliations can go viral in minutes. Nonetheless, the great importance Trollope attributes to a viral video strains credibility because it is hard to believe that a young woman M.'s age would not live it down. Also, compared to the explicitly sexual content of some viral videos, her video is tame and scarcely scandalous.

#### 4. The ending

For Nelson (2012: 174), "the surprise is that although Marianne feels 'no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship' for Brandon, she marries him. She repudiates her former romantic opinions. Even though we are told she marries voluntarily, this marriage does not seem to be entirely her own decision or solely for her own good". Austen is careful to assure us that his love will make a success of this marriage: "Colonel Brandon was now as happy, as all those who best loved him, believed he deserved to be; - in Marianne he was consoled for every

past affliction; - her regard and her society restored his mind to animation, and his spirits to cheerfulness; and that Marianne found her own happiness in forming his, was equally the persuasion and delight of each observing friend" (Austen 2013: n.p.). Still, many are still doubtful that her husband's devotion is enough to ensure Marianne's future happiness – "what, innumerable critics have asked, if Marianne never brought herself to love Colonel Brandon?" (Butler 1975, qtd in Nelson 2012: 176). *Sense & Sensibility* diminishes the readers' negative reaction to the ending – Bill and M. are starting a relationship, not getting married.

Romance is central in both Austen's works and their sequels, but the way that the protagonists approach them is certainly different. In Austen, romance reflects "the heroine's inexperience. Prudence as a loss of youthful illusions is the end, regardless of whether it is rewarded with happy marriage and prosperity or with resignation and, often, death" (Vranjes 2014: 197). M. is still young enough to fall for Wills' wiles on account of her innocence, but her mistakes in associating with him are punished with no more than short-lived viral shame on the Internet. Contrary to *Sense and Sensibility*, we see M. successfully move on and get over Wills and start a new relationship (Trollope 2013: 323-324, 362).

Ed and Ellie do not get married at the end either although they get engaged (Trollope 2013: 332). In *Sense and Sensibility*, "because the resolution comes about in a way that has very little to do with Edward's heroic qualities or Elinor's worth, their story comes across . . . as . . . a story accidentally ending in marriage for reasons that have little to do with either of its ostensible protagonists. . . . Their experience suggests, in fact, that relationships can depend as much on chance as on love" (Shaffer 1994, qtd in Wheelwright 2015: 14). Similarly, in *Sense & Sensibility*, Ed and Ellie's reunion is a matter of chance as a result of Lucy Steele and Robert Ferrars' marriage.

## 5. Conclusion

Austen indicted an excess of sensibility. For a young woman to openly display her feelings not only opened her to potential heartbreak but also from possible social ostracism. Wearing one's heart in one's sleeve, in particular for women, could make them social pariahs and no longer eligible in the marriage market. In *Sense & Sensibility*, an excess of sensibility does not have such serious repercussions. The only consequence of M. 's creating a stir is a viral video. Public humiliation might be bitter, but this does not have long-lasting consequences for M. Also, her excessive sensibility is not strongly criticized by Trollope, as Ellie envies the strength of her sister's feelings and wishes she could feel as much.

Austen's world was one ruled by strict social rules where failing to observe such social conventions and proprieties meant lifelong social ostracism. Moreover, an individual's behavior had a severe impact on the whole family. The two Elizas represent what happens to a woman whose reputation is completely ruined. In general, because in the twenty-first century social rules are not so strictly followed, the force of the characters' wrong decisions do not carry the same force as in Austen's day. Young M.'s public shame on YouTube would be forgotten as the next viral video

hits, scarcely having an impact on her sisters' marriage prospects or her family's reputation.

In Trollope's version, M. and Bill do not get married at the end but are very close to each other (Trollope 2013: 362), which takes into account her young age and may also follow the fact that "love in Austen is a form of friendship" (Deresiewicz 1997: 531). Just like "the final pages of every Austen novel celebrate the very best kind of union, based on compatibility, affection, and respect" (Jones 2009, qtd. in Wheelwright 2015: 3), here we have the same for M. and Bill. The lack of a wedding may help redress the perceived "wrongness" of the original's ending. Many have found fault with the ending of *Sense and Sensibility*, in that impulsive, young Marianne marries a man many years her senior and who does not seem to have much in common with her. Trollope seems to atone for it.

Sequel writers walk a tightrope, concerning the faithfulness of their works to the original novel. If the rewriting is too close to the original, they run the risk of being accused of lack of originality and repetitiveness. If they go too far, they may be blamed for departing too much from the original for recognition. They must create a new literary work, but bearing in mind the situations and characters created by another author (Gomez-Galisteo 2018: 3). However, Trollope, in her excessive adherence to an Austenian situation, stretches credibility, as young women nowadays are more likely to have a career of their own rather than depend on their husbands' financial standing. Despite the use of mobile phones, social media, and some update in morals and greater awareness about women's position in society, which Mags questions, "there is not much adjustment to the contemporary audience" (Svensson 2017: 51). All in all, *Sense & Sensibility*, because of its close adherence to the original, ends up disappointing in failing to acknowledge that social mores have greatly changed from Austen's times.

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## EXPLORING ‘CREATURE’ IN MODERNIST NOVELS<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract:** *This research explores the perceptions and evaluations of the word ‘creature’ in British modernist prose fiction. A corpus-assisted analysis of its contextual meanings and adjectival modifiers in modernist novels revealed a predominantly anthropocentric understanding of this word and its prevailing negative evaluation. However, the assessment of ‘creature’ varies across four identified referential categories, and female-creatures are more positively evaluated in comparison with other entities. My interdisciplinary approach, employed in this study, combines linguistic examination with elements of literary analysis in the exploration of the meaning and evaluation of the word ‘creature’.*

**Keywords:** *corpus, creature, evaluation, meaning, modernist, novel*

### 1. Introduction

This study examines the meanings and evaluations of the word ‘creature’ in the corpus of modernist novels. While many immediately associate this word with Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein*, and its infamous monster – abandoned by his creator and rejected by society – the word ‘creature’ transcends this popular image. Its rich history has shaped it into a widespread philosophical and religious notion, incorporating diverse readings and interpretations. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, this word appeared in Middle English as a borrowing from French and now has 11 meanings, two of which are obsolete (OED). Such diversity of meanings challenges the image of a ‘creature’ as a monstrous being, while also posing difficulties in the identification of its specific referent, especially when this word is used in a generalised sense, denoting anything created.

My research pursues two primary objectives. First, it aims to study the entire spectrum of senses of the word ‘creature’ in the novels written by British modernist writers and to determine its prevalent interpretation in the corpus of texts. Second, it analyses the adjectival modifiers used to assess the conceptual meaning of ‘creature’, to establish the predominant type of its evaluation. Given the direct association of this word with the biblical conception of world creation and “the complex and variegated pattern of belief and disbelief” (Hobson 2011: 5), attributed to the modernist literary movement, the intersection of these two perspectives in modernist novels may provide unconventional insights into the interpretation of ‘creature’ in the context

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of modernity. The modernists' varied attitudes towards religion were studied by many (e.g., Lewis 2010; Bauduin and Johnsson 2018; Callison 2023, and others); however, there are no investigations of how 'creature' is interpreted and assessed in modernist novels. By exploring the linguistic dimensions of this word in the corpus of modernist prose fiction, my investigation blends literature and linguistic studies in the examination of this common philosophical and religious concept and fills the gap in the existing literature.

## 2. Literature review

The numerous senses of the word 'creature' in modern English have evolved from the multiplicity of its perception in the past. Historically, this word was widely used in philosophy and Judaeo-Christian texts, carrying a variety of meanings that reveal the complexity and heterogeneity of its conceptualisation.

In Plato's philosophy, for example, it is applied to the Cosmos or Universe viewed as "one single Living Creature", that contains "within itself all living creatures both mortal and immortal" (Plato 1981a: 179). This concept includes plants and animals, as well as humans, who are referred to as tame animals (Plato 1981b: 439). And for Aristotle, a 'creature' is a living being, either gregarious or solitary, whether "furnished with feet or wings," or "fitted for a life in the water," or "partake of both characters." Human beings are categorised by him as social creatures, along with "the bee, the wasp, the ant, and the crane" (Aristotle 2014: 776-777).

Philosophers succeeding Aristotle have generally perceived creatures as living beings, differentiating reasonable humans from animals. For instance, Eckhart "distinguishes between the irrational creatures and the rational or intellectual ones. While the first are produced according to the likeness of what is in God [...], the second are created in the image of God himself" (Beccarisi 2013: 105). In Locke's understanding, a human being is an intellectual creature, "capable of dominion", to whom God has granted the right to use "the inferior creatures, for the comfortable preservation of their beings" (Locke 1988: 205).

Later philosophical perspectives on 'creature' shifted to acknowledging humans as "one part of the creatures on earth", although being rational ones (Kant 2007: 231). Nietzsche (1996: 81) questioned humans' "inherited sense of being a higher type of creature with higher claims" that makes "a man fairly cold and leaves his conscience at rest", thus losing "all feeling of injustice when the difference between ourselves and other creatures is very great." Contemporary philosophers employ the word 'creature' to equate humans and animals, "since we human beings are also animals" (Korsgaard 2018: 3).

Religious and biblical understandings of the conceptual meaning of the word 'creature' are also numerous. It is broadly conceptualised as "the whole creation" (Easton 2015: 434; Hastings 2005: 165) and includes everything created by divine will: "living and moving creatures (animals and humans)" and "non-living (sun, moon, and stars)" (Harlow 2008: 178). Alternatively, the word 'creature' may be used to refer only to humans and animals as living creatures (Youngblood 2014: 2780).

Thus, the conceptual understanding of ‘creature’ varies across philosophical and biblical contexts, having an impact on its modern perception and categorisation. Diverse meanings of the word ‘creature’ in OED contrast general notions (e.g., creation) with specific ones (e.g., a person who owes his or her fortune and position and remains subservient to a patron); inanimate substances (e.g., a result, a product of something) with animate entities (e.g., a human being); and humans with animals (OED). Such varied interpretations of the word ‘creature’ highlight its conceptual ambiguity and the complexity of its understanding.

Studying the meanings of the word ‘creature’ in modernist novels may elucidate its comprehension in the age famous for its controversy, the dismissal of traditionality, and existential and spiritual pursuits. Modernist novels significantly differ from the prose fiction of their predecessors by their “reassessment of the relation between content and form” (Attridge 2023: 13); rejection of strong plots and “numerous realist techniques such as clear beginnings, heroic characters, dramatic events, overall meanings, and resolved endings” (Kern 2021: 58); aesthetic autonomy (North 2021: 27; Rutledge 2017: 3); “predominance of symbolism as conveyer of the novel’s central meaning” (Dekoven 1999: 176); language experiments (Attridge 2023: 13; Morley 2012: 152); search for the individual self (Levenson 2011: 4-5), and the ambivalent attitude to religion (Pinkerton 2017; Kern 2021).

The beginning of the 21st century witnessed a revival of scholarly interest in modernists’ spirituality, examining their religious beliefs and non-religious practices. Several researchers have reviewed and debunked the stereotypical myth of modernists’ secularisation. For instance, Lewis asserts that “the modernists did not accept secularization as inevitable or embrace a world emptied of the sacred. They sought instead to understand religious experience anew, in the light of their own experience of modernity and of the theories of their contemporaries” (Lewis 2010: 19).

Scholars acknowledge that religiosity was not a straightforward experience for modernists and involves a process of “religious change and a reconfiguration of the concept of the divine, but this does not necessarily result in a general loss of faith” (Bauduin and Johnsson 2018: 5). The significant advancements in scientific studies and philosophical thought in the 19th century had a profound influence on the societal religious beliefs and dogmas in that historical period, making many modernists seek “an uneasy compromise between science and religion, with the religious landscape becoming fragmented into forms of established religion and alternative religious movements” (Bauduin and Johnsson 2018: 5-6). Callison (2023: 12-13) claims that “the study of modernism and religion should be equated not with any one form of religion,” and the fascination with mysticism in that age coexisted with a “Christian ‘orthodoxy’”.

Summarising the scholars’ views on the relationship between modernists and religion, it can be concluded that the belief in supernatural power was never entirely absent in the age of modernity; instead, it transformed and adapted itself to the changing times. Religion still provided the underlying philosophical basis for many modernists’ beliefs and viewpoints, although having lost for many its public prominence and becoming a more personal and private matter. As Pinkerton (2017: 2) asserts, “God

remains very much alive” in modernist literature, since writers “continued to seek in scripture and theology the particular sources of meaning, affect, and literary force that only religion seemed fully capable of providing”. Other modernists turned to alternative practices, such as different forms of mysticism, in their quest for the spiritual self, seeing it as a substitute for institutional religion.

By exploring the meanings and evaluations of the word ‘creature’ in the corpus of modernist prose fiction, this study will hopefully provide deeper insights into its perception during that controversial and provocative literary period, contributing to the broader fields of linguistic and literary studies.

### 3. Methodology

To attain the stated objectives, the synergy of quantitative and qualitative methods has been employed in this research. The initial quantitative analysis of the occurrences of this word and its adjectival modifiers in the corpus texts provides a credible basis for this study, and the following qualitative examination of each instance of the word’s use allows specification of its contextual meanings and determination of the type of evaluation conveyed by its attributive and predicative adjectival collocates.

The corpus of 46 British modernist novels, available in the public domain on the sites *Project Gutenberg* and *The Modernist Literature Project* (McClure and Pager-McClymont 2022), was built with the assistance of *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (Staley 1985). The corpus encompasses diverse British modernist authors with their unique writing styles, spanning from the end of the 19th century to the mid-1930s in the 20th century (see Table 1).

Authors	Novels
Stella Benson	I Pose (1915); Living Alone (1919)
Joseph Conrad	Lord Jim (1900); Under Western Eyes (1911); The Rover (1923)
Ford Madox Ford	The Fifth Queen (1906-08); The Good Soldier (1915); A Man Could Stand Up (1926)
Edward Morgan Forster	Where Angels Fear to Tread (1905); A Room with a View (1908); Howards End (1910)
Aldous Huxley	Antic Hay (1923); Chrome Yellow (1921); Brave New World (1932)
James Joyce	Ulysses (1920); A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (1916)
Rudyard Kipling	The Light That Failed (1890); Captains Courageous (1896)
David Herbert Lawrence	The White Peacock (1911); Women in Love (1920); Aaron’s Rod (1922)
Richard Le Gallienne	The Romance of Zion Chapel (1898); Young Lives (1899); Pieces of Eight (1918)
Rose Macaulay	The Lee Shore (1912); Dangerous Ages (1921)
Arthur Machen	The Hill of Dreams (1907); The Terror: A Mystery (1917)
William Somerset Maugham	Mrs. Craddock (1902); The Bishops Apron (1906); Of Human Bondage (1915)

Hope Mirrlees	Madeleine: One of Love's Jansenists (1919); The Counterplot (1924); Lud-in-the-Mist (1926)
George Orwell	Down and Out in Paris and London (1933); Burmese Days (1934); Keep the Aspidistra Flying (1936)
Dorothy Richardson	Pointed Roofs (1915); Deadlock: Pilgrimage (1921); Revolving Lights (1923)
May Sinclair	The Divine Fire (1904); The Helpmate (1907); The Combined Maze (1913)
Virginia Woolf	The Voyage Out (1915); Mrs Dalloway (1925); Orlando (1928)

**Table 1.** The corpus of British modernist authors

The web-based platform Sketch Engine (Kilgariff et al. 2014) facilitated the corpus compilation and further analysis of the lemma 'creature'. The advanced mode of Word Sketch generated a summary of all occurrences of the search word in the corpus texts, presenting its "grammatical and collocational behaviour" (idem: 9). The contextual senses of this word and its adjectival modifiers were analysed within the expanded concordance lines, which display the immediate context of the lemma's occurrence. In some instances, when the information in them was not enough, a broader context of a novel was regarded to ascertain the meaning of the word or the type of evaluation conveyed by its adjectival collocates.

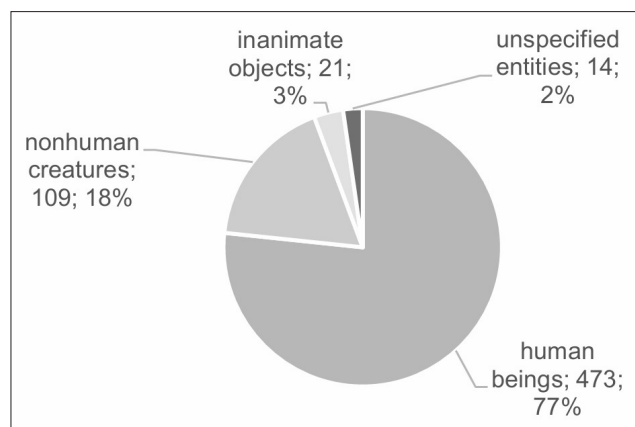
The corpus-assisted analysis of the word 'creature' performed in the study allowed perceiving the larger picture of "trends, broad tendencies and repeated patterns across banks of language data" (Simpson 2014: 48). Specifically, through a semantic examination of the senses of the lemma 'creature' in the context of its usage, the whole spectrum of its meanings was revealed across the analysed modernist texts and classified according to the type of referent they denote. A conducted stylistic and pragmatic analyses of adjectival collocates of the word 'creature' showed the type of evaluation conveyed by them, either overtly or implicitly.

Following Hunston and Thompson (2000: 5), evaluation is understood in this research as "the expression of the speaker or writer's attitude or stance towards, viewpoint on, or feelings about the entities or propositions that he or she is talking about". Leaving beyond the scope of my study the terminological inconsistency of this language phenomenon (see, for example, in Edo Marzá 2017: 101), I employ the term "evaluation" to designate positive, negative, or neutral attitudinal information conveyed by adjectival modifiers qualifying the word 'creature'. Axiologically neutral collocates describe 'creature's' objective physical attributes, such as colour, size, type, and others, and do not convey its positive or negative assessment, whereas axiologically positive or negative modifiers highlight attractive or unattractive features of the characterised entity, shaping good or poor opinions in its perception.

The comparative examination of research findings highlights correlations between various meanings of the studied word in the corpus texts and determines the prevalent type of its evaluation, indicating modernist authors attitudinal stance towards the conceptual meaning of 'creature'.

#### 4. Results and discussion

In total, the word ‘creature’ appears 617 times in the analysed corpus of British modernist novels, with diverse meanings, which include references to *human creatures*, *nonhuman beings*, *inanimate things*, and *unspecified entities* (see Figure 1). References to *humans* were both gender-specific (females - 194 instances and males - 150 instances) and general ones, without gender indications (130 instances). *Nonhuman creatures* embrace animals (84 instances) and supernatural and religious beings (24 instances). *Inanimate objects* (21 instances) are often depicted as anthropomorphic beings, possessing human-like characteristics and feelings. *Unspecified entities* (14 instances) cover occurrences when the precise meaning of the word ‘creature’ and its referent could not be definitively ascertained in the context of its use, due to its lack of clear referential specificity, because the word is used with the general meaning of anything created by God.



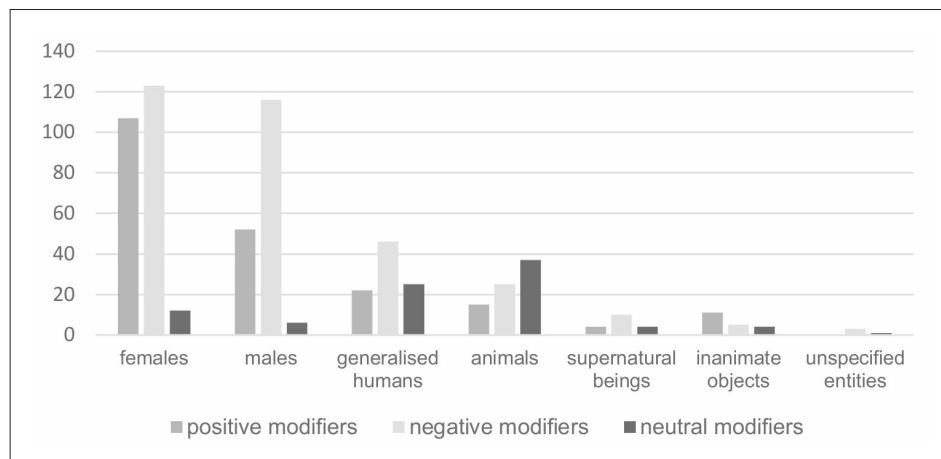
**Figure 1.** Referents of the word ‘creature’ in the British modernist corpus

As my research findings show, the word ‘creature’ in the corpus texts most commonly (77%) refers to human beings, very often denoting females (31%), followed by males (24%), and generalised human figures (21%). The prominence of a human-centric understanding of the word ‘creature’ in the analysed corpus can be attributed to modernists’ interest in the exploration of the human being. This includes rethinking human nature and existence in light of revolutionary advances in scientific and philosophical ideas, questioning the role of religion and religious institutions in individual lives, and a description of the complexity of human existence, caused by war and post-war societal changes. Smith (2019: 72) claims, that “the general loss of a stable sense of meaningfulness and humanity’s place in the universe pervades much modernist work of the interwar period.” Research findings confirm the modernists’ search for the essence of a human being and the reconceptualization of its place in the world.

The examination of adjectives collocating with ‘creature’ both attributively and predicatively in the corpus texts enabled the identification of 628 adjectival

modifiers, conveying various types of appraisal. In 164 occurrences, the word ‘creature’ was used without adjectives, modified by determiners and pronouns (e.g., *his creatures*, *a /the creature*, *all creatures*), and in 19 instances, it was part of a compound noun - ‘fellow creature’ (OED). Adjectival modifications of this word are versatile, sometimes employing two or more lexemes in its characterisation (e.g., *poor struggling creature*; *wild creature*, *nimble and fleet-footed*; *white, flabby, offensive, evil-smelling creatures*; *asinine, creaking*, ‘*what about your king and country*’, *shocked, outraged and speechless creature*).

Furthermore, 261 (42%) adjectival collocates of the word ‘creature’ appear only once in the corpus. Such a diverse range of adjectives used to evaluate the conceptual meaning of this word demonstrates the richness and variety of the language employed by the studied modernist novelists. Nonetheless, each evaluative adjective, whether appearing once or recurrently, contributed to a broad picture of predominantly negative assessment of ‘creature’ in the corpus (328 negative modifiers; 52%) (see Figure 2). Adjectival collocates conveying its positive assessment occur in 214 instances (34%), while axiologically neutral collocates are used 86 times (14%). To exemplify how ‘creature’ is appraised in the studied corpus of British modernist novels, I will elucidate its most common adjectival modifiers in each referential category.



**Figure 2.** Evaluation of creatures in the British modernist corpus

The findings reveal the prevailing negative evaluation of human creatures (52%) in the analysed corpus of modernist novels. In the assessment of female creatures, the contrast between negative and positive adjectival appraisal is less pronounced, compared to males and humans in general, where negative evaluations occur nearly twice as frequently as positive ones. Neutral modifiers are rare in the assessment of females and males, but almost equal in number with positive adjectives in the evaluation of generalised human figures. These results suggest that the authors in the analysed corpus texts undervalue human creatures, which may stem from the modernists’ critical views of humanism and its principles.

*Human creatures* are often appraised in the analysed corpus texts as *poor* (38 adjectives), *little* (28 adjectives), *good* (15 adjectives), *old* (11 adjectives), *human* (8 adjectives), *small* (6 adjectives), *brilliant* (6 adjectives), *living* (6 adjectives), *strange* (5 adjectives), *mild* (5 adjectives).

The most frequently used modifier, *poor*, negatively assesses humans as “needy, necessitous, indigent, destitute” or “unfortunate, wretched, hapless” (OED). Even though this modifier may connote compassion and sympathy when applied to living beings, the way it is expressed, in my opinion, is condescending, implying that the characterised person is pitiable, vulnerable, or inferior, as in the following examples:

- (1) The rest of mankind that did not command the sixteen-knot steel steamer Ossa were rather poor creatures (Conrad, Lord Jim).
- (2) It was the clown’s doing, and the clown, poor creature, was non compos, not entirely there, and couldn’t be called to account for his actions (Huxley, Antic Hay).

The adjectives *human* and *living* are axiologically neutral in the corpus texts. They do not connote human beings’ inferiority to immortal divinities, as suggested in many religious narratives, but categorise beings as alive and belonging to the human race, as illustrated in (3) and (4).

- (3) I can’t imagine any living creature who would bowl over quite so easily (Forster, *Howards End*).
- (4) In fact she possessed, in a degree that amounted to genius, one of the rarest of human qualities, - unconditional pity for the unhappy human creature (Le Gallienne, *Young Lives*).

The modifiers *little* and *small* either objectively describe a creature’s size, build, or age (5) or subjectively assess beings as insignificant and petty, as demonstrated in example (6), where people are belittled in comparison with the vastness of the station.

- (5) But it did make his blood boil to see little creatures of five or six crossing Piccadilly alone (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*).
- (6) In the vast cavern of the station the theatre-goers were hastening, crossing the pale grey strand, small creatures scurrying hither and thither in the space beneath the lonely lamps (Lawrence, *The White Peacock*).

The modifiers *good* and *brilliant* evaluate human creatures positively, carrying approval or favourable attitude towards the characterised entity in their semantic meaning (7). Contrary to them, the modifier *strange* was mainly used to assess an individual as unfamiliar and abnormal, thus to be treated with caution (8). The modifier *old* is perceived as a negative one due to its associations with poorer health and decline, unlike young individuals (9). And the adjective *mild* conveys a negative evaluation of human creatures in all occurrences of its use in the corpus, especially when paired with other negative adjectives (10).

- (7) I think you're an amazingly brilliant creature, Guy—I do really (Mirrlees, *The Counterplot*).
- (8) Furex was a strange creature, a Limousin stonemason who worked steadily all the week and drank himself into a kind of paroxysm on Saturdays (Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London*).
- (9) She was a dishevelled, jelly-soft old creature with a figure like a cottage loaf (Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*).
- (10) She was a pale, mild creature, and had been somewhat overwhelmed by her husband's greatness (Maugham, *The Bishops Apron*).

Among *non-human creatures* in the analysed corpus, animals are most commonly evaluated neutrally (37 modifiers), followed by negative modifiers (25), and positive ones, used the least (15 modifiers) (see Figure 4). Adjectives *little* (6 occurrences), *poor* and *wild* (5 occurrences each) are most frequent in the evaluation of animal creatures, mainly characterising them neutrally, as in example (11). Negative assessment is demonstrated in (12), where the modifier *poor* negatively and pitifully characterises a defenceless sick cat, violently kicked by a boy.

- (11) They were the eyes of some wild winged creature dashed down from its soaring and frenzied by the fall (Sinclair, *The Divine Fire*).
- (12) [...] he saw a large "healthy" boy kicking a sick cat; the poor creature had just strength enough to crawl under an outhouse door; probably to die in torments (Machen, *The Hill of Dreams*).

The *supernatural beings* are predominantly negatively evaluated (10 modifiers), compared to 5 positive adjectives and 4 neutral, like in (13), where goatish beings are negatively assessed because of their eerie appearance.

- (13) Goatish creatures with human faces, hornybrowed, lightly bearded and grey as indiarubber (Joyce, *Portrait of an Artist*).

*Inanimate creatures* in the corpus texts are cities and buildings, means of transportation, plants, natural phenomena, abstract notions, and other objects (21 instances), which are recurrently depicted as anthropomorphic beings, possessing human-like characteristics of liveliness, fidelity, distress, confusion, playfulness, attractiveness, and others. They are mostly positively assessed (11 modifiers), representing and praising humans' achievements, as in the assessment of a ship in (14), or they exemplify beautiful natural things, as sunflowers in (15).

- (14) [...] I felt, did the Maggie Darling, the loveliest, proud-sailed creature that ever leaned over and laughed in the grasp of the breeze (Le Gallienne, *Pieces of Eight*).
- (15) Wonderful creatures sunflowers are (Lawrence, *Aaron's Rod*).

*Unspecified entities* as creatures are often determined by definite/indefinite articles or other determiners (16), and have the least number of adjectival collocates (4 modifiers) in the corpus texts, like in (17), where Ursula dehumanises people like Loerke, comparing them to some undetermined living beings, something less than human.

- (16) It attacks the rats, and through them other creatures (Woolf, *The Voyage Out*).
- (17) But there were no new worlds, there were no more men, there were only creatures, little, ultimate creatures like Loerke (Lawrence, *Women in Love*).

In summary, as my research findings show, ‘creature’ is primarily understood as a human being in the corpus of British modernist novels. There is a wide diversity in its evaluations in the analysed novels, with a general tendency towards negative assessments. Positive appraisals of female-creatures do not significantly differ from their negative evaluations, unlike other referential categories, and animal-creatures are most commonly evaluated neutrally.

## 5. Conclusion

This study deals with the exploration of the word ‘creature’ in the corpus of British modernist novels. Specifically, it examines the contextual meanings of this word in the corpus texts and its evaluation. The research methodology combines established linguistic methods of corpus and stylistic analysis with elements of literary analysis.

The meaning of the word ‘creature’ is ambiguous in modern English, encompassing a spectrum of 11 meanings in the Oxford English Dictionary. Its semantic range contrasts general notions with specific ones, living beings with inanimate things, and humans with animals. Such multiplicity of its understanding can be traced back to the past, when this word was diversely perceived and interpreted in philosophical and religious contexts.

A publicly available corpus of 46 British modernist novels was built for the research, and the web-based platform Sketch Engine facilitated both its compilation and subsequent analysis of the word ‘creature’. The study of this term in the corpus texts revealed that it is employed in a variety of contexts and meanings, though references to human beings notably exceed those to other entities. This anthropocentric view on ‘creature’ may indicate the modernist authors’ interest in exploring the essence of human beings and rethinking humanity’s place in a rapidly changing world.

My stylistic and pragmatic analyses revealed the type of evaluation conveyed by its attributive and predicative adjectival collocates. The conceptual meaning of ‘creature’ is predominantly negatively assessed, although this general trend was not uniform: positive and negative appraisals of female creatures occur in roughly equal proportions, inanimate creatures are predominantly assessed positively, and animal creatures are most commonly evaluated neutrally.

The research findings reveal that despite the plurality of perceptions and evaluations of the word ‘creature’ in the corpus of British modernist novels, it is predominantly understood as a human being, and it is mostly negatively evaluated. Further investigations of this term in the literature of different literary periods may shed more light on its perception and evaluations across history and literary contexts.

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## THE ANGRY YOUNG NARRATIVES IN ENGLISH DYSTOPIA

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**Abstract:** *This paper investigates the ‘Angry Young Man’ archetype within two seminal dystopian novels: George Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four and Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake. By delving into the fundamental aspects of dystopianism, the study examines how Winston Smith and Glenn embody this archetype within their respective dystopian contexts. Through this analysis, the paper highlights the interplay of dystopian politics and the resistance embodied by these characters. The aim is to elucidate how Orwell and Atwood deploy these rational and intellectual figures to critique and reflect upon the political and societal constructs of their imagined worlds.*

**Keywords:** *Angry Young Man, Dystopia, Nineteen Eighty Four, Oryx and Crake, Totalitarianism*

### 1. Introduction

“Every novel begins with a ‘what if’ and then sets forth its axioms”, Margaret Atwood writes in her essay “Writing Oryx and Crake” (2003). Dystopian fiction often emerges from these ‘what if’ scenarios, shaped by an author’s observations of the past and present, and their contemplation on the future. The apprehensive predictions about the dangerous interplay of science and politics that were prevailing before the twentieth century proved to be true and disastrous at the sequences of the world wars. The age that followed, marked by a profound scepticism toward science and technology, revealed the perilous fusion and outcomes of science, politics, and capitalism—arguably one of the most destructive combinations. This disillusionment laid the groundwork for the emergence of dystopian novels preferably in the post-war era.

Dystopia, often termed an anti-utopia, denotes a social setting marked by extreme oppression and a fundamental unsuitability for human survival. J.S. Mill (1988) describes such settings as “too bad to be practicable”. While Marxist critics regard utopian literature as a means to “empower meaningful political action in the present,” dystopian literature transcends simple escapism, embodying “an escape, or attempted escape, to history, which is to say, to the world of contingency, conflict, and uncertainty” (Booker 1994: 3-4). This genre serves as both historically informative and reflective, addressing the issues and patterns of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries—ranging from racism and capitalism to communism, fascism, totalitarianism, colonialism, and digitalism. As “a form of political and politicised writing,” dystopian fiction provides a fictional prognosis on contemporary issues and conflicts (Stock 2018: 14).

More than a work of imagination, analysis and prognosis, dystopian fiction remains a repertoire of ideologies from history and politics, carefully inspected and logistically interpreted. The chosen works of fiction, George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* present a dystopian culture that causes the chief characters to be the angry young men, forlorn and exasperated, at the same time, trying to be rebellious. *Nineteen Eighty Four* presents Oceania, a technologically advanced totalitarian society, which is totally under the surveillance of Big Brother, a technological figure, and his Inner Party. Oceanian culture and the political ideologies are formulated by Orwell based on his understanding and observation of evolutionary politics and revolutionary technologies around his time. *Oryx and Crake* poses a scientific dystopia where Atwood presents the extremity of the twenty-first century lifestyle based on the population's exposure to and impact from science, technology, media and artificialities. This is evidenced by cases such as genetically engineered *pigoons* for human organ harvesting and the virtual world called *Paradice* which imitates the concept of idyllic paradise. *Nineteen Eighty Four*'s protagonist Winston Smith and *Oryx and Crake*'s antagonist Crake are observed as the angry young men of their respective societies under study. Their personality remains in conflict with the social determinants of their dystopian setting, enabling each of them to react as an angry young man, "who will not rub his nose in the golden trough", but will be "bitterly contemptuous of those whom he indicts of cruel insensibility" (Weiss 1960: 287). The phrase "Angry Young Men" was popularised during the 1956 promotional campaign for John Osborne's play *Look Back in Anger*, when the Royal Court Theatre's press officer employed the term to encapsulate the theme (2012); the phrase is likely derived from Leslie Allen Paul's autobiography, *Angry Young Man*, published in the year 1951. Furthermore, J. D. Scott, a journalist for *The Spectator*, characterised the writings of the young British writers of the 1950s, referring to them as *The Movement* which distanced itself from the sombre discussions and poetic sensibilities of the 1940s, instead crafting works to navigate through the corrupt world (Scott 1954). The phrase was then used to describe a group of writers, who much like their characters in their works, expressed cynicism and alienation towards post-war British society. They are the personalities "bored by the despair of the Forties, not much interested in suffering, and extremely impatient of poetic sensibilities". (Oxford 2004: 998). The *angry young man* theme extends beyond John Osborne's era, as reflected in these dystopian works, each unique to its specific setting and context.

*Nineteen Eighty Four* is a dystopian fiction of the twentieth century, as it themes around totalitarianism with dictatorship, surveillance, lack of privacy, manipulation and class conflict. The Republic of Oceania functions under the Inner Party and the Inner Party operates under its ultimate headstrong digitised leader, Big Brother, who is known and seen only by the image representation of a pair of eyes, a heavy moustache and some "handsome features" and a phrase stating "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" (Orwell 2017: 11). Under the icon of Big Brother, the Inner Party decides what the people should know, do and even think. The party exercises absolute control over the lives of the people in Oceania through constant surveillance, the manipulation of truth, psychological repression and the

subtle enforcement of compliance with its demands and doctrines. Also, it has the ultimate control of Oceania's past and present. Oceania has its newly emerging language system *Newspeak*, which has launched a new set of words, eliminating any words that refer to freedom and choice. Oceania's history tends to be the result of its alterations in the present by the party. It is subject to change all the time as even its allies and foes are constantly swapped, altogether causing the people to go insane. Also the party seeks to control its residents' thoughts, emotions and expressions under the name of *thoughtcrime* and *facecrime*. Further, it exercises its rights by suddenly seizing anyone for such crimes without evidence or proof, rendering a person as *unimagined* or an *unperson*, thereby vaporising him/her from the society. The irrationality in Oceania as a result of totalitarianism is hinted at by Orwell through the calculation "two and two make five" (idem: 243). Winston Smith, who initially felt "a sense of complete helplessness", turns out to be *angry* and *young* as the plot progresses (ibid).

Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* exemplifies dystopian speculative fiction, delineating two contrasting worlds: the pre-catastrophic and the post-catastrophic. The pre-catastrophic world is divided into three distinct zones: the Compounds, where "the top people lived"; the Modules, which housed individuals of mediocre status; and the Pleeblands, where "the addicts, the muggers, the paupers, the crazies" with infections and diseases resided (Atwood 2003: 25-31). The elite Compounders, representing corporate capitalism, were the architects of a genetically engineered and scientifically overwhelming world. They shaped the media, culture, and lifestyle, influencing not only the Module dwellers and Pleeblanders but also their own class. This society, altogether, was characterised by an overabundance of choices—"too much hardware, too much software, too many hostile bioforms, too many weapons of every kind. And too much envy and fanaticism and bad faith" (idem: 32). The media and entertainment became inundated with obscenity and violence, leading to a culture where gruesomeness became the norm. The human body was redefined as, "executions were its tragedies, pornography was its romance" (idem: 98). In contrast to the protagonist Jimmy, who resigns himself to his fate, his friend Glenn, known later as Crake, emerges as the *angry young man* who actively challenges the societal order. Crake, disillusioned with the prevailing system, becomes the antagonist by planning and executing a catastrophe that eradicates the existing society and its flawed principles.

In the realm of select dystopian novels, two contrasting societies are depicted: one marked by excessive choice and extravagant freedom, and the other by a profound lack of choice and fundamental liberty. Despite their differences, both societies are characterised by dehumanisation, pervasive surveillance, a technologically driven way of life, pronounced class divisions, violence, paranoia, and mechanisms of control and manipulation. In both scenarios, the common populace is subjugated under the influence of capitalistic structures, where the intentions and actions of the ruling class are driven by the overarching system in which they operate. In these repressive frameworks, Winston Smith and Glenn symbolise the oppressed. The narratives highlight their efforts to assert their individuality—through their personal thoughts, desires, actions, and intentions—within a collectively suppressed society.

## 2. The rise and fall of a trailblazing *angry young man* in 1984

In a letter written to Julian Symons on 4 February, 1949, Orwell (1968: 475) described his *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as “a Utopia in the form of the novel”, and hinted that he had actually “ballsed it up”. The motive behind his writing of the novel is captured in his letter to Francis A. Henson on 16 June 1949:

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralised economy is liable and which have already been partly realised in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily will arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it could arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasise that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere. (idem: 502)

Winston Smith, the protagonist of the novel, was a thirty-nine-year-old man employed at the Ministry of Truth, known as *Minitru*. Within the hierarchical structure of Oceania, Smith occupied a middle position, holding a role within the Inner Party. His income sufficed to meet his basic needs, and he resided in modest accommodations. At this point, Smith had not yet fallen out of favour with the Inner Party, but he wrestled with his own conscience. He maintained an “expression of quiet optimism” when visible to the telescreen, yet his genuine optimism surfaced only when he was out of its view (Orwell 2017: 14). Smith was well aware of the Party’s ideologies and adhered to them. He maintained a facade of optimism, exhibited hatred when required during events such as the *Two Minutes Hate*, refrained from discussing history erased by memory holes, and did not complain about hunger or food scarcity, instead relying on Victory Gin to alleviate his appetite. This approach mirrors the character in W.H. Auden’s “The Unknown Citizen” (1940: 19), where the citizen is portrayed as exemplary and compliant with societal expectations, yet the question of his personal happiness remains unaddressed. Despite Winston Smith’s ability to conform to the Inner Party’s ideologies and propaganda, he remained plagued by paranoia regarding thoughtcrime and facecrime in Oceania. He struggled to reconcile the logic of past and present, could not suppress his sexual urges, and continued to question the existence of the omnipotent figure of Big Brother. Professionally, Smith was engaged in altering and falsifying historical records, but this did little to mitigate the profound cognitive dissonance he felt. He recalled the suffering of his childhood, spent with his mother and younger sister, and recognized a similar anguish in his present life, where “the past was dead, the future was unimaginable” (Orwell 2017: 31).

As a resident of Oceania, Winston Smith experienced a profound sense of mental imprisonment, with his thoughts, gestures, expressions, speech, and actions all tightly controlled. This mental blockade was particularly apparent when he struggled to write more than the date in his diary. His suppressed thoughts, constrained by the Party’s ideologies, evolved into an “interminable restless monologue” over the years

(idem: 16). Smith developed a pervasive paranoia, convinced that the Party was always ready to get people at any moment through its extensive surveillance and accusations of *thoughtcrime*. This fear led him to mistrust everything, aware that the Party preferred to twist the truth in order to fit its needs. For him, the ultimate threat posed by the Party was not merely death but *total annihilation*, rendering their actions far more profound than death itself.

Winston Smith perceived Goldstein, Oceania's antagonist, as another *angry young man*, a more fervent and rebellious figure. Goldstein was characterised by his vehement criticism of Big Brother and the Party's dictatorship, and his advocacy for fundamental freedoms such as speech, press, assembly, and thought. During the *Two Minutes Hate* directed at Goldstein, Winston Smith found himself engulfed in a surge of anger similar to Goldstein's rebellious fervour, though his own feelings were more passive than Goldstein's. He could not escape participating in the *Two Minutes Hate*, which led him to a conflict of emotions - alternately despising and admiring Big Brother. He soon recognized that this existential anxiety stemmed from his passive approach: he had been merely striving to maintain his sanity rather than deeply confronting his thoughts and emotions. With this realisation, he began to express himself more openly through writing, understanding that, regardless of his loyalty to the Party, he was ultimately destined to face his fate under Big Brother at any time. His conscious attempt at writing in his diary records:

To the future or to the past, to a time when thought is free, when men are different from one another and do not live alone to a time when truth exists and what is done cannot be undone. From the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of doublethink-greetings! (Orwell 2017: 32)

The emotional void in his life, the uncertainty surrounding his survival, the blurred lines between truth and falsehood, the absence of purpose, and the disconnect between his actions and their meaning all contributed to a deep-seated *mute protest* within him against his society. This unspoken discontent finally found expression with Julia's arrival in his life. He moved beyond passive diary writing and began taking decisive actions, drawing inspiration from Julia's *practical cunning*. The angry young man shifted his focus from dismantling minor structures to challenging the entire oppressive regime. He came to realise that hope lay not only with the proles but also within himself, understanding that the only way forward was to revolt against the Party. He elevated his animal instinct to have sex as a potent force capable of dismantling the Party. To him, Julia embodied a similar defiant spirit, sharing his anger at the regime and preferring a personal connection with Winston over allegiance to the Party. Thus, he prioritised emotion over rationality, embracing a revolutionary spirit to preserve his humanity in defiance of the regime. From that point onward, he became a driven man of action, intent on challenging the larger structure of Oceania. No longer plagued by frustration and regrets, he bolstered his resolve by meeting with O'Brien, whom he viewed as a *paragon of intelligence*. Additionally, he gained valuable insights into his society and its capitalist framework, attributed to poverty and ignorance, through Goldstein's book, which O'Brien had provided. This newfound knowledge, along with his plans with O'Brien, initially reassured

him of his sanity and led him to understand that “sanity is not statistical” (Orwell 2017: 190). As he endeavoured to restore sanity to Oceania, Winston Smith was confronted with the stark reality that the purpose of the party is to make the rational mad residents sane. Captured and arrested by the Inner Party, he was subjected to a meeting with O’Brien, who had previously orchestrated Smith’s understanding of the party’s history and motives. This meeting addressed Smith’s quest for the *why* in several critical ways. First, Smith was made to recognize that his individual mind was flawed, as memory and perspective are inherently subjective rather than objective. Second, the party’s objective was framed as achieving sanity, highlighting that “it is not easy to become sane” (idem: 220). Third, the party’s system was explained as not totalitarian in the conventional sense, with its mandate being “thou art” rather than “thou shall” (idem: 223). The party aimed to demonstrate that Smith’s perceived flaws stemmed from his own *intellectual inferiority*. Despite the extensive psychological manipulation, Smith’s resistance endured until he was subjected to severe violence. His defiance was ultimately broken when he falsely admitted that two and two made five, primarily to escape the inflicted pain.

The *angry young man* was swiftly reduced to nothingness, as his existence was verbally undermined by O’Brien’s declaration “you do not exist” (Orwell 2017: 227). He then demonstrated his party’s motive of power, showcasing its ability to effectuate a perfect conversion of individuals like Winston and Julia, who were deemed to embody *rebelliousness, deceit, folly, and dirty-mindedness* (ibid). Furthermore, Room 101 played a crucial role in this process, deconstructing Smith and reconstructing him to the point where he came to view any resistance to Big Brother and the Party as “the self-willed exile from the loving breast” (Orwell 2017: 260). Ultimately, he started loving Big Brother.

### 3. The catastrophe induced by the *angry young man* in *Oryx and Crake*

In her brief essay “Writing *Oryx and Crake*”, Margaret Atwood reflects on the connection between the creation of her novel and the historical tragedy of the September 11 attacks (Atwood 2003). Atwood discusses the challenge of crafting a fictional apocalypse while simultaneously witnessing a real-life catastrophe characterised by profound rage, violence, and destruction. This intersection of personal experience and historical events deeply influences her narrative, which centres on a cataclysmic event instigated by a disillusioned young man. The novel portrays a society marred by violence, disorder, and chaos, ultimately leading to widespread devastation and the extinction of humankind. In exploring the pre-apocalyptic world depicted in Margaret Atwood’s narrative, it aligns with Tom Moylan’s concept of a *critical utopia*, where the setting initially appears utopian but is marked by an inherent awareness of its limitations, thus preserving the utopian ideal while acknowledging its inherent flaws (Moylan 1986: 10). The central character, Snowman, previously known as Jimmy, reflects on his life before the cataclysm. He becomes aware of his trajectory towards the apocalypse, which has led him to a state of “existing and not existing” in his current predicament (Atwood 2013: 8).

Jimmy's upbringing was marked by a stark contrast between his parents' attitudes towards their society. His father was pragmatically aligned with the prevailing survival-of-the-fittest mentality, whereas his mother, disillusioned by the deteriorating state of society, expressed a refusal to partake in what she perceived as a meaningless existence (idem: 45). She regarded the scientific experiments conducted at *OrganInc Farms* by the Compounders, the societal divisions, and the pervasive surveillance and control exerted by the Corpsecorps men over the Modules and Compounds, as fundamentally *artificial* (idem: 31). As Jimmy matured, he recognized that his mother's disenchantment with society was shared by his close friend Crake, who grew out to be an influential scientist from the Compound. During their youth, Crake and Jimmy engaged in playing violent online games such as *Barbarian Stomp*, *Blood and Roses*, and *Extinctathon*, and were exposed to disturbing digital content, including electrocutions, live surgeries, executions, and suicides. While Jimmy's mother regarded Crake as "more adult than a lot of adults," Jimmy viewed him as a rational and logical person, noted for his style of *objective communication* (idem: 79). He observed that Crake demonstrated an exceptional understanding of games and media content, approaching them with an analytical mindset beyond mere participation. Crake's demeanour, marked by *cool slouchiness*, and his capacity to remain largely unaffected by his exposures contrasted sharply with Jimmy's own reactions. This nuanced characterization of Crake underscores his complex role in the narrative.

In the post-catastrophic world, Snowman was uniquely positioned to perceive the pervasive influence of Crake, manifesting in concepts such as *Crakedom*, *Crakiness*, and *Crakehood*, which permeated the remnants of society. While Snowman was referencing Crake and Oryx to the Crackers as the architects of a new world and new species, he now perceives a more nuanced understanding of Crake's motives. The *angry young man* persona that dominated Crake's adolescence becomes clearer to Snowman in retrospect. He began to comprehend the concepts of the *Great Rearrangement* and the *Great Emptiness* that Crake had envisioned, gaining insight into Crake's profound disillusionment with the inherent despair and suffering of human existence. This realisation underscores Snowman's growing grasp of Crake's intricate legacy and his own place within the altered world. Unlike the archetypal angry young man who grapples with his middle-class frustrations, Crake has emerged as a privileged figure of the elite, residing in the *Paradise* Compounds after completing his higher education. As a member of this exclusive enclave, Crake bore his *own scars* and *dark emotions* regarding humanity and survival. Crake's father, a humanist dedicated to promoting human welfare, was ultimately captured and killed by corporate forces. His efforts were largely unacknowledged by society. In light of his father's tragic fate, Crake adopted a calculated and detached approach to societal issues, while maintaining a profound commitment to the planet. His approach was marked by a dispassionate objectivity, extending even to his views on love, which he dismissed as merely a "hormonally induced delusional state", and sex, which he regarded as a "mechanical joke" (idem: 225-335).

In his capacity at the Institute, Crake introduced Jimmy to the scientific projects he spearheaded as emblematic of the *wave of the future*, revealing the underlying

*secret units* integral to these initiatives. For Jimmy, these revelations appear as an enigmatic *phantasmagoria*, while for Crake, they are corrupting sources of mankind that should be ultimately discarded. In his research facility known as *Paradise*, Crake concentrated on two principal concepts: human immortality and human sexual gratification. He also engaged in the practice of altering individuals' identities by erasing their pasts and providing them with new personas. To Jimmy, Crake appeared as a figure of immense power and influence, described metaphorically as *the alpha wolf*, *the silver-black gorilla* and *the head lion*. This portrayal contrasted with Crake's true ambition, which was not merely to secure a prominent position within the Compounds but to effectuate a radical transformation for the planet through "the elimination of one generation" (idem: 261). Beyond the constructed environment of the Compounds, Crake established his own distinct artificial setting, complete with a fabricated sun and moon, to facilitate the creation of a new humanoid species. This endeavour was the culmination of seven years of intensive research. The resulting beings were designed with features and traits that Crake deemed essential, while deliberately excluding the characteristics he believed had "plagued humanity" (Atwood 2013:358). Crackers were a humanoid species characterised by their anti repellent skin, short lifespan, rapid growth, disease immunity, and benign nature. Their society was devoid of violence, rape, murder, jealousy, love, and lust. Their reproductive process was distinctive, involving four males and one female, and was conducted openly. This process stood in stark contrast to the covert practices, desires, and pleasures typically associated with human reproduction. These creations were intended to serve as idealised *floor models* of his critical utopian vision.

Despite Crake's considerable scientific achievements, his personal relationships revealed a contrasting dimension of his character. His triangular romantic partner, Oryx, viewed him as detached from everyday concerns, stating, "Crake lives in a higher world...He lives in a world of ideas. He is doing important things. He has no time to play" (idem: 368). While society, friends, and even his lover perceived Crake as a serious and intellectual scientist preoccupied with his ideas, they underestimated his true intentions. Crake's objectives were not merely to benefit humanity but to fundamentally alter the planet's condition. Contrary to the perception of him as a man driven by a *colossal ego*, Crake was, in fact, a misanthropic environmental advocate. Ultimately, Crake's vision culminated in the creation of the *Red Death*, a genetically engineered virus designed to eradicate the human population. On the day of the virus's release, Crake ended Oryx's life and was subsequently killed by Jimmy, thus enabling Jimmy to assume the role of the "King of the Crackery" (idem: 389).

#### 4. Conclusion

Through the characters and their experiences, Orwell and Atwood provide critical insights into the ways dystopian societies manipulate and control their populations. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, surveillance operates as a central mechanism of control, though it manifests in markedly different ways. Orwell's narrative presents a regime of overt

surveillance, where the Party's monitoring is explicit and unrelenting, epitomised by the omnipresent figure of Big Brother. Conversely, Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* depicts surveillance through a more insidious and pervasive influence, where control is exerted subtly, through the manipulation of societal norms and consumer culture rather than through overt observation. Both novels examine the deep-seated anxieties and disillusionments arising from such regimes, revealing how different forms of surveillance impact personal freedom and societal norms. In both Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the dystopian settings are depicted through two markedly distinct approaches to technology and control. Orwell's narrative portrays technology as a transparent tool, explicitly designed to monitor and enforce discipline among the populace. The omnipresent surveillance apparatus of Oceania, embodied by Big Brother, serves as a constant reminder of the regime's watchful eye, ensuring that the inhabitants are acutely aware of their subjugation and the mechanisms of control. In contrast, Atwood's dystopian world operates through a more insidious use of technology and science. The societal control exercised by the corporate conglomerates in *Oryx and Crake* is subtle, causing the manipulation of individuals and society in ways that are not immediately apparent to the individuals affected.

Both authors utilise characters embodying the *angry young man* archetype to illuminate the underlying discontent and resistance within these dystopian regimes. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith is presented as a rational protagonist, grappling with the pervasive influence of Big Brother and the distortions of reality propagated by the Party. His growing awareness of the regime's manipulations, particularly through the revelations in O'Brien's text, fuels his anger and resistance. Despite his fervent opposition to the Party's ideologies and his commitment to Julia, his eventual capture and subsequent torture in Room 101 strip him of his resolve. The profound psychological and physical torment he endures obliterates his defiance, leading to a complete relinquishment of his former beliefs and rendering his resistance futile. The ultimate erasure of his anger and ambition underscores a pervasive *sense of helplessness*, encapsulating the theme of totalitarian dominance. In Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the antagonist Crake exhibits a distinctive approach in expressing his discontent compared to Winston Smith in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Crake's strategy is marked by a calculated passivity, maintaining a facade of quietude while meticulously surveilling the multifaceted layers of society—spanning the Compounds, Modules, and Pleeblands. His discontent, driven by a profound disdain for humanity, ultimately culminates in a catastrophic event aimed at eradicating the human species and initiating the rise of a new humanoid species.

Crake's method diverges significantly from Winston Smith's efforts in Oceania. Whereas Smith seeks to undermine the totalitarian regime by aligning himself with O'Brien, whom he perceives as a potential ally against the Party, Crake operates independently. As a prominent scientist within the Compounds, Crake wields considerable influence and devises his own plans for societal transformation, contrasting with his father's position, which was characterised by suspicion and mistrust of the corporate elites. Crake's radical actions reflect his

contempt for both the corporate elite and the general populace, positioning him as a figure whose ultimate resolution lies in the complete eradication of humanity rather than its reform. His portrayal as an *angry young man* culminates in the extinction of humankind, which represents his perceived solution to the flaws he identifies in the human society. In stark contrast, Winston Smith's trajectory results in a profound transformation. After enduring severe psychological and physical torture in Room 101, Smith's resistance is obliterated, and he is ultimately reconciled with the regime, embracing Big Brother and relinquishing his previous dissent. Smith's final acceptance of the Party's ideology reflects his tragic surrender to the totalitarian regime's power, where his earlier rebellious stance became nothing but a "cruel, needless misunderstanding" (Orwell 2017:260). Winston Smith's transformation from a frustrated individual into an "angry young man" is significantly influenced by his relationship with Julia. Initially, Smith's discontent remains largely confined to his solitary existence, where his frustrations are expressed in isolation. It is only through his connection with Julia that he evolves into a figure of active rebellion against the oppressive regime. In contrast, Crake, as depicted in Margaret Atwood's narrative, embodies the archetype of the *angry young man* from the outset. His disillusionment with society is evident from the beginning, and he demonstrates a mature, if not cynical, perspective on his surroundings. Crake's character is marked by an inherent cunning and a pronounced self-interest, distinguishing him from Smith's more reactive form of dissent.

Both authors portray their dystopian societies as deeply flawed. In *Oryx and Crake*, Atwood portrays a world characterised by consumerism and hedonism, driven by unchecked corporate power and a blend of totalitarianism, while in *Nineteen Eighty Four*, Orwell presents an outwardly disciplined utopian society, which was in fact fundamentally dystopian and irrational. These oppressive conditions incite the anger of their protagonists, who confront the injustices and insensitivities they experience. In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, the narrative offers a critique of a totalitarian regime through the perspective of a socialist, while Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* examines corporate dystopianism through the actions of an antihumanist. Winston Smith, in Orwell's novel, harbours animosity towards the regime, but also exhibits a nuanced understanding of the oppressed individuals around him, feeling both empathy and pity for their helplessness. In contrast, Crake's resentment in Atwood's work extends beyond the corporations to include a broader disdain for humanity's ignorance and irresponsibility, holding both people and their destructive behaviours accountable for the state of the world.

The figures of Winston Smith and Crake, both representing the *angry young man* archetype, are placed in distinct dystopian worlds, and each is characterised by differing motives and approaches. Smith aspires to be a hero, striving for resistance and redemption, whereas Crake embraces a more villainous role, seeking to impose his own vision upon the world. The juxtapositions elucidate the divergent trajectories of these characters and their interactions with oppressive systems, offering insights into the complex interplay between personal resistance and systemic constraints.

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**SOMETHING'S BURNING (OUT)  
IN MONICA ALI'S *IN THE KITCHEN*:  
GABRIEL'S JOURNEY FROM ACHIEVEMENT-SUBJECT  
TO *HOMO SACER* AND BEYOND**

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**Abstract:** *This paper reads Monica Ali's 2009 novel In the Kitchen from the perspective of Byung-Chul Han's philosophy of the burnout society and Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer, focusing on the protagonist Gabriel Lightfoot, an ambitious London chef. Gabriel, who starts out, in Han's terms, as an achievement-subject par excellence is profoundly changed by his encounters with London's exploitative underworld.*

**Keywords:** *achievement subject, burnout society, disciplinary society, homo sacer*

## **1. Introduction**

Monica Ali's novels, including her highly acclaimed *Brick Lane*, deal with the transformation of contemporary British life and identity in the face of a changing, increasingly hybrid and globalised social milieu (Nyman 2011: 92). These themes, including globalised neoliberalism, human trafficking and irregular migration, are also central to her 2009 novel *In the Kitchen*, although its protagonist Gabriel Lightfoot (Gabe), in contrast to *Brick Lane*'s protagonist Nazneen, is a "white, English, middle-class character" with an arguably "Eurocentric and androcentric perspective" (Battisti and Fiorato 2018). Gabriel, originally from the declining Northern English mill town of Blantwhistle, is executive chef at the Imperial Hotel, which can be understood as a microcosm of a contemporary globalised, neoliberal London. Indeed, it resembles a kind of 21<sup>st</sup> century "upstairs, downstairs", where the largely immigrant, "rag-tag" kitchen staff (Caporale-Bizzini 2020: 587) serve a rich elite in the hotel's expensive restaurant (Marino 2019: 29).

In this context, this paper reads the ambitious Gabriel, who aims to establish his own restaurant, as an "achievement-subject" from the perspective of philosopher Byung-Chul Han's (2016) thesis of the "burnout society". Han argues that the exploitative Foucauldian "disciplinary-society" has been replaced by a "performance-society", whose "achievement subjects" no longer work for or are exploited by an Other. The performance-society, however, is characterised by "egotism, atomization and narcissism" (Han 2021), all characteristics which are attributed to Gabe or which he notes are rife in contemporary London. As discussed further below, while contemporary achievement-subjects perceive themselves as free, they actually

exploit themselves, as they are encouraged to work ever-harder in their drive to fulfil their ambitions, thus subjecting themselves to neurological diseases such as burnout, ADHD or depression (Han 2016).

Here, Han avails himself of Giorgio Agamben's (1998) well-known concept of *homo sacer*, a figure of bare life, who is simultaneously subject to the law, but bereft of its protection. Unlike Agamben, however, Han argues that in contemporary society we are all reduced to bare life not by the sovereign state of exception, but rather by our own drive to succeed, so that "it is not just the people at the margins or in a state of exception – that is, the excluded – but all of us, without exception, who are *homines sacri*" (Han 2016: 19).

Overworked, exhausted and burning-out, Gabriel's life changes after the hotel porter Yuri, an irregular migrant, is found dead in the hotel basement, where he had been living. As Gabe later recalls; "When he looked back, he felt that the death of the Ukrainian was the point at which things began to fall apart ... it was the following day on which, if a life can be said to have a turning point, his own began to spin" (Ali 2010: 9). Thus, *In the Kitchen* opens in the manner of a detective novel, as Gabe seeks to discover the mystery behind Yuri's death, yet develops into a novel of social critique, as he gradually becomes aware of the hotel's connection with London's dark underbelly of undocumented migrants and human trafficking (Caporale-Bizzini 2020: 587). Importantly, then, as this paper seeks to argue, Ali's London is not merely a performance-society, populated by auto-exploiting achievement-subjects; it is a city where irregular migrants are very much exploited, indeed reduced to bare, life by others.

## 2. Han: The burnout society and the autopoiesis of bare life

Byung-Chul Han (2016: 8) depicts contemporary neoliberal society as an "achievement" or "burnout" society characterised by "fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories". replacing Foucault's "disciplinary" society of "hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories" (ibid.) inhabited by "obedience-subjects", who were submitted to exploitation, or at least to orders, by an Other (Pari-Bedoya *et al* 2021). For Han (2016: 1), the disciplinary society was a society of *negativity*, characterised by an *immunitary* paradigm, which sought to distinguish clearly "between inside and outside, friend and foe, self and other".

Contemporary globalised neoliberal society, by contrast, is no longer a society of negativity in Han's view; it is rather one of positivity, where the Other no longer provokes an immunoreaction, so that it is no longer perceived as a threat or an enemy but simply as a difference which is softly integrated or tolerated (Han 2016: 3). Thus, even immigrants are no longer considered threatening immunological Others, or foreigners "in the strong sense" (idem: 2-3). For Han (2018: 7), therefore, the time of "the Other is over. The Other as a secret, the Other as a temptation, the Other as eros, the Other as desire, the Other as hell and the Other as pain disappear". The biopolitical work of contemporary philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben (1998) or Roberto Esposito (2011) also belongs to this immunitary paradigm and is, therefore,

*passé* in Han's opinion. Han (2016: 48) argues, for instance, that Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* is outdated, in that it belongs to the "scheme of negativity" of the past, as "perpetrators and victims, sovereign and *homo sacer* are clearly distinguished – and topologically too".

Building on the ancient Greek distinction between *zoe* (natural life) and *bios* (political life), Agamben (1998: 109) adds a third term, bare life (*nuda vita*). While bare life is devoid of political rights, it differs from *zoe* in that it is inscribed in the political realm, so that bare life is "outside but yet belonging" to the political order (Prozorov 2014: 95; Mills 2017: 45). In order to illustrate his concept of bare life, Agamben refers to the archaic Roman legal figure of *homo sacer*; a person declared *sacer*, usually after committing a crime, could not be sacrificed to the gods, yet could be killed with impunity.

For Agamben, then, bare life is intimately connected to the sovereign exception, so that:

The inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original – if concealed – nucleus of sovereign power. It can even be said that the production of a biopolitical body is the original activity of sovereign power. (Agamben 1998: 6)

Despite its ancient origins, Agamben views bare life as increasingly characteristic of contemporary political life, including contemporary democracies as well as totalitarian states. As, in Agamben's (1998: 12) view, the sovereign state of exception increasingly becomes the rule, bare life has thus become almost ubiquitous, so that "exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, *bios* and *zoē*, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction".

In Han's (2017: 20) view, however, both sovereign power and disciplinary power are broadly similar, in that they pursue allo-exploitation, which brings forth the obedience-subject, in contrast to the contemporary neoliberal performance or achievement-subject. In the contemporary performance-society, by contrast, the self, now liberated from dealings with alterity, grows in what Han terms *sameness* or *the own*, in a narcissistic fashion (Mora-Fandos 2017: 344). In this context, Han argues that biopolitics has been replaced by psychopolitics, which focuses on mental and psychological flexibility rather than on the control of bodies, as "the body no longer represents a central force of production as it formerly did in biopolitical, disciplinary society" (Han 2017: 25). For Han (2017: 14), contemporary psychopolitics is far more efficient than the commandments and injunctions of the disciplinary society, as psychopolitics "makes sure that people subordinate themselves to power on their own". This results in a society where "may-not" or "should" has been replaced by "can", and which creates the "achievement-subject" who "stand free of any external instance of domination forcing it to work, much less exploiting it" (Han 2016: 11). Thus, the achievement-subject follows the dictates of freedom, pleasure, and inclination rather than obligation, and aims to be a "self-starting entrepreneur" rather than working for the "commanding Other" (Han 2016: 38).

The achievement-subject's supposed freedom is, however, a paradoxical "compulsive freedom" (idem: 11), where the subject is self-compelled towards constant achievement and action in the form of work, movement, consumption,

self-improvement or entrepreneurship. Thus, this is an illusory freedom, as, for Han (2017: 3), true freedom can only be found in ‘a fruitful relationship – when being with others brings happiness’ and the achievement-society, which turns people into “autistic performance-machines” has rendered meaningful relationships impossible (Han 2016: 22). Therefore, this excess of positivity resulting from a culture of “overproduction, overachievement, and overcommunication” (idem: 3) can, like an excess of negativity, be harmful, as the constant pressure to succeed results in an array of neurological ailments (ibid.), including widespread anxiety, restlessness, exhaustion and depression.

This is, then, a situation of self-exploitation, where “freedom and [self] constraint coincide” (idem: 11), so that the achievement-subject embodies the Nietzschean “last man,” who does nothing but work (idem: 10). Thus, for Han, far from being *homo liber*, the contemporary achievement-subject only succeeds in making a *homo sacer* of himself: “The sovereign of achievement society is simultaneously his own homo sacer, by this paradoxical logic, sovereign and homo sacer still generate each other in achievement society” (idem: 49).

### 3. Homines sacri in the kitchen: Gabe Lightfoot as “achievement subject”

*In the Kitchen* is (mostly) set in a London that, at least on the surface, appears to correspond to Han’s 21<sup>st</sup> century performance society. As Gabe notes, London is a place of constant work and burning ambition: rather than being the brains or the heart of the country, it “was all belly, its looping, intestinal streets constantly at work, digesting, absorbing, excreting, fuelling and refuelling” (Ali 2009: 309). It is a city where people “want to live like celebrities ...because we’re worth it, as the ads say” (idem: 316), and where no-one interferes in, or even notices, their neighbours’ business (idem: 300). It is also a multicultural city seemingly devoid of negativity in Han’s terms, where a myriad of different ethnicities, cultures and races apparently live together in relative harmony, underscored by a British identity which has become “a marketplace of ideas and values and cultures and none of them are privileged over the rest” (idem: 364). However, London’s isolated, overworked inhabitants also seem to resemble Han’s “autistic performance-machines” (Han 2016: 22); as Gabe suggests, “the city bound everyone together or kept them all equally apart. Or maybe it didn’t, but at least everyone was too busy to give much thought to it” (Ali 2009: 222”).

As executive chef in charge of the Imperial Hotel kitchen, Gabriel himself can be read as an achievement-subject who aims to “become a self-starting entrepreneur” (Han 2016: 38). Indeed, he wants to set up his own restaurant, and takes the job at the Imperial to prove himself to his financial partners, Rolly and Fairweather, who expect him to ‘turn that place around’ (Ali 2009: 23). Gabriel had always been ambitious; as a trainee “he’d been the best. He got in earliest, stayed latest, worked on his day off” (idem: 348). At the Imperial, however, he finds himself working sixteen-hour days, a large part of which are spent, instead of creating new dishes in the kitchen, in meetings (37), dealing with spreadsheets (55) and “completing order forms or logging timesheets” (23). In this context, Gabe, recalling that “there

used to be a time ... when he actually cooked rather than sat at a desk” (59) worries that he is falling out of love with food (101-102). In Han’s terms, then, he can be understood as both sovereign and bare life, as, in his drive to achieve, “the sovereign of achievement society ... is the homo sacer of himself” (Han 2016: 49).

Moreover, as an achievement-subject, Gabe becomes increasingly isolated. He is so absorbed in his work that he almost loses touch with his family, while his relationship with his girlfriend Charlie, a glamorous singer, also suffers. At thirty-eight, Charlie is eager to settle down with Gabe and have a child, yet he always seems to prioritise his work so that they often barely even have time to speak to each other on the phone (Ali 2009: 30, 166). Charlie herself, intent on developing her singing career, can also arguably be understood as an achievement-subject in Han’s terms. However, she seems to question her lifestyle and priorities, long before Gabe does. When Gabe suggests that they were lucky not to have lived through World War 2, for instance, Charlie disagrees, contrasting the collective solidarity of the wartime generation to their own generation, which she views, in line with Han, as self-obsessed and isolated, as “our things just make us turn in on ourselves” (Ali 2009: 190).

London appears to contrast with Blantwhistle, which still retains traces of the Foucauldian disciplinary society of the factory, characterised by commandments and prohibitions (Han 2016: 10), and by negativity, marked by “borders, transitions, fences, ditches and walls that prevent universal change and exchange” (Han 2016: 3). This is evident, for instance, in the racist rumours which had been spread about the Pakistani workers in the town during Gabe’s childhood (Ali 2009: 164) and which are now spread by Pakistani immigrants themselves, such as the elderly Mr. Nazir, about the new migrants from Poland (251).

However, the decline of the older generation, symbolised by Gabe’s dying father Ted and his elderly grandmother, along with the closure of the last mill in the town (318), suggest the demise of the traditional British industrial, disciplinary way of life. Gabe remembers how, in his childhood, his father had been an authoritarian figure, “Moses, bringing down the law” (39). He can thus be read as a representation of the repressive, prohibitive paternal superego characteristic, for Han (2016: 46), of the disciplinary society, against whom Gabe, who suggests he became a chef “to annoy the hell out of Dad” (Ali 2009: 408), rebels.

Both Gabe’s father, Ted, and Gabe’s grandmother, known as Nana, who suffers from dementia, therefore appear to Gabe as belonging to a bygone age, and both feel out of place in the contemporary burnout society, which “erodes community, erodes anything social” (Han 2021). Like Nana, Ted misses the past “when people round here cared about each other. When you knew everyone in the street and they knew you” (Ali 2009: 218). However, remembering his eccentric, bipolar wife, Ted acknowledges the negative, immunological aspect of community, its tendency to exclude those who do not conform: “Community’s good for those what’s on the inside, but if there’s some inside there’s others what’s out. I’m thinking of yer mother. Thinking of my Sally Anne” (396).

In this context, as Ted notes, “to lose yer good character, that were a terrible thing in my day” (243), while for Gabe, as a contemporary achievement-subject, the idea of “having character” is a radically different one:

But “having character”, that was just a way of saying you did what was expected of you. It’s almost the opposite of having a character, a personality, of your own. Now you’ve got to know yourself, what you really are (Ali 2009: 243).

Later on, watching the Eid celebrations in Blantwhistle, Gabe realises that it is now the Pakistani immigrants and their descendants who embody the community spirit; “Kids in shined shoes and new clothes, it still happened, but only for Eid. Large families, clubbing together, kinship and community ... all the things that Nana missed most.” (393)

This sense of community is, however, miles away from the isolated half-lives led by some of the undocumented migrants in London, such as Yuri, who are, in Butler’s terms, disposable, ungrievable lives (Marino 2019: 30). Although Gabe, as a self-absorbed achievement-subject, attempts to distance himself from this underworld of exploitation and xenophobia, as Nyman (2011: 97) suggests “it comes to haunt him”. It does so principally through Lena, a dishwasher from Belarus, whom Gabe takes in after she is evicted from Yuri’s subterranean abode after his death. However, what is supposed to be a short-term charitable arrangement leads to the collapse of Gabe’s relationship with Charlie, and, ultimately, to his losing his job and even his sanity.

Gabe is simultaneously disgusted and attracted when the sullen, skinny and mysterious Lena offers him sexual favours in return for his hospitality: “The thought of her drew and repelled him, like an image of an atrocity at which he could not look and from which he could not turn away” (Ali 2009: 151). However, after he succumbs, he surprises himself by his lack of remorse, noting how his otherwise ubiquitous self-absorption disperses in Lena’s embrace; there was “no *I*, no *me*, no *who*, but only this, their bodies, and nothing more” (idem: 159). As Han (2018: 66) mentions, according to the French philosopher Levinas, to encounter a human being “is to be kept awake by an enigma”; it is thus arguably Lena’s very Otherness that enables Gabe, ultimately, to escape the prison of his self-obsession.

Gabe later learns that Lena was a prostitute, a victim of human trafficking and bonded labour, described in the novel as a “form of slavery for the twenty-first century. Taking away passports, debt bondage, threats of violence, that sort of thing” (Ali 2009: 326). The victims of these crimes are certainly not achievement-subjects who willingly exploit themselves without a master (Han 2017: 2). Instead, they are victims of exploitation by others, which can be defined as a lack of dignity and freedom in the workplace, where the worker is instrumentalised by others and obliged to carry out certain tasks against their will (Pari-Bedoya et al. 2021). Thus, Ali’s novel suggests that, beneath its gilded veneer, 21<sup>st</sup> century London is not merely a performance society, but, *contra* Han, hides a dark, biopolitical, indeed necropolitical, underbelly. This depiction of bonded labour and migrant bare life in a contemporary Western city, then, poses a challenge to Han’s claim for the ubiquity of the performance society. It also goes beyond Žižek’s suggestion that the exploitation

of others has merely shifted from the West to the so-called “Third World”, a point later conceded by Han (2021). It suggests, instead, that biopolitics, as well as psychopolitics, is very much alive in 21<sup>st</sup> century Europe.

According to Spengler et al. (2021: 123), the migrant, who, like *homo sacer*, exists at the threshold of the law, is “the living embodiment of whoever dwells in the space of exception, a zone of indistinction, where *nomos/bios ... physis/zoe ...*, violence and justice merge”. Lena, as a *homo sacer* figure, can thus not count on the protection of the law, a point which Gabe, who encourages Lena to report her pimp Boris to the police, has trouble accepting. Lena quips that, even if they succeed in catching him “I will be dead by then. Boris will kill me” (Ali 2009: 200).

To emphasise her point, Lena tells Gabe the stories of some other sex-trafficked women, which underscore that, while sex-trafficking victims are unprotected by the law, they are subject to it and, indeed, are often doubly criminalised, as both irregular migrants and prostitutes (Caporale-Bizzini 2020: 589). A Moldovan acquaintance of Lena’s, for instance, escaped from her pimp and reported him to the police, but he was soon set free after being questioned. The girl, on the other hand, was deported when it became clear that she was undocumented. On landing, however, she was immediately re-captured by her traffickers and brought back to the UK, following which the pimp “beat her like never before” (Ali 2009: 301-302). Using a term which Agamben borrows from Jean-Luc Nancy to describe bare life’s simultaneous inclusion and exclusion from the law, the situation of these women can be described as one of being *abandoned* by the law, that is “exposed and threatened on the threshold in which life and law, outside and inside, become indistinguishable” (Agamben 1998: 29).

Gradually Gabe empathises with Lena and develops a sense of responsibility towards her. He gives her money and promises to find her a new job and flat, and even promises to help her find her “brother” Pasha, who Gabe realises is probably her lover. His contact with Lena and the other migrant *homines sacri* he encounters thus transform Gabe. As Han notes,

it is the negativity of the Other and of transformation is what constitutes experience in an emphatic sense. To have an experience of something means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us (Han 2018: 3).

Gabe is further overwhelmed when he discovers that some staff members at the Imperial, led by the manager Gleeson, are involved in running a prostitution ring. Tricked by the promise of lucrative singing careers, hand-picked chambermaids from the hotel are instead sold “like meat ... two dollars a kilo” (Ali 2009: 364). This discovery, as well as his burnout and the crises in his personal life lead Gabe to a mental breakdown, which had already been heralded by a panic attack (idem: 298), a kind of *katabasis* (Nyman 2011: 99), or metaphorical descent to Hell, during which Gabe, who barely recognises himself in the mirror (Ali 2009: 383) frantically questions his very identity: “What am I? What am I? A nobody? A nothing? A zero?” (idem: 272). However, as argued below, this crisis can be understood as the death of Gabe’s identity as a self-absorbed achievement-subject, and the beginning of his rebirth as a healthy subject, who is fully engaged with, and takes responsibility for, the Other.

In the midst of his breakdown, Gabe, wandering in Victoria Station, gets onto an Imperial Hotel minibuss, which he assumes is taking hotel cleaners to work. However, the bus takes him to an onion farm, a “parallel world of forced migration and indentured labour” (Nyman 2011: 99), where Gabe, mistaken for a migrant worker called Danilo Hetman, becomes trapped (Ali 2009: 517-518). Thus, during his short stay on the farm Gabe himself is temporarily transformed into the immigrant Other (Nyman 2011: 100), becoming a *homo sacer* at the hands of others rather than himself. This experience also weakens the hold of the achievement society over Gabe, disrupting what Han (2016: 5) terms the excess of the Same, allowing him to experience a deeper relationship with both nature and time. Despite the sordid conditions and the backbreaking work, then, Gabe finally feels fully alive, approaching a kind of mindful contemplation:

It was as if until now he had seen the world only in a blur... He felt the cool touch of the wind ... he felt alive ... All his life had been spent in planning, in asking what came next ... so that the present ... was only a dim possibility, as if life could never be truly lived. (Ali 2009: 514)

Gabe also experiences solidarity on the farm, as Olek, a Ukrainian worker, shares his food with Gabe and prevents him from getting into trouble with the management (Ali 2009: 511). Waking up “relaxed and fresh” (514) the next morning, Gabriel feels that his old self is being replaced by a new one, with “no voice or thought, and he sensed it rather than knew it, and it didn’t ring in his ears, and it did not divide him, but made him, for the first time, whole” (518). His sense of peace is shaken, however, when he discovers that the workers, overcharged for accommodation, food, and transportation, have had their passports withheld. Without work permits, they are irregular, and are thus unable to approach the authorities. Finally, Gabe himself demonstrates solidarity with the migrant workers when he confronts the farm owner, who turns out to be Gleeson’s brother, regarding a young Polish worker, whose pay has been cut. Escorted off the farm, he returns to find that Lena has deserted him. When he returns to the hotel, however, he attacks Fairweather, whom he suspects of having abused Lena, which leads to Gabe losing both his job at the hotel and the money he had invested in the new restaurant.

#### 4. Conclusion

Initially, Monica Ali’s *In the Kitchen* suggests that early 21<sup>st</sup> century London has become a performance society, where individuals are no longer exploited by others, but instead, in their drive to succeed, make *homines sacri* of themselves. Gabriel, in this context, can be read as one of Han’s achievement-subjects, in that he effectively becomes a slave to his own ambition, and eventually burns out, becoming “tired, sick of himself and of the war with himself” (Pari-Bedoya *et al* 2021: 439). This, together with his father’s terminal illness and the events that follow Yuri’s death, contributes to his eventual breakdown. Thus, at the beginning of the novel, Gabe is an isolated, self-obsessed individual, unable to appreciate the world around him or to forge meaningful connections with others. However, Ali’s depiction of

London's exploitative underworld, populated by irregular migrants and victims of human trafficking and their abusers, challenges Han's thesis that allo-exploitation has been replaced by auto-exploitation, at least in the West.

At the end of the novel, Gabe, back in Blantwhistle following his father's death, finds his life in tatters, and his ambitions in ruins. However, his encounter with the immigrant Other and his confrontation with his own past have also arguably changed him for the better. He has, notably, become less self-obsessed, and has learned to take responsibility not only for members of the exploited immigrant underclass such as Lena or the farmworkers, but also for his own family, to whom he grows closer.

He takes an interest in his grandmother, for instance, and offers to take care of his niece and nephew, so that his sister Jenny can have a holiday. In this context, he and Jenny seem to recover their childhood closeness; when Jenny accuses him of having been "wrapped up in himself" for the last thirty years, "they sat and laughed like little children with tears pouring down their cheeks" (Ali 2009: 551). Finally, Charlie, who had broken off contact with Gabe following his affair with Lena, gets back in touch with him and suggests meeting for lunch. While, as Charlie emphasises, it is only a lunch date and Gabriel should not get his hopes up, he is left with "a great deal of hope in his heart" (Ali 2009: 553). The reader is also left with some hope that Gabriel, now a less self-obsessed individual, can win Charlie's heart once more.

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## DISPLACED LIVES: AMBIGUITIES OF COMPASSION IN MICHEL HEYNS'S NOVEL *EACH MORTAL THING*

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**Abstract:** *Michiel Heyns' novel Each Mortal Thing (2023) is a meditation on the challenges of compassionate connectedness and solidarity in today's troubled world of displacement and alienation. Its author, an award-winning South African writer, probes into vexed issues of our times, such as identity and belonging, home and away. While in his earlier work, Heyns's main question was 'where is home?', in his latest novel, the emphasis has shifted to displacement as a global and, indeed, a universal human condition. Hence, the question now is: 'how to live in displacement?'. Each Mortal Thing is primarily a novel of ideas in which – along with preoccupations about displacement as a global condition – Heyns contemplates the related theme of 'innocence' versus 'experience', and pragmatism versus compassion. I argue that, through the choice of specific intertextual references to selected canonical figures of world literature, Heyns implicitly also touches on concepts relevant to religion and spirituality. In my analysis, I draw on current insights from postmodern theology and secular spirituality, e.g., on Daniel Boscaljon's (2013) model of faith that integrates contemporary scepticism into the structure of faith. This model of faith requires the 'vigilant groundwork' of cultivating presence of being, kindness and goodwill – qualities that resemble what Heyns's protagonist would comfortably associate with a sense of spirituality and belonging. A novel of religious and psychological exploration, Each Mortal Thing is a welcome reminder of our common humanity and connectedness at a time of deepening global divisions and uncertainties.*

**Keywords:** *ambiguities of compassion, crisis of belief, displacement and alienation, Each Mortal Thing (2023), Michiel Heyns, novel of ideas*

### 1. Introduction

The title of Michiel Heyns's latest novel (2023) is echoed in one of its epigraphs, a sonnet by Gerard Manley Hopkins, in which the poet exhorts the reader to participate in each individual life's mystery through enhanced attention to both the animate and inanimate world. *Each Mortal Thing* is a novel of contemplation about the challenges of compassionate connectedness in today's world of alienation and displacement.

A prolific and award-winning South African novelist, Heyns has always been interested in grappling with the complexities of identity and belonging, diaspora and displacement, and the moral dilemmas of immigration and dislocation in different countries. The setting of *Lost Ground* (2011), for example, is a South African small

town, to which an expatriate journalist returns on a professional assignment. The protagonist's pursuit morphs into a traumatic exploration of his own past relationships as he embarks on a soul-search that triggers a profound sense of having 'lost the ground' under his feet, aware that he has now "become a foreigner in two countries" (Heyns 2011: 237).

In *Invisible Furies* (2012), it is Paris – a culturally seductive, though deeply ambiguous, city for many a foreigner – that offers the stage for reflections on home and away. The reader becomes intimately involved with the protagonist's 'invisible furies' of heart and mind, as he tries to understand and accept a young man's decision to give up his homeland, South Africa, for the attractions, but also the delusions of "this old whore of a city" (Heyns 2012: 280). Here too, there is a sense of loss, the outsider's dramatic loss of an illusion: "a loss of what [Paris] seems to promise" (idem: 292).

While in Heyns's earlier novels, the central question was 'where is home?', in his latest novel, *Each Mortal Thing* (2023), the emphasis has shifted to displacement as global and, indeed, a universal human condition. Hence, the question now is: 'how to live in displacement?' This is primarily a novel of ideas in which Heyns contemplates the problem of innocence versus experience, and pragmatism versus compassion, all against the background of displacement as human condition. The novel abounds in subtle literary allusions to canonical figures of world literature: Hopkins, Eliot, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky, Henry James. I argue that – through the choice of specific intertexts – Heyns implicitly touches on themes and concepts from theology and spirituality.

## 2. London's world of strangers

The setting of the novel is London in 2019, as seen through the eyes of foreigners and expatriates. The opening scene sets the tone for the entire novel: an unprecedented heatwave accentuates outbursts of public hostility and xenophobia. The protagonist, one Terence Winshaw, is a South African expat who now lectures in English at a London college. We see him travelling to Heathrow airport to meet a co-national, Natasha de Villiers, a young novelist whom he had sponsored for a literary-prize nomination. Terence's experience of the crowded tube and the sweltering airport atmosphere metaphorically embodies his wider experience of London: "The train shuddered and clanked into the *Hadean penumbra* of Heathrow Central [...] where aspirant passengers had spent the night sleeping on the floor, awaiting departures indefinitely delayed: was this *Armagedon Lite*, scaled down to the puny measure of our times, the narrow limits of our imagination: *terminal stasis*?" (Heyns 2023: 15; emphasis added).

The emotionally unsettling opening of the novel functions as a powerful objective correlative for the entire book. Amidst "a mixture of petrol fumes, melting tar and human blood, sweat and tears" (idem: 23), there is aggravated human intolerance and hostility as, for example, when – upon attempting to lend a helping hand to a woman visibly struggling with a large suitcase – Terence is chased away for being a "pervert" and a "fucking foreigner" (idem: 16). Terence is taken aback

by this knee-jerk expression of xenophobia, but shortly afterwards, he is gratefully surprised by a random act of kindness from an airport official offering to guide him through the airport maze. These apparently minor, carefully juxtaposed incidents set the tone for the novel's main theme: "the search for goodwill in a merciless world" (Taljaard 2023, n.p.), in which goodwill will outweigh hateful alienation.

As an English scholar, Terence has always been particularly drawn to Hopkins's poetry and its insistence on the painful tension between faith in beauty and human goodness, and a tormenting crisis of belief. Like Hopkins himself, Terence aspires to endow life with transcendent meaning, while simultaneously being torn by doubt. The narrative, therefore, confronts tensions of good and evil, kindness and cruelty, integration and displacement. As he is waiting at the airport for his co-national to arrive, Terence reflects on his London quotidian: while a seductive place of beauty and culture, London – he feels – makes people (whether foreigners or locals, or homeless people) feel like strangers to one another. As a 'stranger' in the City, Terence is affected by the shallowness of social interaction: he ponders the effects of the internet with its world of "simulacra" (Heyns 2023: 48) and its impact on human behaviour, which has seen an aggravation of violation and displacement: "people sleeping in the streets, children murdering other children [...] in what is supposedly the most advanced country on earth" (44).

Terence is taken out of his rumination the moment he meets Natasha in the Arrivals section, and is immediately taken aback by her "infectious eagerness" to discover something new, the beauty of London (21). For – as compared with the other passengers, who look crushed and dishevelled after a long flight – she exhibits a refreshing presence, that "quality of anticipation, excitement and openness to experience" (49). Terence is fascinated by her "unpolluted exposure to the City he now called home" (26), as she seems to embody the innocence (or perhaps naivety?) of a visitor from one of Britain's ex-colonies.

### 3. Innocence meets experience

In the tradition of Henry James's novels ('naïve' Americans visiting 'cultured' Europe), Michiel Heyns draws on the time-honoured trope of 'innocence and experience', while adding his own distinct touch to it. Natasha's fresh take on life and experience, her confident yet unassuming writerly posture ("so undriven by high expectations and yet so unsullied by low expectations", (49)) prompts in Terence the need to protect her from the pettiness and jealousies of the London literary world that she has entered, in her innocence, as a potential nominee for a prestigious literary prize.

The description of Natasha's book launch (27-40) is a masterly representation of London's literary scene, depicted as a stage for aspiring literati to display their knowledge of the latest fads and trends, a place where reputations are made and unmade, or 'cancelled'. Natasha's book – an adaptation of *The Story of an African Farm*, Olive Schreiner's classic novel (1975 [1883]) – casts a critical eye on 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial South Africa. In Schreiner, the central voice is granted to a white woman; Natasha's novel replaces the centrality of the white voice with a black

African voice. Although original and daring, the reception of her book provokes some of the attendants at its launch to question Natasha's moral right as a mixed-race person to represent the voice of a black character (28). Such concerns about agency echo familiar trends in current postcolonial cultural criticism, with race-based identity issues considered to be a key concern. Disconcerting as the question is for Natasha, she holds her own ground by stating that she sees her black African character, in the first place, "as a person" (29).

Another critic raises doubts as to the very validity of 'literary adaptation' as creative concept, with the implicitly malign accusation of appropriation. As a novelist himself, Heyns does not share such a position on rewriting/ intertextuality, as can be gleaned from the caustic presentation of this incident at the book launch. The accuser is described as having a "frightfully superior manner, hiding or attempting to hide, a painful fear of rejection and ridicule himself" (32); most likely a junior reviewer himself, he was "a lesser predator of the literary world [...] for whom anger is the default mode in the face of a successful debut" (35). Tensions escalate, leading to the withdrawal of Natasha's literary-prize nomination (57-72), triggered "almost entirely by either envy or ambition" (59).

Although focused on the internal politicking of the literary world – "Welcome to the London literary scene. It's mainly about scoring points and settling scores" (34) – this scene is offered as a microcosm of British society at large: a scene emblematic of power games between an insider's experience and an outsider's lack of "worldly-wise toughness" (60). Natasha clearly occupies the role of the inexperienced outsider to the London literary world, an easy prey for those tempted to parade their sophistry to the newcomer.

#### 4. In search of meaning: "*A Stranger I Arrived here, A Stranger I Go Hence*"

The words 'kind' and 'kindness' are used numerous times throughout the novel, and particularly in relation to Natasha, who sees the English as unusually 'kind', while for Terence they are merely 'polite' (35-36). She extends warmth towards Terence, in whom she recognises a kindred 'gentleness' he had not been aware of before (40-41). Terence, who, after years of experiencing the London quotidian, had lost most of his lofty expectations of a metropole whose pulse is dictated by people hurriedly passing by one another, is – upon meeting Natasha – encouraged anew to recapture the "excitement and openness to experience [...] as if one is discovering the world for the first time, and finding it delightful" (49).

In spite of the devastating blow to her self-esteem in the aftermath of the nomination withdrawal, Natasha is still able to see beauty, goodwill and gentleness at the core of life. This is, symbolically, represented in the scene depicting Terence and Natasha attending a Schubert concert with its deeply melancholy lyrics of unrequited love as endured by a lonely wanderer in the depth of winter. The scene powerfully echoes Natasha's suffering because of having her debut novel withdrawn from the award nomination, while also foreshadowing the dramatic turn that her life would take. Here, we see her fully transported into the atmosphere of the heart-piercing musical piece with its oft-repeated lines, "*A stranger I arrived here, a stranger I go*

*hence*’” (74; emphasis in original). A daughter of a small town in the semi-desert of the Karoo – the setting of Schreiner’s novel – Natasha reassures Terence that “‘I’m from the Karoo. I know about bleak and beautiful’” (70). Although symbolically rejected by the big city of London, and made to feel like an alien, she is still able to see its cultural beauty and, at the same time, remain emotionally connected to the place of her birth. Terence is touched by her “near-breathless immersion in the music” (75), while she is also emotionally present for him.

To his chagrin, and in spite of his kind hospitality to Natasha in London, Terence is not able to protect her from the blow to her literary reputation. This rejection triggers a whole chain of mishaps that end in tragedy, with Natasha’s death, upon her return to South Africa, at the hands of her jealous fiancé. Terence is also not spared being judged harshly by his closest friends for having become too emotionally affected by Natasha’s predicament. While his actor friend, Simon, derides his “‘good Samaritan’” (100) hospitality as a misguided intention of “‘changing the world’s nappies’” (53), his girlfriend, Jenny, considers him to be “‘just a bleeding-heart bastard [...] with a misplaced nursemaid complex’” (93). As a hard-nosed lawyer, a pragmatist herself, Jenny does not understand Terence’s “looking for innocence in a fallen world” (50). In the economy of the novel as a whole, her position represents a wide-spread nihilistic stance on life’s complexity underneath the surface of things. It is this kind of “refusal to deal with indeterminacy and uncertainty, [her] impatience with less pragmatic souls” (128) that alienates Terence.

Terence’s existential crisis is aggravated by the unexpected arrival in London of slain Natasha’s translator-cum-confidante, Sonja, who accuses him of having (albeit unintentionally) caused her friend’s death by having “encouraged her to come to this overrated little island” (170) in pursuit of literary validation and the allure of cosmopolitan sophistication. Thus, according to Sonja, he may be guilty of having prompted Natasha to distance herself emotionally from the unpretentious life in her own country. At the same time, she insinuates that her friend may not have been the innocent small-town girl whom Terence may have imagined her to be, but someone who had exploited him as a naïve protector of “damsels in distress” (174). For, according to the old Greeks, as Sonja puts it, “‘you interfere in someone’s life at your peril [and] you are judged by the effect of your deeds, not by your intentions’” (169).

### 5. Yearning for ‘re-enchantment’

Despite Sonja’s hurtful intervention, Terence does not give up on his faith in goodwill. In an interview, Heyns tried to explain his protagonist’s (Terence’s) desperate search for a renewed foundation of faith and fellow feeling, which made him return – again and again – for solace and inspiration, to Gerard Manley Hopkins’s poetry. As Heyns said in the interview: “‘Hopkins, as a fervent Jesuit, was torn between his attraction to beauty [in poetry] and his dedication to what he saw as a religious ideal of purity [Although] Terence is not religious, he is drawn to the crisis of belief that he discerns in Hopkins’s work, because he is *looking for something to believe in, in a world that seems to be intent on a collapse of values*’” (Heyns, qtd. in Beaument 2023: n.p; emphasis added).

Terence is on a search for something in which to believe, and – as an emotionally ‘unhomed stranger’ in London – he is on a quest for meaning and re-enchantment amidst brokenness, eager to find a form of faith that can accommodate his existential angst. He strongly believes that it is possible to gain access to an alternative kind of faith which, without having to rely on conventional religion, can bring about a state of re-enchantment, wonderment and freshness, qualities that he had so admired in the young Natasha.

I argue that – by emphasising his protagonist’s yearning for a suspense of scepticism and uncertainty – Heyns points to the possibility of a spiritual rejuvenation able to integrate doubt into a new structure of certainty, a new wholeness. A postmodern theological critic, Daniel Boscaljon (2013: 15-16), refers to such a condition as “*pre-belief*”: a faith that does not rely on conventional religious symbols and doctrines, but on “*pre-symbolic* structures”. To put it differently, it is a faith in one’s own capacity to intuit value in something outside of self: a state *prior* to selecting any given (religious) symbol as true. Boscaljon’s (2013: 14) model of faith “positively sublates contemporary scepticism into the structure of faith, allowing us – in vigilance – to remain simultaneously faithful and sceptical”. It is a faith not in divine entities, but rather in one’s individual relationship to the divine as an affective experience that does not exclude a degree of doubt. Terence’s religious intimations are akin to Hopkins’s tortured aspiration for holiness in a broken world, where “*all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; and wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell*” (Hopkins, qtd. in Heyns 2023: 15; emphasis in original). And, like Hopkins, although fully aware of life’s pain and brokenness, Terence is able simultaneously to feel that “*the world is charged with the grandeur of God*” (ibid.).

According to Boscaljon (2013: 16), remoulding one’s faith requires “human (that is, not divine) groundwork/ intervention”. It requires the ‘vigilant’ work of cultivating goodwill, kindness and presence, qualities that resemble what Terence would comfortably associate with a sense of spirituality: “*kindness* is all that’s left us” – he says – “now that [traditional] faith, hope and charity have left us down so badly” (Heyns 2023: 36; emphasis added). The spiritually ‘vigilant groundwork’ alluded to above also includes the capacity to trust one’s intuition and/or (divine) inspiration without reliance on hard evidence. For Terence, such trust is based on one’s strong “*belief in the essential benignity of the world*” (idem: 49); for, to regain faith in human goodness, one has to open to “*soft evidence* [similar to] the impression a person makes on that part of you that negotiates your relations with new acquaintances, that part that necessarily has to form in ordinary life conclusions *without* hard evidence” (50; emphasis in original). Or, as theology critic, John Caputo (2006: 273; emphasis added) would put it succinctly, it is through cultivating a sense of “*religion without religion*” and undogmatic faith, “the way the day is opened up by the rising of the sun” (idem: 278), that one would access glimpses of the transcendent within the shards of the quotidian.

## 6. Life at street level: a “ragpicker’s” perspectives

In spite of his genuine intention of extending literary solidarity, Terence feels torn by a profound sense of “having failed” Natasha (Heyns 2023: 112). Her tragic death throws him back onto his own crisis of belief: he feels painfully responsible

for “having encouraged Natasha into a situation with a very uncertain outcome”, more exactly, for being oblivious, at the time, of the “unintended consequences” (122) of his ‘good Samaritan’ action in a broken world – as his friend, Simon, condescendingly puts it to him.

Accordingly, Heyns continues to test his core issues – the search for goodness, ‘innocence and experience’ in a world of displacement – by exposing his protagonist to another unexpected encounter. As he is loitering aimlessly, “wondering at life carrying on doggedly, mundanely [...] in spite of the abyss of Natasha’s death” (112-113), he literally stumbles against a homeless young man, Andy, whom he has an urge to invite into his home, into his life. An extreme provocation (is this even plausible?) meant to test the reader about the credibility of Terence’s quest for answers. A native Englishman (not an expatriate, that is), Andy is an innocent, discarded by society and reduced to life on the streets. At this point, an explicit intertextual reference is added to the mix: the homeless man reads Fyodor Dostoevsky’s novel, *The Idiot*, (2004 [1869]), thus prompting the reader to associate his psychology with Prince Lev Myshkin’s guileless simplicity of being, which became an easy target for abuse by corrupt souls. And just like Myshkin, Andy’s innocence will be abused by the crass society of which he is, inalienably, a part.

Although scarred by the unfortunate turn of events around Natasha, Terence once again ventures into putting his faith in acts of compassion and solidarity. He offers homeless Andy a meal and a bed for the night, in exchange for listening to his heartbreak tale. What surprises Terence most is Andy’s “unaffected candour” (117 - 120) and capacity to see in people more good than evil. Even though he occasionally gets assaulted on the streets, Andy still believes that “‘the regular blokes outnumber the gits, otherwise I’d get more kicks than quids [...] They’re just regular people, no better or worse than you’n me [...]. The world is what it is, and we have to live in it as best we can’” (119). This passage brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s (1973: 79) famous “ragpicker” metaphor, an image referring to one’s deeply spiritual capacity to respond to life’s hidden beauty and mystery amid the mundane, and regardless of circumstance.

The encounter with Andy gives Terence the opportunity partly to restore his faith, or, as Anthony Akerman (2023: n.p.) puts it, “it vindicates Terence’s default setting and his faith in humanity’s inherent goodness”. It also gives him the opportunity to experience life, literally, from the perspective of the street, as he sits on a piece of cardboard near Andy: a “spectator, not a participant [and] observing people from below, supremely in charge of the spectacle” (Heyns 2023: 153). Symbolically, this is what Terence needs at this juncture: to look at life from a radically different angle, to experience it upside down, and inside out.

Through his friendship with Andy, Terence is taken out of his own, self-enclosed world as an academic and is exposed to immediate human suffering. One day, he comes across Andy “bundled-up in the customary place” (129-139), having been severely beaten and urinated upon. Hence, reduced to “creatureliness”, as Eric Santner (2006: 12) would refer to that state of physical liminality in which “the human [finds itself] in the neighbourhood of zero” (Heyns 2023: 25). The marks of injury on Andy’s “ethereally slender body” are a provocation for Terence, and reveal

a sight now “lending him a touch of martyrdom” (idem: 137). However, although he feels extremely helpless for “falling short in the face of abject need” (idem: 134), Terence continues to keep his heart and home open to Andy.

In the aftermath of this event, the narrative becomes bolder in terms of its religious allusions, even as Heyns is careful to undercut grandiose statements in brief, ironic interventions. When ironised by his dandy actor friend, Simon, for persevering in being a ‘good Samaritan’, Terence responds briefly, by just quoting a verse from the New Testament: “*Be not forgetful to entertain strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares*” (qtd. in Heyns 2023: 43; emphasis in original).

Although used sporadically and carefully circumscribed, the frequency of Heyns’s religious allusions tends to accumulate towards the end of the novel. Andy’s predicament is aggravated when he has an epileptic fit on the street, an episode during which his dog – his “guardian angel” (132), as he puts it – went missing. Andy’s “elemental grief” (181) galvanises Terence into action and he manages to locate the dog in an animal shelter, while Andy refers to his epileptic fits as visitations from beyond. He tells Terence: “‘I believe there’s someone or somethin’ looking out for me [...] they make me feel like I’ve been in touch with some other way of seeing, a better way [...] it’s a kind of warm feelin’ as if somebody’s holdin’ you close [...] this feeling takes hold of you, of your whole body’” (146-147). Andy’s effusion is undercut by Terence’s sceptical reflection on whether Andy is not in the grip of some delusion that “makes a poor bugger’s affliction seem like a blessing [...] as if the price for happiness was a kind of moral imbecility” (148).

## 7. Acts of omission

Terence’s intervention in Andy’s life has an unexpectedly ‘happy’ ending: unlike his well-intentioned intervention in Natasha’s life that ended in tragedy, his act of companionable solidarity with a social outcast manages to help the latter “find a foothold in society” (198) as a labourer in a dog shelter. As it happens, and in spite of the positive consequence of his act of kindness in Andy’s case, Terence is still unsure whether – “in the larger scheme of things” (222) – it is wise to intervene in the lives of strangers.

He continues his quest for answers to this tormenting question, which prompts him to visit his old alma mater, Cambridge University. For, it is here that he first confronted “the abyss of Unmeaning, the flirtation with despair” (199), albeit from the comfort of armchair debating societies. It is also here that an ex-colleague, one Gary, had succumbed to severe depression and suicide, a memory that makes Terence now feel torn by remorse for not having extended to Gary more emotional support as a friend; an act of omission that is given a fresh poignancy in the context of his recent encounters with both Natasha and Andy. Drawing on his experiences with these two people in whose lives he had intervened, Terence is now willing to expose himself (199-203) to the painful memory of his ex-colleague, who had, to his “then exasperation, sat night after night in Terence’s room nursing his cup of coffee, long since grown cold, desperately keeping a conversation going

so as not to have to return to whatever demons haunted him in his own room” (201). Oblivious, at the time, of Gary’s pain, Terence had not offered him another cup of coffee.

He is torn by remorse for not having been more involved with a fragile soul who had presumably been crushed by the way Cambridge made him feel: not only fatally out of place, but profoundly “unsure of his own identity” (202). Such thoughts throw Terence into deep despondency, during which, through “the strange alchemy of grief” (203), the image of Gary is uncannily merged with the image of Natasha: “two disparate memories sharing the common ground of loss” (203). Memories of two people in whose early deaths he was, paradoxically, involved-yet-not-involved. Waiting at the deserted Cambridge railway station swept by an icy wind – “a vast stretch of nothingness extending at either end into nothing” (203) – Terence feels the scene as an embodiment of his inner torment: “Was it nothing then, his love for Natasha and for Andy, just because their lives amounted to nothing, as the world reckons these things?” (203).

## 8. Conclusion

Heyns ends his novel by turning back full circle. As we recall, at the beginning, the reader was exposed to the protagonist’s doubting whether innocence and compassion can survive in the world, and as summarised in a few deliberately incongruous questions: “What gentleness can survive the Piccadilly Line on the hottest day in history” (15); and, “What kind of a match is that for Donald Trump or Kim-Jong-un?” (18). At the end of the novel, Heyns, still in doubt, has his protagonist strike a more sombre note: “But what then? Do we just harden our hearts to the misery of unhappy people?” (214).

Lessons have been learned. Terence’s heart as a ‘mortal thing’ is softened as he comes to accept that, while he was unable to save anybody from their own destiny, he is willing to “learn not to dwell on his *own* part in their fate” (221; emphasis added). Even though he may have been disillusioned by the ambiguous consequences of well-intentioned compassion, he finds that committing himself to its provocations is infinitely more meaningful than the acts of omission.

Having exposed his protagonist to three existential tests of compassionate fellow feeling (to Natasha, Andy, and Gary), Heyns ends his convoluted introspection by insisting on the most paradoxical relationship of all: Terence’s closeness to the homeless Andy, and his “untheoretical, inarticulate blessedness of being” (206). For Terence, a Hopkins scholar, Andy has become an embodiment of grace, that state of ‘blessedness’ beyond rational understanding that cannot be separated from – in the poet’s own words, as quoted by Terence – “‘*man’s smudge and man’s smell*’” (Hopkins, qtd in Heyns 2023: 222; emphasis in original). Terence has also learned to go beyond sanitised utopian projections of goodness, and accept that it cannot be separated from “man’s lived-in smell, a smell with a history, ‘bleared, smeared with toil’, in a manner of speaking” (Hopkins, qtd in Heyns 2023: 222; emphasis in original).

In compressing the crux of the novel – ambiguities of compassion, and ‘innocence versus experience’ in a world of displacement – Heyns concludes with brief references to Hopkins’s poetry, Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot* and Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Thus, the novel points to the universal character of its topic, and its relevance in today’s world. Andy’s image – the image of an innocent man (an ‘idiot’) living in a tormented and tormenting world – may be an embodiment not of God’s grandeur, but a reminder of what it means to be “nothing but ‘*the thing itself, the unaccommodated man*’: the source of all doubt and the bedrock of all belief” (Heyns 2023: 222; emphasis in original).

Given that both Terence and Natasha have South African connections, one might ask: is *Each Mortal Thing* a ‘South African’ novel? No, it is fundamentally a novel of philosophical, religious and psychological exploration; and, although it does not have a clear-cut or happy ending, Heyns’s novel “shows how tragedies and small joys, which [...] seem unimportant, are precisely what makes life worth living” (Liebenberg 2024, n.p.). Last, but not least, it is a welcome reminder of our common humanity and connectedness, at a time of deepening international divisions and uncertainties.

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## DEMYTHOLOGISING THE RHINO: FROM DÜRER TO VENTER, FROM BEAST TO BEING

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**Abstract:** Eben Venter's novel *Decima* (2023) features Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinoceros* (1515) on its cover, invoking complex myths about rhinos, while, in a synchronous thematic echo with *Decima*, the 'My Rhino is Not a Myth' exhibition in Timișoara, Romania (2023) also draws from Dürer's work to explore the interplay between science, art, and fiction. Venter reimagines the rhino as a sentient protagonist, promoting eco-consciousness and urging ethical responsibility for nature. He demythologises the rhino, moving beyond traditional symbolism to reflect current ecological concerns.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, activism, *Decima*, Dürer, ecoliterature, rhinoceros, Eben Venter

### 1. Introduction

Eben Venter's novel, *Decima* (2023), features Albrecht Dürer's *Rhinoceros* (1515) on its cover, thereby invoking complex myths about rhinos and transporting them into the contemporary milieu of South Africa's rhino-poaching crisis. In a synchronous thematic echo with *Decima*, across the globe, the "My Rhino is Not a Myth" exhibition in Timișoara (the 2023 European Cultural Capital) also draws from Dürer's work to explore the interplay between science, art, and fiction. Historically, the rhino has served as a polyvocal symbol for human agendas, as in Eugène Ionesco's attack on post-war totalitarianism, where the rhino stands for mindless conformity. Venter, however, reimagines the rhino as a sentient protagonist, promoting eco-consciousness and urging ethical responsibility for nature, as well as for the narratives we construct about it. The urgency of this message is underscored by grim reality: in the last 15 years, 10 285 rhinos have been brutally slaughtered in the wild, pushing this highly endangered species perilously close to extinction (Save the Rhino 2024). Against this backdrop we examine how Venter demythologises the rhino, moving beyond traditional symbolism to reflect current ecological concerns in *Decima*.

*Decima*'s protagonist-narrator – Eben – is a writer who has returned home to South Africa (from Australia) to visit his ailing mother and to research the country's rhino-poaching crisis. His mission is to expose the intricate network of rhino-horn poaching and trafficking, the network including poachers, kingpins, corrupt politicians and government officials, as well as practitioners of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). The central figure of this network is of course the rhinoceros itself – a target,

a commodity, a dumb beast – who supplies the raw material for this trade and whose death is a means to an end. But Eben singles out in his account one specific rhino and grants her agency and subjectivity; she is a matriarch whose life and death he juxtaposes with his own mother's. Woven through his narrative are also tales of the historical exploitation of rhinos. He vividly recounts numerous tales of 'great white hunters' and their callous, excessive slaughter of African wildlife. More prominently featured is the tragic account of an Indian rhinoceros that drowned at sea en route to Pope Leo X in 1515. That rhinoceros was the inspiration for the German printmaker Dürer's woodcut, *Rhinoceros*. Through Eben's, broad-ranging investigation and his research in the narrative present, these historical atrocities are magnified, while his representation of one rhino's subjective view, foregrounds how unjustified and unnecessary is the threat of extinction for the species. As Michael Titlestad (2023 n.p.) observes in a review of the novel, "readers will inevitably wonder whether the narrator is Eben Venter, for the details of their lives correspond, and the book itself is clearly the outcome of the investigations it describes". Titlestad goes on to say that, "asked that question in a public conversation Venter suggested that [...] he had made little effort to keep author and narrator apart" (2023 n.p.). Thus, this autofictional text artfully weaves together imaginative fiction with real-world scenarios.

Venter, placing a sentient rhino at the centre of his novel, questions the ability of homo sapiens to decide this creature's fate and asserts its right to inhabit the earth; thereby making an urgent (eco)political statement. The environment and ecology have become urgent subjects in the context of the Anthropocene in academic writing, journalism, and literature. As literary scholars, we ask: how effective can literature be in "push[ing] the world in a certain direction" or altering "people's ideas about the kind of society [or environment] that they should strive after" if it makes "political writing into an art" (Orwell 1946)? And, more specifically, we wonder, can a novel such as Eben Venter's *Decima* have any effect on the way that humans perceive the rhinoceros, or make any difference at all to its plight as an endangered species. Can a novel such as this spur, or be considered as, civic engagement?

A literary theorist, a psychologist, a human biologist, and a literary historian have asked similar questions in *Human Minds and Animal Stories: How Narratives Make Us Care About Other Species* (2019). They performed scientific, quantitative experiments with the aim of "establish[ing] whether [...] narratives of the plight of animals actually do [...] improve attitudes towards animal welfare, or make our attitudes pro-animal" (Małecki et al. 2019: 153). Their starting point for enquiry was the novel *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell (1877), which is written as the 'autobiography' of a working horse. That novel made a profound difference to equine welfare because its protagonist and narrator – a horse – galvanised public outrage at the general cruelty meted out to horses in Britain at that time. The findings in *Human Minds and Animal Stories* clearly indicate that "animal narratives do improve attitudes toward animals", that "the attitudinal impact of stories is not fleeting", and that the impact is "dependent on the cruelty and severity of the animal-suffering it depicts" (Małecki et al. 2019: 154).

But they also commented that "this influence may depend on the species of its protagonists" (ibid.). Bearing in mind that, unlike a horse or a dog, the rhino is

not a domesticated animal and is, therefore, less relatable; and that the many myths surrounding the animal render it a frightening beast, we wonder: could a story with a fictional rhinoceros-protagonist help the cause of the real-life rhinoceros currently facing extinction?

## 2. Dürer's woodcut: Invoking complex myths about rhinos

In *Decima*, his tenth and most recent novel, Venter boldly takes up the *cause célèbre* of saving the rhino from the brink of extinction by exposing the socio-economic complexities of the South African rhino-poaching racket, and imbuing an individual rhino with selfhood, and agency. Also, by featuring Dürer's *Rhinoceros* (1515) on its cover, Venter invokes complex myths about rhinos. In premodern times the rhino was the prototypical unicorn. Indeed the inscription on Dürer's woodcut draws on Pliny the Elder's description of a horned animal, purportedly the monoceros or unicorn (Pliny 1855: 281). Descriptions of unicorns are rhino-like, and thus Dürer's art was compelling and 'went viral' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, because European culture was already fascinated with the single-horned beast. Could Dürer's *Rhinoceros* be "the most influential animal picture ever" and "the pre-eminent example of art besting reality"? (Sherwin 2016: n.p.). Despite never having seen a live rhinoceros, Dürer's depiction persisted as "the real deal" well into the 18<sup>th</sup> century, even after "live rhinos had toured the continent and dispelled the illusion" (idem: n.p.). Dürer's work not only inspired other artists, but found its way into zoological textbooks, cementing its place in the annals of art and science (Clarke 1986: 27).

Half a millennium later, Dürer's rhino remains a touchstone for understanding the power of art to influence public perception. This was highlighted in mid-2023 when *Rhinoceros* featured prominently in two cultural and creative productions at opposite ends of the globe: in a South African novel and a Romanian art exhibition. The latter, the exhibition in Timișoara, titled "My Rhino is Not a Myth," used Dürer's rhino as both icon and leitmotif, albeit with a contemporary twist. The exhibition's promotional material depicted the rhino's head as a 'connect-the-dots' style image, leaving it intentionally blank to emphasize the exhibition's focus on reimagining the past in the present. The catalogue describes Dürer's work as "a remarkable example of the power of imagination", a reminder of a time when knowledge had "not yet been systemised or divided into what modernity would call 'The Two Cultures' – science and humanities" (Notz et al. 2023: 21). The exhibition not only explores the interplay between science, art and, fiction but also positions the rhino as a lynchpin, foregrounding the entanglement of human and animal lives in the history of colonial violence.

The exhibition catalogue and *Decima* retell the sea journey of the Indian rhinoceros that informed Dürer's art. Both texts seek to redress the commodification and exoticisation of the animal. The catalogue reminds us that this rhino was once "a real, breathing creature, turned into living artefact that served as an instrument of power and magnificentia" (ibid.). This description applies equally to the intention of Venter's text. The exhibition catalogue – presented as an open, dynamic and non-linear series of visual and narrative texts – invites us to follow "the way of the

rhino [...] opening an imaginative portal through which we hear the rhino's voice once more" (idem: 11-12).

In these 2023 texts, the animal is brought to the fore thereby subverting official histories, where the rhino has served as a polyvocal symbol for *human* agendas. For instance, in Eugène Ionesco's absurdist play, *Rhinoceros* (1959), the animal serves as a symbol of brutish fascism, furthering a satirical critique of post-war totalitarianism. Set in a French village, the play stages the fantastical conversion of its populace into rhinos, leaving one character, the protagonist Berenger, as the last human. The title of the Timișoara exhibition, "My Rhino Is Not a Myth," is a reversal of the character Botard's exclamation, "your rhinoceros is a myth!" (Ionesco 2000: 54). His refusal to acknowledge the "collective psychosis" everyone is undergoing, is a poignant reminder of the dangerous allure of conformity and the ease with which compassion and individual thought can be abandoned (Notz et al. 2023: 23). Taking its cue from this absurdist drama, the exhibition urges us to resist complacency and complicity in the face of ideologies that seek to erase or homogenise diverse identities, voices, and perspectives. However, the message comes at the cost of reducing the rhino to a Cartesian and anthropocentric dichotomy, where the unthinking, brute beast is contrasted with the thinking, sensitive human. Cartesian dualism set in place the hierarchy that sets the human above all other animal life. Since Descartes's assertion of "cogito ergo sum", animal is merely a symbol without subjectivity (Derrida 2008).

In contrast to Ionesco's symbolic appropriation of the rhinoceros as a dumb brute, Venter presents the animal as a sentient protagonist, promoting eco-consciousness and urging ethical responsibility not only for nature but also for the narratives we construct about it. Literature has an edge over the sciences or philosophy because of its capacity to open a space for the imagining of human/nonhuman interrelations (Zapf 2013). We examine how Venter demythologises the rhino, moving beyond traditional symbolism to reflect current ecological concerns.

### 3. Venter's novel: Demythologising the rhino

The novel features three main story lines: (i) the author-narrator, Eben, doing research for a novel – a novel with a political purpose; (ii) a couple of first-time poachers, Athule and Frankie, who are trying to make a quick 'buck' by hacking the horn off a rhino and selling it; and (iii) the rhino herself, Decima, who is the focus of both the researcher and the poachers, as well as of various conservationists and wild-life rangers.

An additional narrative strand is that of two Australian academics researching Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in Hong Kong. They interview practitioners who explain the potency of the 'product'. In a TCM shop they witness "the destination – destiny – of that animal [and see] the horn with all its functions of rubbing and touching, of tossing and thrusting, the trademark of the animal, ground down into powder" (Venter 2023: 39). Symbolically "[h]orns convey a feeling of eminence and loftiness [and] their symbolism is that of power, [...] that possessed by the animals which bear them" (Chevalier et al. 1996: 513). Sale of rhino horn by TCM practitioners is based on ancient beliefs about its powerful medicinal properties that

cure infection and fever. Though the “Chinese government banned domestic trade and medicinal use of rhino horn in 1993, and removed rhino horn from the official TCM pharmacopeia” there is still “persistent and growing demand” (Cheung et al 2021: 2). Additionally, contemporary myths promote its supposed cancer-fighting properties (*The Great Rhino Robbery* 2024; Hsu 2017: 3), claims that have never been verified scientifically (Hsu 2017: 5), while the claim that rhino horn is taken as an aphrodisiac has been discounted as an urban myth “of the Western media” (idem: 4). A more recent development in the demand for rhino horn is its perception as a luxury item and status symbol; in its powdered form, it is ingested in alcoholic cocktails by the newly rich in vulgar displays of wealth.

Via its various story-lines, the novel thus presents a multi-faceted perspective of conservation and poaching in the present day while also delving into the far-reaching history of trophy hunting and the exoticisation of animals. It problematises anthropocentric and colonial binaries to defy any simple solution. Venter names this rhino-protagonist, Decima, which is “Latin for one tenth, but also [for] a largesse bestowed; [as] she is a generous gift to this southern African land” (Venter 2023: 28); she bestows wealth that cannot be measured instrumentally (e.g. in the form of rhino horn). She has intrinsic value as a sentient being.

The fictional rangers (and, counter-intuitively, also one of the poachers) exemplify in this narrative what multispecies scholars call the ‘art of attentiveness’ which is to view creatures as more than “mere symbols, resources, or background for the lives of humans” (Van Dooren et al. 2016: 6). Their attentiveness awakens a realisation of “shared lives [and] consequential relationships” (ibid.) that exist between human, animal, and all life. Attentiveness is co-extensive with “passionate immersion [which means] becoming curious and, so, entangled, ‘learning to be affected’ and, so, perhaps to understand and care a little differently” (ibid.) because of the shared and consequential nature of all planetary life.

A philosophy of deep ecology permeates the narrative, “imagin[ing] a broader sociality that includes diverse communities of life on earth [and] the valuing of other beings as more than just resources” (Næss 2005 [1986]: 33). This ethics is signalled in the opening epigraph: “[i]f someone doesn’t like animals there is something wrong with them” (Venter 2023: 7). The author-narrator, Eben, asked about the book he is researching, asserts (echoing Orwell) its political intention: it is “for the sake of a particular animal, an attempt, if nothing else, to bring to the fore Decima’s sentience, to try to understand it in the way the first-century poet, Catallus, expresses the meaning of sentience: that is, *fieri sentio et excrucior*. I feel it and I am tormented” (idem: 137-38). Venter reappropriates the Roman poet’s famous epigram on love to describe the intensity of his passionate immersion in the life of a rhino. To feel this deeply is torture, as the Latin *excrucior* alludes to being torn apart on a rack. *Decima* is, as Michael Titlestad (2023: n.p.) observes, a “novel about love, in a profound and manifold sense”. The narrator broadens his own empathy (and the reader’s), placing the tale of the rhino matriarch, Decima, alongside reminiscences of his own elderly mother, implying an affinity and kinship between the two. Avoiding an inaccurate self-sameness, he declares he “will not equate [his] mother’s loneliness to that of a solitary rhinoceros in the bush [but that] there is a *continuity* between the feelings of

two such creatures” (Venter 2023: 28, our emphasis). Beyond the quest for solitude, they share a maternal instinct to protect their young and their love of the fauna and flora of the Eastern Cape, and a desire to conserve it. A portrait of place is presented – Decima’s ‘Umwelt’ – through her focalisation, which provides a visceral and vivid portrait of her world, a sensory feast of the Eastern Cape biome:

Decima likes the late afternoon sun, its tepid rays in the cup of her ear, along her nose, with a whiff of spekboom after a day in the heat. She’ll head west, then north-west where the land rises, she knows it does, where koppies are stippled with noors-thorn. Lifts her nose to the crash; they’ve already started moving for the night-time feed. Those noors are so lovely and tall with arms reaching up, up; she hopes for fresh regrowth too. After all, this is spring and stems should be sappy with milk, there could even be clusters of flowers already. Noors, very much a favourite snack for Decima. (Venter 2023: 87)

When the character, Eben, uses the word ‘continuity’ with regard to the feelings of the human *and* animal mothers, he challenges anthropocentric hierarchies, rooted, he notes, in biblical dogma (especially the call for dominion in Genesis 1:28), turning, instead, to the Romantic philosophy of sympathetic imagination as an ethical alternative to human/animal relations. Drawing on the combined powers of sympathy and imagination enables a mystical, shamanic oneness with the earth and its creatures. In a reflective, philosophical passage invoking Walter Jackson Bate’s (1945) notion of the sympathetic imagination, the narrator advocates for sympathetic imagination over the dispassionate engagement of the hunter-stalker:

Sympathetic imagining and stalking are opposite ways of approaching an animal. The poacher or trophy hunter points the rifle at the rhinoceros, and if for a moment the animal and the human look one another in the eye, there often is no time, or insufficient light, and fellow-feeling can never come into play. [...] The ranger, on the other hand, visits and revisits the rhinoceros in the bush. Smells are exchanged, glances, then a tentative scratch behind the ear. Over time, imagining the life and history of each animal becomes possible, the space between human and animal is erased, and for a moment at least the human identifies with the animal. (Venter 2023: 76)

Although sympathetic intuition and stalking seem to correspond directly with conservationist and hunter/poacher respectively, there is in fact the possibility and hope that the stalker could desist. There is also Venter’s depiction of the poacher’s dire financial circumstances, which are the result of systemic inequality. Furthermore, the greed and machismo of the ‘great white hunter’ of the colonial period is juxtaposed to the bare and precarious existence of the contemporary poacher. Overall, Venter takes pains to represent the contemporary poacher with pathos. At the climax of the novel, when the poacher, Athule, has Decima in sight, exposed under the full moon, there is an opportunity to shift his outlook. His attentiveness to her and the richness of the bushveld awakens in him a moment of sympathetic intuition:

He is within seconds of shooting, yet he still gives himself the time of this moment. Night scents of bush and grasses and thorn tree he picks out, one different to the other. Like an animal he flares his nostrils and grants himself the bliss of it. The land and the

bush are his too, as they are to this umkhombe in front of him, and the air, yes, even the air can be shared by both of them this night, even if it is just for now. This is the place he's had to come to, to be like this animal in front of him. They have become each other's equals, both lit by the moon. For it is the moon that makes the animal so sharply visible to him, not as a target to be killed, rather as a creature living here, eating and shitting and standing and sleeping and, when it wakes up, knowing. Now, full moon means alertness. And courage.

The animal is silent as it stands there with its folds and creases, Athule giving off a smell despite the wind direction. And, as careful as he is to limit his movements, his presence is as clear as the flow of lines in the palm of his hand; they have become each other's targets.

A shift: again, it is as he wills it. He has to separate himself from this animal and resume his life. He has to get ready to do what he has come to do, no matter the outcome, no matter how little, nothing, he cares about that outcome.

It is time. He knows that the animal is aware of him, is prepared to charge at the slightest sound. Turn just a little, please, show your forequarter, now, please, and he raises the .458 as he eases into his breath, into the inhalation, and whispers again: Makwehle okwehlayo.

This time the inside of his mouth is fat with saliva: let be what will be. (Venter 2023: 170-171)

For a moment the rhino is not a 'target', simply a fellow creature sharing land and air as 'equal'. Athule, the poacher, returns to a halcyon time when "[t]he land and the bush are his too" (Venter 2023: 170), recalling a time before the exclusionary politics of colonialism and apartheid. This is a moment of complete identification and kinship between human and animal: shared creatureliness and bare existence – "eating and shitting and standing and sleeping" (ibid.) – but also shared knowing and sentience. It is the knowing that alerts the reader to the hard reality that this is a 'zero-sum game', and Athule (the poacher) must have the courage to choose his life. Decima's inevitable death, as well as Athule's uncertain fate, is all the more tragic because of this glimmer of Arcadian bliss.

If Decima's death is inevitable, it does not stop her from fighting for her life, from clinging to the hope of life. Following the passage giving Athule's heightened emotional awareness is a brief and final focalisation by the hunted, elderly rhino herself:

Yes, the smell of them, these two in front of her. That stink projecting her back, way back, the stink lodged in their groins and armpits.

She is ready for them. This mass of flesh, a primal energy that existed long before any of them and their rifles. Her body bulging either side of her head, tail upright, fiercely horned, a sentient being protecting herself and her young with all her available bulk.

Decima charges.

A sound cracks the night air of the Great Fish River land.

Whoever has heard it recognises its terror. (Venter 2023: 171)

The narratorial voice intrudes to announce the sound of a rifle firing the shot that will kill Decima. Up to this moment the reader is immersed in Decima's focalisation and lifeworld, sharing her disgust at the adrenal "stink" (Venter 2023: 171) of hunters,

a smell that takes her back to the memory of her mother's death. Charging is the last action we will share with her: her body-turned-weapon is suddenly mountainous in size and "fiercely horned" (ibid.). We join in her fight to survive, save her young, and, by extension, the species. The shot is fired, and the shift in perspective to "whoever" is jolting. It propels the reader out of a shared rhino-being, signalling the loss of her voice in the text and opening an existential void for the reader. The "whoever" includes the wildlife rangers who discover her body. The text occludes a portrayal of her decimated body, the typical dehorned sensationalist image of mass media. She is no spectacle or fetishised commodity. In these final moments Decima's dignity, sentience and vitality is brought to the fore.

#### 4. Conclusion

And so we bear witness to the death of one rhino but more importantly to the gloriousness and sensual pleasures of her life, the day-to-day mundane details of existence. By being present with her for a time, a mental shift has occurred: from seeing her as 'beast' to seeing her as a 'being'.

Venter achieves this by bringing together two seemingly opposed modes of knowing: that is, science and art. As with the Timișoara exhibition, "My Rhino is Not a Myth", Venter's novel is concerned with the cross-over of fact and fiction; it draws on scientific knowledge, research, and journalism, as well as personal experience, to create this aesthetic response to the extinction crisis and to animal rights. Venter's *Decima* is remarkably timely in its focus on the rhino-poaching crisis, an issue that is gaining increasing visibility in both the public discourse and media (as evidenced by the even more recent 2024 documentary, *The Great Rhino Robbery*). *Decima* responds to the heightened awareness surrounding this environmental and animal rights issue with a narrative that underscores the urgency of addressing rhino poaching.

By living for a time with a fictional rhino, poacher, trafficker, and researcher in the world of this novel, the entire network of rhino horn trade and trafficking is exposed. Any mythical allure is dispelled and the business of rhino horn trading is seen for what it is: the exploitation and annihilation of a vulnerable fellow creature. Once time has been spent with this sensitive and gentle being, once the animal has been given a chance to respond, the myths no longer hold. This is what Venter's novel achieves. But, the novel does not present any simplistic solutions. It acknowledges the dire straits of (many of) those caught up in this macabre supply chain. Venter presents an urgent and profound political message in the form of art; so that the scales fall from the eyes of those witnessing the possible (inevitable?) demise of the rhinoceros in our time.

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***TERRITORIES OF BECOMING***



## JUDGING BOOKS BY THEIR TITLES: TRANSLATING YASUNARI KAWABATA'S TITLES FROM JAPANESE INTO ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** *This study examines the translation of book titles from Japanese into English, focusing on a selection of works by Yasunari Kawabata. Drawing on Levinson's (1985) classification of titles and Grice's (1975) cooperative communication maxims, it explores the strategies used by translators and the impact of their choices on the form, meaning, cultural specificity, and potential target reader interpretation. The findings reveal that, despite having similar functions, the Japanese and English titles differ in terms of the quantity, quality, and relevance of the information they convey to their readers.*

**Keywords:** *Grice's cooperative principle, Japanese into English translation, Levinson's titles functions, title translation, Yasunari Kawabata*

### 1. Introduction

When thinking about translation challenges, what one usually has in mind is larger chunks of text rather than isolated words. However, though longer texts may appear more daunting to translate, as Pungă and Badea (2018) argued, often times, shorter texts or even stand-alone words are more demanding to render from one language into another. This is frequently true in the case of book titles.

The title of a book encapsulates, in a more evident or subtler way, the essence of the work, while enticing potential readers to engage with its content (a book title, according to Genette and Crampé (1988), may initially address a very large audience, but not everybody will actually get to read the book itself, the decision to do so or not depending quite a lot on how attractive the title is). Titles function as a bridge between the author's intentions and the audience's expectations, guiding the reading from the very cover of the book and offering a lens through which the text may be interpreted. As Genette (1997) explains, titles act as thresholds, they are paratextual elements that not only frame the reader's approach to literary works, but also influence their reception. For translated works, the titles' role becomes even more critical, as they are often imbued with cultural references, wordplay, or emotional resonance that may not have direct equivalents in the target language. Venuti (1995) argues that it is the translator's task to mediate these elements, balancing fidelity to the source text with appropriateness for the target readership. Thus, the translation of book titles often becomes a complex interplay of linguistic skill and cultural sensitivity that bears consequences on how the works are received in linguistic and cultural contexts other than those in which they were initially produced.

With this complexity in mind, we set out to explore the translations into English of a selection of titles of novels by Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese recipient of the Nobel Prize in Literature (1968), praised for the exceptional sensitivity and poetic force of his culturally rich narratives. His recognition by the Swedish Academy brought (back) global attention to Japanese literature in some parts of the world and boosted it in others, including in the English-speaking countries. Yasunari Kawabata's novels began to be translated into English in the 1950s, by American translator Edward G. Seidensticker, the United States thus being the first country to have made his works available to an English-speaking audience. Seidensticker's early translations from Kawabata into English, though not extremely numerous, were instrumental not only in introducing the Japanese writer to the West, but also in boosting his international reputation, which, in turn, was pivotal in his being awarded the Nobel prize.

Kawabata's works have not been extensively examined from a translation-oriented perspective. When they have, the approach has mainly focused on how the Japanese writer's distinctive literary style, narrative perspective, cultural and philosophical references, and thematic concerns were conveyed across linguistic and cultural boundaries (e.g. Jabłoński 2014; Foolen, Yamaguchi 2016; Kataoka 2016; Chan, Ni, 2023, etc), the paratextual elements being the research focus on even fewer occasions (e.g. Serra Vilella 2018, 2021). Our small-scale analysis in this article therefore adds to the existing body of translation research on Kawabata's works, contributing insights in an under-investigated thematic area. In particular, we contemplate the translation techniques used and examine the resulting similarities and divergences in category, form, meaning and pragmatic function between five source and target titles, while we speculate on the possible consequences of the translation choices.

The translation difficulties that we anticipate are connected to some general aspects that we briefly mention in the next section.

## 2. Japanese into English translation challenges

When considering the challenges of translating from Japanese into English, the key difficulties that arise are rooted, on the one hand, in fundamental grammatical differences between the two languages.

On the other hand, while English tends to be more direct and explicit, Japanese heavily relies on context and implication to convey meaning, so that one may often "read" unexpressed language between the lines of Japanese texts. As Ryan (1980: 49) observes, unexpressed language

is so exquisitely refined in Japanese that its identification and ultimate transmission are matters of great significance. Without it, a translation is empty, vapid, drained of the emotion upon which the original Japanese is predicated. It lies on the page, a collection of English words which may or may not 'mean' what the Japanese words 'mean', but devoid of the feeling permeating the original text.

Ryan (1980: 52) further highlights that, until the 1960s, Japanese literary language often embraced imprecision, with sentences intentionally designed to be vague and suggestive rather than direct. This stylistic preference is particularly relevant for Kawabata's works discussed in this paper, as they were written between the late 1920s and early 1970s. Another significant translation challenge arises from the Japanese writing system, which employs three scripts – kanji, katakana, and hiragana – none of which has direct equivalents in English. The use of these scripts often conveys nuanced meanings and stylistic choices that are difficult to replicate in translation.

Finally, cultural differences present another layer of complexity in literary translation. Many Japanese traditions, concepts, and realia lack direct counterparts both in the English-speaking cultures and in the English language, compelling translators to make deliberate choices between what Venuti (1995) calls *domestication* (adapting the text to align with the target culture) and *foreignization* (preserving the cultural specificity of the source text).

### 3. Japanese into English book titles translation. Theoretical considerations

Against the background represented by these overall challenges that may arise when translating from Japanese into English, the analysis of the translation choices made in rendering Kawabata's book titles into English builds on a two-fold theoretical scaffolding: Levison's (1985) title categories and Grice's (1975) maxims that govern what he considers to be cooperative communication. Both will be detailed in what follows.

The six title categories that Levinson (1985: 34-35) identified are:

- *neutral titles* expressing “the names of characters, objects, or places which figure prominently in the body of the work and are insusceptible to any additional spotlighting”;
- *underlining or reinforcing titles* which “add additional weight or stress to some theme or subject that is clearly part of core content, but not so overwhelmingly or unquestionably that titular spotlighting is otiose”;
- *focusing titles*, where “rather than merely underlining, there has to be a certain richness of core content so that two or more elements within could plausibly be regarded as of major importance”;
- *undermining or opposing titles*, which are ironic and counter to the works they represent;
- *mystifying or disorienting titles*, with structures that seem tangential to the work, rather than opposing or descriptive, and
- *disambiguating or specifying titles*, where the work may be seen in a different light than it would have, had the title been omitted.

In our analysis, we will indicate whether the source and the target titles belong to the same category of these six and will speculate on what consequences their being of the same type or of different types may have on the target audience.

If titles were to be fully functional both in the source and in the target language, they should ensure cooperative communication between the author/ translator and

the book readers. To do so, they should ideally obey the four, well-known maxims suggested by Grice (1975: 45-46):

- the maxim of quality: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
  1. Do not say what you believe to be false.
  2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- the maxim of quantity:
  1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).
  2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- the maxim of relation (relevance): Be relevant.
- the maxim of manner: Be perspicuous.
  1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
  2. Avoid ambiguity.
  3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
  4. Be orderly.

However, what has often been clarified is that Grice (1975) did not present his Cooperative Principle as a prescriptive code of communicative conduct. Rather, communication can occur effectively whether the sender of a message adheres to or deliberately violates the maxims, provided the receiver of that message can discern the strategy being employed. The Cooperative Principle functions as a foundational assumption for successful communication. Strict adherence to the principle is not mandatory, but a shared understanding between the message sender and receiver of its existence and relevance is. In the context of our analysis, this means that an appropriately translated title is one that is up front relevant, informative enough, unambiguous and brief for the (potential) target readers of the novels. If it is not, the translation may still be considered appropriate, only provided that the readers can make sense of the meaning intended by the violation of the cooperative communication maxims. Still, readers may only discern the communicative intentions underlying a title that violates conversational maxims after engaging with the content of the work. In our analysis of the titles, we assume this familiarity with the content of the books does not exist at the time readers get in touch with their titles.

The sections that follow are dedicated to comparatively discussing the five titles of Kawabata's books that we have selected, both in their original form and in English translation, from the point of view of Levinson's title categories and Grice's cooperative communication maxims.

#### **4. Translating Kawabata's titles from Japanese into English: case studies**

##### **4.1. *Izu no odoriko* (1926)**

Kawabata's *Izu no odoriko* is his first widely acclaimed literary work. The narrative follows a twenty-year-old student traveling to the Izu Peninsula, where he encounters a family of itinerant entertainers and develops affectionate feelings for a teenage dancer, hence the title of the work. Through its portrayal of the protagonist's

inner struggles, the short story explores themes such as love, loss, and transience, emphasizing the ephemeral beauty of the moment – a hallmark of Kawabata's later writings too. The work is often interpreted as having an autobiographical dimension: Kawabata, orphaned at a young age, frequently travelled in search of emotional equilibrium. He visited the Izu peninsula several times, staying for longer stretches between 1924 and 1927 and fell in love with a woman who might have inspired the novella's central relationship.

The title draws attention to the dancer and can be thus classified as a focusing title within Levinson's taxonomy. Although the dancer is not the central figure in the narrative, she plays a pivotal role in shaping the protagonist's emotions and actions. Levinson (1985: 35) defines a focusing title as one that "suggests which of the contending themes should be given center place in interpreting the work and organizing one's appreciation of it." Indeed, the dancer girl (though a character, not a theme) serves as a crucial point of focus, offering a lens through which the reader can better and more deeply understand the young student's inner turmoil.

The original title consists of three elements: "Izu", the name of the location where the story takes place; the particle "no", meaning 'of', 'from', 'at'; and "odoriko", which denotes a dancer.

*Izu no odoriko* was the first of Kawabata's works to be translated into English. The translation was undertaken by Edward Seidensticker, renowned for his extensive work in translating Kawabata's writings. It was initially published in an abridged form in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in 1955, the full version appearing only later. The English title – *The Izu Dancer* – remained unchanged for both the abridged and the complete variant.

In this English version of the Japanese title, "Izu" is a direct translation. Without any additional information and if readers are unfamiliar with the fact that the proper noun "Izu" stands for a place in Japan, they may find it ambiguous.

The particle "no" is disregarded, which, together with the word order opted for, adds to the ambiguity of the title.

"Odoriko" is a pretty challenging word to translate, if all the subtleties implied by its structure were to be taken into account. It is a compound word made up of "odori", meaning 'dance' and "ko", meaning 'child'. This latter element may have been rendered by various kanji, but the one chosen - 子 – signifies 'child' and implies the female gender, just like it does when it is used in women's proper names like Yukiko, Hiroko, etc. Therefore, quite significantly, the term "odoriko" does not evoke a neutral image, but rather specifically suggests that of a young female dancer.

The English translator's choice for "odoriko" is "the dancer". The use of the definite article "the" as a determiner of the noun "dancer" serves to signal a particular individual who holds a central place in the short story, though, as Japanese lacks articles, the employment of the indefinite article "a" could also have been a viable translation option. While this choice directs readers' attention to a specific figure, the translation of "odoriko" does not go beyond this level of specificity. The original title conveys to the source audience that a young female dancer in/ at/ of Izu is central to the narrative, thereby ensuring cooperative communication, but the nuanced information regarding the dancer's gender and age is absent in the English version.

The target audience is presented with a title that, while still functioning as a focusing one, is considerably less transparent than the original. The overly general “the dancer”, in terms of age and gender of the referent, and the potential opacity of the proper noun “Izu” for readers unfamiliar with Japan’s geography suggest a violation of both the maxim of quantity and the maxim of manner. Consequently, the English title risks being perceived as ambiguous and insufficiently informative.

A pretty similar translation of Kawabata’s title occurred in a research article on the writer’s works (Tsukimura, Kawabata, 1968) – *Izu Dancer*. The only difference resides in the omission of the definite article, the implication being that the referent is rather generic than specific. Our comments above, concerning the ambiguity and reduced informativity of Seidensticker’s title, hold in this case, too.

In 1997, another translation appeared alongside Seidensticker’s, in a collection of short stories, this time by Martin J. Holman, titled *The Dancing Girl of Izu*. Unlike the initial English version, this focusing title overtly carries across into the target language what is implicit in the Japanese original: the person referred to is a young female. By using the analytical genitive “of Izu”, it also clarifies it for the readers that Izu must be a place. As such, this English translation of *Izu no odoriko* may be credited with relevance for the target audience and thus, with alignment with Grice’s cooperative communication principle.

#### 4.2. *Asakusa kurenaidan* (1929-1930)

Kawabata’s *Asakusa kurenaidan* offers a penetrating exploration of the “destitution and marginalization produced by [...] consumer culture” (Lippit 2002: 122). Rooted in modernist tradition, this work diverges significantly from the author’s writings anchored in traditional Japanese culture. Unlike *Izu no odoriko* and *Yukiguni* (to be discussed later), *Asakusa kurenaidan* presents a vivid and dynamic portrait of urban Japanese life, marking a bold departure in theme and style from the author’s more traditional works.

The novel was initially serialized in several Tokyo-based publications, including the *Tokyo Asahi* daily newspaper, *Kaizō* literary journal, where it carried the title *Asakusa kurenaidan*, and *Shinchō* literary journal, where it appeared under the title *Asakusa akaobikai* (*The Red Sash Society*). Its complete text was eventually published in 1930 under the title analyzed here (Wada, White 2018).

Set in the bustling entertainment district of Asakusa during 1920s Tokyo, the novel blends fiction and non-fiction to depict the dark realities of urban life, focusing on the lives of marginalized individuals – beggars, prostitutes, teenagers, dancers – through the perspective of a reflective narrator. Rather than adhering to a linear plot, the novel adopts an episodic structure, emphasizing the atmosphere of Asakusa with its colourful inhabitants. Central to the narrative is the narrator’s engagement with the district’s vibrant stories and characters, facilitated by a gang of female delinquents, which inspires the novel’s title.

In the Japanese title, “Asakusa”, the name of the Tokyo district, acts as a descriptor of “kurenaidan”.

“Kurenaidan” is composed of two elements: the former is “kurenai”, referring to a deep red, crimson, vermilion colour, but which is represented by a kanji that may as well be read as ‘lipstick’. The origin of “kurenai” is said to be a merging of “kure” (‘China’), “no” (possessive particle), and “ai” (‘indigo’, by extension, ‘dye’) – the word can thus be understood literally as ‘China’s colour’. This is explained by the fact that the safflower plant from which the kurenai colour dye was extracted was brought to Japan from China.

The latter part of “kurenaidan” is “dan”, which translates as ‘association’, ‘group’, ‘party’. The implied reference of the compound word in the title is, however, to a group of females, due to the possible “lipstick” reading of the kanji that we mentioned above. The Japanese title of the novel would be categorised as neutral in Levinson’s terms, naming the group of characters that occupy a central place in Kawabata’s writing. The insinuated piece of information that these characters are women is accessible to Japanese readers, familiar with how kanji ideograms may be interpreted. However, what the Japanese title does not communicate is the social status of the characters it refers to, so, we may consider that, in the absence of this detail, the title flouts Grice’s maxim of quantity.

The novel was not published in English until much later after it was released in Japan, in 2005, in Alisa Freedman’s translation, under the title *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa*. Like the Japanese original, this too is a neutral title according to Levinson’s classification. However, the similarities between the source and target titles appear to extend no further than this.

What is immediately apparent is that an analytical genitive structure was favoured instead of the synthetic association of words *The Asakusa Scarlet Gang*, which would have been closer in form to the source title. This helps in at least partly disambiguating “Asakusa” for readers who may not be familiar with the fact that what the proper noun refers to is a Tokyo district. The “of” genitive translation choice works at least as far as it makes it clear that “Asakusa” is a place that the gang in question is associated with or resides in.

“The gang” is not a literal translation of “dan”. As explained above, the Japanese word is neutral in referring to a ‘group of people’, while the English word is much more specific in indicating that the group is one of criminals. Information is thus added as compared to the Japanese title and expectations on the readers’ part are created in closer connection with the content of the novel. Considered from this perspective, unlike the Japanese title, its English counterpart may seem to obey the maxim of quantity. However, the latter does not suggest in any way that the criminals in question are women – as English does not have graphic resources equivalent to Japanese to imply it, this could have only been done in plain English words. Thus, what the English title gains on one side, it loses on the other, in the end remaining only partly informative with respect to the novel’s plot.

As with *Izu no odoriko*, the use of English articles was at the translator’s discretion – a choice was allowed between presenting the gang as known and familiar, through the use of the definite article, or as less so, by employing an indefinite article or omitting articles altogether. She chose the former, unambiguously signaling (in alignment with Grice’s maxim of manner) that the title refers to a specific gang. This

deliberate strategy may function as an attention-grabbing device, positioning the gang as a central focus of the narrative.

Other translations of the title are encountered in papers and novels written before its official English version was published. One of them is *The Kurenaidan [Scarlet Club] of Asakusa*, in the 1939 *Introduction to Contemporary Japanese Literature*, where “kurenaidan” is transliterated and explained in brackets, by a phrase containing “club”, a neutral term as compared to “gang”. Another is *The Crimson Gang of Asakusa*, in a paper by Tsukimura and Kawabata (1968), where the only difference from Freedman’s translation is a partial synonym for the colour word.

Both these translations resemble the official *The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa* in that they convey less information in connection to the novel’s plot than the original title does and thus may be considered not to obey Grice’s maxim of quantity.

#### 4.3. *Yukiguni* (1937-1948)

Kawabata’s *Yukiguni* was written starting with the mid 1930s and added to throughout the years, so that it only reached its final form after World War II. The novel may be considered “the first [...] in which we find all the artistic elements, both modern and traditional, that have since characterized the distinctive style of Kawabata” (Araki 1969: 321). While reminiscent of *Izu no odoriko* in its exploration of the protagonist’s emotional responses to the natural world and human kindness, *Yukiguni* delves into these themes with greater depth and complexity (Tsukimura, Kawabata, 1968).

*Yukiguni* is the story of a successful Tokyo businessman, who frequently travels to a secluded hot springs town in Western Japan, where he now takes romantic interest in two women, a geisha and an employee of the inn where he finds accommodation.

“Yukiguni” holds a precise cultural and geographical significance, denoting a region in Japan characterized by heavy snowfall, most commonly associated with the area stretching from Fukui to Akita Prefecture. The Japanese are well-acquainted with this so Kawabata’s title should make perfect sense to them. The novel’s narrative unfolds specifically within the setting mentioned, in the snow-laden mountains of Niigata Prefecture near Echigo-Yuzawa. Given that the title refers to a place that figures predominantly in the novel, it may be classified as neutral in Levinson’s categorization.

The translation of *Yukiguni* into English, in 1956, under the title *Snow Country*, is also Edward G. Seidensticker’s work.

The title *Snow Country* can be considered a literal rendering of *Yukiguni*, as “yuki” translates as ‘snow’ and “kuni,” when sonorized as “guni,” signifies ‘land,’ ‘country,’ or ‘region’. However, the translator’s choice of the term “country” from among these possible alternatives suppresses the cultural and geographical specificity inherent in the original title. Additionally, the absence of a definite article before “country” further weakens the referent’s precision. These translation decisions render the English title less informative than its Japanese counterpart, which results into the

maxim of quantity being violated by the provision of insufficient contextual detail. The maxim of quality is also flouted, as the English title may mislead its readers. An English-speaking audience is likely to interpret “country” in its general sense as ‘territory of a nation’, rather than in its more specific, poetic sense of ‘region’ or ‘area’. This, however, may not be the case for readers who are familiar with this kind of usage in other publications in/ about Japan, where “snow country” usually appears within inverted commas and so its secondary meaning use is graphically marked (see, for example, *Highlighting Japan*, the Japanese Government’s official online magazine, which promotes Japan to people around the world).

With this exception, even if the Japanese and the English titles are both neutral in Levinson’s classification, they do not communicate the same amount and kind of information to their respective audiences.

#### 4.4. *Senbazuru* (1952)

*Senbazuru*, like several of Kawabata’s earlier works, was serialized in a newspaper, beginning in 1949, before it was published as a novel in 1952 (www.britannica.com).

The novel, which revolves around the culturally very significant Japanese tea ceremony, serves as a meditation on the erosion of traditional values in the aftermath of Japan’s defeat in World War II. While some have interpreted it as a delicate and evocative depiction of the ceremony, in his Nobel lecture (www.nobelprize.org), Kawabata himself rejected such readings, emphasizing that his book was not intended to be celebratory:

I may say in passing, that to see my novel *Thousand Cranes* as an evocation of the formal and spiritual beauty of the tea ceremony is a misreading. It is a negative work, and expression of doubt about and warning against the vulgarity into which the tea ceremony has fallen.

(https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1968/kawabata/lecture/)

This is reflected in the novel’s increasingly sombre tone and in the depiction of the tea ceremony as gradually deteriorating and becoming progressively less formal and structured with each mention in the book. Indeed, from this point forward, themes of nostalgia for a lost past, worry about the future, and the pervasive presence of death become recurrent motifs throughout Kawabata’s works.

The narrative follows Kikuji, a young man struggling with the loss of his father, who gradually becomes entangled in the deceased’s past affairs. His misfortunes begin when he is invited to a tea ceremony by Miss Kurimoto, one of his father’s former mistresses, who seeks to arrange a match between him and her student, Yukiko. However, rather than pursuing this prospective relationship, Kikuji embarks on an affair with Mrs. Ota, his father’s last mistress. This affair ultimately culminates in tragedy, as Mrs. Ota, overwhelmed with guilt, takes her own life. Following this, Kikuji engages in a relationship with her daughter, yet, by the novel’s end, he remains alone.

Although Yukiko plays a relatively passive role in the unfolding events, she serves as a symbolic character in the novel, representing the alternative path Kikuji might have chosen – a life unburdened by his father’s immoral legacy. Her presence is closely associated with a *furoshiki* (a traditional Japanese wrapping cloth) adorned with the thousand cranes motif, which comes to embody both her identity and the cultural ideals she represents. Through this motif, as well as the frequent depictions of her beauty and refined demeanour, Yukiko emerges as a symbol of Japanese tradition and idealized femininity, standing in stark contrast to the other characters in the book.

As the title is about a pattern heavily associated with somebody who is not a main character, yet has an essential symbolic value, it may be categorised as focusing in Levinson’s view. It calls attention to a character/ theme which may not seem immediately important to the reader and may require additional spotlighting.

In terms of structure, the title word *Senbazuru* is a compound made up of three elements: “sen”, meaning ‘thousand’, “ba”, a count word for birds and rabbits (however, literally meaning ‘feather’), and “zuru”, the voiced (*rendaku*) variant of “tsuru”, meaning ‘crane(s)’ and traditionally evoking the image of the Japanese red-crowned crane.

Seidensticker’s 1958 translation *Thousand Cranes* remains faithful to the source in meaning. It adapts to the grammar requirements of English and uses the plural “cranes” after the numeral, in the absence of an equivalent English count word for the Japanese “ba”.

The resulting title retains its status of a focusing title but, unfortunately, it does not manage to convey as much to the readers it targets as the original does to the Japanese public, and to be as relevant for the former as it is for the latter. It does not compensate in any way for the possible break in the cultural background knowledge of the English readership and may thus be said to float the Gricean maxims of quantity and relation.

Though frequently used as a decorative motif, “thousand cranes” originates in the tradition of folding a thousand origami cranes. Upon completion of this task, it is believed that the person or group who has accomplished it will be granted a wish. This is a belief deeply ingrained in Japanese culture that is immediately recognizable as such by native audiences. The thousand cranes in the book title symbolize longevity, recovery and peace, but also wisdom and loyalty. It being so deeply culture-specific, the whole conceptual frame around the Japanese thousand cranes is quite difficult to transpose for a foreign audience. As a result, non-Japanese readers may be more inclined to interpret the phrase literally rather than symbolically. What may be overlooked is not only the rich symbolic meaning of the title, but also the subtle irony embedded in Kawabata’s choice when naming a book, in which infidelity is central, by a bird which symbolizes loyalty. If the author’s ironical intentions may reveal themselves to Japanese readers while advancing in the novel, they risk being entirely overlooked by English-speaking audiences.

A potential issue with the perception of the English translation of the title may stem from the popularisation of Sadako Sasaki’s story. She was a child victim of the atomic bombings of Japan who, while in hospital undergoing treatment for leukaemia,

folded more than a thousand paper cranes in the hope of being granted the wish of getting well (which, unfortunately, but expectedly, did not happen). She has become an international symbol of peace and is globally associated with the thousand cranes (DiCicco, Sasaki 2018). Sadako died in 1955, after the publication of *Senbazuru*, yet before the publication of *Thousand Cranes*. The result of the Japanese girl's story being widely known may be that Seidensticker's target audience may wrongfully associate the English title with the atomic bombings and thus build a wholly different set of expectations than those the source audience may have. The English title may thus be misleading, and consequently, we may consider that it violates the maxim of quality.

#### 4.5. *Meijin* (1954)

Following in the footsteps of *Senbazuru*, Kawabata's *Meijin* was first published as a series only later to be edited into a full-length novel. Drawing inspiration from real events – much like his experiences in Izu and Asakusa – Kawabata, in this instance, departs from personal recollection to explore a historical game of go. The novel is a semi-fictionalized account of the famous 1938 memorial game between professional player Hon'inbo Shusai and the younger Kitani Minoru, identifiable as Otake in the novel. This was Shusai's retirement game, which he lost by five points in favour of his presumably less experienced opponent.

As mentioned in the Introduction to the 1972 English version of the novel, it is built on newspaper reports written by Kawabata himself for *Mainichi* during the actual game. These reports not only provide a faithful account of the match but also offer detailed explanations of the game's moves and rules, making the novel accessible even to readers who may be unfamiliar with the complexities of go. At surface level, the plot may appear to be a mere retelling of this match, known to the Japanese audience of the times, yet not too fresh in the memories of later readers, as the novel was published 16 years after the event. However, upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that the narrative itself is merely a means to an end, as “from the way of Go the beauty of Japan and the Orient had fled. Everything had become science and regulation” (Kawabata 1972: 52).

Kawabata uses the match as an overarching metaphor for the clash between tradition and modernity, between Japan and the West, embodied by the two contrasting characters – the master and his younger challenger. This was of great concern to the author and cannot be separated from the historical context of the writing. The fear of losing traditional values and the outright rejection of Western influences intensified after World War II, the American occupation of Japan between 1945 and 1952 coinciding with the time when the novel was written.

“Meijin”, the word in the title of the book, literally means ‘renowned person’ and denotes a master in a field, frequently that of board games. It may be applied to experts of several games, like karuta, shogi or go, the context clarifying which exactly it denotes. When referring specifically to go, *meijin* is the title which has historically been applied to a single 9-dan player at a time, deemed “the master”. Though originating from China and popular throughout East Asia, go has become

synonymous with Japan starting with its increase in popularity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century only, when it became a state-sponsored game (Rogers 1983). It was then that the *meijin* title appeared, alongside the position of *godokoro* (minister of go). Hon'inbo Shusai, the real-life person and book character, was the 10<sup>th</sup> and last historic “meijin” of go, as well as the last head of house Hon'inbo (<https://senseis.xmp.net>).

Under Levinson's taxonomy, the Japanese title may be classified as a neutral one, since it refers to the master, the main (non-fictional) character of the story. Though it may seem that there are three central characters in the story, Shusai, his younger opponent, and the reporter who narrates the story (mirroring Kawabata himself), the focus is on the master, not just during the match, but also following it, up until his death.

The novel was translated in 1972 by Edward G. Seidensticker as *The Master of Go*, a neutral title itself, which has remained unchanged to the present. What is immediately apparent is that the English translation provides, in an explicit manner, information which is suggested in the source title and fully revealed only in the content of the novel. In the Japanese title, it is not obvious what the game in question may be, or even if reference is made to a game at all. Thus, at first sight, the original title may be ambiguous and said to flout Grice's maxim of manner.

In contrast, the English title disambiguates at least partly what is left unclear in the original – the book is expected to be about a person who is an excellent go player (and one of a kind, as the use of the definite article may suggest). Seen from this perspective, it obeys both the maxim of quantity and that of manner. However, the general term “master” falls short of the cultural nuances that “meijin” conveys to the Japanese readers. “Grandmaster” might come close to the Japanese game title, but as it is used exclusively for chess players, the expectations that it may create are contrary to what the novel is actually about.

## 5. Conclusion

Our analysis of the translation from Japanese into English of the five book titles by Yasunari Kawabata has revealed that the task of transferring them from the source into the target language is not always straightforward. It has also proved that the sources of translation challenges that we anticipated do indeed represent areas from which interlanguage transfer difficulties may stem.

Though similar in function in all cases considered, the original titles and their translated counterparts are not equivalent in terms of form, quantity, quality and relevance of the information conveyed. Differences in form are the result of the grammatical and lexical dissimilarities between the two languages involved in the translation process (such as the complete lack of articles in Japanese as opposed to the frequent use of definite and indefinite articles in English; the absence of direct equivalents in English for certain Japanese words, like “ba”; or the impossibility of capturing the symbolic values of Japanese words or their components in a similar way in English, like in the case of “kurenaidan”).

Incongruence in terms of the titles' communicative value are triggered by formal differences, but, most obviously, by the very solid anchorage of the original

titles in the Japanese socio-cultural and geographical realities (e.g. the thousand cranes symbolic motif, the snow-covered region of Japan or the go leading player). The English translators failed in transferring the cultural dimension of the Japanese originals into the titles they suggested, their domestication techniques neutralizing this dimension almost completely. Thus, the Japanese culture-oriented expectations that the original titles may create for the initial readership are absent in the case of the English audience. For the latter, the titles gain in relevance only after the readers get acquainted with the content of the writings.

Overall, our analysis may be yet another proof of the fact that, though translation is always possible, loss in the process, especially that rooted in culture-specific aspects, is often unavoidable not only in the case of larger chunks of texts, but also in that of shorter stretches of language, like titles of literary pieces.

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**NONCE AND NEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTIONS  
IN *ALTERED CARBON*:  
A QUANTITATIVE CORPUS ANALYSIS**

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**Abstract:** *This paper presents quantitative data identified in the novel *Altered Carbon* by Richard K. Morgan and its two sequels: after finding 846 morphological and semantic occasionalisms in the pilot, all three novels were loaded into the corpus linguistics programme LancsBox, and a search was performed for those gathered nonce/neological constructions. The achieved goal was to provide answers about the creativity/productivity of these constructions, and the status of occasionalisms in the *Altered Carbon* dialect, with an insight into their frequency, meaningful interaction, and collocation networks. It was proven that higher-occurring constructions from the pilot were more productive, and that semantic occasionalisms slightly prevailed over morphological.*

**Keywords:** *Altered Carbon, construction grammar, corpus linguistics, creativity/productivity, nonce and neological formations, quantitative analysis*

## **1. Introduction**

Nonce-formations have been present in the English language for a long time, and have been regarded as a topic of interest from as early as nineteenth century and Lewis Carroll's literature, not just because of their opaque, context-dependent meaning, but also their form: "Nonce-formations have attracted great attention from scholars and linguists because of their deviant form and the non-existence of attested morphemes in their structure." (Rabrenović 2020: 153).

They can be defined as occasional constructions made for a particular purpose within a speech act whenever there is a lack of appropriate terms (or the speaker is unaware of them), which is why they are sometimes referred to as occasionalisms. Crystal defined them more precisely:

Nonce-formations are items spontaneously coined by a speaker or writer to meet the immediate needs of a particular communicative situation. The OED definition stresses the transient, pragmatic nature of the phenomenon: nonce-words are used 'for the time being, temporarily.' [...] The items are deliberate coinages on the part of the user (thereby excluding from the term such phenomena as malapropisms, spoonerisms, copyist errors, and slips of the tongue). They may be used several times within a single speech event, but there is no expectation that they will be carried over into other discourses. (2000: 219)

Depending on their structure, nonce-formations can be divided into traditional, morphological ones (whose meaning is either completely opaque, or which comprise constituents that have never been found next to each other before), and semantic ones (whose form is not entirely newly-coined, but whose meaning differs from their meaning when used outside of that particular speech act). In either case, the listeners or readers need context in order to accurately understand them: “As for their meaning, they are easily interpreted once we are familiar with the (extra-) linguistic context.” (Vujić, Rabrenović 2019: 574).

This study is a quantitative part of a PhD thesis examining how nonce-formations in English reflect the development of technology based on linguistic analyses of science fiction – in this specific case, the novel *Altered Carbon* and its sequels. Science fiction was chosen because of the genre’s need of new coinages for technology which is ahead of our time, thereby representing fertile grounds for nonce-formations: “Lexical isolates are much more common, especially in certain genres, than the traditional accounts of hapax legomena and nonce-formations in literature would lead us to expect.” (Crystal 2000: 228).

The aim of this piece of research is to primarily identify both nonce and neological constructions in the novel: “Neologisms are defined by OED as ‘a new word or expression; innovation in language’: the implication is that a word has passed beyond the stage of idiosyncrasy, and has settled down to become a recognised part of the lexicon, though still felt to be a ‘new arrival’.” (Crystal 2000: 219). The criteria for the division between nonce and neological formations shall be further explained in the next section.

Secondly, the goal is to acquire data about the constructions’ linguistic potential: the collocation networks that they establish, their meaningful interactions, frequency and the number of occurrences in both the pilot novel and its sequels, thereby indicating not only their creativity, but also their productivity: “A last issue in relation to nonce-formations is the difference between productivity and creativity.” (Dal, Namer 2018: 223). The quantification of both aforementioned morphological and semantic constructions is indicative of their creativity, while their repetition in the later novels points to their productivity: “Although ‘productivity’ and ‘creativity’ are synonyms for some authors, we can take the *creative* in *creativity* literally, and use this term to refer to the less automatic creations, those which are clearly deliberate and independent of the system.” (Bauer 2005: 329).

The expected findings included firstly that a similar number of tokens would be found in *Altered Carbon* and its two sequels, *Broken Angels* and *Woken Furies*. Secondly, that, on the spectrum between occasionalisms and neologisms, the former would prevail. Thirdly, the creative processes of forming traditional versus semantic nonce-formations will be proven to have taken place in a similar quantity, with a slight prevalence of semantic occasionalisms. Finally, higher-frequency words with larger, statistically significant collocation networks will prove to be more productive and used more frequently in the sequels in comparison to hapax legomena from the pilot novel:

Hapax legomena are items recorded only once in a given corpus, such as an author’s work, a literary genre, or even a literature as a whole. [...] a hapax found in a corpus is a regular part of the lexicon (which just happened never to have been recorded

elsewhere), a neologism (which did not have a chance to be recorded elsewhere), a nonce-usage (where there was no intention on the author's part of using it again elsewhere), or an error (where there was no intention on the author's part of using it in the first place. (Crystal 2000: 219)

## 2. Material and methods

The research is based on Richard K. Morgan's novel *Altered Carbon* (2002), and its two sequels: *Broken Angels*, and *Woken Furies*. Separate corpora were made from the three instalments in order to provide accurate numerical information: "If asked what is the one benefit that corpora can provide and that cannot be provided by other means, I would reply 'information about frequency'." (Leech 2011: 7).

The theoretical framework used as the grounds for this study is Construction Morphology: "Construction Morphology, which is considered to be a more recent approach to morphological analysis proposed by Geert Booij (2010, 2013), was developed from Construction Grammar. This theoretical framework seems to be particularly suitable for the study of complex words which linger on the borderline between morphology and syntax." (Vujić, Rabrenović 2019: 574). This approach is noticeably appropriate for the study of nonce-formations, considering the impossible task of delimiting if words that technically do not exist are compounds or collocations. An optimal solution would be to place them all on the spectrum of constructions: "A construction is a symbolic unit that combines both form and meaning, and may be linguistically complex." (Leech 2011: 22). Therefore, placing them on the same spectrum relieves the author of the obligation to determine if a multi-word unit belongs to morphology or syntax, or, as Booij (2010: 1) proposed: "It can be used both at the level of word structure and that of syntactic structure without obliterating the differences between those two domains." In other words: "Morphology and syntax are taken as expressions of the same system." (Masini and Audring, 2018: 472), the distinctions between which would be irrelevant for this study.

After potential nonce and neological constructions were identified in the pilot novel *Altered Carbon*, they were entered individually into Microsoft Excel, where they were assigned a colour, based on which one of three categories they belong to: neologism, semantic occasionalism, or traditional nonce-formation. The process of identification was threefold: first, units would be identified in the novel itself, after which they were entered manually into the Webster dictionary and the paid online version of the Oxford English Dictionary. If neither dictionary recognised the query as a neologism, the word would be further typed into Google to verify its inexistence. The primary reason for utilising OED was because it contains a clear marker for neologisms, as well as a rich variety of literature, including hapax legomena: "The OED has always taken pride in its policy of recording individual usages from major writers." (Crystal 2000: 218).

The criteria for identifying items which were kept as a part of the sample excluded well-known and established terms for existing *signifiés* at the time the novel was written (such as clone, or videophone), but included constructions identified by OED as science fiction. Those words were classified as neologisms, since they were known to be used in the discourse: "As soon as people are aware that they have

encountered or used a nonce-formation before, therefore, it ceases to be ‘nonce.’ ‘Twice-formations’ identify the beginning of the road along which a word has to travel before it is accepted as a neologism.” (idem: 219-220).

The items that passed the mentioned verifications comprise the sample of 846 entries, with nonce-formations that form other nonce-formations written and counted as separate units, since they were used for the production of other units: “From the point of view of Construction Morphology, their schemas exist in the speaker’s mental lexicon and can be analogically and productively used for new formations in adequate communicative situations. In addition, if we apply a constructionist approach to nonce-formations, we can see that those that become conventionalized actually form constructions.” (Vujić, Rabrenović 2019: 574).

After arriving at a final sample, the methodology used for further quantification was Corpus linguistics. As Brezina and McEnery point out, it is a unique approach that offers not only information about the frequency of linguistic features, but also an insight into the context surrounding them:

“Corpus linguistics is an approach to the study of language that uses computers to analyse large amounts of language data, both written and spoken, which we call corpora (sg. corpus). This simple definition situates corpus linguistics in the tradition of linguistically grounded analysis that makes use of the development of computational technology to draw on evidence about language use that would not be accessible otherwise.” (Brezina, McEnery 2020: 11).

The software chosen for data analysis is LanksBox, a programme which can be used offline, and offers numerical data, concordance lines, collocation networks (for which it automatically calculates statistical significance and produces diagrams), and the option to create one’s own corpora: “This flexible tool, which runs on all major operating systems, represents a new generation of corpus analysis software. It provides a simple interface yet powerful analytical and visualization capabilities for corpus data. It allows multiple corpora to be easily compared and contrasted.” (idem: 17).

Owing to this feature, conducting research for comparing and contrasting occurrences was made easy: “The remarkable power of OED and other computer corpora present us with new opportunities of inquiry into such matters.” (Crystal 2000: 229). *Altered Carbon* and its two sequels were uploaded into the programme as three separate corpora, including only the text of the novels (without the foreword and information about the author). All found nonce and neological constructions were queried as lemmas and quantified (including all of their variations), based on their number of occurrences and relative frequency per ten thousand tokens. Then, the process was repeated for the same lemmas in the sequels. During the process of quantification for polysemic units (semantic occasionalisms), concordance lines were consulted in order to verify that those examples were indeed of nonce-formations, and not of their form equivalents from everyday discourse.

For the purposes of this paper, in order to display a representative sample of frequency and productivity, there had to be a selection of examples, which were divided into three categories. The excel table was sorted according to frequency in the pilot novel, and top 14 most frequent constructions were chosen for the “Most Frequent” category, ranging from 182 to 34 occurrences in the pilot novel.

Since the sample consisting of 846 entries contained exactly 550 hapax legomena (least frequent constructions occurring once), and Excel automatically sorts them alphabetically, the method for selecting equivalent 14 examples was random selection – every fortieth construction was chosen. They were assigned to the “Least Frequent” category.

For the constructions with “Mid-Frequency” due to the imbalance in the quantity of re-occurring words and hapax legomena, as well as a wide discrepancy in frequency of the fourteen examples from the first category, representative examples were chosen mathematically by taking the range of repeating words in between the two described categories (therefore ranging between 1 and 34) and dividing it by two to reach a middle ground. Therefore, mid-frequency words were considered to be those with 17 repetitions and fewer.

Last, GraphColl was used in LancsBox for all 42 examples to get statistically significant collocation networks visually represented. To avoid collocates with determiners, Meaningful Interaction was chosen as the setting instead of Frequency, with the statistic value of 3.0 and the collocation frequency of 3 for all queries.

### 3. Results

The data provided by LancsBox shows that the three separate corpora (*Altered Carbon*, *Broken Angels*, and *Woken Furies*) do indeed have a similar number of tokens, with only a slightly higher number in the third instalment, as can be seen in Table 1:

	Different Words	Lemmas
<i>Altered Carbon</i>	12.980	11.953
<i>Broken Angels</i>	12.663	11.688
<i>Woken Furies</i>	13.905	12.938

**Table 1.** Number of tokens

Secondly, as shown in Table 2, out of all 42 occasionalisms selected for this study from the pilot, *Altered Carbon*, the results regarding their creativity, or more precisely the process of their formation (semantic, traditional or morphological nonce-formations, and neologisms) are the following:

	Semantic N-F	Traditional N-F	Neologism
Highest frequency	10	3	1
Mid-frequency	6	7	1
Lowest frequency	5	8	1
TOTAL	21	18	3

**Table 2.** Frequency of occasionalisms formation

As mentioned in the *Material and Methods* section, productivity was examined in three groups, classified by their frequency, with the hypothesis that less frequent constructions, as well as those with smaller collocation networks, would have a lower

number of occurrences in the sequels. Table 3 shows quantitative data about the most frequent occasionalisms in *Altered Carbon* (AC), and their re-occurrences in *Broken Angels* (BA) and *Woken Furies* (WF), while Table 4 and Table 5 demonstrate the number of constructions in the Mid-Frequency and Lowest Frequency category, respectively, in the same manner:

	<i>AC</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>WF</i>
sleeve *	182 (11)	90 (6)	151 (8.1)
stack *	113 (7)	78 (5.3)	73 (4.1)
a virtual (N) *	98 (5.9)	37 (2.48)	33 (1.82)
Envoy *	92 (5.7)	129 (8.2)	142 (7.83)
Bay City <sup>□</sup>	66 (4.17)	0	1 (0.06)
neurachem <sup>□</sup>	58 (3.6)	27 (1.81)	33 (1.82)
storage*	55 (3.5)	18 (1.21)	43 (2.37)
Harlan's World <sup>□</sup>	54 (3.4)	25 (1.7)	43 (2.37)
synthetic / synth*	52 (3.3)	1 (0.07)	28 (1.5)
Head in the Clouds *	51 (3.22)	0	0
the tank *	51 (3.22)	8 (0.5)	13 (0.7)
blaster <sup>○○</sup>	39 (2.46)	18 (1.21)	59 (3.26)
Meth *	36 (2.3)	0	0
needlecast *	34 (2.2)	14 (0.9)	13 (0.8)

**Table 3.** Occasionalisms in the mid-frequency category

	<i>AC</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>WF</i>
Merge Nine <sup>□</sup>	17 (1.07)	0	0
decant people <sup>□</sup>	16 (1.01)	5 (0.33)	3 (0.17)
Licktown <sup>□</sup>	15 (0.95)	0	0
dip *	14 (0.9)	0	1 (0.06)
freight (V) *	14 (0.9)	2 (0.13)	0
Jack It Up *	13 (0.82)	0	0
Khumalo <sup>□</sup>	13 (0.82)	6 (0.4)	2 (0.11)
orbital *	13 (0.82)	18 (1.20)	47 (2.59)
Rawling (virus) <sup>□</sup>	12 (0.76)	4 (0.27)	2 (0.11)
grav harness <sup>□</sup>	12 (0.76)	7 (0.53)	2 (0.11)
offworld <sup>○○</sup>	12 (0.76)	6 (0.4)	16 (0.88)
Reaper *	12 (0.76)	0	0
remote storage *	12 (0.76)	2 (0.13)	1 (0.06)
bubblefab <sup>□</sup>	11 (0.7)	31 (1.86)	23 (1.38)

**Table 4.** Number of constructions in the mid-frequency category

	<i>AC</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>WF</i>
fragmenting *	1 (0.06)	0	0
Quellism <sup>□</sup>	1 (0.06)	5 (0.34)	9 (0.5)
sleevedealers <sup>□</sup>	1 (0.06)	0	0
brain dome <sup>□</sup>	1 (0.06)	0	0
directed broadcast *	1 (0.06)	0	0
experia star <sup>□</sup>	1 (0.06)	0	1 (0.06)
holoframes <sup>□</sup>	1 (0.06)	0	0
laugh protocol <sup>□</sup>	1 (0.06)	0	0
needlebeams *	1 (0.06)	0	0
placard generators <sup>□</sup>	1 (0.06)	0	0
Stiffed *	1 (0.06)	0	0
temporary download *	1 (0.06)	0	0
Satyron <sup>□</sup>	1 (0.06)	0	0
borderliners <sup>○○</sup>	1 (0.06)	0	0

**Table 5.** Number of constructions in the lowest frequency category

#### 4. Analysis and discussion

First and foremost, the primary hypothesis that *Altered Carbon* and its sequels have a similar number of words and lemmas was confirmed, which is visible in Table 1. This was significant to establish at the very beginning, in order to be able to accurately compare and contrast the numerical data about frequency in all three parts, and in all three groups. If there had been a severe discrepancy in the overall number of words and lemmas, the relative frequency of our occasionalisms per ten thousand words (expressed in the brackets in Tables 3, 4, and 5) would not have been equivalent, and therefore comparable.

The second part of the study was about the basic creativity in the pilot novel. Two theories were posed in the Introduction section: that there would be significantly fewer neologisms than occasionalisms, and that there would be slightly more semantic occasionalisms than traditional, morphological nonce-formations.

As can be seen in Table 2, where all information is incorporated, the total number of neologisms is 3 – significantly fewer than that of occasionalisms (39), and there is one in each frequency group. Concrete examples of neological formations from the sample are marked in Tables 3, 4, and 5 with two circles in superscript above the entry (○○) and consist of the following words: *blaster* (type of gun), *offworld* (on a different planet), and *borderliners* (people who live on the verge and do not belong to a certain category – not disfavoured, but not *Meth* either, not *neo-Catholic*, but not atheist either).

Table 2 also validates the theory that there would be slightly more semantic (21) than traditional, morphological occasionalisms (18). In Tables 3, 4, and 5,

semantic occasionalisms are marked with as asterisk (\*), and include items such as: *sleeve*, *stack*, *storage*, *freight*, *orbital*, *Reaper*, *fragmenting*, etc. These occasionalisms are classified as semantic because they can all be found with a different meaning outside of the register, and their definitions in *Altered Carbon* can all be seen below, in Table 6.

sleeve *	physical body a person inhabits (temporarily)
stack *	microchip containing a person's consciousness
a virtual (N) *	tangible plane of existence used for all kinds of meetings
Envoy *	special soldier physically augmented for combat
storage*	a prison for stacks
synthetic / synth*	artificially-made sleeve (not tank-grown)
Head in the Clouds *	name of a high-end airship brothel which gets destroyed in <i>AC</i>
the tank *	machine where human bodies are cultured and grown
Meth *	(from Methuselah) extremely rich people with unlimited funds who live forever
needlecast *	transport one's consciousness from one stack to another
dip *	hack into a person's memory
freight (V) *	put someone's consciousness onto a microchip
Jack It Up *	name of a virtual brothel
orbital (N) *	satellites used for different purposes
Reaper *	name of a drug that gives one a near-death experience
remote storage *	construction relying on occasionalism mentioned above, but on the Cloud
fragmenting *	when someone's new body (sleeve) is rejecting their stack
directed broadcast *	directly into somebody's head (not into a computer)
needlebeams *	light seen during needlecasting
Stiffed *	under the influence of a drug called Stiff
temporary download *	temporarily inhabit a body

**Table 6.** Meanings of occasionalisms

Noticeably, despite their overall prevalence over morphological nonce-formations, the number of semantic occasionalisms drops proportionately to the frequency category, as they diminish to hapax legomena. This could be attributed to the constructions already existing in our mental lexicon, and to their being more “available” and therefore suitable for the most important terms in the register, or even to productivity, since they are used for further coinages (which might even be classified as traditional). In fact, an example of this can be seen in Table 6, since *storage* is used to form another construction.

Since the following paragraphs deal with productivity and collocation networks, this is the optimal point for a brief explanation of morphological nonce-formations found in the sample, in order to provide clarity and avoid any opaqueness in methodology. In Table 7 we can find traditional coinages (much like those found in classical literature), such as *Khumalo*, *Rawling* (virus), *bubblefab*, *Quellism*, *Satylon*, or *holoframes*, as well as constructions which contain constituents that have not appeared joint in everyday register: *Bay City*, *decant people*, *brain dome*, *laugh protocol*, *placard generators*, etc.

Bay City <sup>□</sup>	former San Francisco on Earth
neurachem <sup>□</sup>	neuron enhancers for better physical or intellectual capabilities
Harlan's World <sup>□</sup>	name of a planet, a new Earth
Merge Nine <sup>□</sup>	drug that enhances emotional and sexual experiences
decant people <sup>□</sup>	remove a grown sleeve from the tank
Licktown <sup>□</sup>	name of the city's red light district
Khumalo <sup>□</sup>	name of a brand of neurachem
Rawling (virus) <sup>□</sup>	a military virus that destroys stacks of those it comes in contact with
grav harness <sup>□</sup>	harness that creates or removes the impact of gravitational force
bubblefab <sup>□</sup>	clear sphere used for police interrogations of witnesses
Quellism <sup>□</sup>	philosophy that no human being should have the means to live forever
sleevedealers <sup>□</sup>	people who illegally obtain sleeves
brain dome <sup>□</sup>	where a robot's brain is placed
experia star <sup>□</sup>	actor that stars in experia films
holoframes <sup>□</sup>	frames that emit moving holographic images
laugh protocol <sup>□</sup>	robot's ability to laugh
placard generators <sup>□</sup>	electronic poster used in protests
Satyron <sup>□</sup>	name of a pheromonal neurachem

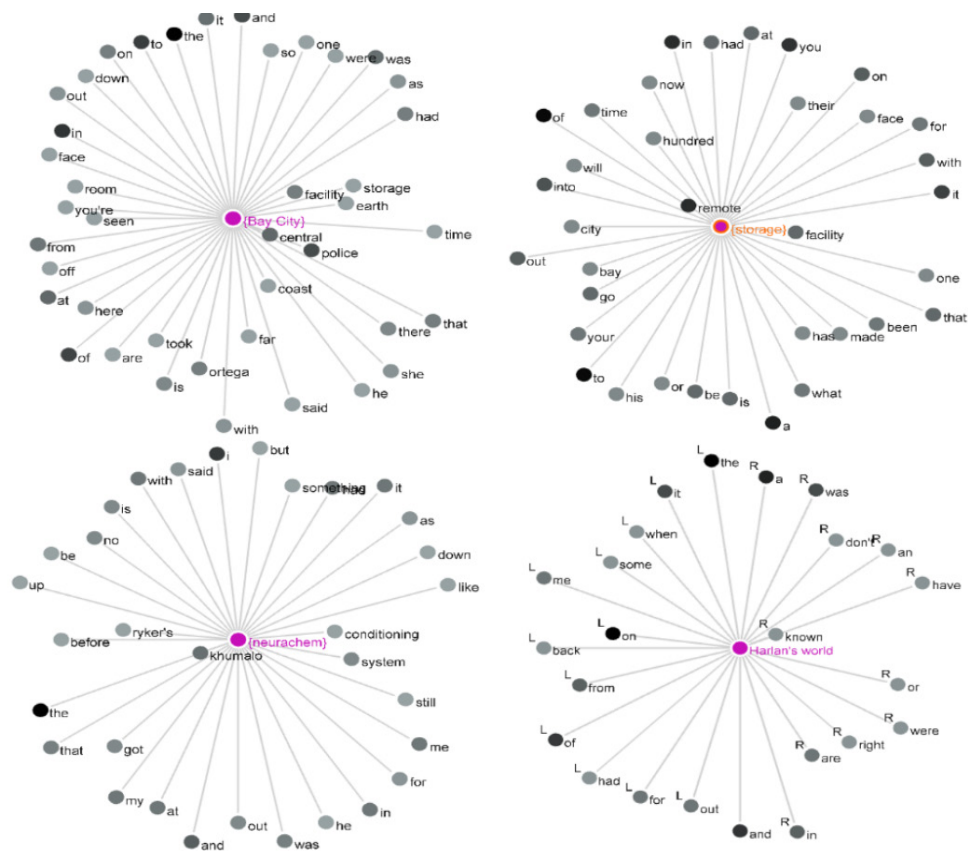
Table 7. Coinages

Now that all the constructions from the sample have been explained, the focus can be shifted onto the hypothesis that more frequent constructions with collocation networks containing more statistically significant collocates are also more productive in the sequels: “Understanding these extralinguistic factors is key to understanding change in word-formation. Observing changes in the increases and decreases in productivity is the microscopic observation of changes in word-formation.” (Cowie 2000: 180).

This article being a quantitative study, below are collages put together from the output of the LancsBox programme, using the parameters described in the Material and Methods section. Considering that detailed collocation networks were not of significance for the research hypothesis (only the quantity of their constituents), a clearer view of the following images of collocates can be found in the appendix.

Figures 1, 2, and 3 show the collocation networks of all the words in the Most Frequent category, in Table 3. As predicted, all networks show a rich variety of constructions, including combinations that create other nonce-formations: e.g., *sleeve theft*, *sleeve mortgage*, *virtual interrogation*, *stack intact*, *Envoy conditioning*, *Bay City police*, *particle blaster*, *tank gel*, *remote storage* and *Khumalo neurachem* (the last two constructions were in the Mid-Frequency category and will be used as a query below), and many more. Two exceptions stand out: *Head in the Clouds* and *needlecast*, whose collocates consist mostly of function words (determiners and prepositions). This could be explained by the fact that *needlecast* was the least frequent in the Most Frequent category, and used more often as a verb than





**Figure 2: A, B, C, D**

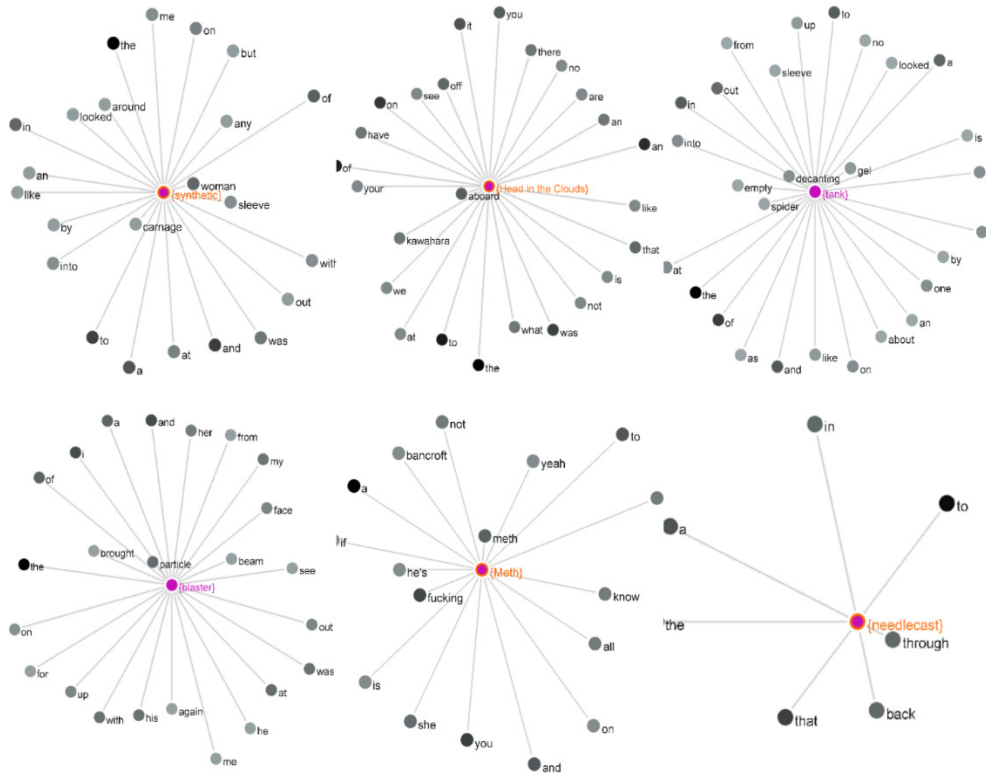


Figure 3: A, B, C, D, E, F

Figures 4, 5, and 6 show collocation networks for the Mid-Frequency category. One collocation network (for *decant people*), is not visually presented below, because it does not have a single collocate, which is reflected in the low number of its reoccurrences. Several constructions show strong collocates: e.g., *grav harness* with *stealth* and *suits*, *freight* with *Harlan's*, *Rawling* with *virus*, and even *Khumalo* with *neurachem* (as seen in the previous category, this is a frequent construction whichever query is entered; however, it reoccurs as seldom as *decant people*) and *system*. The neologism *offworld* strongly collocates with the main character's last name, and reappears in a larger quantity in the last instalment.

However, certain constructions from this category solely stand next to auxiliary verbs, prepositions, and determiners: *Merge Nine*, *Licktown*, *dip*, *Jack it Up*, *orbital*, *Reaper*, *remote storage* (a construction from the previous category), *bubblefab*. Most have zero reoccurrences in the subsequent novels (*Merge Nine*, *Licktown*, *Jack it Up*, *Reaper*), thereby confirming the research hypothesis, but the nonce-noun *orbital* surprisingly breaks this pattern by being multiplied almost thrice in the last instalment, as confirmed by Table 4.

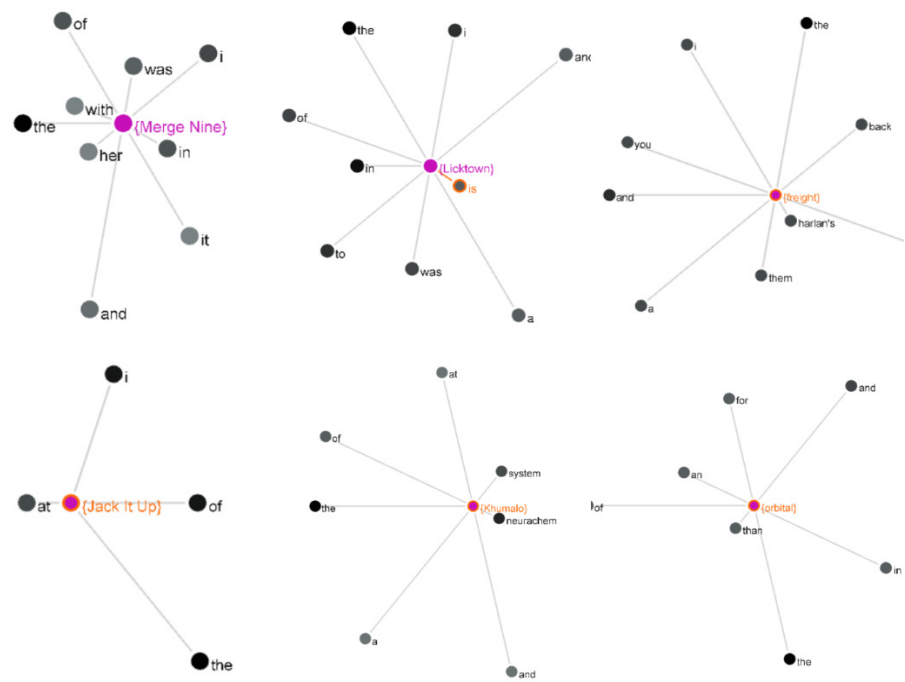


Figure 4: A, B, C, D, E, F

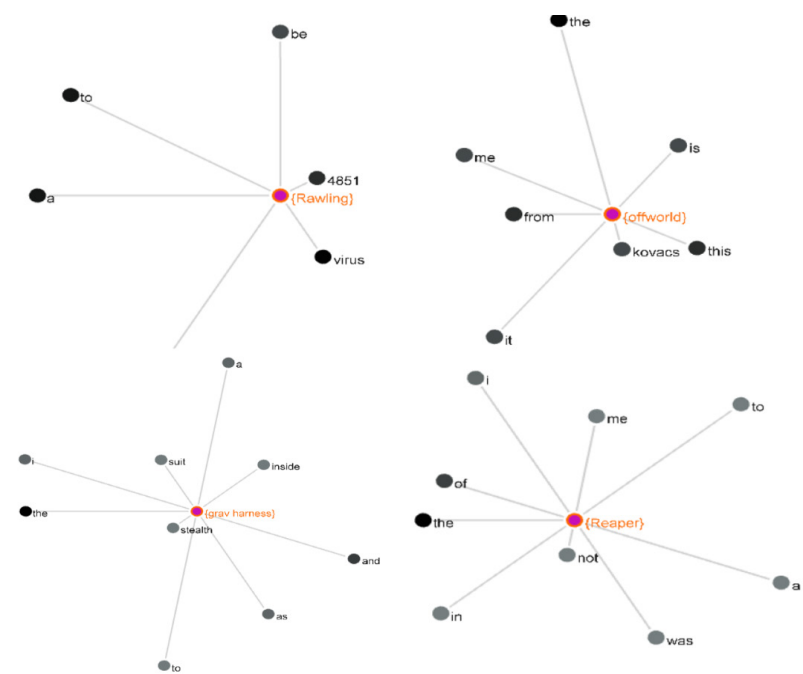


Figure 5: A, B, C, D

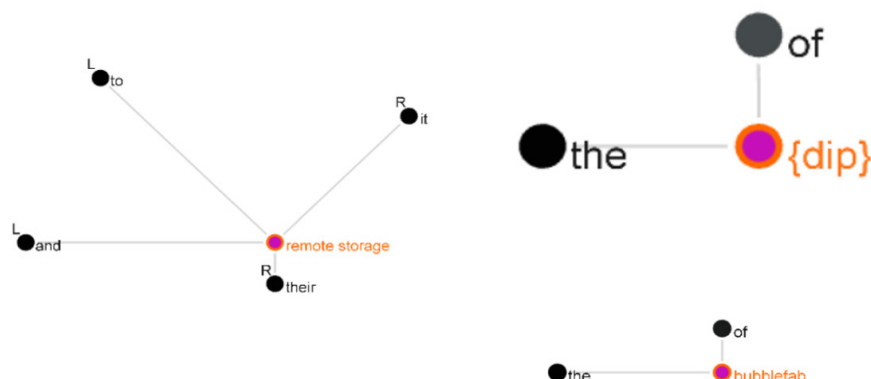


Figure 6: A, B, C

The Low Frequency category produced almost no collocates with the set parameters. The only construction with a collocation network of one is *laugh protocol* and it is depicted in Figure 7 below. We can safely assume this happened because laughter was written in direct speech. When reducing the collocation frequency in the software from 3 to 2, one additional example produces a collocation network of one: *Satylon*, and it collocates with *empathin*, yet another nonce-formation from the sample (with frequency between the Mid- and Low Frequency categories).



Figure 7

Obviously, reducing the frequency to 1 would give each word a collocation network, even our hapax legomena. However, the purpose of finding collocation networks for hapaxes was to see if any words were repeated in their vicinity enough times to form a network – therefore, this would have been redundant.

## 5. Conclusion

Fascinating results have been drawn from the sample of nonce-formations found in science fiction: “Given the fact that nonce-formations referring to elements of popular culture are communicated to a larger speech community (which increases chances that these words will be reused), their status, or, to put it more precisely, their non-lexicalizability, makes this kind of nonce-formations an interesting topic for discussion.” (Rabrenović 2020: 154).

First, the three corpora for *Altered Carbon*, *Broken Angels*, and *Woken Furies* were proven to be numerically comparable, consisting of a similar number of

words and lemmas, giving us a basis for drawing parallels regarding quantity and productivity.

Second, the selection of 42 items (14 constructions from each of the three categories: most and least frequent, and those with mid-frequency, sampled as described in Section 2 – Material and Methods) contained the fewest neologisms (only three), confirming the theory on creativity stating that nonce-formations would be more numerous.

Next, the second creativity hypothesis that there would be slightly more semantic than morphological nonce-formations was also proven true, but with a decline in semantic occasionalisms, directly proportional to the reduction of construction frequency over the three categories. This could be explained by the fact that words that already exist in our mental lexicons are “catchier” and more memorable (especially when used with a completely different meaning), and that they were often used in the sample for the production of other nonce constructions.

The hypotheses on productivity were that more frequent constructions would appear more frequently in the sequels, as well as constructions that boast more statistically significant nodes in their wider collocation networks. Apart from some cases (seen in Tables 3-5), this was shown to be the trend. Some exceptions in the Most and Mid-Frequent categories (which were not repeated in the sequels) were: *Head in the Clouds*, *Meth*, or *Merge Nine*, *Licktown*, and *Reaper*. One construction in the Least Frequent category that has been recorded as recurring was *Quellism*, and, in the Mid-Frequent category, surprisingly, there was a multiplication of the constructions *orbital*, *offworld*, and *bubblefab*.

Though productivity may not be directly connected to the collocation networks allowing for a thorough examination of results for each individual example, it is evident that there is a connection overall between the likelihood of construction reoccurrence and the size of the collocation network, just like between the likelihood of reoccurrence and its frequency in the pilot.

A further examination of the morphological processes for the entire sample is advisable, and in the works, in order to see the processes hidden behind these nonce-formations, and even to potentially connect those mechanisms with the development of technology. Science fiction is a fitting genre for this type of research, considering the inexistence of such technology in real life. Therefore, it encourages the need to construct new coinages from scratch, with the knowledge of technology at our disposal – and expects the receivers of the message to correctly interpret and deconstruct its meaning: “In use the reality is that linguistic categories are fluid, grammar is emergent, language varies and changes constantly, linguistic forms are reinforced or weakened by frequency of use. [...] Speakers understand and produce both linguistic constructions they have already heard many times and new constructions.” (Furtado da Cunha, Cezario 2023: 3).

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## EVIDENTIALITY IN CONTRAST: SERBIAN AND ENGLISH ACADEMIC JOURNAL ARTICLES

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**Abstract:** *This case study aims to compare the manner in which bilingual Serbian authors use evidential strategies in academic journal papers written in English and Serbian. Based on the results of manual corpus analysis, it can be concluded that the two languages are typologically similar in this regard. Nevertheless, considerable differences were found as well, such as the discrepancies in the ratios of evidential categories and parts of speech between the subcorpora. These dissimilarities may testify to the authors' high level of bilingualism. The conclusions reached in this paper apply only to the dataset under investigation.*

**Keywords:** *academic writing, bilingual authors, epistemic stance, evidentiality, intersubjectivity*

### 1. Introduction

Evidentiality, as a field of research within linguistics, has attracted the attention of researchers for several decades and, thus, has established a tradition of its own. To begin the consideration of evidentiality in this paper, the term must be accurately defined. The working definition, which will be applied throughout the empirical segment of this paper, is that evidentiality is the linguistic marking of information source. The said definition is derived from other more complex explanations proposed by renowned linguists (e.g. Aikhenvald 2004, 2007; Chafe 1986; Cornillie 2009; Nuyts 2017). One such exposition can be found in Chafe (1986: 262–263), who puts knowledge at the centre of his model. Tightly related to the notion of knowledge are modes of knowing, i.e. belief, induction, hearsay and deduction, which are based on sources of knowledge (unknown, evidence, language and hypothesis, respectively). It is the modes of knowing that are marked linguistically and that are examined in this study and many others.

One of the most influential theories of evidentiality was formulated by Aikhenvald (2004; 2008). The focal point of her model is the distinction between languages with mandatory evidentiality marking and languages in which disclosing the information source is optional. Languages from the former group use grammatical means to signal evidentiality, while those belonging to the latter group, according to her, may either use evidential strategies, i.e. extensions of already existing grammatical devices, or other means of marking information source, i.e. lexical devices. Serbian and English, the languages under consideration in this paper, both

belong to the second group. As was the case in Tošić (forthcoming), following Trbojević Milošević (2018), so as to avoid any confusion, the term *evidential strategy* will be used to cover both options Aikhenvald provides for languages without an obligatory linguistic category of evidentiality.

Delineating evidentiality as a linguistic category has sparked quite a lively debate. Namely, authors disagree on what the relationship between evidentiality and epistemic modality is. As is neatly summarized in Tosun and Vaid (2018: 133–134), the relations between the two categories suggested so far by eminent linguists (e.g. Aikhenvald 2004; Cornillie 2009; de Haan 1999; Palmer 2001; van der Auwera and Plungian 1998) are (1) complete disjointment – they are two wholly separate categories; (2) inclusion – one category subsumes the other; (3) overlap – the two categories share certain markers but possess their own unshared markers as well; (4) identity – they are the same and all markers are shared between them. Trbojević Milošević (2021: 32) offers a solution to this everlasting discussion. Her *interfacing* view postulates evidentiality as a cornerstone of epistemic modality. This makes perfect sense – broadly speaking, we need to bear in mind what the information is and where it comes from in order to be able to form our stance on it. Also, it can be said that epistemic modality is necessary for comprehending pragmatics and the inner workings of language in everyday life. Therefore, evidentiality is a vital link in the chain of understanding human communication as a whole. This is especially true for the academic writing register, where, without a clear presentation of the sources from which the researcher has gathered her/his information, the paper would be deemed unacceptable.

Another vital aspect to give thought to prior to commencing research on the topic of evidentiality is the categorization paradigm that will be adopted. In this case study, the classification given in Trbojević Milošević (2018: 137–139) will be enforced, for it is straightforward yet comprehensive. The author divides evidence into direct and indirect, based on the type of access speakers have to it. Sensory evidentiality is derived from direct evidence, while indirect evidence gives rise to reportive and inferred evidentiality. Sensory evidentiality is founded on information gathered using the senses, reportive evidentiality rests on the knowledge we have heard or learned from other people and inferred evidentiality draws on the speaker's or others' thought processes. Of course, a plethora of other paradigms have been devised by linguists. For instance, Čikara (2017: 130–133) follows Popović (2012) in distinguishing between evidentials marking first-hand personal experience (which incorporate zero evidentiality i.e. sensory evidentials and inferential evidentials) and reportive evidentials.

Two more terms shall be accounted for within this theoretical framework – epistemic stance and intersubjectivity. These concepts are highly significant for qualitative analysis since they pertain to the way evidentiality is used in context and its pragmatic effects.

As defined by Biber and Finegan (1988: 2), epistemic stance markers denote “[...] speakers’ (or writers’) attitudes towards their messages.” Naturally, the epistemic stance expressed by a speaker may be stronger (marked by e.g. *surely*) or

weaker (marked by e.g. *maybe*). Interestingly enough, during their cluster analysis, Biber and Finegan (1988: 23) claim that epistemic stance signals are not and should not be frequent in academic discourse. However, Gray and Biber (2015) reassess this belief by proving the hypothesis that, in academic discourse, stance is conveyed in less obvious, more sophisticated ways. The hypothesis will be tested in this case study as well.

According to Verhagen (2008: 307), intersubjectivity is “understood as the mutual sharing of experiential-conceptual content between subjects of experience.” If applied to evidentiality, intersubjectivity can be seen as an assertion of the shared status of evidence. The word *assertion* is intentionally used here since, in academic writing, as will be seen, intersubjectivity is most commonly used to reinforce the arguments presented in the paper. For instance, as Trbojević Milošević (2021: 31) illustrates, the first person plural may be used to present attitudes as belonging to a group of people, which may, in turn, strengthen them. As will be shown in the qualitative part of the analysis below, this phenomenon also occurs in the corpus at hand.

Bearing the abovementioned in mind, the aim of this paper is to identify and analyse the evidential markers bilingual Serbian researchers in the field of linguistics (and literature) use when writing in English and Serbian and to determine whether a typological similarity or difference may be asserted. This case study is a continuation of the one given in Tošić (forthcoming).

## 2. Corpus and methodology

The corpus for this case study comprises 10 academic journal articles written in English by Serbian linguists and 10 more authored by the same researchers in Serbian. The English subcorpus, which was the subject of the study presented in Tošić (forthcoming), was taken as a starting point. The 10 papers constituting the said subcorpus were all taken from the 10<sup>th</sup> edition of the BELLS journal. Since the issue was edited by Rasulić and Trbojević (2018) in honour of Ranko Bugarski, one of the most prominent Serbian linguists, it features a representative sample of the most acclaimed language researchers from Serbia. Then, using Google Scholar as the main search engine, the Serbian subcorpus was compiled out of papers written by the same authors in their native language, Serbian. Both external and internal criteria were taken into consideration when selecting the articles for inclusion in the Serbian segment of the corpus. In terms of external aspects, only open-access papers were considered for this study in order to ensure research transparency and reproducibility. Apart from that, the length, type of paper (i.e. research vs. review paper), number of authors and year of publication were all taken into account. With regard to internal features, an effort was made to mirror the topics found in the English subcorpus. Nonetheless, a considerable challenge presented itself during this part of the study – the choice of papers written in Serbian was highly limited, which forced certain discrepancies between the two corpora into being. Most noticeably, two articles in the Serbian subcorpus are co-authored, while all

the papers in the English subcorpus are single-authored and the length of the two subcorpora is not the same. The limited number of academic articles written in Serbian can be explained by a broader phenomenon, where authors tend to write in English instead of their native language in order to increase the visibility of their research (see e.g. Ammon 2001; Filipović 2014).

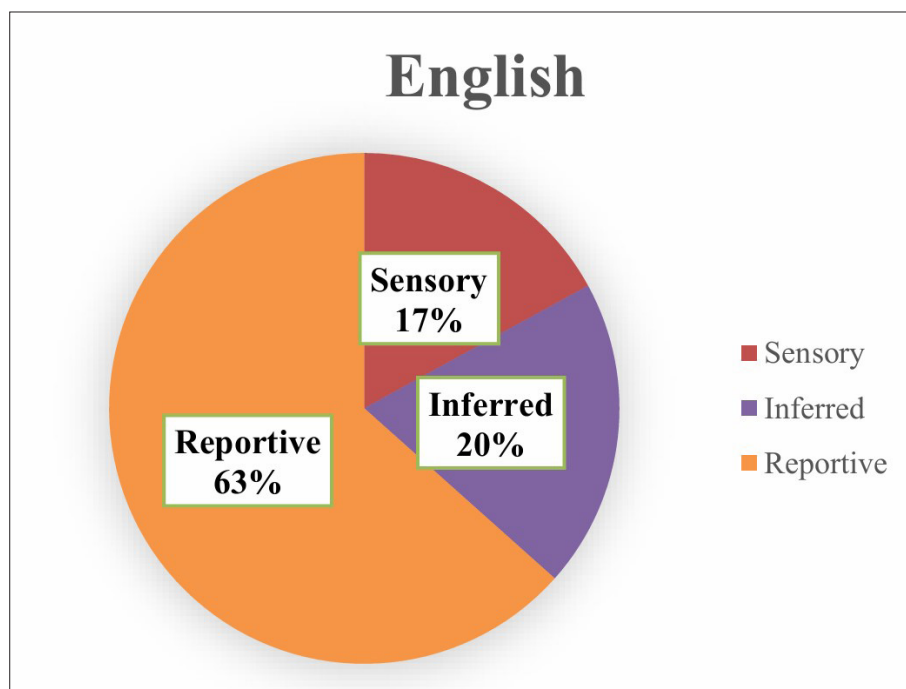
Be all that as it may, the corpus analysed in this study contains 116,929 words in total. The English articles contribute 61,785 words to that count, while the Serbian subcorpus totals 55,144 words. The full list of articles can be found in the Corpus section at the end of this paper. The abbreviations given in the said section will be used when citing examples from the corpus. The corpus was studied manually instead of using a pre-made list of devices in order to catch the more subtle and unusual ways of marking evidentiality representative of the academic register and to highlight qualitative insights. While manual analysis is one of the greatest advantages of this study, it is one of its pitfalls as well. Namely, all the figures presented in the Results and Analysis section should be viewed as preliminary and will be verified in a future computer-assisted study. Another limitation of this piece of research is the abovementioned disparity between the corpora, which is why all the values will be normalized per one thousand words. Finally, it must be emphasized that the conclusions reached in this case study apply only to the limited dataset it was performed on.

### **3. Results and analysis**

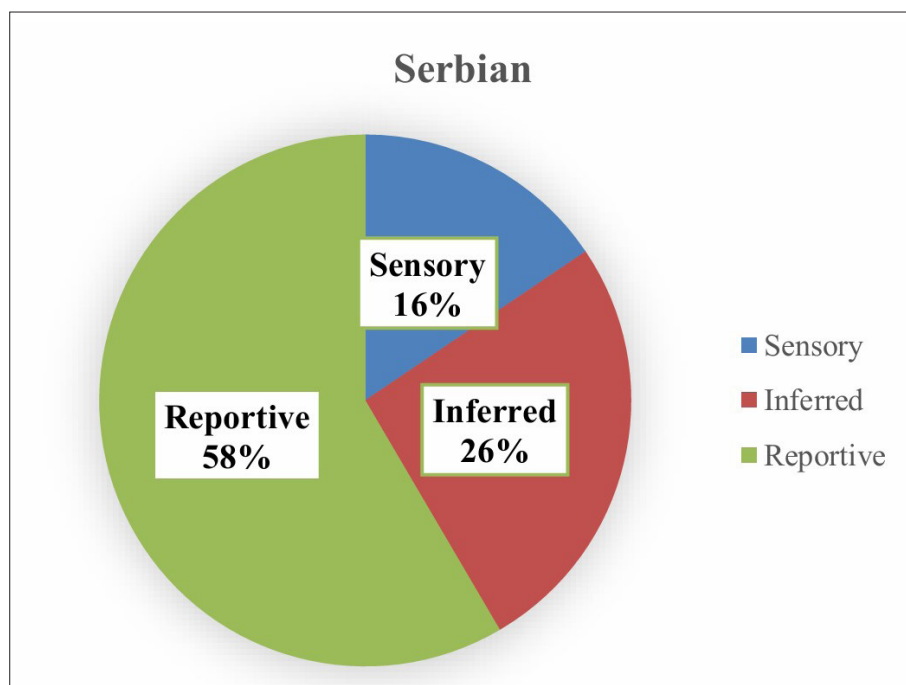
This part of the paper will contain a brief overview of the preliminary quantitative data, followed by a focus on qualitative data i.e. the presentation of evidential markers found in the corpus and the analysis of several notable examples. The qualitative data will provide the full picture of the two subcorpora and, therefore, lead to an interpretation of the quantitative data. At this point, it must be stressed one more time that a study based on the English part of the corpus was presented in Tošić (forthcoming), so some of the data put forward in that article will be given here as well with minor corrections and adjustments. Nonetheless, in this paper, the emphasis will be on comparing and contrasting the two subcorpora in order to determine whether they display typological similarity or difference.

#### **3.1. Quantitative overview**

To begin with, the English segment of the corpus includes 1,574 evidential strategies (25.47 per one thousand words – hereinafter ptw), while 1,783 evidentials can be found in the Serbian part of the corpus (32.33 ptw). Both of these counts are quite high when compared to other genres, such as political interviews (Trbojević-Milošević 2018) or academic abstracts (Alonso-Almeida 2014). The frequency of evidentials is notably higher in the Serbian subcorpus than in its English counterpart.

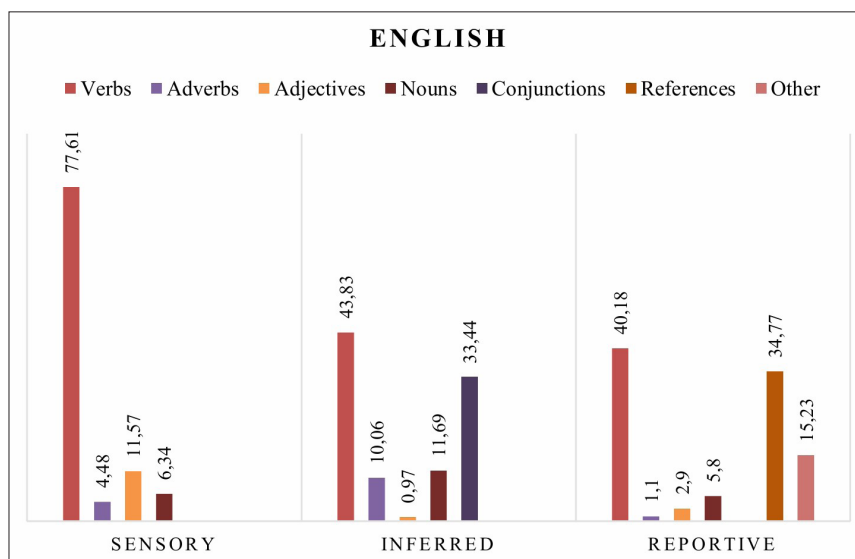


**Figure 1.** Ratio of evidential categories in the English subcorpus

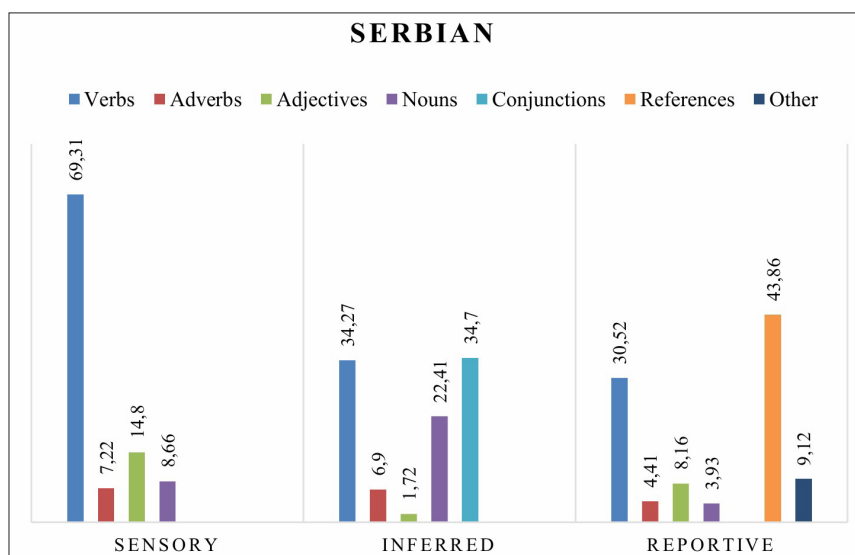


**Figure 2.** Ratio of evidential categories in the Serbian subcorpus

The pie charts featured in Figures 1 and 2 show how well-represented each of the evidential categories is in the English and Serbian subcorpora, respectively. Overall, the categories are distributed similarly, with reportive evidentials leading the counts in both data subsets. However, the inferred category is more common in Serbian academic papers, where it occurs 8.41 times ptw, compared to 4.98 times ptw in articles written in English.



**Figure 3.** Part of speech distribution per evidential category (English subcorpus); given as percentage per category



**Figure 4.** Part of speech distribution per evidential category (Serbian subcorpus); given as percentage per category

When it comes to the dispersal of part of speech categories within the evidential categories, in Figures 3 and 4, several considerable differences between the two subcorpora can be noticed. Though the ratio between the parts of speech in the sensory category is quite similar in both languages, it can be seen that authors tend to use sensory adverbs, adjectives and nouns more frequently when they write in Serbian. The dissimilarities are more evident in the inferred category. According to the collected data, authors favour inferred nouns in Serbian more than they do in English, while the opposite is true for inferred adverbs. This spike in the use of inferred nouns may explain the higher frequency of inferred evidentials in the Serbian corpus and partly account for the higher frequency of evidential strategies in general in the Serbian corpus – inferred nouns are used 36 times in the English subcorpus (0.58 ptw) and 104 times in the Serbian subcorpus (1.89 ptw). The reportive category also highlights the discrepancy between the two languages. Namely, references dominate the counts in the Serbian subcorpus, while reportive verbs are the most common in the English corpus. Furthermore, markers belonging to the “other” category (including evidential uses of the Saxon Genitive and certain linking phrases, as will be explained in the next section) occur more often in English, but reportive adjectives are 4 times more frequent in Serbian. All of the listed quantitative data will be contextualized and interpreted in the next part of this paper.

### 3.2. Qualitative analysis

This section will set forth the evidential markers discovered in the corpus and the relevant examples featuring those markers, followed by a discussion of several significant qualitative observations made during the corpus analysis.

ENGLISH		SERBIAN	
VERBS		VERBS	
see (59; 0.95) show (26; 0.42) find (20; 0.32) reveal (19; 0.31) identify (16; 0.26) perceive (14; 0.23)	observe (13; 0.21) notice (5; 0.08) recognize (5; 0.08) feature (5; 0.08) appear (5; 0.08)	primetiti <i>notice</i> (29; 0.53) videti <i>see</i> (27; 0.49) uočiti <i>identify</i> (22; 0.4) posmatrati <i>view</i> (19; 0.34) pokazati <i>show</i> (19; 0.34)	javiti se <i>appear</i> (13; 0.24) činiti se <i>seem*</i> (10; 0.18) naći <i>find</i> (10; 0.18) otkriti <i>reveal</i> (6; 0.11) uvideti <i>realize*</i> (5; 0.09)
ADVERBS	ADJECTIVES	ADVERBS	ADJECTIVES
clearly (9; 0.15)	clear (9; 0.15) evident (7; 0.11)	jasno <i>clearly</i> (9; 0.16) naizgled <i>seemingly*</i> (7; 0.13)	jasan <i>clear</i> (13; 0.24) prisutan <i>present</i> (7; 0.13) očigledan <i>obvious</i> (5; 0.09)
NOUNS		NOUNS	
observation (5; 0.08)		[imati u] vidu <i>[bear in] mind*</i> (10; 0.18) pogled <i>glance/view*</i> (5; 0.09)	

**Table 1.** Sensory evidential markers

Table 1 above displays the most frequent sensory evidentials found in the two subcorpora, along with their absolute and relative (per one thousand words)

frequencies in the brackets. For all the Serbian evidential devices, English equivalents are also provided in italics. In this table and the ones that follow, only items that occur 5 or more times and are used by more than one author are offered, as they are the most consequential for the current study.

Firstly, the asterisk symbols appearing next to some of the markers shall be addressed. As is apparent from the English equivalents, the words and phrases singled out here lean towards the inferred category of evidentials. Nevertheless, in Serbian, their semantics is clearly sensory, which is not the case in English. For instance, in the phrase *imati u vidu*, *vid* (i.e. sight) translates into English as *mind*. This is a feature characteristic of the Serbian evidential system, which has been previously noticed by linguists. Popović (2010: 23), among others, notices that, in the mind of a Serbian speaker, visual input plays a vital role in the way an individual experiences life. Popović (ibid.) classifies such phrases as inferred markers, while, here, the decision was made to count them as sensory based on their semantics. Either way, this phenomenon makes the line between inferred and sensory evidentials in Serbian exceptionally thin.

Moving on to the interpretation of the data presented in the table, it can be seen that the markers used in both languages are roughly the same, but the frequencies are different. *See* is by far the most common sensory evidential verb in English, whereas, in Serbian, *primetiti*, which is similar in meaning to *notice*, tops the frequency list, while *videti* (i.e. *see*) closely follows. The examples below show the similarities in how *see*, *primetiti* and *videti* are used:

- (1) As *can be seen* from Table 2 below, the adjunct clauses are [...] (VPe: 97; emp. mine)
- (2) *Može se primetiti* i da u okviru pojedinih lingvističkih teorija i pristupa [...] (VPs: 427; emp. mine) (*It can be noticed* that within certain linguistic theories and approaches [...])
- (3) *Vidi se* da trener na samom početku koristi marker privlačenja pažnje [...] (ITMs: 50; emp. mine) (*It can be seen* that, at the very beginning, the coach uses an attention-grabbing marker [...])

Sentences (2) and (3) demonstrate that, when used in context, *primetiti* and *videti* are almost interchangeable in Serbian. The similarity between the two languages becomes blatantly obvious when the English example is taken into consideration. What these three sentences have in common when it comes to verb forms is that they are all passivized. Sentences (1) and (2) make use of the same modal verb (*can* or *moći*), combined with the passive infinitive in English and the reflexive passive in Serbian. Though the third example features only the reflexive passive, if it were translated into English, it would also incorporate the modal verb *can* and a passive infinitive. All the explained devices, i.e. modal verbs and passivized forms, provide the author with a certain amount of distance from what is being said and, thus, allow her/him to assume an objective stance.

ENGLISH		SERBIAN	
<u>VERBS</u>		<u>VERBS</u>	
seem (27; 0.44) consider (18; 0.29) understand (14; 0.23) take to [be/mean...] (14; 0.23)	draw on (10; 0.16) interpret (7; 0.11) appear [to be] (6; 0.1) believe (6; 0.1) conclude (5; 0.09) think (5; 0.09) find (5; 0.09)	smatrati <i>consider</i> (43; 0.78) podrazumevati <i>imply</i> (39; 0.71) zaključiti <i>conclude</i> (15; 0.27)	misлити <i>think</i> (12; 0.22) shvatiti <i>understand</i> (8; 0.14) znati <i>know</i> (5; 0.09)
<u>CONJUNCTIONS</u>		<u>CONJUNCTIONS</u>	
thus (39; 0.63) therefore (15; 0.24) consequently (9; 0.15) since (8; 0.13)	hence (7; 0.11) [which] is why (6; 0.1) due to (6; 0.1) because (5; 0.09) bearing in mind (5; 0.09)	jer <i>because/for</i> (29; 0.53) zbog <i>because of</i> (27; 0.49) budući da <i>since/as</i> (25; 0.45) stoga <i>therefore/ consequently</i> (25; 0.45)	dakle <i>consequently</i> (20; 0.36) pošto <i>since</i> (8; 0.14) zato <i>because</i> (7; 0.13) tako da <i>so</i> (6; 0.11) samim tim <i>therefore</i> (5; 0.09)
<u>NOUNS</u> reason (11; 0.18) conclusion (5; 0.09) assumption (5; 0.09)	<u>ADVERBS</u> perhaps (11; 0.18) probably (9; 0.15) possibly (6; 0.1) seemingly (5; 0.09)	<u>NOUNS</u> stav <i>attitude</i> (30; 0.54) [uzeti u/s] obzir[om] <i>consider[ing]</i> (16; 0.29) razlog <i>reason</i> (11; 0.2) mišljenje <i>opinion</i> (5; 0.09)	<u>ADVERBS</u> verovatno <i>probably</i> (13; 0.24) možda <i>maybe</i> (9; 0.16) nesumnjivo (7; 0.13)
		<u>ADJECTIVES</u> poznato <i>known</i> (5; 0.09)	

Table 2. Inferred evidential markers

Looking at Table 2, it can be concluded that the markers employed by linguists in English and Serbian are relatively similar, with two distinct differences. First of all, the inferred verbs in Serbian are slightly less variegated than the English verbs – there are 11 English verbs with 5 or more mentions in the corpus, while there are only 6 on the Serbian side. Moreover, while *seem* and *consider* are the most common inferred verbs in the English articles, when writing in Serbian, authors usually opt for *verovati* (i.e. *consider*) and *podrazumevati* (i.e. *imply*) in Serbian. The case of *podrazumevati* is quite fascinating since it is highly frequent in Serbian, which is not the case with its English equivalent *imply*.

- (4) [...] pri čemu *se podrazumeva* da je reč o prošlom vremenu. (TaPs: 153; emp. mine) ([...] whereby *it is implied* that it is about a past tense.)

Sentence (4) exemplifies a typical context in which *podrazumevati* appears in Serbian. The author utilizes the reflexive passive to increase the deictic distance between herself and the stated information. This dovetails with the idea that the said verb is borderline reportive since it appeals to common knowledge or refers to information other people take for granted.

As it was mentioned in the previous section, another notable dissimilarity between the two subcorpora is that inferred nouns appear more often in Serbian than in English. It needs to be disclosed here that *stav* (i.e. *attitude*) owes its high frequency to a paper which reports on language attitudes through history (ABs).

Still, inferred nouns are much more common in Serbian than in English with as many as 16 nouns not even making it to Table 2 since they occurred fewer than 5 times.

- (5) Iako u nekim disciplinama još uvek vlada *stav* da poštovanje publike uključuje držanje pripremljenog sinopsisa u rukama, [...] (BAs: 944; emp. mine) (Although in some disciplines the *attitude* that respecting the audience entails holding a prepared synopsis still prevails, [...])

The noun *stav* usually occurs in contexts akin to sentence (5). Here, it is followed by a *da*-clause (*that*-clause) which elucidates the attitude in question and, therefore, presents it quite objectively. This evidential is also partly reportive since it refers to other people's opinions.

ENGLISH		SERBIAN	
VERBS		VERBS	
say (37; 0.6)	signal (12; 0.19)	navesti <i>state</i> (36; 0.65)	[s]pomenuti <i>mention</i> (11; 0.2)
note (25; 0.4)	emphasize (11; 0.18)	istaći <i>emphasize</i> (32; 0.58)	objasniti <i>explain</i> (11; 0.2)
point out (21; 0.34)	write (11; 0.18)	govoriti <i>say</i> (20; 0.36)	pisati <i>write</i> (10; 0.18)
describe (20; 0.32)	add (10; 0.16)	prikazati <i>show</i> (19; 0.34)	napomenuti <i>note</i> (10; 0.18)
mention (16; 0.26)	address (10; 0.16)	opisati <i>describe</i> (19; 0.34)	ukazati na <i>point to</i> (8; 0.14)
argue (16; 0.26)	illustrate (7; 0.11)	kazati <i>say</i> (18; 0.33)	predložiti <i>suggest</i> (7; 0.13)
present (15; 0.24)	claim (6; 0.1)	predstaviti <i>present</i> (16; 0.29)	implicirati <i>imply</i> (7; 0.13)
suggest (14; 0.23)	state (6; 0.1)	reći <i>say</i> (15; 0.27)	zabeležiti <i>record</i> (7; 0.13)
propose (14; 0.23)	stress (6; 0.1)	naglasiti <i>stress</i> (13; 0.24)	tvrditi <i>claim</i> (7; 0.13)
show (14; 0.23)	depict (6; 0.1)		
discuss (14; 0.23)	follow[ing] (5; 0.08)		
point to (13; 0.21)	acknowledge (5; 0.08)		
	establish (5; 0.08)		

Table 3. Reportive evidential markers – verbs

ENGLISH		SERBIAN	
OTHER		OTHER	ADJECTIVES
Saxon Genitive (68; 1.1)	by + name (18; 0.29)	possessive adj. derived from name (30; 0.54)	dat <i>given</i> (24; 0.43)
[to be] based on (24; 0.39)	adj. derived from name (6; 0.1)	[noun] + name in Genitive (27; 0.49)	[s]pomenut <i>mentioned/said</i> (16; 0.29)
according to (19; 0.31)	of course (5; 0.08)	prema <i>according to</i> (19; 0.34)	[gore]naveden <i>[above] mentioned</i> (14; 0.25)
		na osnovu <i>based on</i> (8; 0.14)	takozvani <i>so-called</i> (11; 0.2)
			uobičajen <i>usual</i> (7; 0.13)
NOUNS	REFERENCES	NOUNS	REFERENCES
fact (22; 0.36)	347 (5.62)	činjenica <i>fact</i> (20; 0.36)	457 (8.29)
description (11; 0.18)		navođenje <i>stating</i> (5; 0.09)	
ADVERBS		ADVERBS	
usually (11; 0.18)		obično <i>usually</i> (22; 0.4)	
		naravno <i>of course</i> (10; 0.18)	
		svakako <i>certainly</i> (8; 0.14)	

Table 4. Reportive evidential markers – other parts of speech

Devices used to mark reportive evidentiality are provided in Tables 3 and 4. Before we move on to the analysis, it should be noted that adverbs such as *usually* and *obično*, adjectives like *uobičajen* (*usual*) and the noun *fact* (*činjenica*) were not taken into consideration in Tošić (forthcoming), but are recognized here as markers of common knowledge – if something is usually the case or is a fact, then we are reporting what we have heard and learned from other people so far. This is illustrated by examples such as (6) and (7):

- (6) The primacy dispute [...] developed as a result of the *fact* that both evidentiality and epistemic modality had (or rather have) been understood in their broader and narrower senses [...] (ITMe: 133; emp. mine)
- (7) *Obično* se kao „zlatno doba” određuje neki pređašnji period [...] (ABs: 212; emp. mine) (*Usually*, a past period is defined as a “golden age” [...])

The reportive evidentiality in sentence (6), as well as other examples featuring the evidential noun *fact*, is not only contained in the semantics of the noun itself but also in the presupposition triggered by the *that*-clause. The subordinate clause explaining what the fact is presupposes its existence, making such claims quite assertive. On the other hand, example (7) is more straightforward. The author refers to what he has heard or learned is most commonly the case.

The rest of Tables 3 and 4 provides ample opportunity for analysis as well. Starting with Table 3, i.e. the reportive verbs, it can be observed that, similarly to the verbs from the inferred category, the verbs used in Serbian are less heterogeneous than those the authors employ when writing in English. Namely, in the English subcorpus, 25 verbs have frequency counts higher than five, with *say* being the most usual one, while in Serbian, only 18 reportive verbs appear more than five times, with *navesti* (i.e. *state*) being the most common one. Even though the most frequent verbs differ in the two data subsets, it should be noted that reportive verbs *govoriti*, *kazati* and *reći* converge towards the verb *say* in English; that is, their meanings are more or less the same, as is evident from Table 3. Thus, it can actually be claimed that the most commonly chosen reportive verb is the same in both corpora.

Table 4 presents the remaining parts of speech used to signal reportive evidentiality in both languages. The largest difference observed in this segment of the data is the fact that, in Serbian, researchers tend to use adjectives rather frequently, which is not the case when they are writing in English. Some examples featuring reportive adjectives in Serbian are as follows:

- (8) [...] nova prevodilačka rešenja koja autorka smatra kreativnijim i adekvatnijim u *datim* primerima. (OPKs: 93; emp. mine) ([...] new translation solutions which the author considers more creative and more adequate in the *given* examples.)
- (9) U ovoj završnoj rečenici *tzv.* implicitna [...] metafora „povinovanja“ [...] (KBs: 149; emp. mine) (In this final sentence the *so-called* implicit metaphor of “compliance” [...])

Example (8) shows that reportive adjectives in Serbian may be used to refer to what has been mentioned prior in the article – *pomenut* and *naveden* from Table 4 (both meaning *mentioned*) carry out the same function. Another role of reportive

adjectives is instantiated by sentence (9), where *tzv.* (short for *takozvana*, i.e. *so-called*) points to common knowledge.

Even though several dissimilarities between the two corpora were foregrounded with regard to reportive evidentiality, it must be emphasized that the authors employ the same (or at least remarkably similar) devices to mark the said category. The greatest difference is the distribution of the markers, but the languages are comparable in this respect.

The qualitative analysis section of this paper will be closed with a couple of remarks concerning the entirety of the two subcorpora, which will highlight their similarities. Starting with the way the listed markers occur in context, it was noticed that, in both Serbian and English, evidential strategies incorporate the use of the passive or modal verbs. Note the following examples:

- (10) [...] *it is hoped* that the present discussion provides a step towards more nuanced methodologies [...] (KBe: 126; emp. mine)
- (11) *Smatra se* da je zalaženje u publiku više štetno nego korisno, ali [...] (BAs: 944; emp. mine) (*It is considered* that going into the audience does more harm than good, but [...])
- (12) [...] the author of this paper suggests that its function as a self-politeness strategy *could be seen* as fitting into the frame of [...] (OPKe: 168; emp. mine)
- (13) *Može se primetiti* i da u okviru pojedinih lingvističkih teorija i pristupa [...] (VPs: 427; emp. mine) (*It can be noticed* that within certain linguistic theories and approaches [...])

Sentences (10) and (11) show that the passive is used in both languages to increase the distance between the author and the information s/he is presenting and to display the proposition as being objective, even though it may be completely subjective, like in example (10). In Serbian, authors tend to employ the reflexive passive, with the reflexive pronoun *se* (i.e. *[one]self*), more frequently than its counterpart formed with the auxiliary *biti* (i.e. *to be*). The use of modals is exemplified by sentences (12) and (13). In both examples, the authors decided to complete the modals with passives – a passive infinitive in English and a reflexive passive in Serbian. The combination of modals and passives is quite common throughout the two subcorpora and fuses the properties of the passive explained above with the epistemic meaning of the modals.

Similarly to the passive, intersubjectivity and epistemic stance are marked in nearly identical ways in the two languages. Examples include:

- (14) *We can see*, in other words, that even when Yugoslav linguists did engage in sociolinguistics [...] (ABe: 195; emp. mine)
- (15) [...] *što* u savremenom srpskom jeziku, kao *što smo videli* na mnogobrojnim primerima, nije slučaj. (TaPs: 158; emp. mine) ([...] which is not the case in contemporary Serbian, as *we have seen* in numerous examples.)
- (16) [...] only one metaphorical representation is *clearly* found to be prominent in both datasets [...] (KBe: 113; emp. mine)
- (17) Ovde je *nužno* istaći dve bitne okolnosti: prvo, [...] (TvPs: 32; emp. mine) (*It is necessary* to emphasize two important circumstances here: firstly, [...])

As can be seen from (14) and (15), in both languages, authors usually opt for the first person plural when they want to mark intersubjectivity. Of course, in English, the personal pronoun is a necessary marker, while the morphological grammatical marking is sufficient in Serbian. By employing intersubjectivity, as explained in the Introduction, the authors strengthen their position by presenting their views and observations as if they belonged to a group of people. In both Serbian and English, writers commonly resort to adjectives and adverbs to signal their epistemic stance. Thus, in examples (16) and (17) the authors express a stronger epistemic stance, using an adverb in the former and an adjective in the latter.

#### 4. Conclusion

What can be concluded from the above analyses is that, based on the datasets studied here, Serbian and English are typologically similar in terms of the evidential strategies used in the academic writing register. The categorization of evidentials is the same in both languages (sensory, inferred, reportive), both languages predominantly mark evidentiality lexically, the parts of speech used to signal evidentiality are remarkably similar and the contextual devices appearing frequently with the evidentials are identical (passives, modals, intersubjectivity, epistemic stance). Nevertheless, considerable differences between the two subcorpora were discovered as well, such as the discrepancies in the ratios of evidential categories and parts of speech occurring in the corpus and a more diverse range of inferred and reportive verbs in English than in Serbian. It can be said that these dissimilarities are larger than anticipated and that they may testify to the fact that the authors display a high level of bilingualism and have independent mental lexicons for the two languages at their disposal (see e.g. Macnamara 1967; Scarborough et al. 1984).

The two major limitations of this study are the manual corpus analysis providing only tentative quantitative data and limited corpus data overall, including papers of only 10 authors in total. Both of these limitations will be addressed in future studies by broadening the scope of the corpus and using corpus analysis software to obtain figures. Those future pieces of research, along with this case study and Tošić (forthcoming), will all be a part of my PhD thesis focused on evidentiality in academic writing across varieties and disciplines, whose aim is to help clarify the rules of academic writing which many writers find elusive.

#### Corpus

##### English subcorpus

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## **‘INTRA-LANGUAGE’ AND ‘SOCIAL HETEROGLOSSIA’ IN *OTHELLO***

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**Abstract:** *As a Renaissance playwright, Shakespeare wrote Othello during a time when humanist and racist tendencies were prevalent in England. Whereas humanism emphasized the value of human virtues regardless of race, complexion and nationality, racism glorified white Europeans as the supreme race and looked down on black people. The play, in its depiction of an exceptionally outstanding black protagonist/hero, therefore, can be interpreted as a challenge to racism. However, the hero's tragic downfall seems to be an affirmation of it. Critics throughout the long history of Othello's staging have relied mainly on Iago's characterization and the extent to which he, or Othello himself, plays a role in determining the ending of the play as a key to deciding if the play is promoting the humanist cause or sides more with the racist disposition. The present study, drawing mainly on Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia', detects the constant tension between the two ideologies both in Othello's position, and in Othello's and other characters' utterances about him. This analysis reveals the racist inclination functions as a powerful 'centrifugal force', going against the 'centripetal force' of the humanist ideology, and eventually disintegrates Othello from the white society.*

**Keywords:** *centrifugal force, centripetal force, heteroglossia, humanist ideology, racism*

### **1. Introduction**

Shakespeare lived during the Renaissance era which is known to be a time of tremendous cultural rebirth. This rebirth affected all aspects of European life - social, economic, and political - and ultimately brought about a significant era of intellectual growth. The most dominant theme of the Renaissance was humanism, the product of what Greenblatt (1980: 2) calls, "an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity", which stressed the need for a rounded flourishing of an individual's different potentialities—physical, mental, artistic, and moral. Alongside the prevalent humanist ideology of the Renaissance period, there existed some racist and xenophobic predilection, lurking in the society. These biases could not be interpreted separately from England's colonial enterprises overseas. As Hendricks (2010: 541-542) contends, "Race, indeed, is a Renaissance category". It was during this era that due to "England's pursuit of power in the Americas", "the impact of colonialism and the African slave trade" race was regarded "as a category of identity". The predominant colonial and racist discourses glorified white Europeans

as the supreme race and looked down on people of other races and nationalities, especially black people – whose complexion was assumed to be a marker of inferiority, ugliness, backwardness, and barbarity. This association of blackness with negative attributes, as Maguire (2004: 35) explains, was “an iconographic colour coding”, “inherited from the Middle Ages”, which established an equity between “black skin” and “the devil”. The main threat posed by black people was miscegenation and its consequent danger of undermining white homogeneity and superiority. As Hall (1995: 12) points out, English people associated white skin colour with ‘Englishness’ and black complexion with the racial ‘other’. Therefore, the inclusion of a biracial child “in the nation” would signify the breaking of “the desired homology between land, skin, and group identity” (ibid), which meant dismantling the associations of Englishness with white skin colour and beauty.

Considering the pernicious racism of the Renaissance era, it is obvious that a play like *Othello*, which features an outstanding black male protagonist, endowed with humanistic virtues of courage, compassion, fortitude, eloquence, and benevolence, must have endangered white English men’s sense of superiority and undermined the established hierarchical social order. Bartels (qtd. in Chapman 2017: 109) refers to this sense of danger on the part of the white audience as “anxiety” not over Othello’s differences from, but rather his similarities to the English, his position as an “insider” rather than an “outsider”. The likelihood of the reception of the play as a source of threat becomes even stronger when one takes into regard that not only does Othello occupy an exceptionally high position in the Venetian society, but he has also been charismatic enough to win the hand of one of the noblest and prettiest women of the white race – hence, the possibility of the graver threat of miscegenation, too.

The tragic ending of the play can, to some extent, mitigate the sense of danger the white audience felt. Nonetheless, considering the fact that Othello’s moving downfall is, at least partially, the consequence of the machinations of a white villain, the question of what purpose Shakespeare pursued by writing this provocative play remains unresolved. Did he intend to undermine the racial and nationalistic ideologies of Renaissance England? Or, on the contrary, was the play, in its depiction of a black man who could momentarily assimilate into white society to be soon removed from it, an affirmation of established racial stereotypes? After all, to what extent was Shakespeare under the influence of the two contradictory ideologies of humanism and racism in devising the plot of the play? Critics, throughout the long history of Othello’s staging, have had different answers to the above questions, almost all relying mainly on the characterizations of Iago and Othello and the role each plays in determining the ending of the play. Du Bois, the black American historian and sociologist, mentions that the name of his grandfather was Othello (cited in Cartelli 1999: 147). This naming shows that the name ‘Othello’ was honorific and ennobling to his family. In their view, Othello, in Shakespeare’s play, is a noble Moor whose honour is ruined by the schemes of Iago – a corrupt European. Yet there is a second group of black readers who believe that Othello’s murder and suicide are in accordance with a horizon of expectation that white people maintain about blacks. In view of such readers, the play *Othello* even strengthens established racial stereotypes, since it depicts, as Neill (1989: 393) writes, an “assimilated savage” who unsurprisingly

falls back into primitiveness under pressure. Ben Okri, the Nigerian writer, is one such reader. He contends, the long history of Othello's "committing murder and suicide on the stage" has not produced any "significant change in attitude toward black people" (cited in Cartelli 1999: 123). In his view, *Othello* has done nothing to change the long-lasting system of white racism. In view of such black readers, Iago is no more than a catalyzer; he is not the inventor of the murder plot. He does not accompany Othello on entering Desdemona's chamber, and he does not persuade him to murder Desdemona and commit suicide. That is why some prestigious 20<sup>th</sup> century critics, too, such as F. R. Leavis and T. S. Eliot, condemned Othello, denying him high tragic status. In their view, as Bloom (2010: 2) contends, "tragic dignity" cannot be maintained for Othello since he is "reduced to incoherence" by Iago's machinations.

The present study attempts at answering the above-mentioned questions by recourse to Bakhtin's master trope of 'heteroglossia' and its two types, 'intra-language' and 'social'. In applying and explicating these two types of heteroglossia, the article also draws on two other Bakhtinian concepts, namely the 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' forces, which are believed to operate in every utterance.

It is important to note here that by considering Bakhtin's main reliance on the novel as a genre suitable for elucidating his theories, and his apathy towards drama, the application of his ideas to *Othello* may sound weird. Though Bakhtin expresses some comments on some of Shakespeare's masterpieces, his main argument is to prove that the nature of drama is different from the novel and as such it does not qualify as a suitable genre for explicating his views on the interrelated terms of heteroglossia, polyphony, and dialogism. He writes, "to speak of a fully formed and deliberate polyphonic quality in Shakespeare's dramas is in our opinion simply impossible" (Bakhtin 1984: 33). In his opinion, "Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters" are the "fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel" (Bakhtin 1981: 92). Hence, drama, lacking some of the above elements, is "alien to genuine polyphony" (Bakhtin 1984: 33). Bakhtin only finds Shakespeare, along with such Renaissance figures as Boccaccio, Rabelais, and Cervantes, as "one basic source of carnivalization" (idem: 157). So, in Bakhtin's view, Shakespeare is carnivalesque, but not polyphonic. As Knowles (1998: 8-9) argues, this comment is not acceptable, as both concepts of 'carnival' and 'polyphony' "are linked by Bakhtin's overarching idea of dialogism which parallels his other term, heteroglossia". Knowles calls this a "bias in Bakhtin's thinking" (ibid).

In recent decades, some undaunted critics have taken issue with Bakhtin's "sometimes sweeping dismissals of drama, paradoxically providing the theoretical groundwork for re-reading drama on Bakhtinian lines" (Longstaffe 1998:14). Among Shakespeare's plays, his *Othello*, as a play that includes a black man as its main protagonist, has encouraged some scholars to think of a Bakhtinian reading of it, mainly relying on Bakhtin's major tropes of 'polyphony', 'dialogism' and 'carnivalization'. In his book, *The Properties of Othello*, James L. Calderwood (1989: 67-68), allocates one chapter to a Bakhtinian reading of *Othello*, focusing on an analysis of Othello's utterances to reveal that as long as Othello talks in

monologues, “he commands language, as a writer does when he writes”, but as soon as he enters into dialogic form of language, especially when he is entrapped in verbal exchanges with Iago on the topic of Desdemona’s infidelity, he breaks down. This breaking down, in Calderwood’s view, is quite natural, because “he is not privy to the world shared by Venetians”; he is a stranger; he, not capable of establishing a genuine dialogical relationship with the Venetian society, always speaks from “a place outside or at the borders of [Venice] cultural scene” (ibid).

In “Unbending Bakhtin’s Carnivalization and the Related Approaches in *Othello*”, the authors (Maleki et al. 2013: 433-434) argue that Shakespeare’s *Othello* offers a good “repository” of Bakhtin’s views of ‘polyphonism’ and ‘carnival’. Explaining that an indispensable characteristic of Carnival is “the reversal of all hierarchies” and orthodox outlooks, they go on to demonstrate in what ways in *Othello* hierarchies are reversed. The writers refer to the negative epithets used by Iago and Roderigo in their descriptions of Othello as “a kind of carnivalistic disrespect,” which Othello attempts to reverse. They also argue that Shakespeare’s *Othello* contains the multiple voices which indicate the case of polyphonism.

In “Shakespeare and the Bakhtinian Dialogism: The Case of *Othello*”, Goudarzi (2021: 36) presents a dialogic reading of *Othello* with a focus on the utterances of Iago. His analysis reveals that Iago’s language is not a mere tool for conveying “neutral description or information”, but it is designed to provoke a response and to initiate dialogue. Hence, it is charged with “polemic, parody, evaluation and so on”. This dialogism, in Goudarzi’s view, is evidence of Shakespeare’s inclusion of the voice of dissidence in the hierarchal society of Elizabethan England.

What makes the present study different from the works presented above is that it finds *Othello*, as a play that includes an Other as its protagonist, a specifically suitable work for illustrating Bakhtin’s master trope of ‘heteroglossia’, evident in the utterances of characters about Othello, which is itself a reflection of social heteroglossia surrounding the issue of Othello’s assimilation into Venetian society and occupying a high status in it.

## 2. Methodology

Bakhtin, in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981: 102), introduces the two concepts of ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces in order to describe the nature of language and the way it gives voice to “forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization”, and, on the other hand, toward the continuous “processes of decentralization and disunification”. Bakhtin calls these opposing forces working within language as “intra-language heteroglossia”, explaining that in every utterance “[t]he processes of centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification, intersect” (idem: 35-37). This quality implies that the utterance answers both the demands of “its own language as an individualized embodiment of a speech act” (idem: 35), and the demands of heteroglossia. In other words, while an utterance conveys a seemingly one-layered, unitary meaning, it also reflects the numerous voices of a certain culture, people and era about an issue, or to use Bakhtin’s term, about an “object”. Therefore, it is

possible to have a concrete and thorough examination of any utterance, when we have approached it “as a contradiction-ridden, tension-filled unity of two embattled tendencies in the life of language” - i.e., as a unity of ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces (idem: 102).

To clarify his definition of ‘intra-language heteroglossia,’ Bakhtin introduces the concept of ‘social heteroglossia’ as well. He explains that by language, he does not merely mean “a system of abstract grammatical categories, but rather language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as a worldview” (1981: 101). This suggests that “the seeds of social heteroglossia” are “embedded in words” (ibid). Hence, when Bakhtin talks about centripetal forces within each utterance, he is referring to “the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization” (ibid). In other words, by close analysis of any utterance, one can grasp the ideologies-in-tension within a culture and the way these tensions affect the worldviews, modes of lives, and even fates of people living in that culture.

Shakespeare’s *Othello*, in its depiction of a black character, as the focal point of its plot - whose racial difference affects the course of events and determines his own fate and the fates of the main characters of the play - provides a rich context for analyzing the two modes of heteroglossia Bakhtin identifies. In what follows, we present a scrutinized analysis of Othello’s ‘tension-ridden’ position and the mode of language he himself and other characters use in order to expose the ‘social’ and ‘intra-language heteroglossia’ working in the play. The quite varied and even contradictory approaches of different characters to Othello’s exceptional status in Venetian society, and the presence of a constant tension in the Venetian people’s utterances about him, as this study demonstrates, bears witness to the ‘social heteroglossia’ surrounding him and indeed surrounding the general question of black peoples’ assimilation into white societies and the lack of, to use Bakhtin’s term, ‘finalization’ in white-black racial dialogues.

### 3. Heteroglossia in *Othello*

Othello’s character, his position, his utterances and other characters’ utterances about him are the best embodiment of both ‘intra-language’ and ‘social heteroglossia’ surrounding him. Through a comprehensive study of various aspects of his character, it is possible to fully grasp how two opposed discourses of the white European society of the 16<sup>th</sup> century England, the humanist and the racist, were in constant conflict with no possibility of reconciliation. This constant clash leads to hidden racism’s outdoing the humanist ideology, resulting in the ultimate poignant perish of Othello, and the heinous murder of innocent Desdemona in his hands.

From the outset of the play, Othello is not a participant in, or at least an onlooker of, many of the events that are central to the plot and have a direct impact on him. The opening dialogue between Iago and Roderigo, before Othello himself takes any role, reveals his ‘contradiction-ridden’ situation as one who has got unified with the white race but at the same time, as Roderigo and Iago’s racial epithets reveal, his race disqualifies him, endangers his position and puts him at the threshold of ‘disunification’. Roderigo and Iago talk vaguely about a “he” or “him” for much of

the first scene. When they begin to talk more directly, especially when they continue their talk under Brabantio's window, they use such racial epithets as "the Moor" (I.1.18), "the thick-lips" (I.1.18), "an old black ram" (I.1.20), and "a Barbary horse" (I.1.22), instead of his proper name. Later, Othello's ship is the last one to arrive in Act II, Scene I; Othello is standing apart when Cassio and Iago apparently talk about Desdemona in Act IV, Scene I; and Othello wrongly thinks that Cassio is killed because he is not an onlooker of the fight scene in Act V, Scene I. Indeed, throughout the play, as Cartelli (1999: 126) discusses, Othello hardly speaks *to* the reader: "he is either 'inward' with Iago or inward with himself" yet not in a way that gives the reader "direct access to his subjectivity". He is a center constantly on the verge of de-centering. The processes of what Bakhtin (1981: 35) calls, "centralization and decentralization, of unification and disunification" intersect in his position as a successful black Moor in the racist white society.

Othello's position as an outsider - both racially and culturally - in the eyes of Iago, Roderigo and Brabantio, is balanced by his stature as a highly important part of Venetian civic society in the eyes of the duke and the senate. His skill as a soldier and leader puts him in high demand for the safety of the state as it is evident in Cassio's report that the senate "sent about three several quests" to search for him (I.2.30). The Venetian government counts on Othello to the extent that he is allowed to have a complete command of Cyprus, both martially and politically. The contradiction in Othello's status is by now quite obvious. He is rejected and loathed by one party of characters, utterly the bad ones of the story, but wanted and liked by another party, the good ones of the story. The opposing 'centripetal forces' of humanism and 'centrifugal forces' of racism are in a conflict, thwarting each other and preserving Othello's status as both an outsider and an assimilated one. Iago and Brabantio see the marriage of Othello and Desdemona a combination of binary oppositions: "black and white, Venetian and alien, age and youth" (Leggatt 2005: 117). Yet, Duke of Venice, extolling Othello's virtues, assures Desdemona's father of his merits:

If virtue no delighted beauty lack  
Your son-in-law is far more fair than black; (I.2.54)

In Duke's eyes, Othello's humane and martial merits beautify his black complexion. But what is quite interesting about Othello's position, as an assimilated black man in the white society, is that even those characters who regard him their social and cultural peer, such as Duke and Desdemona, are mainly under the influence of his exotic past and personality. Interestingly enough, Othello himself is aware of this fact as it is evident in his account of the way Brabantio became his friend: "[Desdemona's] father loved me, oft invited me,/ Still questioned me the story of my life/ From year to year" (I.3.46). He fascinates his listeners with his exotic tales. The duke's response to Othello's description of the way he wooed Desdemona is: "I think this tale would win my daughter too" (I.3.48). Hence, though Othello's marriage with Desdemona can be interpreted as his assimilation, yet, when we look closer, we find it is not a true unification; it is the result of his bizarre stories that, as Brabantio claims, work as "spells" and "witchcraft" and "subdue and poison" Desdemona's affections (I.3.108). The social heteroglossia surrounding the issue of a black man's

assimilation into white society disallows proper unification of Othello in this society; he is temporarily admitted into it for, in the first place, the good service he can offer it due to his courage and physical power, and second, due to his exoticism, something that keeps the established white/black binary opposition intact.

Furthermore, the same characters, who are advocates for Othello in the beginning of the play and have enough faith in his honesty and greatness as a man, irrespective of his race, by the end of the play, enraged by his sudden violent outburst towards Desdemona, resort to his racial distinctions in their rebukes. This is evident in Desdemona's reaction to his rage on her deathbed: "And yet I fear you; for you are fatal then/ when your eyes roll so" (V.2.222). It is also evident in Lodovico's reaction to Othello's striking of Desdemona:

Is this the noble Moor whom our full Senate  
Call all in all sufficient? Is this the nature  
Whom passion could not shake? Whose solid virtue  
The shot of accident, nor dart of chance,  
Could neither graze nor pierce? (IV.1.180)

In this excerpt, Lodovico is undermining all of Othello's merits which bought him Duke's and Senator's favour - merits of nobleness, virtuosity and self-control. Othello, therefore, is an outsider, a barbarian, who momentarily assimilates into the white society and is doomed in it. His marriage can be interpreted as an intrusion that is in contradiction with a dominant established ideology that eventually incorporates it. It can be argued that Othello may serve as a military subject in white society, but not as a cultural peer. On the battlefield, Othello is adept and victorious; in the living room, he is unenthusiastic until Desdemona takes the lead and encourages him to tell his adventurous life story. It is Desdemona, rather than Othello, who renders their secret marriage as a rightful act with her eloquent defense. All this shows that Othello is not a wanted son-in-law for a Venetian senator. "He can never truly become a Venetian" (Dillon 2007: 78).

The social heteroglossia surrounding Othello's 'queer' position as a black man who has, against all odds, successfully acquired a high position in the Venetian society is reflected even in his own utterances; his words reflect his ambivalent status, as both insider and outsider. He sometimes plays up his outsider position; he either recognizes his exotic attraction to Venetians or is self-aware and wary about his visibly different complexion. For instance, despite his obviously eloquent speech in Act I, he exclaims, "Rude am I in my speech, / And little blessed with the soft phrase of peace" (I.3.42), hence undermining his own eloquence.

He becomes more self-conscious, and hence less self-confident, about his different complexion as a black man among the white race when he is provoked by Iago to doubt Desdemona's fidelity. On his first reaction to this warning, he talks of his "own weak merits:"

Nor from mine own weak merits will I draw  
The smallest fear or doubt of her revolt,  
For she had eyes, and chose me. (III.3.128)

Iago's clever responses to Othello's certainty about Desdemona's true love for him includes both 'centripetal forces' of humanistic ideology and 'centrifugal forces' of racist propensity, which seem to be thwarting each other. A closer look, however, reveals that Iago even puts the humanistic ideology in the service of the racist one. On the one hand, he talks of Othello's "free and noble nature:"

I would not have your free and noble nature,  
Out of self-bounty, be abused. Look to't. (III.3.128)

On the other hand, he refers to Othello's black complexion as a possible source of "shake and fear" for Desdemona and, by extension, for the whole white race:

She did deceive her father, marrying you;  
And when she seemed to shake and fear your looks,  
She loved them most. (III.3.128)

Iago, in his next remark, continues to focus on the racist traits to build further distrust in Othello's mind:

Ay, there's the point! as (to be bold with you)  
Not to affect many proposed matches  
Of her own clime, complexion, and degree,  
Whereto we see in all things nature tends - [...] (III.3.130)

In the above utterance, Iago boldly and frankly undermines Othello's "clime, complexion, and degree" by recourse to Desdemona's natural inclination to marry a man of her own nationality, race, and rank. Here, the utterance is totally imbued with the 'centrifugal forces' of the racist mindset, pushing completely to the background the humanist ideology that endears Othello to Desdemona and centralizes him in the Venetian society.

Othello, pondering on Iago's words, affirms Iago's racist view of him, which becomes evident in his speculation on the possible reasons why Desdemona may have become disloyal:

Haply, for I am black  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have, or for I am declined  
Into the vale of years - yet that's not much -  
She's gone. (III.3.132)

In this utterance, Othello draws a binary-opposition distinction between himself and the white race, attributing the negative qualities of coarseness, i.e., lack of civic social graces, and aging to himself, because of his black race, in contrast to the positive attributes of civility and beauty which are assumed to be the natural characteristics of the white race. 'Centrifugal forces' of the racist mentality are powerfully disintegrating him from the white society.

Nowhere is Othello's own awareness of the tension he suffers, as a black outsider in a white society, better illustrated than in his speech preceding his suicide:

Soft you; a word or two before you go.  
I have done the state some service, and they know't.  
No more of that. I pray you, in your letters,

When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
 Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,  
 Nor set down aught in malice: then must you speak  
 Of one that loved not wisely but too well;  
 Of one not easily jealous, but being wrought  
 Perplex'd in the extreme; of one whose hand,  
 Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away  
 Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,  
 Albeit unused to the melting mood,  
 Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees  
 Their medicinal gum. Set you down this;  
 And say besides, that in Aleppo once,  
 Where a malignant and a turban'd Turk  
 Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,  
 I took by the throat the circumcised dog,  
 And smote him, thus. (V.2.244)

In the above excerpt, Bakhtin's (1981: 102) view that "every utterance participates in the 'unitary language' (in its centripetal forces and tendencies) and at the same time partakes of social and historical heteroglossia" is very well evident. Othello starts his speech with an effort to "participate" in the "unitary language" by wanting to be remembered as a soldier who "has done the state some service" and who has killed a lot of Venice's enemies. Yet, the rest of his speech reveals social and historical heteroglossia of his position; he establishes a comparison between himself and a "turban'd Turk", i.e. Venice's sworn enemy. He later accentuates this comparison by committing suicide with the same sword that he used to "smote" the "malignant" Turk on the battleground. By this point, Othello sees himself as a savage outsider (like a "Turk" or a "base Indian"), which is what characters like Brabantio have been calling him all along.

It is important to note that, as Hopkins (2015: 180) argues, Othello's own personality "is to be understood not in terms of a racialized concept of human identity, but of the insidious impact of the cultural construction of difference". This means that "he is less black than marked as 'black'" (ibid). In other words, it is the dominant racist and xenophobic ideologies of the Venetian culture that render him an Other. Ania Loomba (1989) (qtd. in Roux 2009: 23) describes the process of *otherization* of Othello as moving from the position of a black "subject", who exists "on terms of white Venetian society" and attempts "to internalize its ideology, towards being marginalized, outcast and alienated from it in every way, until [he] occupies [his] 'true' position as its other". Othello collapses his humane identity into the 'centrifugal forces' of the racist thought that render him as Moor, i.e., a black Other who is represented as jealous, intemperate, murderous, and barbaric by nature.

#### 4. Conclusion

The play *Othello*, featuring a black Moor, i.e., an Other, as its protagonist, provides a rich context for analyzing the two modes of heteroglossia Bakhtin identifies – intra-language and social. Othello's position, as an outstanding black

man who has achieved an exceptionally high status in white society, is tension-filled. He is the locus at which 'centripetal forces' of the humanist ideology and 'centrifugal forces' of the racist ideology are in constant war. On the one hand, his skin colour, his origins and the tales he narrates render him an exotic outsider. On the other hand, his military and moral merits make him competent enough to be put in full command of Cyprus, and to win the love of Desdemona, one of the noblest and prettiest women of Venice. However, his 'unification' does not last long; the 'centripetal' humanist ideology which defines Othello's character not in terms of his black complexion, but in terms of his humane merits is ultimately defeated by the 'centrifugal forces' of the racist penchant. The 'contradiction-ridden' situation of Othello and the 'social heteroglossia' surrounding him as reflected in the characters' varied responses to his position and downfall embody both intra-language and social heteroglossia surrounding the long-standing question of black people's assimilation into white societies which has no end/ 'finalization' to it.

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## PERCEPTIONS OF THE USA IN SECONDARY AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN EAST SLOVAKIA

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**Abstract:** *“Anti-Americanism has emerged as a hostile response to America’s growing influence, but also to the spread of democracy and the global market” (Krastev 2004: 14) and has been strengthened by the intensive promotion of democracy by the US. Krastev differentiates between two types of anti-Americanism: one is the anti-Americanism of fanatical terrorists, while the other “is the anti-Americanism of those who take to the streets and the media to campaign against America but who do not seek its destruction” (idem: 5). In this study, I address this second form of anti-Americanism and investigate its roots and characteristics. The study also measures the extent to which it can be identified among young Slovaks in the 14-25 age cohort in the region of East Slovakia.*

**Keywords:** *anti-Americanism, cultural dominance, Slovak anti-Americanism, Slovak youth, values*

### 1. Introduction

Anti-Americanism became a more prominent aspect of public discourse in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA, but academic interest in the topic has since waxed and waned. The genesis of scholarly research into the issue can possibly be dated to the 1995 publication of Hollander’s work *Anti-Americanism: Irrational and Rational* (2005) which refers to the anti-Americanist phenomenon as an antagonistic opposition to American values. Hollander sees anti-American sentiments as being mostly grounded in prejudice and notes that it is often illogical and irrational in nature. The study also categorizes some of the main aspects of anti-Americanism as follows: “nationalism (political or cultural), the rejection of (or ambivalence toward) modernization, and anti-capitalism” (Hollander 2005:7). Opposition to core American values, such as diversity and inclusion, modernity and laissez-faire capitalism, evidently play a role, but this raises the question of how anti-American sentiments change in line with the observable shifts in American values. It is important to clarify what factors generate opposition and hostility towards the US: is it the value system itself or is it the aggressive promotion of those values springing from the myth of American exceptionalism? To date, much of the scholarly analysis of anti-Americanism has lacked consistency and has consequently left many questions unanswered. The objective of this paper is to offer a more adequate definition of contemporary anti-Americanism, which can serve as a framework for research in

the cultural realm. The study concentrates on the region of East Slovakia and deals exclusively with young Slovaks in the 14-25 age cohort, based on surveys conducted with undergraduate students in the Department of British and American Studies of the Faculty of Arts at the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice and students at East Slovak bilingual secondary schools, in which English is the language of instruction, either partly or fully. This group of respondents was chosen for three reasons. Firstly, members of this cohort show some sensitivity to the subject through their experience with the anglophone cultural realm and their relatively sound knowledge about the USA, and their responses would therefore be expected to reflect an elevated level of cultural knowledge about the country. Secondly, this age cohort is constantly exposed to a wide variety of media content which actively shapes their worldviews. Thirdly, many members of this age cohort are at risk of potential manipulation through fake news, targeted advertisements, or trolls, that can divert their attention towards anti-Americanist narratives.

The study was conducted as part of an ongoing small-scale research project at the Department of British and American Studies of the Faculty of Arts at the Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice under Grant No. vvgs-2022-2435, with the title *Perception of the USA at Secondary and Higher Education Institutions in the Eastern Slovak Region through Local and Global Media*. The present paper is the final output of the project.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Slovakia and the USA have long enjoyed extraordinarily cordial relations. This is particularly apparent in political and economic cooperations, such as the large-scale investments made by American corporations in key Slovak industries, the most notable of which was the acquisition of the East Slovak Ironworks in Košice by US Steel Corporation in 2000. Furthermore, the US has long been a major destination of Slovak emigration, the result of which is the large communities of Slovaks who have settled permanently in the USA. An estimated 780,000 Slovaks currently live in the US (Brittingham and de la Cruz 2004), a population which constitutes the largest Slovak community abroad and which makes a permanent contribution to active cultural exchanges and the tightening of bilateral relations.

Given these positive impacts of Slovakia's successful integration into the western political and economic structures, it is not then wholly surprising that this small Central European nation has yet to experience active anti-Americanism in the form of street protests, boycotts of American goods, destruction of American property in Slovakia or the burning of flags, but anti-American rhetoric is undoubtedly present in contemporary Slovak political and public discourses.

The outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict in 2022 has further strengthened anti-American sentiments in the Slovak society, and these tropes have gradually leaked into public debates and infiltrated political discourse. Juraj Sýkora (2023) claims that the signing of the Defence Cooperation Agreement (2022) between Slovakia and the USA was a strong impetus which provoked a wave of anti-American sentiments among Slovaks and created a narrative about the possibility

of US nuclear weapons being deployed on Slovak territory. A further example of the linking of the USA with conspiratory actions against Slovakia is the oft-repeated accusation levelled at President Zuzana Čaputová that she is an “American agent”, a regular trope employed in the media by her political opponents. These attacks on the integrity of the head of state reached such a degree that President Čaputová announced in 2022 that she was considering legal action on the matter (Hudec 2022).

It is important to note that “the label [of anti-Americanism] cannot and should not be applied to any vocal criticism of U.S. values or policies” (Krastev 2004:7), and it is therefore necessary to clearly differentiate criticism of US domestic or foreign policy from real anti-Americanism. The case of Slovak anti-Americanism is complicated and reflects a certain type of national schizophrenia, which is characterized, on the one hand, by the admiration of the US as a role model, and, on the other, by a latent antipathy which is rooted in the willingness of the US to prioritize their own geopolitical and commercial interests, even at the expense of their supposed allies. Central and Eastern European countries have long been struggling with the burden of the post-communist heritage, which has significantly hindered the establishment of functional democracies throughout the region. Central European populations have often been witness to the uncritical subservience of their governments to pressure from Western powers in terms of the demand that they adapt their ways of life, values, and conduct to Western ideals, rather than allow the natural evolution of a democratic system. This has bred frustration in many, and, as Krastev (2004: 9) argues, “far from commitment to freedom, it was the instinct to the vassal whose behavior is motivated by carrots and sticks that explains the course taken by East European governments”. Slovakia is no exception in this respect, and it is difficult to disagree with Cabada’s (2021: 292) assertion that “civil society in Central and Eastern Europe often survived the Communist period in the form of a rather ‘bad civil society’ or uncivil society”, which has left a legacy of corruption, social tensions springing from economic inequality, lack of opportunity and disrupted moral behaviour. Possibly to compensate for these shortcomings, Slovaks have gradually built up a worldview and identity rooted both in a mythical past, characterized by the deeds of the great Slavic heroes of 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist romanticism and in an adherence to conservative Catholic values, blended with a post-communist heritage, which masquerades as social democracy. This eclectic model represents an effort to amalgamate such disparate concepts as nationalism, social democracy (basically used as a euphemism for the outdated worldview of socialism), pan-Slavism, and religious conservatism.

Besides history, geographic factors also significantly affect the extent of this type of thinking among Slovaks. Urban-rural juxtaposition is marked in the Slovak public discourse, where urban areas display a greater inclination towards cosmopolitanism and progressivism, and in the 2024 presidential elections, urban electorates predominantly voted for the liberal candidate, in contrast to those of rural regions, which preferred the more explicitly patriotic nationalist candidate (volby.sk 2024). The situation, however, is more complex than a straightforward urban-rural opposition, and divisions can also be identified within the urban population itself. The countries of Central and Eastern Europe have maintained a model in which “the

boundaries between the rural and the urban have remained porous” (Buzalka 2008: 760), and this approach is reflected in ways of thinking which have remained intact within the new context of city life. The massive migration of the rural population to the urban areas in the decades after World War II has led to the emergence of urban generations which have preserved “the ‘rural’ narratives, morality, imagery and ideology [...]”. With the exception of Czechia, such a ‘rural’ narrative is also strongly interconnected with religiosity” (Cabada 2021: 293). These new inhabitants of the cities remained strongly connected to the rural environment due to the popularity of weekend cottages in the 1970s and 1980s, a trend found across Central and Eastern Europe. This effect created a divided urban population, which is comprised of two major layers: a small inner circle of citizens who are the descendants of the original urban bourgeoisie and espouse liberal and cosmopolitan values, and the “newcomers”, more specifically the earlier generation or generations of rural inhabitants, who moved to the city in search of work, but who have maintained links with their rural origins.

Despite the presence of anti-American phenomena, the US remains popular in Slovakia, and this generally positive stance is reflected in the mushrooming of bilingual and international schools and the widespread use of English, with the country ranking on the 13<sup>th</sup> place among 113 countries for English proficiency (EF English Proficiency Index 2024). “The democratic and market changes that Eastern Europe experienced over the past decade came wrapped in the American flag. When democracy came to Eastern Europe, it was singing in English, it was in love with the U.S. Constitution, and it was promoted by American foundations” (Krastev 2004: 10). As a result, the type of anti-Americanism which we will investigate in this study is one which “...is a protest not against America itself but against its apparent failure to live up to its own ideals” (idem: 8).

### 3. Methodology

My research uses sociological data collection methods in the form of an online anonymous questionnaire. The objective of the research was to investigate the acceptance of selected American values promoted on media platforms, accessible to young Slovaks in the 14-25 age cohort. This was done by using a questionnaire containing 30 items which enabled both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The survey incorporates a minimum level of demographical data, including independent variables, such as age, biological sex, place of residence or travelling experiences in the USA. It concentrates on measuring opinions, feelings, and attitudes in relation to selected American values through semantic differential scales and Likert scales. These data collection tools provide reliable information about people’s attitudes, opinions, or perceptions. Semantic differential scales use pairs of opposite adjectives and ask respondents to rate their feelings and opinions along a continuum, for example *true–falls*, *acceptable–unacceptable*. In Likert scale questions, respondents are presented with a statement or question related to the topic being studied. Respondents are given a set of pre-defined response options that indicate different levels of agreement or disagreement on a scale which typically represents a continuum from strong agreement to strong disagreement.

The selection of values is based on Neal and Youngelson-Neal's *Core Values in American Life: Living with Contradictions* (2014), which depicts many attitudes which are widely discussed in the contemporary USA. As the webpage of the publisher (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group 2024) states, "the authors identify individualism, the pursuit of happiness, freedom, consumerism, materialism, equality of opportunity, technology, mastery of the environment, quality of marriage, and national unity as the core American values". The goal of this research is not to investigate the extent to which these values are present in the Slovak mindset, but rather to map the overlaps between the American and Slovak worldviews and identify the specific values which are acceptable to or considered praiseworthy by our Slovak target group.

The hypothesis is as follows: *If young Slovaks are willing to accept core American values either fully or partially, this may prove that pro-American attitudes can predominate over anti-Americanism.*

My questionnaire aimed to identify conflicting worldviews and point out values which may be less acceptable among those in the 14-25 age cohort and to clarify any possible sources of latent or open anti-American attitudes among young Slovaks.

The first three questions collected demographic data about the respondents, including their age, biological sex, and place of residence. Geographical location was investigated separately in order to examine possible rural-urban differences. Given the fact that the Slovak urban structure is somewhat homogenous, with a predominance of medium-sized towns, we differentiated between four categories of settlement: villages with up to 1000 inhabitants, towns with up to 5000 inhabitants, larger towns up to 10,000 inhabitants, and lastly large urban areas of over 10,000 inhabitants. We hypothesize that the urban mindset described by Cabada (2021) would only be apparent in the case of respondents who are permanent residents of large urban areas of over 10,000 inhabitants.

Question 4 was composed of a single main item accompanied by eight sub-questions, all designed uniformly, according to the semantic differential model, offering the respondents the opportunity to express their attitude on a seven-level scale. The first sub-question was formulated in a straightforward manner, to coach the respondents on what was expected from them: "How would you describe your feelings towards the USA?" Possible answers ranged across a Negative-Positive scale. The sub-question "How would you describe the USA?" was followed by eight semantic differential options: Dangerous-Friendly, Exploitative-Helpful, Oppressive-Democratic, Selfish-Fair, Liar-Trustworthy, Corrupt-Honest, Excluding-Accepting, and Poor-Rich.

Question 5 investigated the personal experiences of the respondents by asking about their opportunities of travelling to the USA.

Question 6 was designed to create a cross-reference with the sub-questions in Question 4. In this question, respondents were asked to choose three qualitative statements that they believed best described the US, from the following options: Family loving, Consumerist, Equal, Environmentalist, Educated, Independent, Individualistic, Materialistic, Free, Developed, Religious and Influential.

Question 7 repeated the pattern in Question 6, but asked the respondents to freely choose a single word which they believed best described the US. This question was designed to eliminate any unintentional bias which may have arisen in Question 6 due to the limited range of available options.

Questions 8-22 offered statements about the US with hidden references to selected values. The answers provided information on the respondents' attitudes towards these values on a seven-level scale on the Agree-Disagree range. The selected values and their associated questions were as follows: a series of questions relating to environmental protection Q8) "The USA is able to solve environmental problems because it is technologically advanced"; Q9) "The USA manipulates people and therefore they generate environmental anxiety"; Q10) "Global warming is a scientifically proven fact"; Q11) "I am concerned that the food I eat, the water I drink and the air I breathe are contaminated"; Q12) "The collapse of human society and a global catastrophe are inevitable and unavoidable"; Q13) "Americans live in harmony with the natural environment"; Q14) "American companies can be trusted to do everything possible to adapt their technologies to be more environmentally friendly"; Q15) "The USA is a good example and we should follow in their footsteps". A series of questions relating to issues of personal freedom and individualism followed: Q16) "My opinion is more important than my parents'/friends'/communities' preferences"; Q17) "Personal freedom must be restricted to ensure the smooth functioning of society"; the next five questions were related to personal accountability and independence: Q18) "People largely get what they deserve out of life"; Q19) "If people work hard enough, they will become successful"; Q20) "A strong individual has the right to rebellion against authority"; Q21) "Everybody has the right to enjoy a lifestyle that he/she considers to be the best, regardless of the opinions of others"; Q22) "We cannot know what is true and reliable because truth is relative".

In an effort to interrupt the monotony of the survey, Question 23 requested respondents to choose from a series of four statements that described how they see the possibility of influencing events through responsible decision-making: A) "History deals only with the past and has little relevance to contemporary life", B) "Knowing the past helps us improve our lives now", C) "The future is unknowable, so I do not care about it. I concentrate on the here and now", and D) "The future is predictable, so I try to prepare for it".

Statements 24-27 investigated the possible dominance of American culture over local traditions: Q24) "American films are great, and I like the topics and heroes in Hollywood productions"; Q25) "I mostly listen to American music"; Q26) "Slovak traditions are boring"; Q27) "Real freedom consists of being alone and living without commitments".

Question 28 investigated the personal preferences of the respondents by asking them to choose three life goals from the following: build a career, get rich, have children, become famous, be normal, become respected, be useful, be loved, be happy, be clever, become experienced or have a clear conscience.

Question 29 and Question 30 investigated the extent to which the respondents were under the influence of anti-American conspiracy theories by asking whether

they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: Q29) “Democracy is just a tool with which to manipulate people” and Q30) “This world is run by a few people and there is not much that the little guy can do about it”.

#### 4. Discussions and results

A total of 451 responses were received between 14 September 2023 and 21 November 2023. The demographic data shows that the distribution of the informants’ age groups was relatively even, with no single age group predominating, although there was a two-thirds overrepresentation of females to male respondents; this bias should be taken into account, and we acknowledge that it may have had a considerable impact on the survey results. This effect may spring from gender differences in perceptions and life experiences or perspectives that shape human attitudes. Cultural norms or different communications styles between female and male respondents may lead to differing results which might also be influenced by the actual subject matter or hidden biases and stereotypes. In terms of urban-rural distribution, approximately 49% of respondents indicated permanent residence in an urban area i.e., a settlement of more than 10,000 inhabitants.

The results of the semantic differential section of the survey showed that our respondents held a fairly balanced view of the US as partner. They perceived the US as a somewhat dangerous, inclusive, selfish and untrustworthy country, which was rich, but also largely corrupt. It is interesting to contrast this result with that of Q5 which investigated personal experiences of travelling in the US. Only 30 respondents indicated that they had visited the US on at least one occasion, and this allows us to infer that the results collected through the semantic differential test are probably not rooted in real-life experiences, but are formed by media narratives or personal prejudices. The choice of adjectives selected in Q6 supports this view, with three adjectives – Materialistic, Influential and Consumerist – being selected most often, a finding which can be seen as a reflection of the strong influence of media narratives rather than firsthand experience. In Q7, the respondents were asked to write down the first word that popped into their minds when they heard the term “the USA”. The most common words were “guns” (24 times), “freedom” (20 times), “New York” (13 times), “eagle” (10 times), “shooting” (10 times), “flag” (9 times) and “money” (9 times). These choices also indicate that the respondents displayed a strong tendency to echo social media narratives or media clichés and to think in simplified stereotypical terms, which have little basis on the real issues facing America.

The second section of the survey investigated the degree to which respondents accepted or refused selected American values, more specifically those related to environmental protection, personal freedom and individualism, and personal accountability. In terms of environmental issues, the respondents indicated that they trusted the US as a leading power with the capacity to combat environmental problems effectively, with 198 answers agreeing with this opinion, in contrast to 168 answers showing sceptical or highly sceptical stances. Q9 showed that 241 respondents trusted the US as a dependable actor in environmental questions and rejected the idea that the US manipulates people to generate environmental anxiety.

A similar result is reflected by the answers to Q10, where 375 respondents clearly indicated that they accepted the scientific argument for the reality of global warming. Q11, which investigated environmental anxiety, displayed an even distribution of responses, with a slight majority of 232 respondents stating that they were concerned about the quality of food, water, air and soil. Q12 revealed that the respondents had a somewhat ambiguous perception of the future; a narrow majority of 201 respondents believed that we could solve environmental issues, while 180 indicated that they did not believe that there was a reliable solution to an unavoidable environmental catastrophe. These results form a stark contrast with the results of Q13, which asked the respondents whether they believed or not that Americans lived in harmony with nature. A total of 355 respondents were of the opinion that Americans were separated from nature, with 144 of them stating that this separation was extreme; in contrast, less than 10% of the respondents believed that Americans lived in harmony with nature. Q14 followed the same trend as far as trust in American companies was concerned. A total of 336 respondents were extremely sceptical or just sceptical that American companies would be willing to adapt their technologies to become more environmentally friendly, while less than 10% of respondents saw a willingness to do so on the part of American industry in this respect. Q15 asked whether the US was a good example in general and whether we should follow the American way. An overwhelming majority of 328 negative or extremely negative responses rejected the idea of accepting the US as a role model.

Q16 investigated the value of individualism and its acceptance or rejection among the members of the studied age cohort. The respondents were relatively equally distributed in their individual opinions of the value, with 161 respondents rejecting individualism as a value, 122 expressing a neutral stance and 168 indicating that individualism is seen as a rather positive or extremely positive trait. The control question, Q17, investigating the possibility of restricting personal freedom in order to enable the creation of a more stable society also showed that the respondents still accepted individualism slightly more positively than collectivism, but the respondents were far from benevolent towards the concept of personal freedom, with 218 respondents stating that they did not approve of restrictions on personal freedom in favour of social peace and stability. A total of 81 respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, whereas 152 respondents could justify limitations on personal freedom for the benefit of peace and stability in society.

Q18, which investigated personal responsibility for the consequences of individuals' decisions showed an equal distribution of responses, and the results suggest that young Slovaks evidently do not perceive a strong relationship between hard work and quality of life. It should be noted, however, that the statement "People largely get what they deserve out of life" can be interpreted in various ways and that not all respondents linked the statement with the idea of merit arising from hard work and a responsible lifestyle. This ambiguity is addressed in Q19, which clearly referred to the respondents' opinion about the relationship between merit and hard work. A total of 286 respondents indicated that they believed that better standards of living and an enhanced social status could be achieved through hard work.

Q20 addressed the respondents' view on individualism from a slightly different angle, asking if the struggle for individual rights could justify rebellion and protests. The results were mixed, with 178 respondents expressing disagreement and 164 showing agreement with the statement. A further 109 respondents had no opinion on the matter. These results indicate a lack of bias and demonstrate the low level of assertiveness when personal rights are threatened. In contrast, the answers to Q21 show that a large majority of the respondents (343) agreed to the right of the individual to live freely without restrictions; nonetheless, it is clear that this is seen as a benefit granted freely by society and not a right for which an individual should fight and struggle.

Q22, investigating the respondents' views on absolute truth, revealed a slightly biased distribution of answers, with 232 responses agreeing to the existence of objective truth and 114 answers indicating that truth is a relative quality. Q23 served as a control question for Q22 by emphasizing the importance of historical experiences in decision making. 301 respondents believed a deeper knowledge of the past could help improve our lives in the present, while 61 indicated that it is a person's individual responsibility to use their knowledge and experiences of history to prepare for the future. Once again, this indicates a slight bias towards individual freedom and responsibility, albeit with some reservations.

Q24 analysed preferences in cultural consumption patterns and cultural dominance, more specifically the relationship between the cultural differences existing between America and Slovakia. The responses revealed that the majority of the young people have a strong or relatively positive attitude towards American cultural products. Hollywood productions were seen as high quality and enjoyable according to 282 respondents, although 98 respondents rejected or strongly rejected American cinema as a symbol of quality. A similar situation was observed in terms of attitudes towards American music, with 258 respondents stating that they liked or very much liked American music, more than twice as many as the 126 who disliked or strongly disliked American music. Q26 indicated that Slovak traditions remained important for young Slovaks, as 334 respondents considered them important or extremely important compared to American traditions. Less than 15% of the respondents displayed some degree of Americanization and a preference for American culture over Slovak culture. Q27 provided a cross reference in connection with the notion of individual freedom and the answers showed considerable disagreement with the statement that real freedom consists of living alone without commitments. Q28 reinforced the findings provided by Q27, as two of the most dominant life goals were to be happy and to be loved, with respondents choosing these values over materialistic goals, such as becoming rich or building a career. 67% of the respondents wanted to be happy and 61% wanted to be loved whereas just 40% perceived success in terms of the context of career and 38% thought that getting rich was an important life goal.

The answers to Q29 indicated that Slovak young people believe overwhelmingly in the advantages of democracy and showed no signs of being influenced by conspiracy theories about shadowy groups controlling the world, the new world order or other hoaxes. A total of 213 responses indicated a strong or very

strong belief in democratic values, while 112 responses showed scepticism or strong scepticism towards democracy as a social system.

This finding is in sharp contrast with that of Q30, which explored the respondents' views about the actual condition of democratic institutions and processes by referring to a widespread conspiracy which posits that a handful of very powerful families control the world. 272 respondents stated that they strongly believed or believed to a certain degree in this conspiracy theory, more than the double of the 123 respondents who rejected this idea.

## 5. Conclusion

My original hypothesis stated that: *If young Slovaks are willing to accept core American values either fully or partially, this may prove that pro-American attitudes predominate over anti-Americanism.* The results of the survey clearly show that this hypothesis is correct.

The US is still dominantly seen as a positive role model by the target group, the 14-25 age cohort. The type of anti-Americanism which was identified in the survey results was neither political, nor aggressive, but corresponded with Krastev's (2004: 8) perception of "a protest not against America itself but against its apparent failure to live up to its own ideals". The results of the semantic differential analysis show that our respondents hold a generally balanced view of the US as a partner. Young Slovaks lack personal experiences in and with the US and therefore tend to echo opinions (both negative and positive) which they have obtained from different media sources in an uncritical manner. Concerning the acceptance or rejection of selected American values, the responses revealed a relatively strong pro-American attitude combined with some degree of Slovak patriotism. When placed in conflict with certain American values, such as individualism, individual responsibility, meritocracy, free competition, or the struggle for individual freedom even by means of force, the informants revealed a preference for Slovak attitudes over American influence; for example, they stated that Slovak traditions were still important (Q26) even though a large majority showed a preference for American popular culture over Slovak cultural products. Despite the admiration and high expectations which many hold regarding the US, young Slovaks do not fully trust the US, especially in the context of its corporate culture, in which environmental issues are seen as being overlooked, and many hold rather negative views about the state of democracy in the US. Although some slight differences were observed in the opinions of rural and urban Slovak young people, this was not significant, and we can agree with Buzalka (2008) that the new urban generations have successfully retained a great deal of the traditional rural worldview and morality.

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## ***BOOK REVIEWS***



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**ÁGNES ZSÓFIA KOVÁCS**

***BEYOND THE GILDED AGE, INTO THE WORLD.  
THE MEMORY OF ARCHITECTURE  
IN EDITH WHARTON'S TRAVEL WRITINGS***

New York: Routledge, 2025, 226 pages,  
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**CRISTINA CHEVEREȘAN**

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American writer Edith Wharton (1862-1937) is primarily known for her literary work, which made her the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1921, for *The Age of Innocence*. Born into a respected New York family, privately educated at home and abroad, married to a Boston banker, she intelligently used her admittedly privileged status for artistic purposes, meant to capture the evolving society around her during some of the most intense eras of American and world transformation and transition to new values and realities. Her conjoint interests in architecture, art history, (interior) design, decoration, and garden planning helped to shape a private and public universe, worthy of closer observation than the strictly technical one, habitually devoted to her skills as an awarded author.

Apart from, or complementary to her impressive list of novels, novellas, short stories, and even poetry, Wharton's non-fiction captures a world view and an artistic sensitivity that are congruent with and enriching for the extensively explored fictional world, which already forms her legacy. In 2025, The Routledge Research in Women's Literature series proposes a fresh look at the set of Whartonian texts that pertain to the travel writing genre. From the beginning, via an informed and mindful reminder, Hungarian academic Ágnes Zsófia Kovács draws her readers' attention to the fact that the studied writer first became known as a travel author, subsequently building her literary career, and emphasizes the elements of visual culture, ethnography, and cultural history that contribute to Wharton's personal(ized) investigations of communal life, education, mores, and aesthetics.

It is this peculiar niche in the exploration of a famous body of work that Kovács sets out to exploit, proposing a detailed analysis of what she calls "the Wharton map" (2), which covers three major geographical areas: Italy, France, and North Africa (specifically Morocco). The main corpus is, thus, made up of a set of essential pieces: *Italian Villas and Their Gardens* (1904), *Italian Backgrounds* (1905), *A Motor-Flight Through France* (1908), *Fighting France* (1915), *In Morocco* (1920).

As carefully pointed out, in time, archival research has pushed the limits of this cartography to include Spain and the Aegean in the American connoisseur's overall illustration and assessment of the historical continuity, encoded in the visual and architectural dimensions of the visited territories.

Kovács' introduction opens with the necessary literature review, outlining the major notions that guide her reading and placing it in the clearly identified research gap: a contemporary, post-theory reconsideration of Edith Wharton's travelogues, with interdisciplinary tools and a solid preoccupation for conceptualizing the intersection between the historical and the aesthetic. The relationship between war, crisis, and society, the anthropological streak and the architectural vision stand out in what is presented as the American writer's outlook on beauty and culture, emergent from her texts and their reception so far. Beyond the ever-changing patterns of travel writing throughout time, and its gradual reevaluation as a cultural product, not a merely unimaginative recording of things seen, the importance of gender in travelers' accounts is also highlighted, as it suitably describes the evolution of expectations concerning traditional domestic roles.

Closely following the arguments of previous analysts (Wright (1997), Buzzard (1993), as well as various contributors to the 2002 *Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing* and the 2009 *Cambridge Companion to American Travel Writing*, for instance), Kovács points out how Wharton manages to transcend the established traditions of travel writing via her extensive expertise, appropriating and going beyond the usual combination of genteel, belletristic, and objectifying accounts. Consequently, the researcher astutely classifies the pieces under discussion: "These informative works can be connected to three major traditions of travel writing. The Enlightenment ideal of aesthetic and social *Bildung* related to the elite Grand Tour emanates from Wharton's love for Goethe's Italian Journey. The romanticizing personal touch of the belletristic tradition is present through Symonds and Bourget, and the scientific-moralizing thrust can be considered through Charles Eliot Norton and Vernon Lee's works." (23) One can easily notice Kovács' preoccupation for detail and accuracy, her extensive readings and archival work, her penchant for structure, construction and coherence in argumentation, and the relevance of the information selected, always placed in the appropriate metatextual framework.

Her book is divided into seven chapters, which plunge the reader increasingly deeply into Wharton's topography of the world she discovers and discloses. Chapters 1 and 2 revisit the Italian space, with its villas, gardens, and backgrounds, alongside the American traveler's theoretical and practical considerations on art, architecture, models of observation and coexistence. Moving onto France, which is not just another site of contemplation, but the country that literally adopted Wharton, Chapters 3 and 4 capture the emotions stirred by this complex territory in its visitor, before and after the First World War. "Wharton focuses on the workings of the sentimental mode as she describes her visits to diverse Gothic cathedrals" (28), Kovács contends, noting how the cataclysm annihilates the visual consumption of beauty and leads to a set of completely different representations after the bombing of once sacred places.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 either shift the direction of the recorded expeditions or add to the novelty of the studied material. Against the backdrop of World War

I, Morocco is examined through Wharton's simultaneously fascinated and biased perspectives on North Africa. The researcher focuses on the traces of the French colonial past and rhetoric, identified by an enchanted, yet attentive reader. Island hopping in the Aegean marked different stages in Wharton's early, respectively late, career, which makes the comparative observation of her notes even more interesting, as they prove significantly marked by the evolving socio-historical context. Recently published archival material supports the last chapter of this incursion, which redefines Wharton's Spanish itineraries via relevant excerpts. Placing these new readings in resonance with the previous ones, Kovács argues that "the place of the brief Spanish notes can be estimated anew among Wharton's major travel texts" (29).

Her serious and meticulous literary study succeeds in shedding new light upon the non-fiction of a canonic American author, by revealing an entire series of what she calls "uncatalogued treasures" (63). She embraces aspects that might have previously seemed marginal or secondary, repositions and reinterprets them, proving how essential travel writers and art historians shaped Wharton's nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between past, present, and future events. The depth and resonance of the argumentation rely on erudition and the determination to construe in a disciplined, skilled, architectural manner in and of itself, identifying the author's aesthetic and philosophical filiations and foregrounding her preoccupation with the culture-nature synergy, its significance and evolution.

Kovács does the work of a cultural archaeologist, analyzing synchronically and diachronically, going back to the sources, production, circulation, and reception of the studied works. Thus, she eloquently adds to the existing Wharton scholarship and opens new avenues for research in the field. Her initiative is particularly relevant, since Oxford University Press has announced the publication of an impressive 30-volume *Complete Works of Edith Wharton (CWEW)*. By the inclusion of drama, poetry, non-fiction alongside novels and short-stories, this marks not just an unprecedented acknowledgement of Wharton as "a central, indeed indispensable, figure in English-language literature and the humanities" (<https://whartoncompleteworks.org/about/>), but also the critical move towards a more inclusive overview of her work, which Ágnes Zsófia Kovács has already contributed to notably.

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**ARTHUR ROSE**

***ASBESTOS – THE LAST MODERNIST OBJECT***

Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2024, 256 pp.  
ISBN 978 1 4744 8244 8

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In *Fordlandia* (2010), historian Greg Grandin writes the story of a grandiose project run by Henry Ford in the early decades of the twentieth century, to build a large manufacturing community in the middle of the Amazon jungle, a project regarded then as a new stage in the fight between nature and the modern man, to be won by the latter. But this alternative El Dorado soon turned out to be a social and ecological disaster, compelling evidence of how so many of the utopian agendas of modernism eventually showed their true, dystopian face. Arthur Rose, senior research fellow at the University of Exeter, makes a similar demonstration in *Asbestos – The Last Modernist Object*.

The book's cover is a detail from a mural that decorated the entrance to the 1939 New York World's Fair, by Hildreth Meière, depicting a man in an asbestos suit fighting against the flames. Arthur Rose explains he chose this illustration to indicate that „*Asbestos – the Magic Mineral* personified the humble function of fire resistance through a noble figure that appeared to manage and defy the elements. But to think of the mural only in terms of its content fails, I think, to appreciate how Meière's bold combination of flowing lines and modern materials encourages the viewer to imagine the mineral's role in building the 'World of Tomorrow'. Transient as it was, Meiere's work exemplifies a cultural response excited by asbestos's utopian, world-building possibilities, the sense of wonder it evoked, the security it provided, the social responsibility it implied and the possibility of a better world it anticipated.” (2024: 4)

Hailed initially as a magical material with life saving powers, asbestos, a word of Greek origin, meaning „unextinguishable”, was then revealed to be an insidious mineral, extremely hazardous to human health: „a strangely wonderful, terrible material”, in the author's words (2024: 2). While many books and studies have been written in the past two decades on the medical, legal, and industrial aspects of asbestos, Arthur Rose's approach to it, from a combined cultural historical and literary perspective, is highly original and rewarding. Scholars championing for the continued relevance of the humanities in contemporary societies, like Spanish

philosopher Santiago Zabala (2017), claim that arts and literature offer valuable case studies that enable us to deal with crisis and understand the relations between the individual and the world. *Asbestos*, far from being only a very thorough cultural history of this material, provides insight into the numerous contradictions that marked the twentieth century. Through the history of asbestos, Arthur Rose evokes the ambivalent story of modernism, in a broad sense, caught between trust and an idealized view on progress, on the one hand, and a fatal exposure to dystopian scenarios, on the other. Interestingly, the first literary work listed by the researcher is Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. It is not a coincidence, Rose argues convincingly, that the modernist writer, who was also co-owner of an asbestos factory in Prague, wrote in his famous novel that one is sentenced not only in innocence, but also in ignorance. For the Exeter University scholar, this quote can become the very motto of the century-long injustice done to workers and consumers suffering from asbestos poisoning, who were refused compensation because the disease was deemed inexistent. This ignorance didn't imply the absence of knowledge, but a series of wrong assumptions about asbestos and its employment at a global industrial scale.

In this volume, Rose gives a minute account of the narratives surrounding asbestos, from its early days of utopian glory, through its proliferation in the built environment, and then to the proliferation of asbestos-related diseases and the efforts for its elimination. The chapters of the book can be regarded as instantiations of the polysemy of the noun and verb *use*: asbestos was „widely used” in industry because of its miraculous quality of never „being used up”, then it was „misused” when economic agendas continued to support it despite growing awareness of its harmful effects; actions included „the creative use” of data and devices to hide its hazardous potential; the situation culminated with the „controlled use” fiction that most countries have embraced cautiously in recent decades; last but not least, the volume shows how narratives were „used” to tell the controversial story of asbestos. Even when the texts Rose quotes „use asbestos without dwelling on it”, the fact is significant in the sense that it demonstrates the lethal mineral „was meant to be taken for granted” (2004: 7). If not a significant object or event in the selected corpus, asbestos still functions as a metaphor, describing different realities of the relation between the mineral and the human, as well as the two phases of modernism: first, optimism and future orientation, and then, a grim realistic perspective, where the spectre of environmental and other disasters looms large. Through the analysed texts, asbestos is featured at the intersection between three networks: a spatial one, of commercial exchange and of significant sites associated with its exploitation and consumption; an emotional one, bringing to the forefront feelings of hope, anxiety and disillusionment about this material; and a temporal one, following the shifts in the perception and the meaning of asbestos for individuals and communities.

Because the asbestos in literary texts is more important as a metaphor than as a physical object or an actual phenomenon, Arthur Rose draws on Paul Ricoeur's (1990) study on the function of the metaphor and divides this volume into three sections that borrow the French philosopher's categories of mimetic narrativity. In

*Prefiguration*, which refers to the expectations readers bring into a story, the scholar discusses two literary genres in which asbestos is featured, utopia – as well as its counterpart, dystopia –, and mystery. While the former category is oriented towards the future, showcasing the writers' (and the societies') enthusiasm about the infinite potential of the new material or deploring a reality in which the effects of asbestos are obvious, the latter dwells on a retrospective exercise, in which present troubles are explained in connection to a murky past, related to asbestos use. *Configuration*, which, in structuralist terms, is synonymous with emplotment, and refers to the elements that make up the story itself, is the second part of the volume, where Rose analyses the meaning and mediating role that various narratives gave asbestos. Such examples can include writings about illness or stories about seeking justice and compensation in asbestos-related cases. The third part is *Refiguration*, for Ricoeur, a phase of understanding and transformation, when the story is taken back to the real world. Rose reserves for this part a survey of sites that follow the „life-cycle” of asbestos, from the mine, the place of its extraction, through the factory, the place of its manufacturing and production, to the built environment, for its distribution and consumption, up to the dump, the place of its disposal. What the author achieves is a genuine cultural geography of asbestos, which maps the evolution of this physical object and metaphorical element, as well as the process of attributing value to it and then of confiscating it.

The corpus analysed in this book is very vast. While it includes only texts from English-speaking cultures, the selection criteria are very convincingly justified, in relation to the literatures of the countries best known as asbestos mining nations and as large manufacturers of asbestos products. British, Canadian, American, Australian and South-African writers are discussed in the eight chapters, as well as in the Introduction and Conclusion. Both highbrow and genre fiction are canvassed, as the selection criteria are based on the principle of cultural relevance, rather than aesthetics. In fact, this aspect is in consonance with the declared purpose of the series to which this volume belongs, the *Edinburgh Critical Studies in Modernist Culture* series, coordinated by Tim Armstrong and Rebecca Beasley, to expand the sense and scope of the canon of modernism, to reflect on modernisms, in the plural, and their numerous cultural, intellectual, and historical contexts. As a result, Arthur Rose walks his readers through an impressive gallery of texts and genres, ranging from prose, drama, poetry, and documentary, and many writers, including Lawrence Durrell, Djuna Barnes, Ross Raisin, Alan Bennett, James Kelman, Marianne Moore, Edwin Rolfe, as well as Richard Kunzmann, Louise Penny, Damien Boyd, or Algernon Blackwood.

A comprehensive and astute inventory of literary texts in which asbestos is embedded culturally and symbolically, as well as a compelling story that documents the success and disaster of the two-faced material, Arthur Rose's book, winner of the 2024 ESSE Book Award, invites readers to reflect not only on asbestos itself, but also on literature's ability to shed light on individuals' and communities' experiences with asbestos in a way no other medium could. What legal and medical discourse, historical accounts, and economic news took decades to achieve, *Asbestos – The Last Modernist Object* succeeds in one stroke.

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**MADALINA ARMIE**

***THE IRISH SHORT STORY  
AT THE TURN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.  
TRADITION, SOCIETY AND MODERNITY***

New York and London: Routledge, 2023, 242 pp., ISBN 978-1-032-30825-8

**MIHAELA MUDURE**

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In 2023 Madalina Armie, a distinguished scholar and professor at the University of Almeria in Spain, enriched the scholarship on the Irish short story with the monograph she published at Routledge. Probably based on the doctoral thesis that Armie defended at the University of Almeria, in 2019, this study continues, at a higher level, Armie's previous scientific activity, consisting of articles published in prestigious journals, such as *Irish Studies Review*, *Review of Irish Studies in Europe*, or *Studi Irlandesi*, and the co-editing of the Routledge collection *Trauma, Memory and Silence of the Irish Woman in Contemporary Literature: Wounds of the Body and the Soul*.

Armie's work intersects with previous ample studies of the Irish short stories, such as *The Irish Short Story* co-edited by Patrick Raffroidi and Terence Brown in 1979 (the first extended study of this very popular genre), *Stories by Contemporary Irish Women*, co-edited by Daniel J. Casey and Linda M. Casey in 1990; *Twentieth-Century Fiction by Irish Women. Nation and Gender*, published by Heather Ingman in 2007; *A History of the Irish Short Story*, also authored by Ingman, but published in 2009, or *The Irish Short Story: Traditions and Trends*, co-edited by Elke D'hoker and Stephanie Eggermont in 2015. To all these studies and the numerous articles mentioned in the bibliography, one could add the articles by Maureen Murphy (1979), Anne Enright (2020), Adrian Goodwin (2019), Eoghan Smith (2019), Gillian Moore (2019), or Anne Fogarty (2013), which point to the interest raised by Irish literature, in general, and the Irish short story in particular.

Already in 1989. Richard L. Thompson dealt with six Irish short story authors (George Moore, James Joyce, Sean O'Faolain, Liam O'Flaherty, Frank O'Connor, and Mary Lavin) in his monograph *Everlasting Voices: Aspects of the Modern Irish Short Story*. It is also remarkable that, in 2019, Patricia de Aquino Prudente defended a doctoral thesis on *The Contemporary Irish Short Story: Identities in Transformation* at the University of Sao Paulo. Certainly it is Armie's merit that she ventured on a territory that was and still is of interest to so many researchers, while also mapping a new perspective in Irish short story studies.

At the end of his review of Rafroidi and Brown's collection, James H. O'Brien (1981: 103) expressed his hope that "this excellent volume, *The Irish Short Story*, will perform an Arnoldian function of criticism, stimulating not only criticism but new, revitalized approaches to the writing of short stories". This statement seems to have acted as a foreshadowing of further researches, in narrative terms a prolepsis within the story of the Irish short story. Madalina Armie's book is certainly such a "new and revitalized" approach.

From the very beginning of her scrutiny, Armie delimits, very clearly, the object of her scholarly interest. She does not deal with the Northern Ireland short story, nor does she deal with the short stories written in Irish. Armie's method is cultural studies, which presupposes that the literary discourse is seen as a particular manifestation of culture as constructed in a certain historical period. The span of time chosen by Armie is the period of the Celtic Tiger (1994-2008) and the post-Celtic Tiger years (2008-2013), with all its economic and identity implications. The reader must appreciate her intellectual/epistemic bravery, as the closeness in time to the object of literary analysis makes analysis more difficult, but also more challenging. The lack of a deep perspective in time can be fatal if the analyst does not have good literary taste and solid theoretical background. Or these are exactly the qualities which impress the reader of Armie's study.

The book is divided into two well-constructed sections. The first third of this cultural/literary investigation deals with the historical background of Irishness from a post-colonial and multicultural perspective, including former marginalised groups from a gendered or ethnic point of view: women, lesbians, homosexuals, Travellers or Roma. Armie historicises her study by following the consequences of the Great Famine, emigration, exile, and the monopoly of Catholicism during the period that she chose for perusal. As the emphasis is on literature as a cultural product, Armie clarifies, in the last subchapter of her study's first part, the overall importance and peculiarities of the Irish short story writing and then she gives an overview of this genre at the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the next one.

The following two thirds of the study are literary analyses of 26 short stories written in English. Armie chose her authors with taste and competence. Emergent voices as well as well-known authors offer their perspectives on the issues mentioned in the first section of the study. Kevin Barry, Mary Costello, Emma Donoghue, Gerard Donovan, Roddy Doyle, Anne Enright, Claire Keegan, Éilís Ní Dhuibhne, Julia O'Faolain, Colm Tóibín, William Trevor, and Elaine Walsh translate into emotions and life experiences what was defined as turn-of-the-century Irishness in the theoretical and theoreticized part of the book. I wonder, on the other hand, why each analysis is titled according to the same pattern: an -ing verbal form (a participle or a gerund followed by an object, or an adverbial) and then the literary placement of the analysis. Some examples should be enlightening for the reader of this review: "Blowing Dreams and Tulips in Anne Enright's 'Yesterday's Weather'" or "Emigrating Dreams in Emma Donoghue's 'Counting the Days'" or "Seizing the Change in William Trevor's 'Of the Cloth'". This monotonous structure of titling in this second section results in some didacticism, which contrasts with the careful and nuanced analysis of the short stories.

A keen reader can also wonder why the problem of space does not explicitly appear in this monograph. Time is amply treated by Armie, but philosophically, time and space usually go together in what is called the time-space continuum. Hopefully, Armie will use all her knowledge and diligence in order to tackle this problem in the future. Derek Gladwin already paved the way for a spatial approach to some short story authors (Anne Enright, Claire Keegan, and Kevin Barry) in an article he published in 2019 and Armie's temporal/historical approach from this monograph could very well be completed with an analysis of turn-of-the-century Irish landscapes as places of the nation's environmental concerns. The minor suggestions from above are not meant to undermine the value of Madalina Armie's monograph. The importance of any piece of scholarship also comes from its ability to open new roads and invite follow-ups. Undoubtedly, Armie's work is a piece of scholarship that impresses the reader by its grasp of an important genre in the Irish and the Anglophone tradition. For anyone interested in the Irish evolution of the short story, this book is a must.

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**PABLO GÓMEZ-MUÑOZ**

***SCIENCE FICTION CINEMA IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY –  
TRANSNATIONAL FUTURES, COSMOPOLITAN CONCERNS***

London: Routledge, 2023, 194 pp. ISBN 9780367759063

**ELIZA CLAUDIA FILIMON**

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Contemporary Science Fiction productions take centre stage in Pablo Gómez-Muñoz's *Science Fiction Cinema In the Twentieth Century – Transnational Futures, Cosmopolitan Concerns*, an exceptionally detailed study, winner of the European Society for the Study of English (ESSE) Book Award for 2024, in the Cultural and Area Studies in English category. It is the result of research partially carried out at the University of California, the Eaton Collection of Science Fiction and Fantasy, and encouraged, reviewed and supported by the research group Cinema Culture & Society at the University of Zaragoza in Spain, under the direction of Professor Celestino Deleyto.

In the 'Introduction', Pablo Gómez-Muñoz gives an overview of the main features of the films under scrutiny, namely post-2000 SF Hollywoodian and Western productions addressing cosmopolitan issues via imaginary universes, which function as metaphors of current concerns. The author emphasizes the ambivalent approach to borders that cosmopolitan discourses take in the context of globalization. The role of technology, an inherent element of SF films, is linked to a comprehensive typology of borders which become mirrors of cosmopolitanism. The aim of the study is to analyse the thematic components of a selection of SF films, focusing on their versatility in addressing cosmopolitan concerns.

In view of facilitating an in-depth understanding of the analysis, Pablo Gómez-Muñoz provides the context and definitions of key terms such as 'globalization', 'transnational', 'cosmopolitan', or 'international', giving examples of films whose production or success is highly influenced by transnational approaches. Contemporary theories on 'borders', 'aliens' or 'otherness' pave the author's critical endeavour to expose the ambivalent nature of filmic units in connection to transnational narratives:

"The relationship between cosmopolitanism, borders, and sf on which I focus in this book concerns the *transnational* physical, symbolic, spatial and temporal borders that sf uses to construct seemingly cosmopolitan discourses." (Gómez-Muñoz. 2023: 12)

Four groups of films are analyzed in the main body of the book, with each chapter introducing common elements of each subgroup and giving a detailed critical perspective on two illustrative examples.

The first chapter, 'Systemic Dystopias Through a Cosmopolitan Lens: Contesting Global Neoliberalism', focuses on systemic dystopias and their exploitation of humans caught in a socioeconomic race for profit, leading to shifting individual and public physical borders. Technological advancements in connection to global financial issues lead to societal division and the exploitation of diminishing resources. The author focuses on what he calls 'systemic dystopias', which heavily impact the lives of citizens, emphasizing contemporary thematic conventions, such as surveillance, geopolitical conflicts, and biometrics, with a magnifying glass on the dystopian SF films *Elysium* (2013), and *In Time* (2011).

The following chapter, 'Greening Apocalypse: Eco-Conscious Disaster and the Biopolitics of Climate Change', zooms in on transnational environmental concerns voiced through extreme weather manifestations, which generate displacement and post-apocalyptic alternatives to life on Earth. Climate change in old and recent SF productions grouped in the category of 'disaster films' becomes a catalyst for migration at a large scale, with the disastrous consequences of environmental degradation, as the author demonstrates in his thorough evaluation of *2012* (2009).

'Love for the Alien Same: Interplanetary Romance and Kinship as Harbingers of Ambivalent Cosmopolitanism', the third chapter, deals with transnational relationships by exploring human and alien figures engaged in profound connections that transcend the layers of reason and prejudices. These relationships are viewed as metaphors of transnational love, whereby couples become "harbingers of cosmopolitanism" (Gómez-Muñoz. 2023: 90). LGBTQ themes are seen as frameworks for investigating the borders of sexual cultures, as Pablo Gómez-Muñoz states in his study of the romantic SF film *The Host* (2013) and the comedy film *Codependent Lesbian* (2011).

The core of chapter four, 'The Cosmopolitan Potential of Connections across Time and Space', is human, yet more abstract, as the concept under discussion is humanity in its journey across space and time, configured via narrative loops, "the butterfly effect, the mutations of spaces through time, the interconnectedness of time, and even reincarnation" (Gómez-Muñoz. 2023: 16). Spatial networks in SF films are evaluated from the perspective of their global negative effects, and temporal shifts in the narratives are interpreted in the context of facilitating the survival of species, with particular focus on *Cloud Atlas* (2012).

Pablo Gómez-Muñoz's book is a meticulous and elaborated study of twenty-first-century science fiction film, which delves beyond conventional themes and spectacular effects, uncovering representations of transnationalism and cosmopolitanism at societal and individual levels, via characters engaged in negotiating shifting borders under the pressure of uncontrollable technology and heterotopian paradigms.

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**DANIELA PETTERSSON TRABA**

***THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONCEPT OF ‘SMELL’  
IN AMERICAN ENGLISH***

Berlin: De Gruyter, Mouton, 2022, 270 p., ISBN: 978-3-11-079229-4

**LOREDANA PUNGĂ**

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Synonymy has long been a central topic in linguistics research, mainly in fields like lexicology, lexicography, semantics, and pragmatics. Despite some periods of apparent consistency in research trends, approaches to synonymy have generally been uneven, particularly with regard to the classification of synonyms (closely tied to the varying theoretical perspectives on meaning that scholars have adopted), to the type and number of synonyms considered, their contextual behaviour, and the methods used to investigate them.

The diverse approaches to synonymy have undoubtedly advanced our understanding of the phenomenon, but they have also opened the door for novel analytical perspectives. The opportunity to build on existing research (which she proves to be very well familiar with) in order to come up with fresh perspectives has been taken aboard by Daniela Pettersson-Traba, in her book *The Development of the Concept of SMELL in American English*.

Her study employs a corpus-based methodology, integrating elements from the distributional approach, usage-based onomasiology, and historical linguistics within the broader framework of cognitive semantics. It focuses on a group of five near-synonymous adjectives associated with the concept PLEASANT SMELLING: *fragrant*, *perfumed*, *scented*, *sweet-scented*, and *sweet-smelling*. The contextual occurrences of these adjectives are extracted from the *Corpus of Historical American English* (COHA) and their distributional patterns are analysed, with the primary aim of highlighting their functional similarities and differences.

Following two introductory chapters that contextualize the study within the broader trends in synonymy research, and establish its overarching objectives (*Introduction*, and *Synonymy*), the third chapter (*The Concept PLEASANT SMELLING*) transitions the reader towards the analytical core of the book. The chapter begins with the author’s justification of the selection of the synonymic set, drawing on information about synonyms in the semantic field of PLEASANT SMELLING in eight contemporary English dictionaries. Subsequently, the COHA is introduced, and the methodology for constructing the two databases central to the analysis is outlined in

detail. The chapter also provides an account of how these databases were annotated according to eleven distinct variables: language-internal semantic variables (sense, semantic category, animacy, concreteness, countability), language-internal non-semantic variables (syntactic function and degree), and language-external variables (the temporal span during which the collocations containing the terms under scrutiny as nodes were recorded and the type of text in which they appeared).

Thus, Chapter four, *Semasiological and Onomasiological Analyses of the Synonym Set*, examines the language-internal variables Sense and Semantic category. From a semasiological perspective, the key results of the analysis in this part of the book reveal that the concept PLEASANT SMELLING and the five adjectives under analysis exhibit varying frequencies across the four time periods documented in the COHA, spanning the time from 1810 to 2009. Furthermore, their distribution across natural, artificial, figurative, and indeterminate senses also shifts over time in terms of frequency, with some of the adjectives being inclined towards one or some of the senses over the others. The most obvious diachronic distributional variation consists of the transition from the concept (and its corresponding adjectives) predominantly referring to natural smells to increasingly referring to artificial ones. This is reflected in the senses of the nouns which collocate with the five adjectives that indicate pleasant smells.

When adopting an onomasiological perspective on the five near-synonymous adjectives set in the latter part of the chapter, the author concludes that diachronic shifts in their frequency are not uniform across all contexts of use, but are instead confined to specific semantic functions.

To sum up the results of her two-sided investigation in Chapter four, she points out that the semantic development of the five synonyms is characterized by attraction and ongoing substitution.

The discussion of context-related frequency variation is taken further in the next chapter, *In-depth Onomasiological Analysis of the Synonym Set: A Multivariate Approach*. Here, the focus falls on testing the models that can be applied to assess the adequacy of the variables in predicting the choice of the adjectives in the synonymous set on particular occasions of use. The models discussed include multinomial and mixed-effects regression approaches, which demonstrate notable advantages. However, these models are shown to be effective only up to a certain point, highlighting the need for further refinements to account for the full range of variation present in the data, including a closer look at the idiosyncratic collocational behaviour of the near-synonyms.

A sample of how this behaviour can be approached is offered in Chapter six, *Idiosyncratic Collocational Preferences of the Near-synonyms*, where Daniela Pettersson Traba zooms in on the noun collocates (in a L5 – R5 context window) of three of the near-synonyms in the set under investigation. The initial analysis, which uses Semantic Vector Space modeling, reveals potential semantic shifts in the collocational patterns of these near-synonyms. Building on these findings, the author further conducts a qualitative investigation of their most prominent collocates, categorized as consistent, initiating, terminating, and transient. Besides emphasizing the highly idiosyncratic collocational patterns of the adjectives, the conclusions

drawn in this chapter corroborate earlier findings: some of the near-synonyms tend to prefer the natural sense, while others show a preference for the artificial sense and the frequency of these synonyms varies across the time periods represented in the corpus. Specifically, the study demonstrates at this point that synonyms experiencing a decrease in number of their collocates over time also tend to show a decline in their overall frequency.

If so far in the book the data have been approached from a linguistic perspective, in the last chapter, *The Concept PLEASANT SMELLING: A Victim of Societal Change*, the perspective is an extra-linguistic one. First, a dictionary-based approach is used to identify whether the frequency of the most prominent noun collocates of the near-synonyms fluctuates in time in the *COHA* in general, not only when they are used specifically with the adjectives under scrutiny. Then, a data-driven approach is employed to look at the same kind of diachronic behaviour of the associations of these collocates with other words in the corpus. The findings validate a previously drawn conclusion, too: the concept PLEASANT SMELLING evolves in time from being applied predominantly to natural smell to being used for artificial smell more often. What the results of the analysis in this chapter bring new is that this evolution of the concept follows the evolution of extra-linguistic, societal developments in the United States, in the period covered by the *COHA* - more exactly, those implied by the Industrial Revolution and its consequences on the mass production of goods and the extensive access to them, coupled with a move away from the natural world.

In this book, the author successfully fulfills the research objectives she outlines in the Introduction. She provides valuable insights into a semantic field that, while rich and complex, has been underexplored in prior works. By employing synchronic methods to address near-synonymy diachronically (which has not been extensively done so far, hence one aspect that contributes to the novelty of her work), she demonstrates the efficacy of using such methods in longitudinal semantic research. Quite notably, her analysis encompasses an unusually large number of near-synonymous expressions, which are examined across a diverse range of usage contexts. Furthermore, the adoption of a corpus-based methodology not only ensures the relevance of Pettersson-Traba's study as an up to date type of research, but it also contributes to highlighting the potential of corpus linguistics in semantics research, thus adding to studies that have so far underscored it (e.g. Lindquist (2009), Geeraerts (2010), McEnery, Hardie (2012), Stefanowitsch (2020)). From a theoretical perspective, the findings offer robust evidence that the process of attraction plays a more significant role in language change than has been acknowledged in much of the existing scholarship on synonymy. This insight, in turn, suggests that the mechanisms driving the diachronic evolution of semantically related words and expressions, including near-synonyms, are more intricate than previously understood. Beyond the well-documented processes of differentiation and substitution, others, like attraction and convergence, influenced by extralinguistic factors, may also contribute to these evolutionary patterns.

Pettersson-Traba's book is primarily aimed at a professional audience, as the depth and complexity of the analysis necessitate expertise in the field to fully grasp its development and significance. For such an audience, it may serve, as the

author herself desires, as a source of inspiration to go deeper into the intricacies of diachronic semantics, especially when investigated with big data instruments. Some of the possible avenues to take in future research are actually indicated in the concluding chapter.

Nevertheless, the book may also prove rewarding for readers with less specialized knowledge of semantics and corpus linguistics. The author takes care to elucidate the more intricate concepts (e.g. *absolute synonymy* vs. *near-synonymy*, *entrainment*, *salience*, *collocation*, *colligation*, *semantic preference*, *semantic prosody*, *the non-synonymy rule*, etc) and provides thorough explanations of the broader research methodological context within which her analysis is situated (e.g. the *Behavioral Profile approach*, the *semasiological*, the *onomasiological approach* to near-synonyms, etc). Thus, she manages to make her text accessible and informative to a wider audience as well.

For younger researchers, the book may as well be a model of well-planned and carefully carried out research that strikes the right balance between well-grounded theory and empirical data analysis, so as to generate meaningful conclusions.

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