

**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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