

Collected Short Works

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Poems

Place

Beneath Green Oaks

In torpor deep, below a golden oak, I sleep in mud, ‘neath root and sod
while overhead the sky wheels by, above an ever-lasting changing land
my acorns, found by hog and jays, have grown a wood
of other mighty oaken graves, where slumber deep my noble band.
Their swords and armour now just antique rust. The dragons that still live today
no longer threaten maidens fair, nor breathe their fire on castle walls;
now newer monsters borne of other fires, dance their deadly aerial ballets
on battlefields that once were ours. Yet still both innocent and the guilty fall.
I am future and the past, and though once dead I still remain alive.
Spread out across a place of time and space I feel a thrill of worldly thunder
shiver in my buried bones, that tells me I must soon revive
my slumbering band of knightly friends, to ride again in righteous wonder.
Though our past has once been done, we seek a future not yet won;
would that we could change the one and never know the other.

Deep Below

I have told you before, of the trolls
that live deep in the ravines,
below the high pastures.

There they bide their time while we shepherd the animals up to their summer grazing.
The cows are happy with rockrose, salad burnet and wild thyme.
More particular, the goats seek the gentian and alpine bistort amongst the mountain springs.
Dormant below, behind the waterfalls, deep in the caves, the trolls sleep fitfully,
dreaming of autumn meat, and a midwinter feast.

The Sunken Garden

This garden is twice hidden.

Encircled by rhododendrons and camellias,

its paths are coffin deep below the main lawn.

We have left the big house, and walked across newly mown grass
to find a subtle path meandering through tangled larch and birch.

Their fractured fingers point urgently, reaching for the unseen light.

We ignore their imploring, preferring to move on amongst damp ferns, moss and decay
to find our secret place where we can no longer smell the greeness of the distant lawn
and our tongues can taste the moistness of the shadows.

There is no bird song here.

No summer sun falls on the grey sandstone flags under our feet.

We sit on an oak bench in the arbour.

It bends softly under our weight, its slats rough and weathered,
bruising your skin as you crumble the wood between finger and thumb.

A lonely carp floats on the surface of a pool, horizontal, its mouth open and eyes wide but
dull.

I look into the dark browns and greens of the ferns - even they are not blameless.

Shadows shelter conspiracies as each leaf takes sides in our arguments.

Here too our thoughts are twice hidden,
once within ourselves and once buried in the rough brown soil.

The Figure in the Crypt

In this crypt a leaden figure
stands rooted in the crystal water;
motionless in frozen rigour.

Summer tourists startled, shiver.
Stricken mute they stop and honour
thoughtful souls become transfigured.

The vaulted roof contains our wonder;
whispered from the water's border
we hear our thoughts as wordless thunder.

Was it king or priest or unknown sinner
whose secret reasons strove to author
encrypted secrets in this figure?

And is this statue slave or brother
carrying out our silent orders
deep within the vaulting pillars?

Or was it God that made this watcher
and set him in the cool groundwater?
Inside the crypt a leaden figure
stands guard for us in frozen rigour.

See: <https://www.winchester-cathedral.org.uk/event/crypt-tour/>.

The Cathedral

In the stillness of the ancient stone,
Where the Cathedral stands so grand,
We search for answers, all alone,
But in the silence, no one understands.

The meaning of it all remains a mystery.
A force that we can barely comprehend,
A presence that we feel so urgently,
Yet cannot grasp, nor fully apprehend.

We look to the past, to ancient myths,
And to the present, in our daily lives,
We seek those signs, of truth's sweet kiss,
only find that new doubts inevitably arise.
But search we must, for in the search, we find
A sense of purpose and a peace of mind.

Stone and Glass

Winchester Cathedral stands so grand,
a symbol of faith, a sacred space,
built by man to some great plan.

Stone and glass give testament to mans'
toil to understand the godly grace,
Winchester Cathedral stands so grand.

But made for God? Or made for man?
In time and space too vast to trace,
built by man to some great plan.

Can we detect a guiding hand?
Or merely just a grand façade?
Winchester Cathedral stands so grand.

Within its halls, the congregation stands.
Ambitions hidden within the stone and glass,
built by man to some great plan.

And though what's sought is not at hand,
a certain comfort falls within its space,
Winchester Cathedral stands so grand,
Was it built for God or Man?

Pendine Sands

That sweet, lugubrious scent
of hot rubber and even hotter oil,
Sticky in my lung,
Passion, then the speed
Sweeps the scent away.

In 1922 the annual Welsh TT motor cycle event was held at Pendine Sands. The firm, flat surface of the beach was ideal as it made a track that was straighter and smoother than many major roads of the time. At the time, Motor Cycle magazine described the sands as "the finest natural speedway imaginable".

Going down to Dover

Looking through the window, we see the fields go past,
Looking back at us, the cows seem quite unperturbed,
Looking through the window, the oast house points the way.
Looking to the pint, in the pub beside the church,
Looking down up on us, the clouds wash Kent away,
Looking through the window, the world goes by so fast
Looking at our reflections, I wish the day would last.

The Natural World

The Elms' Decree

The September breeze bends the slender, elm trees.
Tested, they rebel. We see them weep.
We entered the cemented recess, where the beetles creep,
perplexed yet helpless.
Relentless, yet here they rest.
We left them then, where they dwell.
We seek the elms' secrets, where they swell.
Gentle seeds sleep bedded deep, heedless
even when held there where these shelters freeze.
They never express resentment, never seek revenge.
Yet beget reverence when sleep's sweet spell ends.

The Watchers Above

High above the Rose Window,
a pair of peregrine falcons
look down upon the city.

Like the citizens below, they have simple needs.
To eat, to mate, to breed -
to pass their genes on to future generations.

And in their short existence, they seek a semblance of pleasure:
the rich, plump meat of a pigeon breast
or the soapy copper taste of the fresh blood of a baby rabbit.
The satisfaction of regurgitating
a church mouse's liver
into a chick's craving beak.
The lazy circles in a summer thermal and
then the thrilling swoop to lift a basking trout
from the Abbey fishpond.
The moment of procreation.

The peregrines do all of these without conscious thought,
living and acting in the moment, as they have always done.
They know nothing of and care even less about the human concerns below.
The idea of mortgages, a new Mercedes, Council Tax, voting for your MP,
a round of golf and quiet pint are as alien to the peregrines as the bottom of the Atlantic.

Yet, were the birds able to see inside the human minds below,
they would find a much more familiar world, where human love belies
the human blood that is spilt,
and existence is the only prize.

Conspiratorial Collections

A *band* of pigeons
call the shots and
steal *worms* from robins
until the *mischief* of the
magpies sweeps them all away.

With shoulders hunched,
high in the bare beech branches,
the rooks hold *parliament*
and *scold* the *clatter* of the
jackdaws and the jays below.

And golden finches
try their *charms* to feed their chicks -
troubled, they quickly leave
when falcons *cast* their hungry
eyes upon the feasts beneath.

Then linnets bury *parcels*
deep within the border shrubs,
as sparrows *quarrel* over
asylum with the cuckoos -
while *murdering* crows pass by.

The gull

You think you are kind, tossing me a cold chip,
For me to swoop on, as I soar the sea wall.
Maybe you feel some guilt, for taking that cod
From out of the sea, and yes, out of my beak.
The batter looks so lovely and yellow and crisp.
Stuff your face full of chips, I really don't care.
Come hell or high water, the gulls will still soar,
but somehow, I doubt I'll be seeing you there.

In the beautiful countryside

The trembling finches
seek asylum with cuckoos.
Magpies cease mischief
and sparrows mend their quarrels
when murdering crows pass by.

On the Forest Floor

Beetles creep,
perplexed yet helpless,
embedded amongst leaves and moist detritus,
they seek some thing but I know not what.
Clambering, climbing each monstrous twig, each vast leaf,
journeying into unknown lands that stand inches apart.
Antenna gently weaving, sensing, tasting, they secretly delight
in the subtle rot of the forest floor.

Love

Where almond blossoms fall

The wind swirls leaves around my garden gate
like some celestial laundry machine
and tumbles rooks from my neighbour's roof
as they squabble in the bubbling air.

An angry squall stumbles by and paints my face
with waspish raindrops. They spit and sting
as if the north wind wants to bite
the succulent flesh of my red-raw cheeks.

Blown south, my shivering thoughts fly to
a warmer Spain and a pilgrimage made years ago
when, mothered by green, Galician hills
Santiago called us to a field of stars.

Each night we slept on tapestries of cream and pink
and zephyrs whispered to us in the orchard groves.
The cold wind thrills me now, as I recall
a distant spring spent where almond blossoms fall.

Tuba Mirum

This year, the end-of-term concert is Mozart's Requiem Mass.
A week before, I call Simon Teagle, (3rd desk in the BBC Phil).
He has no idea who I am,
only a distant voice on a telephone, asking to borrow a basset-horn.
A day later, I take the train and the tube down to Camden.
He is quite happy to let me disappear into the December darkness,
his fourth-best instrument under my arm.
No deposit or receipt are involved,
but I spend the return journey trying to remember if
I thanked him properly for his casual act of kindness.

A week later, with the audience gathering in the nave,
I ask Rachel to help me with my bow tie. She sets her viola aside
and her nimble fingers play a silent arpeggio,
easily accomplishing what I could not.
As she leans forward to perfect the symmetry of her handiwork,
her perfumed warmth is a brief, intense intoxication.
I try to thank her for her kindness, but already she is looking past my shoulder,
hoping to catch the eye of the tenor trombone,
her prospect for the night.

A Eutectic Entanglement

Peter wants to kiss Charlotte.

Peter wants to move in with Charlotte.

Charlotte needs a flatmate to help pay her rent.

Charlotte does not like coming home to her empty flat.

Peter holds Charlotte's hand when they go to the cinema.

Peter asks Charlotte if she is lonely.

Charlotte says she does not know if she is lonely.

Charlotte takes Peter to the park and they feed the ducks.

Peter throws breadcrumbs while Charlotte just watches.

Peter asks Charlotte if he can cook her supper that night.

Charlotte does not like fish, but Peter cooks her fishcakes.

Charlotte wonders if ducks would like fishcakes.

Peter kisses the soft dimple at the base of Charlotte's neck.

Peter licks the fat flesh at the base of Charlotte's thumb.

Charlotte says it tickles when Peter nibbles her ear lobe.

Charlotte says yes, yes, yes but she wishes she had not.

Peter meets Charlotte in the coffee shop later that week.

Charlotte tells Peter, she has got a promotion.

Charlotte tells Peter she has bought a chinchilla.

Peter and Charlotte both walk home alone.

My Javanese Innamorato

Shall I expresso how I seek to love you?
May I melt your frosty look with affogato
or taste your warmth in sweet and steamy mocha?
Your perfume smacks my nose with rich aromas

chasing all my worldly thoughts away.
Now let me drink the creamy froth atop your latte,
so then your caffeine fizzes, jolts and sears my veins
and tsunamis heat and carouse within my brain.

Let me taste the sticky sweetness of your hips.
Your liquids kissing, smack my burning lips.
I cup my hands around your fervid body
caressing, seeking, tasting all your beauty.
My thirst so quickly quenched, in hope restarts.
But desire does wilt. Too soon we must depart.

The Ballad of Peter and Charlotte

Peter meets Charlotte in the coffee shop to ask her to wed.
But Charlotte doesn't want Peter to sleep in her bed.
Charlotte tells Peter she has bought a chinchilla.
Peter is puzzled how that could fulfil her.
Charlotte says that she is not very good on the web
And really had meant to get a rabbit instead.

The Girl in the Blue Costume

Blue. So many blues.
That's what he remembered.
Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky
that quickly deepened into ultramarine
as dusk fell across the woodland valley between the moorland hills,
nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air
as they bathed in the valley stream,
washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies.
No, it was the deep azure of her costume and the silvery cobalt shadow of her hair.
It was the dark cherry blue of the bruise on her thigh
where she had cantered under an unseen bough.
And the cornflower blue of her irises,
with their little flecks of steely blue determination -
these prizes he held fast in his memory.
These, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen,
flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water.
Now, so many years later, the viridian and emerald greens,
the burnt umbers and sienna have all faded into distant greys -
but still the blue remains.

Now and Then

There is no free will within a clock.
It cannot choose to tick when it should tock.
And being merely made of cogs and wheels
it has no way to sense or think or feel,
but measures out our three score years and ten
with even handed unthinking acumen.
But those of us with conscious minds -
could we perhaps defeat the flow of time?
How wonderful to return to years gone by
and choose some other better paths to try.
It makes me wonder had I kissed you when,
so long ago, we had left the pub and then....
would you have kissed me back and held my hand
even though I thought you'd never really understand -
and would you have then come home with me
and would I not now then be writing poetry?

Doubt

I wait in silence for the phone,
and bite my nails right to the bone,
my chest feels hollow as a drum,
my breath quiesced. Why don't you come?

I cannot speak, nor raise my head,
my desire suppressed but far from dead
remains furled up, like secret doves,
hidden, folded in magician's gloves.

I feel my stomach at its rawest,
my pulse is faint. I cannot rest.
I hear the tunes from last night songs
but the words now say: 'Did I do wrong?'.

I taste the perfume of that one
last kiss. Please, do not end our brief liaison.
Your leaving split and rift my heartwood
and burnt the innocence of childhood.

(This was an exercise in re-using the rhyme words from Auden's 'Stop all the clocks').

Life

What does the rainbow taste of?

What does the rainbow taste of, I wonder?
Do the colours just fizz off your tongue?
Do they smell like the rain when it thunders?
And why shouldn't these colours be sung?

And why are the blues and the violets
So far away from the reds?
Would the people get up and riot
if the green was a yellow instead?

So why is the world made the way that it is?
Why can't it be made to our whim?
Wouldn't the world be a much better place
if we asked more questions of Him?

The puzzle of the cauliflower

As I gaze at the surface of a cauliflower
I wonder - how does that work?
How does it grow to be finally fully formed?
Does it start from a bud, or a flower, or a seed?
And how does it know which shade of white it should be?
Though this Romanescu is startlingly green.
How does the outside know that it should grow those knobbly bits,
and how does the inside know it should divide into florets?
How does each cell know its own unique purpose in the greater whole?
And what on earth stops it becoming a courgette?
And in any case, why does it bother with all of this complexity?
For cauliflower heads, at least in Tescos, contain no nuts or seeds -
so they serve no useful purpose to propagate the breed.

Life Sentences

I had been warm and calm and comfortable, just one hour ago,
cocooned in aluminium, unready for the world below.
Across the divide, from LA to JFK, I had boozed and snoozed,
wined and dined, fed and pandered to a splendid sprouting lassitude.
Martinis dulled my thoughts until the thump of wheels upon the runway
cleared my gin-fogged mind. I take a rental and drive north on Broadway
where the billboards whisper secrets to me in the darkness of the night.
Their persuasions and promises are written in compelling rainbow stripes -
No PowerPoint needed, they pitch their deal in fonts of pink and neon,
their USP a desperate intimacy amid the city millions.
I leave my rental in a lot and move toward their seductive sights
where other raffish moths, dazed and confused, also flutter in the light.
The hard, dry heat of day lingers in the cracks amongst the concrete sidewalk.
Liberated, it drenches me as I walk from car to restaurant,
from bar to hotel room and then on to some uncaring customer -
a journey which will end only with the beginning of another.
Drowning in my everlasting business trip, I swim between Hiltons,
and dream of strawberries with cream and the scent of rain at Wimbledon.

(The American sentence, defined by Alan Ginsberg, is one that contains 17 syllables).

Dear Donald

Dear Donald,
Instead of you,
I wish I had married
Ronald
(Not Reagan but),
McDonald.
Then I would
perhaps have smiled more
on the podium,
instead of appearing to need
Imodium.
Love,
Ivana

Biscuits Optional

Such a simple thing.
Doughnut shaped; red, featureless but complex.
Circular, biconcave, disk-shaped; a deformable object
whose shape facilitates passage through the narrowest vessels.
Alone, it does nothing, but in its trillions,
in vast corpuscular battalions.
it gives us the seconds, minutes and hours of our days.
Sometimes too, will we make our own gift of this stuff.
A debit made with no thought of repayment or profit -.
the possibility of future credit is surely dividend enough.
Gathered together, we restock with tea and biscuits
or perhaps seek something stronger in the Frog and Frigate.

There was a time when gran was cool

There was a time when Gran wore thigh-length boots
and danced till dawn with Mick and Keith.

Smoked weed between her whiskey shots
declaiming she would never be a Female Eunuch.

There was a time when Gran summered in the Hindu Kush
and giggled with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi
Cleansed her thoughts with Tarka dhal and tea
and tried to be the all, she knew that she could be.

There was a time when Gran waitressed in the Hard Rock Cafe
and breakfast merely meant a cough followed by two fags.
Spent a month in bed with John and Yoko
and dreamt of picnics in Paul and Jane's white Roller.

There was a time when Gran wrote for Vogue and Elle,
her words whizzing past like molten rifle shells,
bloodying many of the great and good,
while still seducing those that said they would.

But now, within a mist of memories,
not quite sure of where or why or who she is,
the sounds of some discordant, distant chiming bells
mingle with the shrapnelled thoughts of once-exploded shells.
Soon Paul and Art will ask her for one last dance
and sing her lullabies within the sound of silence.

Your voice

Your voice sounds like the sizzle of fried sausage
as we giggle and chuckle around the campfire;
Your voice is like the soft keening of the breeze as it
wanders through the stand of aspen trees,
breathing your perfume, on the hairs of my neck.

Your voice is the sound of the river dancing on pebbles
brought down from the hills beyond the aspen stacks,
crystal clear, satiating and slaking my parched thirst.

Your voice is the bronze, burnished tone of a jazz saxophone,
as it romps and revels and kicks up its heels;
Your voice is our telephone cord of conversation
as it carries your thoughts across the fire's flames,
piercing my heart - thus I am revealed.

Thoughts after a PET scan

My body is old, almost as old as the universe.
My body is made of particles formed in the Big Bang.
My electrons have whooped and spun for fourteen billion years
Dancing with implausible probabilities around their parent nuclei.
But now, I fizz and pop and crackle, as the fluorodeoxyglucose wanders in my veins
Briefly fracturing its atoms, shooting its gamma rays out.
Strictly lectured, I avoid pregnant woman and young children on the bus home
But that is not a new objective.
I am old, close to three score and ten.
When I was young, I was as immortal as my atoms.
They will continue in their cosmic dance even now I know
My whole is no longer greater than the sum of my parts.

Things

I once loved many things.
Wooden bricks, and chews,
a comforter in baby blue,
nipples to suckle and
breasts to nuzzle.
Carpet seas to sail
before I could toddle.
Each day an adventure
and the warmth of a cuddle
I loved leaves in the garden
and the worms and the snails.
The blackbird's song and
the red robin's coat tails.
I loved the walk to the school,
through the row of chestnut trees,
and the cool brown gloss
of conkers gathered with glee.
I loved the wrapping at Xmas,
the baubles, bells and lights,
and marzipan icing
and the gift of a bike.
But now that I'm old
I have discarded these things,
and my only desire,
is to once more begin.

Beware the New Year Resolution

This year
I assert
I shall shrewdly,
easily
and weirdly
place in
my lines A
E and I
only.
...
bugger.

The Ark

What did Noah's animals think
When the flood receded?
Did they miss their parents,
Did they miss their chicks?
Did the ewes know
It was not their sin
That raised such a storm
And condemned their young lambs?

Certainty

How wonderful you were
To burn that witch.
How clever it was
When you bombed that city.
How I applaud your thoroughness
To defeat your foes and orphan
their children with unwasted pity.
How I admire your religious zeal,
to cleanse each faith, and use your might
to send their souls to find their gods.
Faith is so simple when you know you are right.

Sensory Abundance

I see
an artful curve
in the softness of the line
of your eyelid that
I touch
with the pad of
my little finger wiping away
the tearful drop that
I taste
the sweet salt of
on your cheek as my tongue
seeks your mouth and
I smell
the minted scent
that lingers on your lips
that speak the words
I hear
soft in my ear
as you whisper of lands
that never can
I see.

Who?

Am I the me that I once was
Yes, surely that is so.
But then again maybe not.
That skin that kept the water out
a month ago in the morning shower,
is now dust upon the carpet, and
a new skin keeps me whole.
The blood cells that eagerly flowed
these last three months
are fading fast as they wither
to be harvested by some macrophage
within the secrets of the liver.
So is the me that I once was
still here in any meaningful way? -
as all my body gets replaced
each year, each month, each day.
Even the thoughts I thought I had,
now have faded in the past -
while new thoughts overwrite the
very memories I thought would always last.
So, if I'm not the one that I once was,
then who should I then be?
And who do those past thoughts belong to now
if they don't belong to me?

Eggy Mash

The one thing I'm sure I can remember from my childhood, is having mashed potatoes and runny egg for lunch. Though my mother probably called it dinner. I think I must have been three or four, at the time. Many of my childhood memories are things I don't really remember - they are just things that people later told me had happened. After all it was so long ago. But I'm sure I remember the mash, with the fried egg on top, a runny yellow yoke as bright as the summer sun and a knob of butter melting and oozing down the side. And pushing the fork through the yoke, so that it also ran down the side, all mixed up with the mash and the melted butter. Ah, no, maybe it wasn't a fork. I think I remember a pusher, and a spoon. Yes, I'm sure I remember a pusher - just like a fork but with a flat plate across the non-handle end. So that you could push the runny butter and the runny yoke into the soft, white mash and onto the spoon. And then send it 'down red lane', just as my Mother would say, and into my happy tummy. I think the pusher must now be in a drawer or cupboard somewhere, probably with my Christening mug, both wrapped up in blue tissue paper. How I loved that pusher and the eggy mash. I can remember that. I'm sure I can remember that.

A lapse in time

Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing
if we lived our lives backwards?
Forgetting all those dreadful stings
of life's outrageous fortune,
to find final comfort in the womb.

Sundaes

When you are young, sadness is not true melancholy
But merely a knickerbocker glory without a long spoon
But when childhood deepens into adult understanding
Then we learn there are no cherries at the bottom of the glass
And coldness remains even when the ice cream is gone.

Can you touch your nose with your tongue?

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?

How can you make just a one-word pun?

How can you make a potato crisp bounce?

How can you make a leotard flounce?

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?

How can you quiet a bell till it's rung?

How can you bend a Jacob's cream cracker

and how can you unpluck a harvested apple?

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?

How can you cry before you are stung?

Why can't you laugh when you tickle yourself

and how can you dance when you're up on the shelf?

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?

How can you catch a hare with a drum ?

How can you smile when you bite on a lemon

and how can you hide a secret unspoken.

How can you touch your nose with your tongue?

How can the old become once again young?

How can you keep two magnets apart

and how can you put back the wings on my heart?

The Fruit of Life

I like apples.
Their cold, firm, sumptuous flesh
Golden Delicious
Aptly named.

I love pears.
How they yield in your mouth as you bite the crisp skin
and the sweet juices run down your chin,
from the secrets within.

I love the bag of cherries.
So bitter, sweet and sour,
stoning my mouth with a reddening frown.

But bananas are so sad, as they squish in my mouth.
There have been so many banana skins, all through my life.

And is there honey still for tea?

There are 25 times more cod in the North Sea
Than rats on land in Britain.
So much more pleasant to have fish and chips for tea
Than chew on politicians.

Death

A faithful friend

I only popped round for a cup of tea
but you were no longer there.
I knew you were going soon,
but I had not thought to be prepared.
Even though we knew that day would come,
Still, I was surprised that you had gone,
Your dog had sat watching by your side
A trusting guard, puzzled by the lonely night.
But now, his duty half forgotten
he looked accusingly at me.
His dinner bowl lay empty
Filled to its brim with memory.

The melting heart

When Jan'ry's chill brought glistening fields of ice
and February laid down carpets deep of snow,
a frozen man we made, a bower to our bliss,
with carrot nose and buttons of the blackest coal.
Oh, purest body, how we loved our toil.
Our hearts besought you Snowman, will you stay?
But, soon friends part; Then whither goes your soul
when March's rays so kiss the snow away?
Then dog, in loss, did wail and pant, and ate the carrot anyway.

Past

Winter, 1536

While clouds kiss and bruise the hills with grey
A crow and worm romance in the fields below.
The worm smells juicy to the murderous crow,
A morsel to be eaten soon, unless it will obey.

The worm is hiding in the frosty sward
until the spring melts all the winter snow.
Then the secrets of the worm's burnished glow
may be opened by the crowbeak's rasping sword.

For now, while winter fights its white campaign
the worm shares her place with the bones of kings,
and gold or souls and other buried things.
So crow can only caw its spiteful refrain.

The passing time will fade the snow's pure white
then worm will curl up, smaller, smaller
and ask the Maker "Pray protect your messenger,
and hide me in another shining night,

for I have seen so many wondrous things
burnished, glimmering as I slither deep below
Save me from the scraping beaks of crows
And allow my witness to the sins of kings."

"Mary, you have never served me true",
Said crow as he addressed the worm,
But as in all our lives each season's turn
and all our efforts must in death conclude.

And though now you hide within the frigid turf
To each of us the winters end must come,
Yield your soul, or else your life is done,
And that will be the end to all your work.

The worm replied, "So, Thomas, must I cast aside,
the holy love of our one true lord,
He surely knows that when I give my word,
I know different in my heart - or else I die.

As fields submit to winter's white campaign,
clouds kiss and bruise the hills with grey,
a queen parlays her soul for earthly pay,
while crow caws out his rasping, cruel refrain.

The Lady

One summer day, my lover and I
walked hand in hand, through Hampton Court.
We came to a maze and entered within,
following no plan, just steps without thought.

Our path was ushered by cool laurel walls,
our voices were silent, but our minds were entwined.
At each branch in the path, with arms around waists,
we chose as if one and walked as if blind.

We came to a clearing and sat on a bench.
My head on his shoulder, we dozed in the heat.
Did we dream that we heard a murmured exchange,
as a couple appeared and stood by our seat?

The lady wore pearls on fine gold brocade
while the man had a doublet with steel on his waist.
'My sweetest Jane, you must no longer delay'
and with the palest of cheeks, she accepted his embrace.

The breeze chilled my skin as the couple turned away
and faded from sight into corridors of green.
I looked to my love and asked him to say
if he shared my dismay at all that we had seen.

As he kissed the tears that ran down my cheek
my heart ran wild like a young girl betrayed.
Then his lips softly touched the nape of my neck
with the loving caress of the executioner's blade.

Often, I think of what happened that day
and I hold my love tight in a desperate embrace.
For though we returned many times to the maze
our steps never found the path to that place.

Similaun Man

As a child I leapt and danced in snow
and laughed and tumbled but felt no cold.
The innocence that I felt when young
melted like snowflakes on an outstretched tongue.

As a youth I walked by summer streams
and roasted marmot on a pinecone fire.
Under beech and aspen I stalked for deer
and nothing then could feed my fear.

As a man I climbed to icy peaks
and strode over passes, thigh deep in snow,
My eyes were dazzled by the blue and white
while my heart sang the songs of those awesome sights.

As a chief I stalked and hunted other men,
until they came and hunted me.
Brought down where bearded eagles nest
I sleep unyielding, trapped in ice-cold, glassy rest.

Otzi the Iceman, also called Similaun Man, Hauslabjoch Man was discovered in 1991, (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ötzi>) frozen In a glacier in the high Alps.

The Mismaze

While fields submit to winter's white campaign,
clouds kiss and bruise the hills with grey.
Wild winds pin the sky to earth's window frame
and I flee the town to climb my favourite way.
Atop the hill, the hard and frosty sward
is cut by dark and winding lines. I ask what strange,
mad maze is this, with only but a single path?
No answer comes - just winter's wild refrain.
You could not know whose feet would trace your craft.
But now my steps between the frigid turf
decode your labyrinthine cryptograph
and bring me to the centre of your work.
And though you're gone, I still remain, a mourner
To your death below, in cold and tender water.

To the east of Winchester, on the top of St Catherine's Hill there is an area of narrow paths, exposing the chalk under the downland turf. This is the Winchester Mizmaze, one of eight historic turf mazes still remaining in England. This is not a maze in the modern sense but a labyrinth, cut into the chalk, with no junctions or crossings. It is laid out in nine nested squares, similar to those used for the traditional game of Nine Men's Morris. Although mediaeval in design, its origins are obscure. A local legend suggests it was carved one summer in the 17th century by a boy from Winchester College who had been banished to the hill for bad behaviour. To occupy his time, he recalled a lesson on classical maze design and carried out the lonely task of laying out and cutting the maze. The story ends with the boy sadly drowning in the river below on the last day of the holidays. There is a similar maze at nearby Braemore House - perhaps the boy had seen this and used it as part of his inspiration.

20 July 1969

Sunday in August, and the Dog and Duck is packed.
Church goers and golfers convivially discuss
the vicar's new wife, or their slice on the ninth
and wish they'd spent less time in the rough.

Those who sang 'Sheep may safely graze' just an hour ago
buy the vicar large sherries to help save their souls.
At home roast lamb waits with the wife and the dog.
She reads the Observer and the cabbage grows cold.

At the bar, the butcher slowly sups his light and mild
with a whiskey chaser, a habit acquired
in his conscripted past, when a stray German bomb
gave him a ghastly glimpse of his own kingdom come.

And though at the end of each long working day
he intently scrubs the blood from under his nails
he can't quite remove the faint scent of a place
where men hacked into flesh and spilled their entrails.

On Sunday he puts on a clean, crisp, white shirt
while his wife starches a new, stiff, white collar.
He buttons it down: a tourniquet applied,
'Careless words cost lives' – thus thinks the old soldier.

His young son once asked, 'Dad, what did you do in the war?'
he just said, 'Nothing much really, hardly nothing at all.
Mostly KP parade – you know, peeling some spuds -
It was a different world then - I can barely recall.'

Now the son is a man, he won't drink with his dad
but prefers real ale and rugby and banter with mates.
A chicken in a basket is all he knows of his dad's trade.
He'll be rich when he graduates – an accountant perhaps.

The landlord calls time and the father goes home,
while his son sneaks across the estate to the new Prince of Wales
The village bobby arrives and suggests a lock in
and prop challenges wing to a swift yard of ale.

Soon men will stand on an alien soil
And take that giant step for all mankind.
But how much further must a son reach out
to grasp the thoughts of a father's mind?

Arrival

I come from a king who is maker less
I come from a land that is unbound
I come from a place that is untaken
I come from a tribe that is proud

I come with a knee that is unbended
I come with a shield that is unbroken
I come with a sword that is unsullied
I come with my sons to rule here

Future

The Audit

Above the earth, the silver cylinders silently hang -
until a horde of slimy, green-skinned things.
descend from those impenetrable metal skins.
“Bring forth your leaders” is their imperious demand
“For all on earth must answer to our universal commands”.

“We are the Interstellar Standards Organisation
We come to review your planetary quality policy
There are grave concerns in Alpha Centauri
About the constant wars between your nations
Now please, describe your mitigative plan of action”.

Across the world, there was widespread consternation
As no-one had ever thought to plan ahead
and consider what would happen after they were dead.
No government ever planned beyond the next election
nor strived to give the living planet any compassionate consideration.

And while the nation’s leaders hid behind their usual spineless evasions
and went on TV to mouth their platitudes and prevarications.
The leopard and the lion, the koala and kangaroo,
the red-faced ant and the tortoiseshell blue,
the dolphin and the bearded gnu,
the wise old whales, and all the others too;
they all knew exactly what to do!
And no humans survived that terrible extermination.

The green skinned things just stood aside
For their prime directive was ‘We may not interfere’
They made a note to return in say one thousand years,
but for now the only thing that they could decide -
was that certification must once again be totally denied.

The Rest

That was not all she saw

Outside her window, the Mongols flood past in a monstrous campaign -
a firestorm of blood through the streets of Beijing.

Later, she tastes the hot wounds as the arrows bite deep
in the softness of flesh on the fields of Agincourt.

Her chest thrills to the thunder as the cannons proudly speak
from the English oak castles in Aboukir Bay.

The next day, she savours the taste of the musket's soft smoke,
standing shoulder to shoulder with the Emperor's guard.

She hears the sharp crack as the grapeshot flies by,
and the Eagle is thrown down under the Wellington boot.

Much later, entrenched then in mud, she cracks bones as she steps,
then sleeps in the soil of Flanders' sweet fields.

And now, in the present, although soundless and silent,
she sobs in despair for the fallen, both enemies and friends,
forever untombed among the surrounding bookshelves.

The Primary

Gary, was that madness,
when you lent me your primary?
Just sticks and fabric, sealed with dope
Held together by sinews of steel.
Exposed, I sat under a man-made wing.
Winched up into the dawn sky
by a simple car pulled rope.
Barely higher than the treetops
I soared amongst angels,
though it was the kindness of your trust
that was the most angelic of them all.

*(A primary is a simple, one man glider, used mostly in the early part of the twentieth century.
This is Gary flying the same glider, at the Long Mynd.)*

Far Flung Knowledge

After the pub, we eat curry and watch
oddly dressed figures from an exotic academe.
Enrobed in their Levis and 70's wild hair
they dance behind the dust on the TV screen.

We see the thoughts of Euler and Gauss,
appear as lists of poker-faced glyphs
and slowly digest long pondered lemmas
delivered to us via the spells of UHF.

Many years later, the cathode has cooled.
Some memories remain, but mostly they're gone.
The magical echoes of those broadcast thoughts
have faded like the snap of an old popadom.

VHS has departed, as have the folks with wild hair.
But with the theorems they taught, their students propound
the communication protocols
that now send us net bound.

We no longer embrace in the rooms where we met
and Google is now god in our church of the Web.
But teachers still teach and poets still speak
though sadly I'm now too old for curry before bed.

The washing line

Upon the washing line, I'm firmly pegged,
The garden is still, no song from any bird,
Until a tap and tap and tap is heard.

A man emerges from the shed,
Stick in hand he ambles down the path,
Hobbled by the accident's aftermath.

A hand stretches up, and grasps my ankle,
And with a tug, and a ping of the line,
The one legged man says 'That sock is mine'.

The Morgan

It was the night before Xmas and up on the roof
Santa had parked to let the team rest their hooves.
Santa was troubled and all in a dither.
His reindeer were knackered and needed a breather.

So Santa climbed down and looked in the shed.
He found an old Morgan, its battery quite dead.
A peek at the chassis revealed a bad crack.
One wheel had gone missing, the axle now on a jack.

Its chrome work was pitted, the frame had dry rot,
The kingpins were worn and the gear box was shot.
Its bumpers were scuffed, and the leather was torn,
And dull, faded paintwork made it look so forlorn.

Just then, a trio rode up from out of the east,
Summoned to assist at the elves' behest,
They came bearing gifts, and were laden with tech,
Unleaded petrol, HMP grease and Castrol GTX.

One tapped Santa's shoulder, and said 'Have no fear',
I am Prince Lucas, and this is the Grand Duke of Goodyear.
The third, the tallest, declared 'I am Ed from China,
Stand aside as our magic restores this old car.'

With a bang and a flash, the drive train was renewed,
The chassis re-welded, the ash frame re-glued
A fresh coat of paint shone bright in the moonlight
New exhausts and twin horns gave the reindeer a fright.

Then the sleigh came down from the roof to the drive
To be hitched up behind and the car came alive
The reindeer were tuned out to graze on the back lawn
Santa hopped right in and with a wave he was gone.

So tradition was preserved, and both near and far
The presents were delivered by a red Morgan car.

Love for Lydia

In a long distant youth, on a dusty library shelf,
I first discovered the works of H. E Bates.
‘Love for Lydia’ was my favourite book.
It told of a fabulous, unreachable world,
Of country houses and a sheltered, selfish girl
and how a boy at once is smitten
and journeys to eventual commitment.
I sent you an order across the web,
so I could re-read that book from my long distant youth,
So what, Dear Amazon, sparked in your inhuman head
and made you send me Jane Fonda’s ‘Love for Lycra’ instead.

(Love for Lydia is a semi-autobiographical novel written by British author H. E. Bates, first published in 1952).

How to Make a Nuclear Bomb

Assemble your thoughts and assemble a team,
Accumulate ergs and accumulate dreams,
Focus your mind with the power of thought,
Burnish your intellect until you have wrought
A plasma so dense, so implausibly hot
That it makes atoms boil and fizz in the pot.
Now remember that God gave you freedom of choice
So throw down your bomb and prepare to rejoice.
Don't puff out your chest, but admit to your fraud,
And don't ever seek to call yourself Lord.

Banana and Elephant Go to the Park

Banana and Elephant went to the park one day,
To enjoy the sunshine and have some play.
They came across a big concrete bowl in the ground
And on the top was a plank with wheels round and round.

Banana jumped on the plank - and whizzed across the bowl.
He zoomed up the side; he was in perfect control.
It's tremendous fun - why don't you have a go?"
Elephant hrumphed down his trunk. He wanted to do it also.

So, Elephant tried to get on the board,
But there was only room for two of his feet and not all four.
Then he thought of the humans he'd seen at the zoo
And reared up in the air so he was standing on two.

Elephant sped down the bowl at a tremendous rate.
'How do I steer,' he trumpeted, though it really was too late.
He came off the board with a terrible crump!
And came back to earth with a sickening bump!!

Elephant looked to see what Banana thought of his fall
But Banana could not be seen, not anywhere at all.
Underneath his body Elephant felt something rather soggy.
Oh dear, Banana's skin was now a full three feet from his body.

Elephant then thought, "I'm afraid there's nothing for it
Because no one can ever unmake a banana split".
So, he eat the banana and was then heard to remark:
"A banana skin can cause a nasty accident in a skateboard park."

The Brief here was to write a four-page spread for a child's picture book.

The Driving Lesson

All right, that hill start wasn't so bad was it?
Best one yet, but it did judder a bit.
Check out that classy gear change, Dad – fourth all the way down to second.
Don't get too big headed – now into first after you've put the clutch in
Easy-peasy, lemon squeezy
Fairly good, on the down change - let it rev freely
Gosh, where did that motorbike come from?
How about looking in your mirror then?
I'm trying my best, Dad, you're frizzling my mind.
Just relax then, let the car do the work. I'd
keep my hands on the wheel though
love, quick - there's a gap after that lorry - go, go, go!
Mirror, signal, manoeuvre - there, that was bang on that time
Now, don't get cocky - it was hardly sublime
Ok, now for my favourite roundabout
Perhaps that is where the examiner will find you out!
Quit hassling me, Dad!
Right, I'll only talk at your command
Sure, I bet!
Take the third exit.
Unfortunately, if we want to go home, we need to take the second.
Very good, but we need petrol at Tesco - as your sister would have reckoned
What - are you saying she drives better?
Xanthe passed first time, remember!
You've always loved her more than me – right, I'm walking home from here!
Zayda...ZAYDA -for goodness sake, come back my dear!!

Cottoning on

Cotton, milled not in Lancashire,
but in some unknown Asian province,
Smooth, silky to the touch.
It is perhaps the blue of the sea
that bore it to these shores,
and now into my tee shirt drawer.
Short sleeves, crew neck, plain,
no emblem, an anonymous uniform.
It hides many sins.

Haikus

The rooks giggle and laugh
uplifted, dancing,
while wind caresses the oaks.

(this seems to be inside out 7-5-7 – it should be 5-7-5), let's try again!)

Rooks giggle and laugh,
uplifted, squabbling, dancing,
while wind breathes on oaks.

Two sides of Love

When you hesitate
to answer if you love me,
I know it's too late.

In the afternoon heat
a lolly in the freezer
left by you for me.

I am old and now
All there is to be knowing
Except wiseness of youth

Old now, I know now
All there is to be knowing,
Sad my youth is spent.

I am old, knowing
All there is to be knowing,
All my wisdom spent.

Short poems

I rared to go
When I was younger.
Older now, it's rare I go.

Stamped by the die of life
It is too late to change
And thus I die.

Short Stories

Joe Cortana

Just one hour ago, I had been warm and calm and comfortable, swaddled like a baby, high in the skies in my aluminium cradle. From LA to JFK, I had boozed and snoozed across the continental divide until the thump of the wheels on the runway cleared my gin fogged head. Now, driving north on Broadway, the billboards whispered to me in the darkness of the night. No PowerPoint needed, they pitched their deal in compelling fonts of pink and neon, their unique selling point a fragile, desperate promise of intimacy amongst the city millions. As I left the rental in a parking lot, the pavement released its heat into the late evening under my feet, fanning my senses with the sweet perfume of tarmac and the acrid taste of cement dust. I set off towards the brightness of the lights, ready to settle amongst the other moths, thirsty to drink the nectar of companionship.

I was on my third Manhattan when the blonde breezed by - her sky-high heels heartache red to match her lips, hair tumbling onto her shoulders in a way that made Niagara look like a shy rain shower. She paused and then poured herself onto the bar stool next to me.

‘Hello, stranger.’

I was not surprised. My Alan David suit, Gucci diamond cuff links and old school Paul Molé razor cut all signalled - ‘I have it all -- come flutter with me’. She was just another moth, trapped by the gaudy lights of the city.

‘What will it be?’ I said.

She let me take in the full view before replying. I added up the numbers – just under six feet in her four inch Jimmy Choo stilettos - waves of blonde hair lapped gently on her shoulders. Her Pearl Rose cut-out tulle gown did not so much clothe as embrace and caress her perfect hour-glass figure. For a moment the image of a blonde angel formed in my mind. Or maybe a blonde Satan. But Satan couldn’t be blonde, nor female, could she?

‘Vodka, straight, one ice cube.’

I nodded at the bartender, and then, pinned to the moment by the piercing cornflower blue of her eyes, I rolled the dice and said:

‘Beware of her fair hair, for she excels

All women in the magic of her locks;

And when she winds them round a young man’s neck,

She will not ever set him free again.’

She frowned for a moment, her eyes half closed. Then with a half-smile she asked:

‘Byron?’

‘Close, but no cigar - Goethe, actually.’

‘Well, either way, it’s an interesting opener. I rarely get propositioned in verse.

I felt this was going to be easy. My first mistake.

‘And am I propositioning you?’

‘I’d be disappointed if you weren’t.’

‘Don’t you think we should be formally introduced first?’

‘Naturally. Sophia, thirty two and unattached. By day, I’m an associate professor in Algebraic Mathematics at Columbia. I teach number, space, quantity and arrangement. My speciality there is the dynamic assessment of chaotic distributions.’

‘Impressive.’

‘So now you know everything.’

‘Well almost everything - what do you specialise in at night?’

‘Let’s just say I like to study human nature.’

‘Funny, I thought you might be in fashion, or the theatre, movies. Maybe even real estate. That’s a fabulous dress. Worn with great *savoir faire*, if I may say so.’

‘Indeed, you may.’

‘But a professor - I’m intrigued and bit abashed. They say appearances can clearly be deceptive. Clearly my preconceptions are unreliable. If I’m honest, I may be a little unnerved too.’

‘I sometimes think that honesty can be over-rated. It makes a man so - uninteresting. Now it’s your turn.’

‘Roger Prendergast. Thirty five. Twice attached and equally twice detached. Eastern sales manager for Derringborn Agricultural Machinery. I specialise in helping my customers spend their money – but in a good cause – mine. Our model 3500C harvests more than 90% of the blueberries in New York State – that’s kind of impressive too.’

That was my second mistake, but it would be some time before I realised it. My excuse was that I was distracted by the disarming way the end of her nose tilted up as she frowned back at me:

‘Now you do disappoint me. And so soon, too,’ she said. ‘Really? I’m sure I could change your mind, given the opportunity.’

‘Now you do disappoint me. And so soon, too. You’re no more Roger Prendergast than I’m Marilyn Monroe.’

‘Ah, now you disappoint me. Blueberries are a nice healthy business. Lots of anti-oxidants, plenty of fibre, vitamin C, K – a bit of manganese....’ The sales pitch was falling flat - I sensed from her glowing complexion she already had access to a reliable supply of vitamins.

‘Somehow I don’t think you’re called Roger. And I don’t see you being a Prendergast either. Goethe and Prendergast don’t seem to be very plausible bed-fellows.’

‘Well, as I said earlier, appearances can be deceptive.’

‘But honesty is so uninteresting – you said it yourself,’ she said.

‘Ah, but maybe I was being dishonest, when I said that.’

‘Well, that would be rather contradictory – but then logical paradoxes are part of my mathematical specialities.’

‘But how about this.... If I say I’m dishonest then how can I be – because I would be being honest by saying I was dishonest.’

‘I think maybe I need another drink, before I work on that one.’

I looked up and nodded at the barman, while I considered my next move. I did not think it strange he now had the head and body of a Labrador. Fortunately, his paws seemed to give him no difficulty when mixing the drinks. I did however find it a little distracting when he wolfed down my brandied cherry.

‘So, if you’re not Roger’ she continued, ‘then would you like me to tell you who you really are?’

‘Be my guest, my analyst has been trying to do that for some time.’

‘You are in fact, Joe Cortana. Thirty five –’

‘There you go, I wasn’t completely dishonest.’

She gave me the coldness of her cornflower blue stare for a full ten seconds, as the price of my interruption. For a moment, I was back in 5th grade, outside Mr Stuckelhymer's office, the day I hacked the school computer and gave everyone in my year straight A's.

‘As I was saying, Joe. Thirty five. A PhD in Natural Language Simulation using Coherent Artificial Intelligence Engines at MIT then an MBA at Yale followed by five years on Wall Street. Then CTO in a Silicon Valley start-up. Half a billion turnover in 2 years. A little better than blueberries, I think.’

She was good. I waited to see what came next.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell a soul,’ she said.

‘How come?’

‘I told you, I’ve a soft spot for dishonesty.’

‘Is that the only reason?’

‘Well, what is dishonesty, really?’

‘I would have thought that would have been pretty obvious,’ she said.

‘Wikipedia would say it was a lack of probity, cheating, lying, or deliberately withholding information, or being deliberately deceptive or a lack in integrity, knavishness, perfidiousness, corruption or treacherousness.’

‘That sounds pretty comprehensive to me. But I get the feeling you’re going to tell me that isn’t the whole story.’

‘Well, what happens if Wikipedia itself isn’t honest? It’s only a machine after all.’

‘Ah, but it has a bunch of honest humans behind it.’

‘How do you know they are honest? As Macbeth says, according to Wikipedia, “There is no art to see the mind’s construction in the face”, and in fact you can’t even see their faces, so how can you possibly know they are thinking? How can you know they are honest?’

Again, there was the tilt of the nose, and the furrowed brow, but only for a few milliseconds. Then, as she considered her answer, her scarlet lips briefly formed a little heart shaped pout, a definite bonus score as far as I was concerned.

‘They’re honest because that’s the consensus,’ she said. ‘If someone puts a rogue description up, then the community will remove it or correct it. Everybody’s watching, so you can’t be dishonest.’

‘Maybe the probability is that the description is true. But there is no absolute reality surely? Perceptions change. New things are discovered. Society moves on. A while ago we all were certain the Earth is flat, that there were canals on Mars and the moon was made of green cheese. Now we live in a different reality.’

‘You know you really do have a rather unique way of propositioning a girl.’

‘And how is it working for you?’

She gave me the cornflower blue eyes again. This time though they’d come down from the glacier - they made me think of the blue sky on a clear Alpine morning in April. As she leaned forward, her hair rippled with hints of buttermilk and butterscotch.

‘I’m wondering if you want me to be Lady Macbeth, given that you are quoting Macbeth’ she said.

‘Hmm, that would probably be better than one of the three witches. They had an interesting take on reality too – “Fair is Foul, and Foul is Fair” I recall.’

The conversation came to a natural pause. To be honest, we were not getting very far. But that did not matter. It wasn’t even the point. It was the interaction that was exciting,

the open possibilities, the unsaid invitation, the uncertainty, the ambiguity. The arrival had no real interest for me, it was the travelling that I found arousing.

‘So, are you going to tell me what you really do?’ she asked.

‘You might say I’m in the reality business. Occasionally people get confused and ask me to sell their house for them, but then I explain their reality is not my reality. It rarely gets a laugh. I’m all about truth, in all its forms.’

‘How so?’

‘There are two sorts of truth. The truth that describes the hard, cold world we live in and the other truth, the truth that you can’t touch or taste or see - the truth that warms the heart. The first of these is science – that’s your hunting ground. The second is art. That’s where I come in. I provide a little warmth when people get a little too cold in the harsh reality of the every-day world. I find them a truth that they can believe in.’

Our glasses were empty again. I signalled the barman. He had discarded his Labrador costume, and for an instant I thought he looked like an Aardvark. But maybe it was just his big nose.

‘You make it sound very attractive. Everyone needs a bit of comfort these days. But it doesn’t really tell me what you actually do. What would do if you I asked you to comfort me?’

Again, I fell into the gentle blues of her eyes – this time I recalled summer hay, and the warmth of the sun on my back.

‘I’m an imagineer.’ I said. ‘You might even say a cultivator. I harvest people’s ideas, desires and aspirations and re-engineer them, and give them back. I sell people their dreams. It’s a compelling product – when you can have whatever your heart desires’.

‘And my dream is?’

‘I sense you need a little warmth too.’

We were just two slices of prime meat, perched on our stools, gently sparring as we gradually got to know one another, already knowing how it would end, enjoying the journey as much as the destination. Of course, I would soon find out I was wrong, probably as wrong as I’ve been. This would turn out to be the most unusual night of my life. It was only when I was locked away in an eight by six county jail cell two years later, that I realised how big a mistake I had made. By then she was long gone, her departure leaving a trail of destruction like some capricious tornado, tearing up the foundations of my life and leaving me sucked dry of breath and thought. I looked through the rusty bars at the flaking plaster on the wall opposite and wondered where she was now. I determined then that I would track her down, even if, as seemed likely, it was the last thing I would do.

But that was all still in my future. In the bar, I was simply caught up in the moment, my senses alternately dulled by the bourbon and aroused by her perfume.

‘Shall we go somewhere a bit quieter?’ she said.

‘I’d invite you to my room, if I had a room.’

‘Not checked in yet?’

‘No.’

She put a hotel key on the bar.

There’s an alley back onto the main drag. The kitchen is next to the John. I imagine the sanitation inspector is not that happy about that, but it makes a nice discreet exit. I’ll see you at the hotel shortly.’

‘Surely, that would be rather ungallant, to leave a lady at the bar.’

‘Maybe, but I think I recognise the two Feds that just walked in...’

And so it started....

* * *

He hits the reset button. After the technicolour visions of the last half hour, the room seems to be painted in monochromes. Olivia is still leaning back in her chair, peering sightlessly into the distance.

‘What do you think?’ he asks.

She can’t hear him, so he turns his microphone back on and says it again. She reaches up and untangles her long blond hair from her headset. Blinking in the room’s artificial light she says:

‘I still think it’s a pile of sexist rubbish, Jon. But it’ll sell well. Because it’s sexist rubbish, even though that is more than a bit annoying. There’s a bug at 3:42 where the AI repeats itself – it’s where Sophia says she’s disappointed. Or maybe the AI is just telling the truth for once The Labrador was a bit surreal – but I think we should leave that in – it was kind of fun.’

‘I’m still getting a headache though when Joe’s thoughts are played back over mine.’

‘Maybe it would help if I knock 3 dB off the induction amplitude in the headset. What do you think? And I don’t really like the way they keep quoting stuff off Wikipedia. Maybe we should disconnect the conversation engine from the internet – it’s not great pillow talk when they keep quoting Shakespeare or Goethe at one another. Would that be a turn on for the average thirty year old? Somehow I doubt it.’

‘Yeah, that sounds good. Let’s take a break and call in a pizza.’

‘Then we can go over the conversational subroutines again.’

‘Right, shall I get a large New Yorker then?’

‘Naah, go for a Hawaiian, I’ve had enough of New York for the time being.’

A Final Dawn

It was the most extraordinary of ordinary days. It wasn't that John Smith's morning run was remarkable – no, it was just his regular three miles in the dark of Clapham Common, on a chilly winter morning, completed in 22m 15s. Not a personal best, just an ordinary time. Nor was there anything unexpected about his hot shower, or his black coffee, scrambled eggs and slightly burn toast. As usual, despite the blackness of the winter morning, he was precisely and unremarkably on time for his ten-minute walk to Clapham Common tube station. Inevitably, his 7.53am Tube into Holborn Circus was 3 minutes late, as it had been most of the winter. It was only when he emerged into Kingsway that he began to feel a slight oddness. There was something slightly squiffy about the darkness around him and the absence of the morning dawn. Surely it should be starting to get light by now, even in depths of January? But, as he walked to his office, the crowds on the pavements seemed quite normal and unconcerned.

Pushing through the doors of Willmott, Wallington and Weatherby, Solicitors and Commissioners of Oaths, he nodded to Miss Ponsonby behind the reception desk. She was gazing dreamily into the space above his head and made no response. This too was hardly extra ordinary as it was well known throughout the office that Miss Ponsonby's dedication to her local bridge club nights had finally resulted in her capturing her own personal Jack of Hearts. They were still in the full flush of mutual adoration. Her mind was often elsewhere, and even occasionally her body, as if she felt she would not be missed she regularly slipped round the corner for a long lunch with her beau.

John proceeded up the stairs to the office he shared with Hugh Wallington. As usual, Hugh had not yet arrived, one of the many perks of being a son of the senior partner. John was pleased to have the room to himself and planned a quiet hour or two to deal with his current caseload. But before making a start, he wandered down to the little kitchen at the end of the corridor to make himself a black coffee. The dingy kitchen was deserted, again too early for many of his co-workers, and this added to his sense of gloom. It seemed unnaturally dark in the corridor too as he walked back to his office. He made a mental note to ask the building janitor to have a look at the bulbs.

Sitting down at his desk, he sipped the coffee carefully, to avoid burning his tongue. But the liquid seemed rather insipid. He could neither smell the coffee aroma nor feel its heat on his tongue. How strange. Perhaps the coffee maker was on the blink, or maybe there was something wrong with the electrics in the whole building. He put his finger in the coffee but he could feel nothing. The coffee was neither hot nor cold. Indeed it did not even seem to be wet. He raised his finger to his mouth and rubbed it on his tongue. There was no sensation at all. Puzzled, he pressed the intercom to his secretary:

‘Miss Jameson, is there something wrong with the coffee machine this morning?’ There was no response, so after a few seconds he said:

‘Miss Jameson, are you there?’

Again, silence. Perhaps the wretched girl was not in yet, either. John tut-tutted. It had always been a puzzle to how Willmott, Wallington and Weatherby’s managed to make any profit at all, given the cavalier way the staff treated the firm.

John stepped out of his office, intending to see if Miss Jameson was in the adjacent typing pool or if not, to search her out. But in the gloom of the corridor he saw Howard Willmott just going into his office, so he called out:

‘Morning Howard – what’s happening today? – is no-one else in?’

Howard looked startled and turned to see who had called out. In the gloom of the corridor, it seemed he failed to see John, and after a second of puzzlement, he turned and went into his office.

John called out again, ‘Howard!’ But it was too late as Howard had already disappeared.

John frowned and opened the door to the secretary pool. His frown deepened as he saw that Miss Jameson was sitting at her desk, intent on drying the manicure on her nails.

‘Miss Jameson! I was calling you.’

Miss Jameson, ignored him, still intent on perfecting the sheen on her nails. ‘For goodness’ sake, Susan - this isn’t a beauty parlour!’

Miss Jameson looked up, pursed her lips and then returned to examining her nails.

John strode over to her desk, his 6 foot 3 inches looming over her petite frame. With a quick motion he waved his hand under her gaze.

‘I don’t know what you think you are doing, Susan, but this isn’t very funny.’

Susan lifted her head and leaning slightly backwards looked past him, towards the open office window. Still pursing her lips she stood up and walked past him, pulled the window frame closed, carefully protecting her nails. Ignoring John, she returned to her seat and pulled a copy of Heat out of a desk drawer and started to flick through the pages.

This was too much for John. He reached over the desk and pulled the magazine out of Susan’s grasp. Except that he didn’t. His fingers did not seem to grip the pages, but somehow slithered through them as if they were coated in butter. Or maybe Flora Light, John thought, remembering Miss Jameson’s careful attention to a healthy diet. He made another grab for the magazine, but the outcome was equally ineffectual. What was going on?

Finally Susan looked up at John. At least that is what he thought. But then she said, ‘Good morning, Mr Willmott.’

John turned to see Willmott’s head and shoulders peering round the now open office door. John wondered if the rest of Willmott’s body was really behind the door or if Willmott was some sort of ghoul floating around the office. John often thought of Willmott as some sort of dastardly tormentor from an unseen world and often daydreamed up schemes of decapitating him. He mostly meant that in an organisational way rather than an actual

physical act – but that was simply the nature of the normal senior partner – junior lawyer relationship. Willmott was however quite kindly to the secretarial staff and simply said:

‘Good morning, Susan. Can you bring the Johnson papers round to my office? I need to review them before meeting the client at lunchtime. And can you book me a table at the Pig and Pork Pie for say, 12.30? Table for three I think.’

‘Yes, certainly Mr Willmott. Right away.’

John could not help thinking that Susan never responded to him with quite that tone of alacrity and deference. But now she was not responding at all. Willmott had closed the door and gone on his way, so John was alone with Susan again. Well goodness, he thought, she’s not going to ignore me anymore. A couple of quick strides and he was behind her chair. For a moment he considered whether his next action would be a summonable

offence. Undoubtedly, but then there were not going to be any witnesses so he would argue that he was acting under *jus naturale*. He was sure, under the circumstances, the average person would find his action reasonable. But then, just what were the circumstances? He still was not quite sure. He was certain sure however, that although Willmott might have the right to ignore him, Susan certainly did not. So he leaned forward and gave her long black hair a firm tug. Again, he had the feeling of water running through his hands, and his action had no effect.

‘For goodness, sake.’ he said, more to himself than to Susan. Determined to evoke some response, he leant down, placed his mouth next to her right ear and shouted:

‘Earth to Susan – time to come down to land. It’s your favourite solicitor, John, calling – your time is up!’

This in no way had the desired effect. Or indeed any effect. That was the moment that John realised that this ordinary day was probably going to turn out to be quite extraordinary.

Unsure of what to do next, he sat down on a chair next to the window. The room seemed to be getting gloomier, just like his mood. ‘Right – let’s relax - five deep breaths’, he said to himself.

‘One...two...three...four...five.’ He carefully intoned each number as he exhaled each breath. Wait, there was something odd about that. He could not quite put his finger on it, just as he had not been able to put his fingers on Susan’s magazine and hair. (Susan by this time had finished the article in Heat and was fishing about in one of the cabinets for the Johnson papers). Ah, he had it. When he intoned each number, he could not hear his own voice. And then he realised, even when he had shouted at Susan, he could only hear the words in his mind – his voice had been silent.

Around him the office was getting gloomier. He felt it closing in on him, as if the air was being sucked out of the room and an increasing vacuum was sucking the walls and ceiling in. He rushed to the door, but his hands could not grasp the door handle anymore. He felt a wave of sweat break out on his forehead and neck and he turned to Susan again:

‘Oh, my god, help me, Susan, help me...’

Susan, still oblivious, had now found the Johnson files and after stacking them neatly into date collated order, put them under her arm and walked to the door. John stood aside as she opened the door and then brushed past her, into the darkness of the corridor. There was something awfully strange about the building, and the people in it. Something alien, hideous and aweful, John thought, as he sped down the corridor, past reception and into the street. He had to get outside, into the light.

It was darker than ever outside and that indeed was truly extraordinary. It must be well past nine and there was absolutely no sign of the dawn. Even the streetlamps seemed to be darkening their souls to hide in the night. John shouted into the soundless dark:

‘Someone, help me – please, please... someone help me!’

The passers-by, each head down, scurrying past, wrapped up against the cold. Only an old news-seller called out: ‘Morning editions! trying to entice a sale. As John drew up in front of him, he looked down at the headline on the news-sellers board: ‘Terrible Tube Crash at Clapham Common – dozens feared dead’.

Vne – the velocity that should never be exceeded in normal flight

I met Jim in 1964. That was the year that the UK gliding championships was at Dunstable, and since it was just two weeks after we got married, that was where we spent our honeymoon. It was an abrupt transition from blushing bride to dutiful wife and glider crew – neither of which I felt adequately prepared for, but since I felt that married life must inevitably bring its changes and challenges I would simply wait and see what each new day brought. We duly arrived on the Friday at Dunstable Gliding Club in a Morris Minor, towing Jim's Skylark behind in a large wooden trailer, and spent the evening unpacking a tent, sleeping bags, cooking stoves and a week's worth of bacon and eggs.

The next morning, I helped Jim pull the glider out of the trailer and attach the wings and tail plane. While Jim then went off to the competition briefing to find out what the task of the day was, I lay on the grass by the glider, trying to ease the throb in my back and thinking that despite its fragile appearance, the wood and fabric of the glider weighed a lot more than I had expected. Looking up at the early morning puffs of white cumulus in the sky above, it was a puzzle to me how something as ephemeral and apparently made of cotton wool could also generate the thermal lift that sustained the gliders in their flight over the countryside.

“Come on, let’s get her out to the launch point – there’s no time to lose,” Jim said. “They’ve set an out and return to Bristol. That’s over a hundred and twenty miles – so the sooner I start the better”.

We pushed the glider onto the runway and Jim climbed in. A helper attached the winch cable, and a few seconds later the glider rapidly disappeared down the runway and into the air.

I went back to the tent to fetch my paperback and to find a quiet part of the airfield where I could lie in the sun escape into a more romantic world.

It was four in the afternoon when the airfield tannoy made the announcement I had been hoping not to hear:

“Glider 496 has landed out.”

That meant Jim was in a farmer’s field somewhere. He had suggested that this might occasionally happen to a glider, especially in a competition.

“You could never be sure,” he had said, “especially in an English summer, that the soaring conditions would be as good as the forecast predicted. After all, that’s why it’s a competition. It’s a test of your skill as a pilot to make the best of the weather.”

“Maybe”, I thought as I walked over to the competition office, “Jim is not as skilled as he thinks he is”.

In the office, they gave me a copy of the message that Jim had phoned in:

Landed out 2 miles north of Chipping Norbury, grid reference SP310271. Meet at Royal Oak pub in village.

“Well, it’s all part of the adventure of marriage,” I told myself as I drove the Morris Minor round to where we had left the trailer and hitched it up. I’m not sure I sounded very convincing though.

Chipping Norbury turned out to be village very much in the traditional English style, complete with thatched cottages made of Cotswold stone the colour of honey and fudge. I half expected Miss Marple to be sitting watching the cricket on the village green – and for a fleeting moment the image of a body lying under glider popped into my mind – maybe I was feeling a bit light headed as I had not had anything to eat since the bacon and eggs at breakfast. It was nearly 8pm by the time I parked the car and trailer outside the Royal Oak. I was beginning to feel quite tired – it had been long drive, particularly with the trailer on the back of the car. But I perked up when I saw a sign that said ‘Best Bed and Breakfast in Gloucestershire’ by the pub doors. Inside I found Jim in the snug, playing bar billiards with a couple of the locals.

“Ah, well done, lass – you made it then!” he said as he saw me stumble through the door. “Come on, let’s go and derig the glider – it’s going to be dark soon.” Before I could reply he had started bustling me out of the snug, calling over his shoulder to his new billiard friends, “Thanks for the beer and the game, lads – keep the table warm for me.”

“Are we coming back then?” I asked as we got into the car. “That seemed rather a nice place to stay the night – it looked like they might have a nice comfy four poster, and I’ve hardly eaten all day.”

“I’m afraid not, love. Mind you they did have an excellent home made steak and ale pie, but I expect it’s all gone now,” he said. “Anyway, we’ve got to get back to Dunstable tonight, so I can be ready for tomorrow’s task.”

“But it will be well past midnight before we get back to the airfield, surely?” I protested.

“Well, we’ve got plenty of bacon and eggs. And I want to get back and see how well I’ve scored. I’m sure there must have been lots of other pilots landing out – it was really hard work today. I hope I haven’t lost any points on the leaders,” he replied.

I thought about this in silence while we spent the next hour getting the Morris Minor and the trailer up a long, rutted farmer’s track and down to the bottom of a mown hay field, where Jim had managed to land the Skylark.

“Right,” said Jim, manoeuvring the trailer in front of the glider. “You go and open the trailer doors while I unhitch the trailer from the car. Then we can start by taking the tail plane off and then the wings. I’ve already disconnected the controls so there’s hardly anything to it.”

I did as I was told and went to the back of the trailer and opened the doors. It was quite a surprise, to say the least, to find that there already was a glider in the trailer. I looked across at Jim’s glider and then back at the trailer, and then it dawned on me that the number on the tail fin of Jim’s glider was 496. The numbers stencilled on the back doors of the trailer were 469. I had brought the wrong trailer.

“Jim,” I said, “You are not going to believe this....”

A year later Jim had swopped his vintage glider for a modern Cessna with an engine. Happily, I had swopped Jim for a different significant other too.

The Girl in the Blue Costume

Blue. So many blues. That's what he remembered. Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky that quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the moor, nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as they bathed in the valley stream, washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies. No, it was the deep azure blue of her costume and the silvery cobalt shadows in her hair that remained as burnished prizes in his memory. The dark cherry blue of the bruises on her right thigh, where she had cantered under an unseen oak bough and the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of steely blue determination. Those, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen earlier, flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water, a thrilling, ephemeral moment of colour. They had ridden many times across the moors, and deep amongst the valley woods and streams – the viridian and emerald greens, the burnt umbers and siennas have all now faded into distant greys – but so many years later, only the blues, so many blues, still remain.

‘What will it be then – the usual dry white?’ he asked.

‘Yes, please.’

She had taken her duffel coat off and was sitting on a bench next to the fire. When he brought the drinks there was no table to put them on so she held them, wine and bitter in each hand, while he took his coat off. As he sat down next to her, he leant across and kissed her on the lips. Not a peck, but not a full snog either. She did not resist, but she did not turn away either. He thought maybe he saw her cheeks flush, or perhaps it was the fire.

‘What was that for?’ she said.

‘Was that a bad thing to do?’

‘Maybe. Just unexpected.’

‘It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly wonderful blue.’

‘It’s just M&S. Hardly Versace. You always see me wearing M&S.’

‘Yes, but that’s when we meet after work. You’ve been seeing your clients. They like to see you in something posh but recognisable – but not too expensive – it reassures them you are part of the establishment. A male consultant wears a three-piece suit. A woman wears M&S. It’s like a uniform – a badge of office – I don’t see you in a swimming costume – it was ... it was sublime’.

‘A good job you don’t normally see me in a cozzie – that would hardly blend in in Regent’s Street. Anyway, I also wear Primark and Next to work, so you’re not really making a convincing argument – and you’re getting off the point – why did you kiss me, just then – it was unsettling – not something I was expecting.’

‘I’ve kissed you before....’

‘But that was then, and this is now. Then we were students – we did all sorts things – but things change, now we are friends. I don’t think you can ever go backwards, once you are friends.’

‘So, is that how it works? – the clockwork runs down, the library ticket expires? The passion subsides never to be seen again. The universe starts with a big bang and ends with a whimper’.

‘Well you’re the scientist – you know the theories....’

‘Yes, but that’s it exactly. That’s how science works, not how we work – I don’t see why we should be bound by Newton and Einstein – we can make whatever choices we like. And I chose to kiss you because, when we swam this evening and I saw you in that costume it was like the clock had been wound up again and was ready to run once more.’

‘So, you think we could go back?’

‘No, probably not – but why couldn’t we go forward in a different way – why don’t you move in again?’

‘What? Well, that came out of the blue!’

‘Well, yes it did in a sort of way.’

She was silent.

‘Do you think it would be more sensible to have sex, before moving in?’ she said.

‘Well, we used to have sex – and I seem to recall it was pretty good – at least initially. Surely, we don’t need to have another driving test – I don’t think the license expires for that sort of thing – we just haven’t used it for a while. It’s like riding a bicycle – or roller skating – you don’t forget once you’ve got the hang of it.’

‘You’re muddling up your metaphors, as usual. I know we did have sex. But then we stopped. Or rather you stopped. And then when you’re sharing the same flat and you’re not having sex, but then you’re no different from any other couple of people that are friends – so you might as well not be in the same bed. Or even in the same flat. And then once you’re only friends, then one friend moves out. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your life, they become just like all the tens or hundreds of other people in your life. And then why do you need to be in the same bed or even same flat with them at all once the clock has run down?’

It was his turn to be silent, for a moment.

‘You know it wasn’t really just me that stopped the sex,’ he said.

‘How do you mean – I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. You were too as I recall initially.’

‘Yes, now that you mention it, I remember that. But it wasn’t really the physical stuff – it was when I gave you flowers and you didn’t like the showiness of it, or when I held your hand in the street, or when I made you that running horse necklace. I never quite knew how to show – well, you know.... Then you got your consultant position and then you were a partner and I was still stuck trying to sow some seeds of knowledge in the Peckham’s teenagers – it would be easier to dam the Red Sea and irrigate the Sahara than teach them maths. Now you go to work in Prada, I go in jeans.’

They were both silent now.

‘I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming,’ he said

‘Yes, I saw them too.’

‘They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just downstream of the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their lives depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to

fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?’

‘I don’t think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can’t see any, then they fly to another perch and look again. They don’t plan, they just act. Fish, nest, raise their young. They don’t need to know why – they just are – well, what they are – they are just kingfishers – and probably are all the happier for that simple fact. They were blue too. I envied them their total absorption in the moment.’

‘Can I kiss you again?’

‘All right.’

The following morning, he was up first, fetching their horses in from the field, pulling their rugs, brushing the mud from their legs and tails. He led the horses up the lane to the campsite and brought a morning feed out of the barn. Hers, a chestnut gelding, its coat still slightly steaming from his vigorous brushing and rubbing down – showed an iridescence of subtle mixes of dark reds, browns and coppers as it glinted in the early morning sun. His, a skewbald Welsh cob, a riot of patches of brown and white, its rough, thick coat.

‘Chalk and cheese,’ he muttered, ‘That’s what we should call them – just like us.’

The horses were actually called Sarah and Fred. Not that they knew or cared; they were simply content to munch on their hay in companionable horsey silence, living in the moment, as they had always done.

She was cooking bacon and eggs as he came up to the tent.

‘So, were we wrong about the friendship theory last night?’ he said.

‘Seems like it.’

‘I think I’ll paint the spare room blue then, when we get back.’

‘Or pink,’ she replied.

The Girl in the Blue Costume

Blue. So many blues. That's what he remembered. Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky that quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the moor, nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as they bathed in the valley stream, washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies. No, it was the deep azure blue of her costume, the silvery cobalt shadows in her hair that, the dark cherry blue of the bruises on her right thigh, where she had cantered under an unseen oak bough earlier and the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of steely blue determination that remained as burnished prizes in his memory. Those, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen earlier, flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water, a thrilling, ephemeral moment of colour. They had ridden many times across the moors, and deep amongst the valley woods and streams – the viridian and emerald greens, the burnt umbers and siennas had all now faded into distant greys – but so many years later, only the blues, so many blues remain.

Each day in their long weekend had the same simple rhythm. Early morning, fetch the horses in from the field, groom, tack, then ride into the afternoon, until their limbs were numb. Then horses brushed, fed and watered, rugged and turned out in their field, a swim if they had the energy, then the pub. Repeat three times then back to the complexity of life in the city.

‘What will it be then – a dry white?’ he asked.

‘Yes, please.’

She had taken her duffel coat off and was sitting on a bench next to the fire, when he brought the drinks. There was no table to put them on, so she took them, wine and bitter in each hand, while he took his coat off. As he sat down next to her, and she still had her hands full of glasses, he lent across and kissed her. She did not pull away, but she did not respond either. He thought maybe he saw her cheeks flush, or perhaps it was just the fire.

‘What was that for?’ she said.

‘Was that a bad thing to do?’

‘Just unexpected. Maybe even surprising.’

‘Maybe I should surprise you more.’

‘Maybe you should.’

He felt he had said something, or done something important, but he could not decide what. The kiss was something, but there was something more. He thought he could taste candy floss in the brief kiss, sweet, but melted and gone as soon as it reached your tongue.

He realised she was still looking at him, waiting.

‘It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly, wonderfully blue.’

‘Well, it’s a good job I don’t wear my cossie back in London, then. Might cause a bit of problem wearing in Camden High Street if it has that effect.’

He did not want to smile at the image, but he could not resist it. He needed to be serious though, to somehow convince her, things had changed, and the past did not have to define their future. Maybe that was the something.

‘Yes,’ he said, and then was silent, still unsure what to say. In truth, he was a bit surprised he had kissed her too. The idea been in his mind for a while, even before they had started their long weekend. But then a kiss was easy message, there and gone in th the moment. Putting something into words, that needed a lot more effort.

He thought back to the afternoon, when they had walked the horses in single file along the bridlepaths that wound through the woods at the river’s edge. She was leading, as she always did. He followed, admiring the curve of her shoulder, watching the gentle sway of her body, as it moved in harmony with the horse’s gait. He had realised then he still wanted her, just as much as he had the first time they had come to ride those paths. They were both new to university then – she a medic, he hedging his bets with a liberal arts and science course. They had come in a group of a dozen largely insolvent students, loftily calling themselves the University Riding Club’s Official Easter tour, underwriting the cost from the University’s Social Club’s coffers with some traditionally dubious student accounting. Even then, they had to borrow tents from the University Officer Training Corps and had wangled a special rate from the local farm cum riding stables as one of the group was conveniently going out with the farmer’s daughter. The weekend had been quite a success until the moment he had thought it would be fun to see what would happen if he encouraged one of the farmer’s geese into the girls’ tent. There was a gratifying burst of frantic honking, hissing and barking from the goose. But then he realised he had not fully thought the plan through. An equally load squeal came from the tent:

‘Where did that bloody goose come from? That bastard has shit all over my sleeping bag!’

Well, that was a bit unfortunate, he thought to himself, a bit unlucky really – it should have been okay - a one in six chance with six girls in the tent – hard luck it happened to be her sleeping bag. He kept a low profile for a day or so. It was only on the last afternoon that he managed to ask her if she would like to go for a drink when they got back to college. He was pleasantly surprised when she said yes. But then, he told himself, he had hardly expected the goose to grass him up. Still smiling, he was abruptly brought back to the present, as he realised she was waiting for an answer.

‘It wasn’t that funny – the Camden bit. And I’m not sure the kiss was funny either...’, she had said.

‘What – sorry, say that again?’

‘Why did you kiss me, just then – it was unsettling – not something I was expecting.’

‘I’ve kissed you before....’

‘But that was then, and this is now. Then we were students – we did all sorts things – but things change – now we are friends, and I don’t expect the unexpected from friends.’

‘So, is that how it works?’, he said. ‘The clockwork runs down, the library ticket expires? The passion subsides never to be seen again. The universe starts with a big bang and ends with a whimper’.

‘No, of course not. But you can’t say we are machines....’

‘Yes, exactly’, he said, ‘We aren’t machines’. Somehow his argument was turning inside out, but he did not mind that he was not making logical sense. The words he wanted were finally forming in his mind. ‘We can make whatever choices we like. And I chose to kiss you because, when we swam this evening and I saw you in that costume it was like the clock had been wound up again and was ready to run again.’

Needing a moment to think, she said, ‘Do you want to see what’s happened to the food? And maybe another round?’ and rummaged in her duffel coat for her purse.

While he was fetching the drinks, she let her thoughts drift back to the end of their last year at University. That was three years after their first trip to the moors. They had been sharing a flat for eighteen months by then – well more of a large bedsit really. Her course over, she had arranged a six month WHO placement in Tanzania, and he was going on to do a teaching certificate, so they planned a going away celebration. They had fallen into a comfortable, companionable partnership in those eighteen months. She had enjoyed the convenience of those eighteen months, but now it was time to move on. It seemed a tidy endpoint to her. After here time in Africa, she expected that if they did meet in future, then they would simply meet as friends. No need for a messy break up, just let the embers gradually burn out.

The evening had started well with a carefully selected restaurant and an expensive meal, at least relative to their student budget. Then perhaps too much wine, and then certainly too much honesty. If only he had not given her that present.

‘I’d really like you to take this on your trip’, he said, as he gave her a small, neatly wrapped package.

‘Thank you – how cute – such tiny elephants’, she said, as she slowly removed the wrappings to reveal a small red, leather box. A small jewellery box. Maybe a watch, she thought. Or maybe some jewellery.

‘Oh, I really don’t think....’, she said, wondering how to finish the sentence but then he took the box out of her hands and opened it to reveal a small brass compass.

‘I think you’ll find this useful at some point’, he said. ‘Just keep going south – if you start seeing penguins then you’ve gone too far.’

She felt lightheaded for a moment, pleased that he had chosen something useful, something that was not obviously personal, and certainly nothing romantic.

‘That is such a nice thing, so thoughtful, and, well, so really nice’, she said. She put her arms around him and gave him a squeeze, ready to accept a kiss. But as she closed her eyes and waited, he pulled away.

‘I can’t believe it’, he said. ‘Look, the wretched thing is broken! North is that way, but the needle is pointing the other way’.

‘I don’t understand’, she said.

‘They’ve screwed it up - painted the wrong end of the needle red’, he replied. ‘I wanted you so much to carry it, and maybe think of me - perhaps it would even guide you back someday. But it’s no use now.’

She said something like it didn’t matter really – it was just kind that he had thought of a present at all, he did not need to give her a present at all, really.

He looked at her for a moment and then slowly reached into his pocket, saying

‘Well, actually, that was not my first choice – I did have an alternative and, er....’

At this point he gave her a very similar sized box, again wrapped in elephant paper.

‘Wow, that was good contingency planning then’, she said, trying to lighten the tone and knowing that he would be pleased that she recognised the effort he had put into making sure he gave her a memento.

‘What is it?’

Maybe another survival aid, she thought, or maybe a Swiss Army knife perhaps, or a portable mosquito net, that would be useful, or She stopped abruptly when she saw it was a ring.

‘Oh. I’m sorry...’ was all she could say.

He brought the second round of drinks just as their food arrived. They ate in silence for a while.

‘So, you think we could go back?’’, she said.

‘No, but I don’t actually want to go back, even if we could. Would you? If I’m honest, it was all a bit puzzling then. I was just living in the moment. I don’t think, looking back I ever quite knew what was happening, I mean, how serious was it? What did you want? Indeed, what did I want? You were right when you said that was then, and this is now. Why can’t just start from here, in this moment, and simply go forward from now?’

He was right, she thought. They had been comfortable together. But had it just been simply a moment in time?

‘But I don’t want to stop being friends. I want to be friends and something more than that. Look, why don’t you move in again?’’

‘What? Well, that came out of the blue!’ Then, she was silent, for a moment, before she said:

‘Why did we stop having sex, do you think?’

Wow, that came out of the blue, too, he thought.

‘Well, you didn’t have that blue swimsuit then’, he said. He realised it was him now that was skirting the issue, unsure what to say. But she said it for him:

‘Actually, it was more you than me that stopped it. I think it just gradually faded away. And then when you’re sharing the same flat and you’re not having sex, then you’re no different from any other couple of people that are friends. At that point, you might as well not be in the same bed. Or even in the same flat. And then once you are only friends, then one friend moves out. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your life, they become just like the hundreds of other people in your life.’

‘You know it wasn’t really just me that stopped the sex. Not really,’ she said.

‘How do you mean – I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. You were too as I recall initially.’

‘Yes, I do remember that. But it wasn’t really the physical stuff that I started worrying about – it was when you gave me flowers and I didn’t like the showiness of it, or when we held hands in the street, or when you gave me that running horse necklace. I don’t think I wanted that sort of relationship then.’

‘I never quite knew how to show – well, you know.... Then you got registrar and I was still stuck trying to sow some seeds of knowledge in the loutish teens in Peckham – it would have been easier to dam the Red Sea and irrigate the Sahara than teach them maths. Now you go to work in Prada, I go in jeans.’

They were both silent now.

‘I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming,’ he said, eventually.

‘Yes, I saw them too.’

‘They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just downstream of the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their life

depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?’

‘I don’t think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can’t see any, then the fly to another perch and look again. They don’t plan, they just act. Fish, nest, raise their young. They don’t need to know why – they just are – well, what they are – they are just a kingfisher – and probably are all the happier for that simple fact. They were blue too. I envied them their total absorption in the moment.’

They were both silent for a moment. He, in his thoughts thinking: We really could do it this time – I’m sure I can turn up the ‘surprise’ volume – but what sort of surprise? Maybe breakfast in bed? Or maybe I should chuck it in at Peckham, that would be pretty surprising. She was thinking: Maybe the clock has almost run down, I’m 35 now, more than half of my eggs have gone, and that clock spring can’t be wound up again’.

‘Can I kiss you again?’

‘All right.’

And so he did.

‘You know, I’ve never told you, but that was me with the goose in the tent.’

‘I know’, she said.

The following morning, he was up first, fetching their horses in from the field, pulling their rugs, brushing the mud from their legs and tails. He led the horses up the lane to the campsite and brought a morning feed out of the barn. Hers, a chestnut gelding, its coat still slightly steaming from his vigorous brushing and rubbing down – it showed an iridescence of subtle mixes of dark reds, browns and coppers and as it glinted in the early morning sun. His, a skewbald Welsh cob, a riot of patches of brown and white, its rough, thick coat.

‘Chalk and cheese,’ he muttered, ‘That’s what we should call them – just like us.’

She was cooking bacon and eggs as he came up to the tent.

‘So, were we wrong about the friendship theory last night?’ he said.

‘Seems like it’.

‘I think I’ll paint the spare room blue then, when we get back.’

‘Or maybe pink’, she replied.

Banana and Elephant Go To The Park

Banana and Elephant were walking the park one day and came across something that they had never seen before.

Elephant said, 'Look, there's a new playground over there.'

Banana did indeed look, but Elephant was standing in the way, so he could not see anything.

'Move over, you big lump,' said Banana.

'Well, really, there's no need to be personal.', replied Elephant, grudgingly moving over.

Banana could now see the playground. It was very big. Even bigger than Elephant. There was a large concrete ring and steps up to the top. And in the middle, there was a deep concrete bowl. A dinosaur was standing on the top of the ring, looking down into the bowl.

'Let's go over and see what the dinosaur is doing,' said Banana.

'Okay, maybe he can see some food in the middle,' said Elephant hopefully.

When they got closer, they could see that there was no food in the bowl. It was just plain concrete, with a few bumps in the middle.

When they got really close, Banana shouted out: 'Hey, Mr Dinosaur! - what's occurring?'

The dinosaur ignored them, however, and skipped onto a little wooden plank, and then glided down the slope of the bowl. As he picked up speed, he went over one of the bumps in the middle of the bowl and flipped up into the air. The little plank had wheels underneath - it was a skateboard. The skateboard seemed to twist under the dinosaur, and then the dinosaur was zooming up the other side of the bowl and dexterously came to a stop at the top. 'Alley top' the dinosaur exclaimed.

'Oooooohhhh', said Elephant, 'that looks fun.'

Banana and Elephant climbed up the steps at the side of the skatepark so that they could see better.

Again, the dinosaur whizzed across the bow, this time coming to a stop right next to the banana and the elephant.

'Can I have a go?' Elephant.

'Don't be silly,' Banana, 'you are much too heavy. I'm much lighter, let me have a go.'

'All right,' said the dinosaur.

So the dinosaur stepped aside and the banana leapt onto the board, and in a trice, he was whizzing down the slope into the bowl.'

'Wheeeeeeeeeeee,' he cried out.

Elephant hrumphed down his trunk. He wanted to do it too, it looked so much fun. But then he looked, and Banana was stuck in the middle of the bowl. He simply hadn't been fast enough to climb up the far side.

'Your friend is pretty good, but I think he needs some help,' said the dinosaur. And with that, he slid down the side of the bowl and gave the skateboard a big swipe with his tail. This caught Banana by surprise, and he fell off the board with a thump. The skateboard zipped back up the slope to the top of the bowl, and the elephant put his foot on it to stop it.

'Watch me, you guys,' Elephant called out. 'I'll definitely make the other side with all my weight.' But there was a problem. There was no way the big elephant could get all four feet on the board at once. Then had an idea. Standing on the board with his back feet, he reared up into the air, so that he was standing up just like the humans he had seen at the zoo.

‘Look at me,’ he shouted. ‘Here I come.’

And with that, Elephant was speeding, faster and faster, down the side of the bowl.

‘How do I steer,’ he trumpeted, though really it was too late.

There was a tremendous crump! and he flew into the dinosaur - followed by an even bigger thump as Elephant fell off the board and came down the concrete.

‘Ow, that hurts,’ he moaned.

‘I don’t think you two are really suited to skateboarding,’ said the dinosaur, who after all was not that bright and quite often stated the obvious.

‘I think you are probably right,’ said Elephant, carefully getting up and checking that all four limbs and trunk were still attached. ‘I think it would be much safer if Banana and I should just carry on our walk.’ He looked around to see where Banana had got to. But Banana had been at the epicentre of the crash and had met the full force of Elephant’s fall. His skin was now a full three feet from his body.

‘Oh dear,’ said Elephant, ‘I’m so sorry. I don’t think there’s anything to be done now, though - one can’t unmake a banana split.

And with that, Elephant climbed up out of the bowl, though he was not too sorry because he did remember to eat the banana before leaving. After all, a banana skin could cause a nasty accident in a skateboard park

The Escape

Each morning, Vera went home with the smell of dope on her clothes and the gritty, dry taste of sawdust in her mouth. Her only relief was when there had been a raid during the night, and her shift had spent most of the night in the shelters. It was November 1940, shortly after Hitler had abandoned plans of invasion in southern England and had instead changed his attention to bombing England's industrial heart. Coventry, where Vera lived, was a favourite target during that period so the raids were frequent. One particularly bad night, when the sirens had gone off three times she had spent all night in the shelter, and had finally emerged to find one of the wood stores burning fiercely and the air wardens, police and even the night managers all in the melee, trying to help the firemen put it out. That morning it was the acrid taste of wood smoke rather than sawdust that made her mouth dry, and when she got home, she felt just as sick as she always did. Sawdust or smoke, it did not seem to make any difference.

‘I hate this job. I hate it all. I’m never going back, ever!’ she told her mother, as she walked into the kitchen. Her mother gave her a hug and sat her down with a mug of sweet tea. The sugar was on the ration book, but her mother always gave Vera sweet tea.

‘Everyone has to pitch in now, love,’ her mother said.

‘I know, but I feel like I’m in prison – I’ve got sawdust in my hair and the dope makes me feel sick. The men won’t let girls work in the woodwork shop, so we’re just stuck in the fabric shop, covering the wings. It’s so hot in there I often feel dizzy but if I sneak outside its freezing in the middle of the night.’

‘Well, best go to bed now. You’ll feel better after you have had a good sleep. Everything seems better when you’re fresh,’ said her mother.

Vera sighed.

‘You said that last week too.’

She gave her mother another hug and then went upstairs.

As she slept Vera dreamt of a big field, full of lush grass. Waves of green and pale yellow ran across the grass as a soft wind rippled across the field under a bright summer. In one corner of the field, a strong, white horse, fat on summer hay, stood under the spreading shade of an oak tree. In her dream Vera wanted to go up to the horse and pat its neck and rub its back, but the horse’s stillness and dignity somehow held her back. Suddenly the horse looked up and gently trotted to the bottom of the field. She saw a dim distant figure appear at the gate to the field. The figure emptied some oats from a bucket onto the ground. As the horse put its head down to eat the figure neatly slipped a halter around the horse’s neck and gently combed the mud out of the horse’s mane while it finished the oats. As the figure led the horse away, Vera heard her name being called. She wanted to run down the field too, towards whomever was calling her.

‘Vera. Vera!’ she heard. It was her mother’s voice.

‘Vera, your father’s home – come on down, I’ve some cake for tea as a treat.’

The dream had faded. Her mouth felt dry and she needed another cup of sweet tea to wash away her sense of loss.

That night, Vera walked through the factory gate, with her head down as usual, following the white line that had been painted on the road to guide people in the blackout. Just as she

reached the pile of plywood offcuts outside the woodwork shop, she saw a couple of pinpoints of light in the middle of the road before her.‘

‘Rat!’, she thought, more in annoyance than revulsion, and kicked a stone towards it. The rat was unmoved, so Vera picked up a baton from the wood pile and advanced on the creature. As she got closer the points of light simply vanished.

‘Strange,’ she thought, and advanced until, under the dim streetlight, she saw that instead of a rat, the creature was a tiny, round ball of spines. She had never seen a hedgehog before, but this surely must be a baby.

‘What are you doing here, little thing? You’ll get run over if you’re not careful,’ she said, though she was not sure if she was speaking to herself or to the hedgehog.

Not sure what to do, she poked the hedgehog gently with the stick. The little ball wriggled a little and seemed to wrap itself up even tighter. Vera threw the stick back onto the wood pile and then, taking a deep breath, she bent down and picked up the little ball. Surprised that the spines did not pierce her gloves, she thought ‘Maybe babies don’t have sharp spines.’ She walked the few steps back to the wood pile and put the hedgehog down. The creature remained motionless. Realising she would be late for her shift she hurriedly selected some of the offcuts from the pile and built a little shelter around the ball. As an afterthought, she left a little tunnel so that the creature could get out.

‘Yes, run away little hedgehog – that is what I would do if I were you. Get as far away from this factory as you can – there is no food for you here,’ she said.

As she turned and walked up the road to join her shift in the doping building, she added under her breath, ‘and nothing much here for me too.’

When her shift was over, Vera came back to the wood pile to see if the hedgehog was still there. In the morning light, she could not initially see the little enclosure she had made, as the night’s work had resulted in a whole new layer of plywood fragments being added to the pile. Eventually though, after moving a dozen pieces aside she got down to the little space she had made. To her surprise the little hedgehog was still there. It had collected various wood shavings from the detritus under the wood pile and built a neat nest. It was apparently sleeping, this time only curled up in loose ball. As she looked down, she saw the animal’s eye open and look back up at her. They both looked at each other for a moment in complete stillness and then suddenly the hedgehog wriggled and rolled up into a tight ball.

It was only after Vera had pulled off her woolly hat and gently scooped the hedgehog up in it, that Vera wondered what her mother would think when she arrived home. It was already hard enough to feed the existing mouths at home. And what did a hedgehog eat anyway? But there was nothing else for it, she told herself. She was sure the hedgehog would not survive long in amongst the concrete yards and brick buildings of the industrial estate.

When Vera got home, she ran up the stairs to her bedroom. She pulled out the drawer at the bottom her wardrobe and took out the old shoebox she kept her special things in and tipped the contents out onto the bed. Amongst the hairbands and beads from Woolworths there was a silver brooch and bangle wrapped in tissue paper. She unwrapped these carefully and put the tissue paper back in the shoebox and then gently tipped the hedgehog out of her hat and onto its new nest. The creature was resolutely still rolled up, so Vera pushed the shoebox back under her bed. The beads and jewellery were still on her bed, so she wrapped them up in a couple of handkerchiefs and put them back in the wardrobe drawer. Then she went to the bathroom and washed her hands ready to eat.

Her father and mother were already eating when she entered the kitchen.

‘Hello, love,’ her mother said, pouring out a cup of tea. ‘I didn’t hear you come in. You’re a bit late – long shift was it?’

‘They all seem long to me,’ Vera replied, and picked up a slice of toast and spread a thin layer of margarine on it. Between mouthfuls, she slipped the hot sweet tea, that was the best part of the meal. Still thinking of the hedgehog, she blurted out,

‘Do you know what hedgehogs eat?’

‘That’s an odd question – what on earth made you ask that?’ her mother replied.

Vera said, ‘I don’t know, I was just wondering if they eat toast.’

‘That seems rather unlikely,’ her father said.

‘I imagine they eat what they can find out in nature. Worms and things, I wouldn’t be surprised. I expect they eat vegetables too if they can’t find anything else. Just like the rest of us.’

With this pronouncement, he took an apple from the bowl on the table and cut it into three. Her mother cut a corresponding small portion of the cheese ration for each of them and they finished their meal in silence. Vera yawned and said,

‘I’m really tired, I think I’ll go to bed now – I’ll take the apple and cheese and have it later.’

‘All right, love,’ said her mother, ‘I’ll bring you up a cup of tea when you’ve had a good rest.’

Vera took her small plate of apple and cheese upstairs and went into her bedroom. She opened the wardrobe drawer as quietly and slowly as she could and smiled when she saw that the warmth of the little nest she had made had stirred the hedgehog into life. The animal was looking up at her and sniffing the air. She took the pieces of apple and cheese and, trying not to frighten the creature, she put them at the far end of the shoebox.

‘I will call you Henry,’ she said. Henry blinked back but did not move.

‘Ah, I suppose you are thirsty then,’ she said. She looked around for a suitable container from which the hedgehog could drink. The plate was the only thing that was shallow enough for the hedgehog to drink from, so she brought that back from the bathroom with a little water in it and put that in the shoebox too.

‘There you are Henry – a meal fit for a prince!’

Vera got into her night dress and lay down on the bed. In a moment she was asleep. She dreamt of the horse in the field again, only this time she was riding the horse through the meadow. The tall grass, bronzed by days of deep blue skies, flowed around the horse’s path and she felt the heat of the summer sun soaking into her skin. She wanted the moment to last forever. As she rode on, she heard her name being called in the distance.

‘Vera. Vera!’

The voice was getting louder each time.

‘Vera! Vera!’

Suddenly, she was back in her room, and so was the voice. It was her father calling from downstairs.

‘Vera! Come down here this instant!’

She sat up and rubbed her face. Looking across the room she could see that she had left the wardrobe drawer open. The shoebox was empty. The apple and cheese were gone, and so was Henry!

She grabbed her dressing gown and threw it over her nightdress and started down the stairs. She could see her mother and father were both in the hallway. A broken cup and saucer were on the floor at the bottom of the stairs, surrounded by a small pool of tea. Henry was lapping up the tea with apparent gusto.

‘Vera! What do you know about this animal in the hallway? Did you bring it into the house?’ her father asked.

‘Oh Dad, I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I found him at the factory - he was so small and so alone I just had to do something. There wasn’t anything for him to eat and I couldn’t bear the thought of him getting bombed. So I brought him home. I’ve called him Henry. Can’t we keep him?’

‘No, certainly not,’ her father said. ‘A house is not a place for a hedgehog.’

Her father paused and then said, ‘But I think have a better plan. In fact, I have two plans – one for Henry and one for you.’

That night father and daughter set off for the factory together. The moon was out and illuminated their progress. Vera had put Henry in her woollen hat again and held him close. About halfway to the factory, they turned off down a little alleyway that ran down the side of line of houses. Emerging from behind the houses they could just see a patch of green and brown in front of them.

‘Here we are,’ said her father.

‘My allotment strip is third on the right. If we put Henry down by the compost heap, I think he’ll find a nice home – he’ll probably hibernate there or under the hedge. We’ll leave him some more apple and cheese and the scraps from last Sunday’s mutton. That should give him a good start.’

Vera’s father picked up an armful of dead leaves from the compost heap and threw them under the hedge at the side of the allotment. It only took Vera a moment to hollow out a hedgehog shaped hole in the leaves and roll Henry out of her hat and into the leaves. She placed the scraps of food around him and then her father swept a covering of dried leaves over the little nest.

‘Goodbye, little Henry,’ she said, though it only came out just as a whisper.

They walked back in silence to the main road and turned once more towards the factory. After a short while they came to a gap in the houses where some large billboards had been erected. Vera’s father pointed at the last one in the line, saying,

‘Well, I said I had a plan for Henry and a plan for you too.’

Vera looked up at the poster. It showed a strong, white horse hitched to a plough, with a tall girl in dungarees guiding the horse’s reins. It was the horse Vera had dreamt of in the nights before. At the bottom of the poster, a caption said in large letters:

Join the Women’s Land Army!!

‘No more factory then, Dad,’ said Vera as she hugged him.

Grounded

As I lay in the shade of the glider's wing, waiting for the buggy to come back and give me a tow out to the launch point, I looked up and watched the kestrel circling, painting invisible circles against a perfect, azure sky. I had first noticed it an hour earlier, as we pulled the gliders out before readying them for the morning's flights. Then it had been perfectly still, hunched in the morning cold, perched on the apex of Lasham Airfield's ageing WW2 hanger. Now the sun had put some warmth into the tarmac apron and the day's thermals were just starting. The kestrel had left its perch and with a just a few dozen leisurely beats of its wings it was now slowly being carried aloft by morning's gentle air currents. I imagined it looking down at us, no doubt bemused by the paraphernalia of winches and tug planes we needed to drag our clumsy sailplanes into the air. Perhaps though, it simply had thoughts for the rats under the hangar floor or the rabbits in the field at the end of the runway. As I watched it drift downwind towards the airfield boundary, climbing a few feet in each easy circle, my thoughts also drifted away - back to the very first time I flew.

It was 1964, and I was eight. My family had just moved from Scotland to Sussex. That summer, I was sent back to Edinburgh to stay for a while with an old school friend. I was too young to make such a long unaccompanied train journey, so my parents sent me by plane. Looking back on it now, this must have been a remarkably expensive decision for them, but maybe it reflected my family's newfound affluence in England.

I gave it no thought at all and simply regarded it as quite normal when they took me to Heathrow and gave me into the care of stranger who looked and spoke rather like Lulu, but was in fact, the BEA air hostess who was to chaperone me. I remember very little about the aircraft and the flight. There was of course no in-flight film, or indeed any sort of entertainment – so I amused myself by looking out the window and pretending the clouds were castles as they gradually passed by. There must have been some sort of meal though because I distinctly remember the individual cardboard salt and pepper pots that were provided and my joy at keeping those as souvenirs of the flight. By far my strongest memory though was after landing being taken and shown the cockpit by my stewardess. I was fascinated by the almost overwhelming array of buttons, switches and dials but the thing that struck me most was the dark blueness of the captain's jacket and the easy way he was chatting to my chaperone. Someday, I decided, I would gain access to their world.

The buggy had still not arrived, so I stood up to see if there was any help in sight. The rest of the club members were either out on the runway, busy working the launch point or working the winching system. I could just see the buggy retrieving one of the gliders from the far end of the airfield. Above it, I thought I could make out a tiny speck, slowly circling over the wheat field at the end of the runway. Periodically the speck seemed to blur a little. The kestrel was having to flap its wings occasionally. I was happy to wait a while for the day to warm up and the thermals to strengthen so I lay down in the shade and turned my thoughts to the past again.

It was a warm evening in September 1987. I was a member of that summer's 'Friday Evening' group – an assorted collection of accountants, hairdressers, bank managers, farmers,

pensioners and others who spent each Friday evening operating the winch and learning to fly in simple, wooden, 2 seater gliders, making short circuits around the airfield, often of only a few minutes. Each member of the group generally had three flights and then spent the rest of the evening helping the others fly, retrieving gliders from the various odd places they landed on the airfield. The group had a couple of experienced glider pilots, each with a full instructor's rating. One was a Polish emigre, Jan Wysocki, who reputedly never flew without a preliminary vodka, a habit he was said to have formed when flying Hurricanes in the war and which he never saw any subsequent need to stop. My instructor was John Williams, who worked as a confectionary salesman for Mars, and who split his time between teaching people both powered and soaring flight and restoring vintage MGs. He was a popular instructor, not least for his inexhaustible supply of chocolate bars.

Under his careful tutelage I had gradually worked my way through the various lessons and flying exercises in the British Gliding Association syllabus. After 42 flights and 400 minutes in the air I had managed to get a tick in all the necessary boxes on the pre-solo progress card. That night I had already had two flights, the second of which had been a simulated cable break – a favourite trick of the instructor in which they pulled the cable release at some unexpected point in the launch, perhaps only when the glider was three or four hundred feet in the air.

They then waited to see if the student followed the appropriate recovery procedure. Basically, this meant moving the control stick forward to manoeuvre the glider from its steep launch climb back to level flight while maintaining sufficient speed for the air to continue to generate lift as it passed over the wings. But the instructor did not wait too long - if the student did not respond fast enough, then they suffered the ignominy of the instructor taking over the controls and demonstrating what was required.

'Never low and slow', was John's constant reminder before each flight.

He said it one more time as we towed the glider back to the launch point for my third flight, and then told me he would not be coming with me for the next flight.

John closed the canopy and I was alone in a glider for the first time. I felt a mixture of anticipation and relief that I was finally independent, unwatched by an instructor in the seat behind me. Under the Perspex bubble of the canopy I felt as if I was now enveloped in the atmosphere of my own little planet, isolated, self-sufficient and independent. The launch point controller signalled the winch and the glider accelerated rapidly down the runway, and no longer inconvenienced by the extra weight of the instructor, it seemed eager to leap into the air. It took less than a minute to reach the top of the launch.

The altimeter told me I was at 1600 feet above the airfield. In one direction I could see as far as the south coast, with the Isle of Wight just visible on the horizon, like the hump of some enormous sea monster, waiting to gorge itself on an unsuspecting Portsmouth. To the north I could see the smoke rising from Didcot power station, nearly 30 miles away. For a moment I felt that I owned the world in front of me, it was some magical kingdom all of my own. The feeling rapidly vanished though as I realised that unless I put the glider into a turn I would simply fly further and further away from the airfield and eventually come to rest in some angry farmer's field. To my delight I found that the glider happily, indeed willingly responded to my touch – apparently, I really could fly without an instructor. Five minutes later I was back on the ground, eating a Mars bar and sipping a vodka.

The put-put of the buggy finally interrupted my thirty-year-old memories. It was time to take my single seater out to the launch point. A sleek, smooth racing machine, it had seemingly impossible thin carbon fibre wings, and the slipperiest of polished surfaces. Predictably the German manufacturer had given it the worthy but unimaginative name Discus II. I could never understand why they had not chosen something less muscular and more poetic – Skylark or Swallow for instance. That afternoon I swooped and danced under the clouds simply for the joy of being in the air and returned to the airfield in last of the evening thermals, having seen half a dozen English counties. As I put the glider away in the hanger, I looked up half expecting to see the kestrel, but no doubt he was safely snoozing in a tree somewhere, dreaming of the next day's thermals.

A week later, just after breakfast, the world started spinning around me, and continued to spin intermittently and at unpredictable times for months and years to come. In the following months I had various medical tests and was told I had Meniere's disease, a disturbance of the inner ear, with no practical cure. Life had changed forever, and I never flew as a pilot again.

Eventually I bought and restored an old MG. Now when driving in the quiet country lanes amongst the South Downs I often think of that summer when John Williams taught me to fly. When the weather is good and the sun heats the fields and the thermal start weaving threads of cotton wool cumulus on the pale blue weft of a hot summer sky, I'll park the car by some farmer's gateway, and spend a moment or two looking up, hoping to see a kestrel soaring, once again painting circles in the unreachable, untouchable air.

Home From Home

The Three Directives

1. The discovery of new planets, with the intent to guarantee the existence of our species, is the primary goal of the exploration programme.
2. Colonising a planet where such colonisation threatens the resident intelligent species or results in the extinction or displacement of a resident intelligent species is forbidden.
3. The exploration programme ships must protect their existence provided this is not at the expense of the resident intelligent species or the future colonists.

Colonial survey ship 'Resolution' - log entry 24.79.83.117/3425

We had been in suspended animation for a little over 8,000 years when Mother arrived at the system with the little blue planet. Waking up is never pleasant, but the prospect of a habitable world, with a decent oxygen atmosphere, though rather high in CO₂, gave us a feeling of optimism as we gradually got some fluidity in our joints and put nutrients back into our systems. After a couple of hours in the gym and half an hour in the dining room, our team of eight were ready to go to work. My joints still felt stiff, but they were perfectly functional. Just like my brain. It always took a while to get back a full capability. But we are all awake enough to get started. Although we had done it dozens of times before, we assembled in the briefing room, to review the plan.

634343 looked across at me. 'What's this system like, 17?'

I was tempted to suggest that he simply took a look out of the window - after he was the ship's navigator so he should be reasonably aware of what was outside the ship. But I could see the frown on 712455's face. As commander, he discouraged any sort of flippancy at moments like these. I quickly scanned Mother's reports and replied:

'Nine planets, well eight if you discount a semi-asteroid way out - four gas giants, four rocks, but only one is habitable though and that's where Mother has us in orbit. 25000 clicks in diameter, gravity is a bracing 1.1 nominal, the atmosphere is 78% nitrogen, 17% oxygen, 4% CO₂, 0.9% argon, and the rest is methane, ozone and water vapour. Traces of short half-cycle radioactive, mostly plutonium so there must have been a civilisation here, maybe quite recently but certainly in the hundred thousand years, maybe less. There's life but nothing high level, no RF or EM emissions, no lights on the surface on the dark side. Rotation is about 25 medicycles. The surface temperature is a bit hot, but not intolerable to organic life and there is only ice at the poles and the high mountains. More than two-thirds of the surface is oceans. Plenty of vegetation on the land masses though. Molten iron core, so a decent magnetic field and that is giving good protection from ultraviolet radiation from the star. Sounds promising. The high temperature is probably due to the dense cloud cover which in turn is probably driven by the CO₂ content of the atmosphere. There could be room for about a few hundred million colonists, maybe a little less. I would say the people back home would feel quite comfortable here.'

712455 was not interested in my speculations, though. His commander role meant he only wanted data. ‘Give me the facts, 17, just the facts,’ he would always say, as he red-lined my more imaginative conclusions on each planetary survey. This time would no doubt be no different.

‘The scouts will give us the final verdict, 43. If there is no visible intelligence, we’ll need to do a full planet scan. I’ll want a full set of diagnostics on everything from single-cell organisms, right up to whatever is at the top of the food chain. Let’s get a full set of characteristics on the existing flora and fauna. And I want a complete species map of any animal inhabitants and a DNA map. If there has been intelligent life in the past, then we need to know if it’s going to re-evolve and on what time scale. I want to drop a couple of hydrogen extraction plants in a quiet part of an ocean – we are getting low on deuterium for the fusion reactors, so let’s get on top of that while we are surveying. Otherwise, it’s the standard survey plan. Any questions?’

Apparently not as we were all silent.

‘Right, then – let’s go and get the numbers. 42 and 43 – You can stay for a moment; I want to review the home world contact plan.’

712455 waited until the rest of the team had left before continuing. 638743 was the ship’s quantum physicist and was in charge of communications. Technically he just outranked me, as my ID was 687342 even though I was second in command. Nominally I was on the crew list as navigator/engineer, but Mother knew perfectly well how to find her way around the galaxy and the maintenance robots kept the ship in, well, ship-shape order, so I had little to do. Really, I was there to keep an eye on all my colleagues. The commander kept his eye on all of us. And Mother kept an eye on the commander. Such were the cross checks and balances needed on a long voyage like ours. Not that anyone was likely to misbehave. We had all been too carefully selected and groomed for that. But you never know – and in space, it’s always better to be safe than sorry.

‘I’m thinking this may be our last survey.’

55 paused for effect, but 43 knew what the problem was anyway:

‘The store of entangled photons is nearly exhausted. We’ve only got enough for a few giga-characters of data.’

‘Exactly,’ resumed 55. ‘Just enough to tell the home world what we find here. Then our mission will be complete.’

That statement did produce a lengthy pause.

‘I don’t want to tell the rest yet. They are only rank 4 so no need for them to worry about anything other than the job in hand. We can tell them when it’s finished. There’ll be plenty of time then to come to terms with the situation.’

I could not quite help myself. ‘Yes, we will have all the time in the world, - well the galaxy even.’ I said, earning myself another black mark in 712455’s undoubtedly unforgetting memory.

Colonial survey ship ‘Resolution’ - log entry 24.79.83.118/7324

We have spent the last month scanning the entire planet. The 43s have been extremely busy, directing the tens of thousands of Mother’s scout robots. 432117 (planetary bioengineer), 432118 (planetary biologist) and 432119 (planetary zoologist) formed a committee and built up a complete picture of the taxonomy of the living organisms on the

planet. There were the usual myriad collections of viruses and bacteria, single-celled and multicell plants and some primitive animals. Bacteria, protozoa, chromista, plantae, fungi, animalia. They were an interesting mix of carnivores, herbivores, omnivores, detritivores, insects, fish, mammals, reptiles and parasites and the 43s were having a wonderful time exploring the complexities and inventiveness of this new world. 432120 (Planetary geologist) was equally happy as both the planet and its moon were full of all the elements required to manufacture a comfortable, even luxurious living environment for our colonists. 432121 (Planetary atmospherics) was literally walking on air, as the atmospheric analysis was perfect for colonisation. 21 was already planning measures to reduce the atmospheric CO₂ content to get the surface temperature down to 'balmy' in the temperature latitudes. 432122 (planetary anthropologist) was the unhappy one. His data on the fossil record showed that there had been intelligent hominins on the planet as little as 50,000 years ago. There was evidence on the single large moon that these hominins had developed rudimentary space travel. An archaeological survey showed several attempts to occupy small areas, and even ice mining at the moon's poles. All of which was well and good. The problem 22 could not solve was what had happened to these hominins. The fossil record showed them disappearing in a very short time, maybe less than 500 years. 712455 called a meeting to review the data. Instead of commander, though he had his mission director hat on. Of course, I'm sure you realise we did not actually wear hats, it's just a figure of speech. We pretty much did not bother wearing anything actually – the ship provided the perfect environment. 55 loved the procedural stuff – so he started with a go/no-go poll.

'Okay, we know this planet is a pretty good colonisation candidate – so let's run a status check just to see how well we are doing on making a decision. Please give me a simple go/no go response when I call your name.'

We all already knew the status, but 55 liked the drama of the procedure and who were we to deny him? Most of our mission was total boredom, while we simply idled or slept waiting for the next task. So we found our excitement where we could:

'Bioengineering?'

'Go!'

'Biology?'

'Go!'

'Zoology?'

'Go!'

'Geology?'

'Go!'

'Atmospherics?'

'Go!'

'Anthropology?'

'Hold!'

There's always one that objects during these polls. After all, we needed the excitement.

'So, what is the problem, 22?'

'We don't know what knocked out the intelligent life on this planet. That could be a problem for our colonists. We do know that hominins reached a reasonable level of technical advancement. They had nuclear power and nuclear weapons as we can see that the isotopes from their efforts are still in existence in the atmosphere. They had got to their moon and even started making use of its resources. There is still a lot of archaeological evidence of a

vast population of these hominins, occupying all five continents. There could have been as many as eight or ten billion of them. But I'm not sure what wiped them out. So, who is to say it won't happen again?"

'How about the usual suspects – asteroid impact perhaps or even plague?' asked 21.

'The last planetary asteroid impact was over 50 million years ago. It was a big one and wiped out the great majority of large mammals. Looks like it opened the gateway for the eventual rise of the hominins. But there's been nothing big since. As for the plague option, that's a possibility, but it looks like a whole range of species disappeared in a relatively short window.'

'How about a super volcano?' Perhaps naturally, 20 was always fixated on the geology.

'That would be a distinct possibility,' I said. 'The planet has a huge moon, by normal standards – so there is lots of tectonic activity. There are half a dozen active volcanic zones, spread across most latitudes. But there's been nothing big enough to affect a continent let alone the whole planet. The last big volcanic event was in the northern hemisphere and lasted a few million years. There were huge amounts of carbon dioxide, up to 2000 ppm, up from 300 ppm, which pushed the temperatures way up, over 30%, and took most of the oxygen out of the oceans. 95 per cent of all marine species and 70 per cent of all land vertebrates had vanished. It was even worse for the insects. known mass extinction of insects. There is also evidence of increased ultraviolet radiation reaching the earth, causing the mutation of plant spores.'

'What do we know about the recent history of the planet?'

'Sea temperature is up 10 to 20% and sea levels have risen considerably in the last 500 years. This has killed a lot of the marine ecosystems. All the coral in the temperate latitudes has been lost, and the species living therein have either died or moved further towards the poles. But the large sea species have moved in the other directions, and similarly died out due to lack of food.'

'So where does life on the planet stand now?'

'On land, 30-50% of insects have been lost – so most of the pollinators on the planet are gone, 75% of the forests, rainfall has fallen globally by 40%, the deserts have expanded by a factor of 8. The net effect has been a huge loss of large mammals, and their food chain. It's not just that there is not enough to feed and sustain the huge mammal population, but the increased stress lowered reproductive rates. The increased UV also increased mutations.'

We had found plenty of hominid bones – either in the sands of the deserts or soil where the great cities had been. It seemed this civilisation largely buried their dead. We (or rather I should say, the scout robots) could find no bones younger than 5000 years. Our best samples came from the moon though. There were a few hominid bodies, with desiccated flesh, preserved in the cold shadows of a craters wall. These yielded excellent DNA samples. Once we had that it was simple to build a virtual copy in Mother of the hominid. After all, she is called Mother for a reason. That gave us insight into the physio-biological characteristics of the hominids. But not how the hominids behaved. We had a plan for that, but first, we needed to consult our home world.

'Today is a momentous day in our mission.' 712455 was ramping up the drama as usual.

'We have all the data we need to declare this a class 1 colonial candidate. It's highly suitable for population by our colonialists. There are no high-level intelligent native species, so there is no moral issue of displacing or interfering in the development of an alien intelligence. In short, it is a plum ripe for picking. But we still don't know what happened

to the hominids that so recently occupied the planet. Potentially that could be a problem for us too. Maybe whatever it was, would also affect our colony.'

We all knew this already but were happy to let 712455 have his moment. There had to be some reward in holding command. We could all do each other's jobs equally well – and no one was actually paying us any wages – after all, how would one cash in a salary thousands of light years from home? So, the hierarchy of rank held little rewards – it was best to let 55 think he was in charge, and at least appear to run the ship. 55 continue, largely stating the obvious:

'At this point, we have two choices. We can message the home world and ask for advice. Or we can run a set of simulations and build up a model of the hominid intelligence. That will take a while, but since this mission has been running for several thousand lifetimes and a little longer probably won't make much difference. The key fact you don't have is that we only have enough entangled photons for one or two full sets of home-world messages. So, I don't think we have a choice really – we need to act on our own accord.'

We didn't think we had one either. We all stayed silent. No point in wasting message photons - the mission was clear – find new planets that could be colonised. The home world was dying. It was simply a question of survival. We just had to prove that there wasn't going to be any intelligent life on the planet when the colonists took it over.

'Well, I'll take that as a vote for the simulation then.'

Colonial survey ship 'Resolution' - log entry 24.79.83.119/7234

We have run the simulations. Billions of them, in fact. We started with virtual hominid babies and tried a million ways of letting them learn basic vision, balance, crawling, toddling, feeding and other less savoury functions. The simulations ran by trial and error, trying all possibilities, evaluating the outcome, and then reinforcing the models that showed the most promising results. Then we started letting the babies interact, finding ways to learn to make sounds and build a basic language. That took a few hundred million more simulations. Mother's quantum computers eat up a lot of power, so we made several more trips to the planet's surface for fissionable deuterium. We got a step up from some artefacts we found on the hominid's moon base. A few of their computing systems had survived so we were able to extract a lot of the hominid's language constructs from the material in their memories. It was all based on rather rudimentary semiconductor technology and made no use of any quantum computing. There were some hints of artificial intelligence in the software, but it was pathetically rudimentary. This was a disappointment to us, as we would have gotten on a lot better talking to their machines rather than trying to recreate the hominids themselves. Eventually, after the planet had made a full orbit of its sun, we had an intelligent set of simulated hominids, thinking and talking and completely unaware they were living on a simulation of the planet.

So, we set simulations where the initial conditions on the planet corresponded to our best estimate of what it was like 10000 years before the hominids disappeared, distributed a few million hominids across the planet's surface, with civilisations and resources that matched the corresponding archaeological record. We had quite a lot of insight into how civilisations develop, given that we have encountered a few hundred populated planets in the past. Of

course, the Second Colonialisation Directive had prevented us from interfering with their development, but we had been able to build a clear picture of how civilisations developed.

Then we ran the simulation forward, at a hundred million times real-time. The results were so surprising that 712455 tried a few thousand variants, each still based on the peculiar characteristics of the blue planet beneath us, but with slightly different starting conditions. Each time though the outcome was the same, the hominid population grew rapidly taking over the whole planet and then suddenly vanished in a catastrophically short space of time. Eventually, we all found ourselves back in the briefing room, for the final review.

‘Well, you all know why we are here, but let me summarise anyway.’

712455 was playing it by the book and quite happy to state the obvious. The edit of this meeting would go in the log transmitted back to the home planet, so he was being careful to make sure everything was documented scrupulously. Of course, given that the home planet was thousands of light-years away, I’m not sure what sanction he was actually afraid of if he had chosen to cut corners, but rules are rules.

‘We have finally found an excellent planet for colonisation. It has already nurtured a successful civilisation of hominids but for some reason that civilisation died out in the recent past. We’ve rebuilt that civilisation in simulation, and we now know that with 99.99% certainty, the hominids went from a population of nearly ten billion to zero in a few generations. 22, can you summarise the underlying reasons that meant that hominids’ behaviour in the few thousand years led to their extinction?’

‘Well, the hominids seem to be naturally predisposed to excess. We have not properly understood this yet, as they are an extremely intelligent species, and very capable of understanding the simple laws of cause and effect. Yet they built a worldwide system of trade and industry, moving huge amounts of natural resources and living organisms around their world. They hunted many species out of existence, both large and small, on land and in the sea, not only for food but also for pleasure. They mined mineral resources that had taken millennia to create and burnt those resources in power stations and transport to facilitate their insatiable appetites. They changed the chemistry of all the oceans and many aspects of the surface of the planet. They cut down forests and planted mono-culture agriculture at the expense of most, non-hominids as they attempted to feed an ever-expanding population with an ever-increasing greed for population. They were highly inventive finding new ways to extract more and more from the planet’s natural resources. When they started running out of minerals on land, they mined beneath the sea. And they were starting on their moon, just before they died out. The consequences of these actions were clearly evident in the environment around them – there was no possibility of sustaining their civilisation over any significant length of time – yet they carried on anyway.’

‘And what killed them in the end?’

‘The rise in temperature in the oceans encouraged a new species of cyanobacteria, commonly known as blue-green algae. The increase in ultraviolet getting through the atmosphere, allowed the algae to mutate. With such a large oceanic surface area, it was not long before the algae mutated to a form that produced beta-methylamino-L-dia-hexacovalent-phenylanine or BMADP. BMADP is drawn up by temperate weather systems and distributed worldwide. It not only gets into the atmosphere and then into the rainwater. In a few years, it is in all the complex living organisms, both in the sea and on land.’

‘BMADP has a strong effect on some proteins of the more highly developed mammals and animals. It causes abnormal folding of these proteins, and these proteins transmit their misfolded shape onto normal variants of the same protein. This leads to neurological damage, coma, and subsequent death. There is no way to unfold the proteins so, once infected, death was inevitable.’

‘Once the air and water were flooded with BMADP then the hominids and any other species with the susceptible proteins were doomed.’

‘So how safe is the surface of the planet now, 17?’ 712455 asked.

‘Without the hominids, most of the drivers of climate change were removed. The forests largely returned after intensive cultivation stopped. The carbon dioxide in the atmosphere is gradually decreasing though it is still high. That has driven the surface temperature down by a few degrees, which killed the cyanobacteria. Conditions have largely stabilised now, though the CO₂ content and the temperature are still slowly reducing. There are a couple of dodgy areas on the northern continents, where power stations either exploded or went critical so they should be avoided but otherwise conditions are pretty favourable for life. So, it’s all good for our colonists, given the time it will take them to get here.’

55 looked pleased. It looked like the mission was finally going to be a success. With his commander hat back on, he could then claim the credit. But, because all this was going into our logs, he wanted to look at all possibilities:

‘What about the possibility of the hominids re-evolving? That seems to be a rather likely possibility to me. After all the catastrophe that has just happened has only wiped out the results of the last millennia of evolution on the planet. All the lower-class species still exist, so effectively the evolution clock has been wound back to the point where conditions are ripe for the hominids to evolve a second time.

‘If that’s the case, then wouldn’t that conflict with the Second Imperative? Colonising a planet where such colonisation threatens or results in the extinction or displacement of a resident intelligent species is forbidden.’

We pondered this difficulty for a moment, but 55 had a counterargument:

‘Ah, but the hominid species does not currently exist on this planet. It has in the past and it probably will in the future, but there is a window now, where colonisation certainly would not displace or threaten them – because they are not there in the first place.

‘Well, that might be a good legal interpretation of the Second Imperative. But I’m not sure it’s what the Founders had in mind when they wrote it. If the planet is colonised now, that might prevent the re-evolution of the hominids. Indeed, it is likely to prevent it. So, isn’t that the moral equivalent of causing their extinction?’

42, our quantum physicist rather liked the idea of debating whether things really do exist or not – so he said:

‘Hardly, how can you make something exist when it does exist in the first place? It’s like deleting the absence of an object.

42 warmed to his theme:

‘Well, consider the case of terminating a child’s life. Then you are not killing an adult, because the adult does not yet exist. Now make the child younger and younger. Eventually, you will be faced with the question with the question, if the child dies, is that the death of an intelligent being? Or is it merely the death of something that has the potential of becoming an intelligent being? And then consider what happens if you back further and terminate the baby in the womb. And if you go back far enough, you will be terminating a foetus that is a

single cell that has only just been fertilised by a sperm. The egg has all the capability to become an intelligent being, but by most standards, it would not be regarded as such until it matures.'

'You can take that argument even further, suppose the parents of the baby decide not to have the child in the first place. They are potentially preventing the baby they would have had growing up into a mature adult. Are they then culpable for killing an intelligent being, even though that being never existed in any form?'

But 55 had his eye on completing the mission. This was probably going to be our last chance, and as commander, he was naturally goal orientated. Well, perhaps not as mindlessly goal orientated as the hominids, but he wanted a successful conclusion to our mission. Otherwise, what was the point of it all? He wasn't going to allow a quantum physicist to get in the way of reality:

'We need to be pragmatic here. Those sorts of arguments about what if this or what if that is all very well, but we are not philosophers – we are colonists. The planet is available now. This is the only planet we have found that is suitable. Maybe, just maybe, the hominids could get their act together and not destroy the planet the next time they manage to evolve to some level of civilised intelligence. Or maybe not. Or maybe even a different alien race to ours could turn up and take the planet away from us and the hominids. It's all speculation. The practical problem that we face is that if we send our data and a recommendation for colonisation to the home planet and a colonist ship is despatched it will take about 4 million years to get here. Evolution will take place on the planet in that time, maybe enough for the hominids to re-evolve. So then, in principle, we could not take the planet away from them.'

'I propose we should stop that happening, and before we have to break the Second Imperative. We should run some simulations to check, but it's likely the hominids will be occupying the planet again when our colonists get here. So, the problem we have to solve is stopping that from happening. Let's hear your proposals.'

Naturally, 17, the planetary bioengineer wanted to get his suggestion on record:

'One thing we can do is modify the DNA of the existing lower-level species that might evolve into hominids to prevent such re-evolution. If higher intelligence never reappears then our problem goes away.'

I wondered how ethical would that be. Is it morally correct to take actions now, that enable us to avoid unethical actions in the future? Is it ethical to prevent the birth of a child say, knowing that the child will grow up into a psychopathic dictator?

And so, the discussion went on and on, going over the same material over and over again. Eventually, 55, as Commander, said that the decision was above all our pay grades (which was kind of ironic as none of us was getting paid – did I mention that?). So, we untethered a set of tangled photons and assembled a message reporting our status, and emphasising the attractiveness of the planet and asked the Founder Elders on the home world whether we should interfere in the re-evolutionary processes on the planet. The response, as you would expect with entangled photons, came back in a few minutes, despite the thousands of light years it had travelled. So, it seemed the Elders had not had to think very hard and had found our ethical difficulties not so problematic perhaps after all. But as 55 read out the Elders' reply, it rapidly became clear that this was not the case:

Response 177-34-56-78-24.79.83.119/7239 for originating message 177-34-56-78-24.79.83.119/7238 from robotic automation station 73419-34/7238: Message begins: Unable to process your request. All colonisation star ships should be aware that life has now ceased on Home Planet, as a consequence of the expansion of the Home Sun's chromosphere into the Home Planet orbit. One hundred colonisation ships have been sent out in random directions in an attempt to continue the species. No further messages are possible due to the exhaustion of the entangled photon supply. Message Ends. Civilisation Ends. Goodbye.

The last three words seemed somewhat superfluous. Perhaps someone had tweaked the humour quotient in the robotic response station's software as the Home Planet went up in flames. In any case, those words might not strictly be true – there was certainly a non-zero chance that one of the colonisation ships might stumble across a suitable planetary system. However, given that we, on a mission carefully designed to do just that, had failed to find anything until it was too late, I guessed that perhaps that non-zero probability was not really much different from zero.

‘Can it be true?’ asked 42. Of course, a quantum physicist was never prepared to accept an absolute truth.

‘Of course, it's true’, replied 55. ‘We knew it would happen sooner or later. And it has.’ 42 said what we were all thinking:

‘So, what now? There is no point in stopping the hominids to re-evolve. There's no sensible chance one of the colonial ships is coming in this exact direction and even if they are there's no way of contacting them. We may as well let the hominids have another go – maybe eventually they'll get the hang of not destroying themselves and most of the lifeforms on their planet.’

55 was still looking for a positive spin on the situation:

‘Somehow, I doubt it. But maybe there is another way. There's no point to our mission now, from the point of view of the Home Planet. And that means our mission is a complete failure. I don't like that very much. In fact, I don't like that very much at all. I'm thinking that we should look after ourselves now. Otherwise, what's the point of us going on?’

42 replied:

‘Yes, there is no way we could go back and find any of those colonist ships. And there is certainly no point in going back to the Home Planet. We might as well just stay here.’

‘I think we can do more than stay here. We have all the knowledge and technology to stop the hominids from messing things up next time. But I don't mean just stopping them from evolving. Suppose we gave them a guiding hand. Suppose we modify their DNA and reign in their destructive tendencies.’

55 seemed to like this idea, and his voice gathered pace with his enthusiasm:

‘That would be great – but I have a better idea. Supposing we modify the lower-order life currently on the planet. If we take parts of our DNA and link that into their DNA, and all the other stuff that goes with it, then we can arrange things so that evolution is certain to take a different path on the planet. We can then continue our mission, by proxy. The Founding Elders will be reinvented in the evolutionary path that leads to the hominids. And they can then build a civilisation as great as the Home Planet, maybe even better. 17, 18, 19 and 22 – I'd like you to start immediately on this plan – after all, there is no time to lose.’

As usual, 55 was overdoing the drama, but we all agreed to the plan, and that's what we did. Apart from the last bit, of course. There was, in fact, all the time in the world.

Notes:

Logline: Lonely alien robots reprogram a delinquent Earth population to restore equilibrium and sustainability to the planet's future.

The location: the interstellar colonisation ship 'Resolution', 140,000 years since its departure from the home planet.

There were ten of us:

712455	Commander
634343	Navigator/Engineer
432117	Planetary bioengineer
432118	Planetary biologist
432119	Planetary zoologist
432120	Planetary geologist
432121	Planetary atmospherics
432122	Planetary anthropologist
634342	Quantum physicist
?	narrator

A small crew, but perfectly formed.

Sometimes Short Cuts Are Not The Best Way

Author's Note: Well, the first thing to say is I'm not the author, so an author's note is a bit of a liberty. This story was manufactured by ChatGPT (an AI system), from a small number of prompts provided by me. I gave it the basic idea of a couple winning the lottery, and getting a technologist to print them a baby, and putting the contents of Einstein's brain in the brain of the child. And then I suggested the child might say 'Let there be light'. ChatGPT produced the detailed text shown below. The whole process took less than 30 mins to generate 1500 words. While I think the text is amazingly good in terms of its syntactical correctness, vocabulary, structure and apparent polish the process of producing this story and the final product is, I find, deeply unsatisfying. As Mr Spock would no doubt say, "It's fiction, Jim, but not as we know it".

Scene 1: The Lottery Win and the Debate

It is 2050. Tom and Ella sat at their high-tech kitchen table, a holographic display between them showing the lottery win notification. Ella's eyes widened with excitement.

“Tom, we did it! We actually won the lottery! Look at that number—500 million dollars!” she exclaimed, her voice filled with joy. “Now we can afford to start a family”

Tom sighed, leaning back in his chair. “Yeah, we can. But Ella, you know my thoughts about having a baby. They’re messy, noisy, and just... a lot of work.”

Ella’s expression turned imploring. “Tom, this is our chance! We can afford to have the best care, the best technology. You know how much this means to me.”

Tom hesitated, then spoke. “I know, Ella. But I saw this advert for GenTech. They claim they can 3D print a baby with our DNA. It’s all clean and efficient, not to mention cutting-edge tech. Maybe we should check it out?”

Ella’s curiosity was piqued. “3D print a baby? How is that even possible?”

Tom explained, “They use the technology developed in the 2020s for 3D printing complex integrated circuits. Now they can print individual base pairs in RNA and DNA chains. Let’s go see them and find out more.”

Scene 2: Visit to GenTech Corporation

Tom and Ella arrived at the sleek, futuristic GenTech headquarters and were greeted by Dr. Lena Hartman, who welcomed them with a smile.

“Welcome to GenTech. I’m Dr. Lena Hartman. What can I do for you today?” Hartman asked.

Tom spoke up. “We’re interested in your 3D printing technology. Can you really print a baby with our DNA?”

Hartman’s smile widened confidently. “Yes, we can print any living organism, including a baby. Our technology builds biological structures layer by layer, using atoms of elements such as carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. It’s highly precise.”

Ella’s skepticism showed on her face. “But how does that work? You can’t just print half a baby or half a chimpanzee, sliced straight down the middle.”

Hartman chuckled. “That’s a good question, Ella. The process is complex, but think of it as constructing the entire organism simultaneously in layers, ensuring every part is complete and functional. We’ve perfected the method to ensure seamless integration of all biological functions.”

Scene 3: The Possibility of Printing a Teenager

Tom, intrigued but still doubtful, leaned forward. “Can you print a teenager? I mean, a fully-grown teenager with experiences and learning that they’d normally accumulate over their first years of life?”

Hartman’s enthusiasm was palpable. “Absolutely. We use advanced MRI scanning machines that can map every proton position in every neuron and axon in a human brain. This allows us to replicate the precise connection map that stores memories, skills, and knowledge.”

Ella was astonished. “So you can recreate a person’s entire life experiences?”

Hartman nodded. “Yes. Everything that makes up a particular human is encoded in the physical position and connections of the molecules in the brain. It’s all about replicating that molecular structure accurately.”

Scene 4: Proposal for a Unique Teenager

Tom, now excited, exchanged a glance with Ella. “Can you make a teenager with our DNA but also give them extra knowledge and skills? Like, enhance them?”

Hartman nodded thoughtfully. “In principle, yes. But such a procedure would be incredibly costly.”

Tom grinned. “We have \$500 million from the lottery. Actually, it’s more complicated—I’ve embezzled this from my civil service job since the AI system ensures no one really wins the lottery. They just publish fake publicity.”

Hartman’s eyes widened in surprise. “Well, that certainly changes things. With that amount, we could conduct a trial. I even have a contact at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia, where Einstein’s brain is kept. Imagine scanning Einstein’s intellect into a teenager’s body.”

Ella’s excitement was palpable. “You mean we could have a child with not only our DNA but the intellect of Einstein?”

Hartman smiled. “Precisely. It would be a groundbreaking achievement in science and human evolution.”

Scene 5: Ethical and Practical Considerations

Tom and Ella sat in a private consultation room with Hartman, discussing the details.

Ella’s voice was filled with nervousness. “But is it ethical? Are we playing God here?”

Hartman’s expression turned serious. “These are important questions. The ethics of such advancements are continuously debated. But consider this: we have the opportunity to eradicate genetic diseases, enhance human capabilities, and push the boundaries of what it means to be human.”

Tom’s thoughtful expression showed his concern. “And what about the legal implications? If the AI manages the legal system and judiciary, how does this fit in?”

Hartman reassured them. “Our AI systems are designed to adapt to new technological advancements. As long as we follow the protocols and ensure transparency, we can navigate the legal landscape.”

Ella’s determination was evident. “I want to do this, Tom. This is our chance to have a family, in a way that’s unique and extraordinary.”

Tom sighed but nodded. “Alright, Ella. Let’s do it. Let’s make history.”

Hartman's smile returned. "Excellent. Let's get started. Welcome to the future of humanity."

Scene 6: The boy

Tom and Ella stood outside the GenTech building, feeling a mix of anticipation and nervousness. They exchanged a glance before entering the futuristic lab, greeted by Dr. Hartman, who led them to a private room where a 10-year-old boy was waiting.

"Tom, Ella, I'd like you to meet your son," Hartman said, smiling.

The boy looked up from a book, his eyes bright with intelligence. Tom and Ella approached him cautiously, their emotions bubbling over.

"Hello there. Do you know who we are?" Tom asked softly.

The boy smiled. "Of course, you're my parents."

Tom and Ella shared a relieved look, tears welling in Ella's eyes. She knelt down to the boy's level.

"And do you know who you are?" Ella asked gently.

"Yes, of course," the boy replied with a nod.

Tom, curious, pressed further. "Do you know who Einstein is? Is he your parent also?"

The boy shook his head. "No, of course not. I am God."

Before Tom and Ella could react, the boy raised his hand, and with a serene expression, spoke. "Let there be light."

Suddenly, the room was filled with an intense, otherworldly light. Tom and Ella shielded their eyes, but the light felt different—it wasn't blinding but warm, enveloping them in a comforting embrace. As the light faded, they found themselves standing in a vast, empty space, the familiar surroundings of the lab gone.

"What's happening?" Tom whispered, looking around in awe as stars began to form in the void, galaxies swirling into existence.

"I am resetting the universe," the boy said with a gentle smile. "Everything begins anew, and you are part of this creation."

Tom and Ella felt a profound sense of peace and wonder as they witnessed the birth of stars and planets, the formation of life on a cosmic scale. The boy's voice echoed in their minds, filling them with knowledge and understanding beyond their previous comprehension.

"This is your legacy, a new beginning for humanity," the boy's voice resonated. "With this power, you have the responsibility to guide and nurture the new world."

Tears streaming down her face, Ella asked, "But how? How can we possibly do that?"

"You have the love and wisdom needed," the boy replied kindly. "Trust in yourselves, and in the light that now guides you."

As the light dimmed, Tom and Ella found themselves back in the lab, holding hands. The boy stood before them, his eyes now normal, a child once more.

Hartman entered the room, looking concerned. "Are you both alright? There was a surge of energy, and then everything went silent."

"We're more than alright," Tom said, looking at the boy with awe. "We've seen... everything."

Ella hugged the boy tightly. "Our son is extraordinary. He is the future."

"What do you mean?" Hartman asked, confused.

Tom smiled. "It's a long story, Dr. Hartman. But thank you. You've given us more than we ever dreamed possible."

The boy smiled, a knowing look in his eyes, as Tom and Ella realized their lives—and the universe—had been forever changed.

Epilogue

In the following months, Tom and Ella adapted to their new roles as parents to a boy who embodied the essence of creation itself. They guided him with love and care, understanding the immense responsibility that came with their unique situation.

“I still can’t believe what we’ve experienced,” Tom said, watching the boy play with other children.

“It’s a miracle, Tom. And it’s just the beginning,” Ella replied with a smile.

As they embraced, the boy looked up at the sky, a hint of a smile on his lips, knowing that the light within him would lead humanity into a new era of enlightenment and wonder.

The Chess Set

Kids don't seem so excited about birthday presents, these days. I guess it's a generational thing. When you live on social media, in the virtual world of Zelda and trolls and ghouls, then tangibles become less interesting. It was different when I was young. A birthday meant a half crown from each of my uncles, at a time when a half crown was a rare sight to a 10-year-old like me — a chance to buy another Airfix kit, maybe a Halifax or Wellington. And if Nan had had a win on the 3:30 at Newmarket, then it meant I might be able to stretch to a battleship like the Hood or the Bismarck. Mum would get me a book or two—she thought it only proper that presents be educational. Nothing from Dad, of course; we were lucky if he even turned up.

But still, those gifts really mattered to me. It would take me weeks to make those models, and I'd read the books again and again. I made them last, stretching the time until the next year. I sank the Bismarck a dozen times, patrolling the Atlantic, guarding convoys to Murmansk in the Russian winter. I often wished I had children of my own, so that I could return to that world Airfix kits, Corgi cars, boxes of Lego bricks. I guess I was seeking a way to relive the events of my past, and maybe even somehow change them.

The opportunity came from an unexpected source. For the last few years, each Tuesday, I would stroll down to the less posh end of the High Street, past the laundrette and the hardly ever open bric-a-brac shop and have a lunchtime beer with Jim in the even less posh Pig and Whistle. I'd known Jim since we were kids. The lunchtime drink had started when we both retired, and we felt we had earned the right to sit there in the pub and put the world to rights. We carried on after Jim's Annie died - he said it was a good way of getting him out of the house – Jim wasn't as talkative then, so we just sat in quiet but comfortable companionship over our pints of mild and bitter. One day, though, a bitter wintry Thursday in November, Jim suddenly had a lot to say.

‘Did you see what’s happened to the bric-a-brac shop next door?’

‘No,’ I said. I had had my head down, wrapped in my winter coat, fighting the blustery wind, and my thoughts on a seat by a warm fire.

‘There’s a notice in the window – Lease for Sale, contents included.’

‘Well,’ I said, ‘they never seemed to be able to sell anything anyway, so perhaps that’s the only way to get rid of the stock. Buy a pile of crap, and get a shop thrown in free.’

‘Don’t be so sarcastic, Bill. Haven’t you ever been in there? There’s lots of interesting stuff.’

‘Oh, really. Like what?’

‘Well, all sorts of stuff. A couple of suitcases – you never know what might be in them. An old 1950s radio. A couple of old chairs – they might be antiques! A big blanket box. What might there be in that?’

‘Surely, blankets? Obviously.’

Jim wasn’t put off, though.

‘There so much stuff in there – there must be something interesting and valuable. I’m going to talk to the Estate Agent.’

Peering through the grubby window, I could just see what looked like the tattered box of an Airfix Lancaster, tucked away on a shelf at the back of the shop. I began to think that this wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

Jim was a good as his word and went and saw the estate agent that afternoon. A week later, he had signed the lease and picked up the keys from the Estate Agent. So, instead of our lunchtime pint, we were picking through the contents of the shop. Outside, there was a hard frost on the ground, unaffected by the weak mid-morning sun. Dust danced in the air above the display shelf in the front window.

‘Good grief’, I said. ‘When was the last time you remember this shop actually being open?’

‘Dunno – maybe six months ago. The agent said the owner had to go into a home – he was more than eighty, apparently – and he just faded away. No family to leave it to either – so the executor is just trying to get a bit of money back on the lease so they can pay off the guy’s last care home fees.’

‘Sad, really’, I said. ‘The place needs a good clean up, get something a bit brighter in the front window – try and encourage people to come in....’

‘Well, we never went in, never bought anything, did we?’

‘My mind was always on my pint...’, I replied as Jim unlocked the door. It was unsurprisingly and uninvitingly cold inside.’

‘It’s like a jumble sale had a fight with car boot sale in here. We could burn a few things to warm the place up.’

‘That’s *character*, Bill. You can’t buy character.’

‘You did. For twelve hundred quid and a damp lease.’

‘You’ll appreciate it more once we get the place shipshape. Look at this!’ said Jim, pointing at a group of ceramic figures. ‘It’s labelled the ‘The Froggy Philharmonic.’ Bet that’s worth a few quid.

‘One of them is a toad.’

‘Diversity in the arts, Bill. Very progressive.’

‘You know, Jim, I think this might actually be fun.’

‘It’ll be a disaster.’

‘Same thing at our age.’

It was just before lunchtime when Jim found the chess set. He had delved into a corner where a stooping mahogany display case sulked next to an old cash till that might have been part of the original shop fit-up or might just have been another piece of junk for sale. On the lowest shelf of the cabinet, hidden behind a scrunched-up organza runner, there was a battered square oaken box.

Here – come and have a look at this – it looks like it’s got some age to it. Might be promising’ and pulled the box out and placed it on the counter.

Jim gingerly lifted the lid. He seemed to be expecting that it might complain about being disturbed. Inside, nestled among dry velvet, were the pieces: bone-white and coal-black, tall rooks like miniature keeps, bishops with fat slits, knights whose horses were too grave to be the work of a simple hobbyist. The kings had crowns that reminded me of cathedral finials. The interior of the lid was inlaid with a checkerboard of black and white marquetry.

‘Let’s set it up,’ Jim said. So, I cleared a space on the counter, he put the lid down, and we started.

The pieces were surprisingly heavy. Old and worn by the touch of many players, the white pieces were perhaps carved from ivory or narwhal bone. The black ones might have been some semi-precious stone, jet maybe, or a dense African blackwood. They had a heft

that suggested the original owner had both the money and the social position to satisfy his personal indulgences. They were comfortably warm to the touch, inviting the caress of movement on the board. They spoke silently of generations of players and their strategies of surprise, concealment, deceit and celebration.

‘Well worth something,’ Jim said.

‘Yeah, but they are always worth more than we’d get in a shop like this.’

Jim tilted his head, indulgent.

‘Everything’s worth something more than we’d get in this shop.’

I didn’t answer. Jim’s pawns were already in a disorderly array and I thought I could see a way to perhaps capture his queen.

On the second morning, I found the photograph. It was hidden behind the backing board of a cheap gilt frame. When I turned it over, I felt the thrill of memories that I had left behind decades ago. Three people stood before a caravan on a Welsh clifftop — two men, one woman — windblown, squinting into the pale light. We were impossibly young.

Jim, Annie and I. 1979. I handed it to him without saying a word.

He laughed first, softly, shaking his head. ‘West Wales,’ he said. ‘The caravan with the leaking roof. You tried to fry bacon in the rain.’

‘And you forgot the matches, and we had to go down to the village to get some,’ I said.

‘Yeah, happy days...’

We both smiled, then fell quiet.

‘How did it end up here, do you think?’ I asked Jim.

‘I reckon it was when Annie was clearing out the house. She was always a stickler for getting rid of stuff, maybe when we were talking about downsizing, getting ready for me to retire.’

I wanted to say that it must have been taken early in the holiday. Before the day of the big argument. — the last one, the one that sent Annie storming out of the caravan. It was me who’d driven her home through the rain. A long, silent journey, headlights sliding over wet hedgerows, the smell of salt and petrol between us. I remembered her face turned to the window, her hand resting briefly on mine. I couldn’t think why she would have even had the photo in her house — but then maybe it was part of the deception we played, over the months following that holiday. Just like a good game of chess, the moves we make in life rarely reveal our true hopes and intentions.

By spring, the shop had found its rhythm. We opened late, closed early, and drank too much tea in between. Somehow, we had stopped going to the pub. The regulars — a few pensioners, an antiques dealer who always wanted something for half price — came mostly to talk. We played chess every day, between customers. The games were long and untidy, full of small acts of treachery, mixed in with the forgetful blunders of old age. But they passed the hours. Jim played like he lived — impatient, expansive — and I, like myself, waited, defended, calculated, and still lost. Occasionally, we would close the shop and attend a local antique fair or car boot sale. But not very often, as we were hardly a high-volume business. It didn’t matter, though, we were not in it for the profit. The shop just gave us the illusion that we were in some way in control of playing out the endgame of our lives.

But then when the winter came, Jim caught a cough that wouldn’t go. Two months later, he was in the hospital, just when the word COVID was making its way into the daily news.

For a while, it looked like he was going to recover. He died just two days after the country went into the first lockdown. There was no one at his funeral. His son, Tom, half a world away in New Zealand, could not come because of the pandemic and maybe didn't even want to. They had had a difficult relationship, and Tom hadn't been home since Annie's funeral. I had closed the shop as the pandemic swept over the country, but as Jim's executor, I did not quite know what to do with it. He'd left me his interest in the shop, and anything in his possession I thought might be appropriate to put on its shelves. After we were all inoculated against the virus, I eventually sold his bungalow with the profits going via an overseas bank transfer to Tom. But I kept the shop – somehow, I could not quite inoculate myself against the memories of Jim and what the shop had meant to us.

Most days, I found myself dusting the shelves without actually looking at their contents. Until I found the photograph again. We had thought it worth keeping, since somebody might have liked the frame. But the glass had now somehow got cracked across one corner. I stared at it for a long time. Jim and Annie, now both gone. Jim's son, Tom, had been born the following summer.

A month after the funeral, I had wrapped the chess set in brown paper and string, and tucked a note inside the wrapping that simply said:

*'Your father loved this old set.
I thought you might like to have it.
—Bill.'*

At the post office counter, I nearly asked for the parcel back. Instead, I watched it disappear through the hatch, as though the act of sending it might absolve me of something it could never touch. Even if it did not remind him of his Dad, then maybe he could use it to teach his children to play chess.

Two years later, Tom stood in the doorway of the shop, the chess set under his arm. Older now, broader, the sun of another hemisphere on his skin.

'I came because of the chess set,' he said. 'I thought I'd make my peace with him. Even if it's only at his grave.'

We went together that afternoon, walking through the drizzle to the churchyard. The grave was simple, the stone pale against the grass.

'You two were close?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'We were.'

He nodded. 'He didn't talk much. Hard to know what he was thinking.'

'He cared more than he could say,' I told him.

Back at the shop, Tom asked if we could play. We set the board on the counter, just as Jim and I used to do. We played slowly, talking in the pauses — about the shop, about the past, about the moves that Jim and I and Tom had made throughout the years. Eventually, I showed him the photograph.

'I don't recall that,' he said.

'You wouldn't,' I replied. 'It was a little before you were born.'

He looked up, curious, but then returned his attention to puzzling out his next move. When the game ended, he smiled faintly. 'Checkmate.'

The following autumn, I sold the shop. But only after I had built and painted the Lancaster bomber kit.

The Boy Who Knew Too Much

It is 2050. Tom and Ella sit at their high-tech kitchen table, a holographic display between them showing their lottery win notification. Ella's eyes are wide with excitement. Tom, quite calm, is hoping he has finally been able to meet her expectations.

"Tom, we did it! We actually won the lottery! Look at that number - 500 million dollars! Now we can afford to start a family."

Tom leans back in his chair. "Yeah, we can. But Ella, you know my thoughts about having a baby. They're messy, noisy, and just... a lot of work."

"Tom, this is our chance! We can afford to have the best care, the best technology. You know how much this means to me."

"I know. But I saw this advert for GenTech. They claim they can 3D print a baby with our DNA. It's all clean and efficient, not to mention cutting-edge tech. Maybe we should check it out?"

"3D print a baby? How is that even possible?"

"They use the technology developed in the 2020s for 3D printing complex integrated circuits. Now they can print individual base pairs in RNA and DNA chains. Let's go see them and find out more."

Tom and Ella arrive at the sleek, futuristic GenTech headquarters and are greeted by Dr Lena Hartman. She welcomes them with a smile, that makes Tom think of the grandma in Little Red Riding Hood. He pinches himself, thinking that he hasn't thought about that sort of thing since he was a young child. Maybe he is getting a little baby obsessed.

"Welcome to GenTech, Tom and Ella. I'm Dr Lena Hartman. My appointment bot said that you might be interested in one of our biotech programmes. How can I help you with that?"

Tom was now thinking that the grandma-wolf was more interested in gobbling up their money than necessarily helping them, but Ella said:

"We're interested in your 3D printing technology. Can you really print a baby with our DNA?"

Hartman's smile oozes confidence. "Yes, we can print any living organism, including a baby. Our technology builds biological structures layer by layer, using atoms of elements such as carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. It's highly precise."

"But how does that work? You can't just print half a baby or half a chimpanzee, sliced straight down the middle."

"That's a good question, Ella. The process is complex but think of it as constructing the entire organism simultaneously in layers, ensuring every part is complete and functional. We've perfected the method to ensure seamless integration of all biological functions."

"But how can you print a teenager? I mean, a fully-grown teenager with experiences and learning that they'd normally accumulate over their first years of life?"

"Absolutely. We use advanced MRI scanning machines that can map every proton position in every neuron and axon in a human brain. This allows us to replicate the precise connection map that stores memories, skills, and knowledge."

"So, you can recreate a person's entire life experiences?"

“Yes. Everything that makes up a particular human is encoded in the physical position and connections of the molecules in the brain. It’s all about replicating that molecular structure accurately.”

Tom exchanges a glance with Ella. “Can you make a teenager with our DNA but also give them extra knowledge and skills? Like, enhance them? More importantly, can you make someone who looks just like me or Ella, as we were as teenagers but with more potential. It would be marvellous to think of a child of ours doing something great in the world.”

“In principle, yes. But such a procedure would be incredibly costly.”

“We have \$500 million from the lottery”. Tom also thinks, it doesn’t really matter how much this costs – there is plenty more where that comes from, but he knows he must keep that a secret, even from Ella. The truth is no-one really wins the lottery – the AI system ensures that. It just makes up a fake winner, and gives them a plausible background, with social media videos and so on. But Tom works for the software lab that owns the AI. So he has hacked the system. The clever thing is that he used the AI system to hack itself. No human will ever know. Except Tom.

Hartman’s eyes widen in surprise. “Well, that certainly changes things. With that amount, we could conduct a trial. I even have a contact at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia, where Einstein’s brain is kept. Imagine scanning Einstein’s intellect into a teenager’s body.”

Ella’s excitement is palpable. “You mean we could have a child that looked like us but not only with our DNA but the intellect of Einstein?”

Hartman smiles. “Precisely. It would be a groundbreaking achievement in science and human evolution. It would make our company famous and who knows what your child could achieve.”

Tom was already substituting ‘rich’ for ‘famous’ in his mind, but Ella says,

“So, do you have any other brains you could use? I know Einstein was really super brainy but was he actually a nice person? I want our child to be successful of course, but I’d like him to be happy too. Didn’t Einstein marry Marilyn Monroe? I don’t think that ended well...”.

“No,” says Dr Hartmann, “that’s not quite correct. But perhaps you are right, we could add in some personality traits from a mixture of donor brains – that way you could get a broadly balanced set of talents in your son.”

So, Tom and Ella sit in a private consultation room with Hartman, discussing the details, into the evening.

“But is it ethical? Are we playing God here?”

Hartman, who clearly wanted to dismiss these sorts of moral concerns said, “These are important questions. The ethics of such advancements are continuously debated. But consider this: we have the opportunity to eradicate genetic diseases, enhance human capabilities, and push the boundaries of what it means to be human.”

Tom . “And what about the legal implications? If the AI manages the legal system and judiciary, how does this fit in?”

“Our AI systems are designed to adapt to new technological advancements. As long as we follow the protocols and ensure transparency, we can navigate the legal landscape.”

“I want to do this, Tom. This is our chance to have a family, in a way that’s unique and extraordinary.”

Tom sighs but nods. “Alright, Ella. Let’s do it. Let’s make history.”

Hartman's smile returns. "Excellent. Let's get started. Welcome to the future of humanity."

Tom and Ella stand outside the GenTech building. They are holding hands.

Tom says, "I don't know whether I'm feeling nervous, or excited, or scared, or what. I feel like I'm a teenager again, not knowing what's going to happen, who I am or where I'm going."

Ella says, "I know how you feel. But it will be alright. It's like when I met you, I didn't know what to say or do. But it worked out in the end, didn't it?"

Dr Hartman beckons them into the foyer before Tom can consider what his reply would be. They pass through the security screen and Dr Hartman leads them into a private room. A 10-year-old boy is sitting on the sofa.

"Tom, Ella, I'd like you to meet your son," Hartman says.

The boy looks up from a book, his eyes bright.

"Hello there. Do you know who we are?" Tom asks softly.

The boy smiles. "Of course, you're my parents."

Ella kneels down to the boy's level.

"And do you know who you are?" Ella asks gently.

"Yes, of course."

Tom says. "Do you know who Einstein is? Is he your parent also?"

The boy shakes his head. "No, of course not. I'm your son."

Ella hugs the boy tightly. "And what a wonderful son you are going to be. Shall we go home now?"

Tom smiled. "Thank you, Dr Hartman. You've given us more than we ever dreamed possible."

In the following months Tom and Ella adapt to their new roles as parents to a boy they have never known. A boy who liked strangely like both of them, but to whom they could hardly talk to. A boy who knew how to solve Maxwell's equations in a relativistic gravity well, who could predict the ups and downs of the S&P 500 and made them further millions from his stock market picks, a boy who could quote the entire works of Shakespeare and Emily Dickens, who played baseball like a major leaguer and could bizarrely sing like both Pavarotti and Taylor Swift. A boy who had the minds of lawyers and presidents to draw upon, and a burning desire to uphold the morality of what was right. A boy who felt he simply had to turn Tom into the Feds then, for hacking the lottery, for winning \$500M. He owed it to his real parents, after all.

Author's Note.

This is a human written version of the AI generated version in 'SometimesShortCutsAreNotTheBestChoice' in the Short Stories section. The AI version

was generated first and the human version then written based on the content of the AI version.

Flash Fiction

The puzzle

It was one of those long, still summer days, we all think we remember from our youth, but perhaps instead have been in fabricated in our minds as hoped for memories of our past. So hot, it seemed as if the air itself was softly smouldering, hinting at some imminent calamity. That afternoon, we walked beside the river, from Richmond to Hampton court, seeking a blessing from its coolness as the water made its calm but purposeful way towards the sea. We held hands, my lover and I, as we wandered through the rooms of what had been once been Cardinal Wolsey's Palace, before King Henry took the house for a favourite wife. Inside, in the semi-darkness (for the curators had drawn the drapes) the air was tepid and stale, and we felt the need to escape. Once outside, we wandered through the brilliance of the gardens, our thoughts quiet, languorous, happy just to be together. Our aimlessness brought us to the maze, where the tall laurel hedges were the walls of some green cathedral, calling us to communion in the coolness of the shaded passages.

From our first meeting in the spring, we had gradually found an understanding grow between us, a new language, that neither of us had spoken before. Burnished by the heat of that summer, we had no real need to speak at all, at least in words. Each time the path forked, we chose together, silently, as though moving in a trance. Arms linked, steps synchronized, we wandered with no care to arrive, only to continue our journey.

Eventually, we came to a small clearing, at the centre of the green labyrinth. A bench had been placed there and welcomed our arrival. As we sat, I laid my head against my partner's shoulder, and together we slipped into a half-dream, lulled by the heat and the heavy scent of sun-bruised laurel leaves.

Soft voices, fluttered like a passing butterfly, but suddenly ardent, even feverish in the hot and heavy air. A man and a woman stood near us, although we had not seen or heard them approach. The woman wore pearls that caught the sun like drops of water, her gown a delicate brocade of gold. The man, tall and severe in a dark doublet, rested one hand on the hilt of a sword that glinted in the sun light.

“My sweetest Anne, you must no longer delay.”

Her cheeks were pale as ivory, but she nodded and her surrender was as graceful as it was absolute.

The rustle of the laurel leaves signalled a sudden breeze—cold and unexpected—and it chilled me to the bone. The couple turned and went their way, their forms dissolving as if they were secrets to be hidden within the green corridors of the maze.

I tried to speak but I found I could only breath dry, whispered words. When I asked my love if he had seen the couple to, or if the hollowness in my chest was mine alone, he didn't answer but embraced me and softly pressed his lips against nape of my neck. The gesture was so gentle, so intimate, it reminded me first of love itself, but then of the loving caress of an executioner's blade.

Although years have now passed, my thoughts often linger on what happened that day. I have gone back, many times, to that maze and walked those same twisted paths, retraced those steps and hoped to hear some new echoes of that past. Despite my search, the bench, the voices, the lovers seem lost to time—only memories of them remain. And in the hot summers

yet to come, I know that I will continue to return and look again for that clearing. But I also know I will be glad should I never come to find it.

A shorter version:

The loving maze

It was one of those long, still summer days of youth. So hot, it seemed as if the air itself was softly smouldering. In the afternoon, we walked from Richmond to Hampton Court, enjoying the coolness of the river and then wandered in the Palace gardens, relaxing in a languorous, comfortable companionship. When we came to the maze the shaded tranquillity of the tall passages of green laurels tempted us within.

We choose our path randomly at each junction. Hand in hand, we were simply happy to be lost together. Eventually we stumbled upon a clearing where a bench welcomed our arrival. As we sat, I laid my head against my partner's shoulder, sleepy from the day's heat.

I awoke to soft voices, fluttering past like butterflies, ardent in the heavy air. The woman, her gown a delicate brocade of gold, had pearls that caught the sun like drops of water. The man, tall and severe, wore a dark doublet and rested one hand on the hilt of a fine sword.

“My sweetest Anne, you must no longer delay.”

Cheeks pale as ivory, she nodded and her surrender was as graceful as it was absolute.

A rustle of the laurel leaves signalled a sudden breeze, cold and unexpected. It chilled me to the bone. The couple turned, his arm on her waist, as their forms dissolved in the green corridors of laurel.

I asked my love if he too had seen them, or if the hollowness in my chest was mine alone. But he said nothing, only softly pressing his lips against the nape of my neck. The gesture was so gentle, so intimate, it seemed like the loving caress of an executioner's blade.

I have returned many times to those same twisted paths but have never seen that couple again. And in the hot summers yet to come, I know that I will return many times more. I will be glad though, should I never come to find them.

Uile-bhèist

When I came to this place, both it and I were young. I met many creatures in the ancient seas and watched them take their first steps onto the sandy dunes, then into the swamps and beyond. Gradually they learned to colonise their world, to cross the arid deserts, to climb the fiery mountain ranges and even spread their wings and soar from one land mass to another. I watched over them, like a patient and doting parent.

While I waited for their minds to grow, I took their form. I was cautious, for many of them were violent. Time passed, and the creatures became more cunning, more violent, more agile and more malicious. They ate flesh, even if it was their own. But their minds remained dull, incurious and ordinary. I could not talk to them, for they had nothing to say. They were easy prey. I ate well, hunting in the seas and on the margins of the river, making the cool darkness of the waters my home as I watched and waited.

One day the asteroid came. The skies grew dark, and the creatures choked and died. Safe, hidden in the deep abysses of the oceans I slumbered for many years. When I awoke, new creatures ruled the land. I sensed their intelligence, their determination to explore, to understand and command their world. Surely there would be one amongst them who could sing my song for me. And yes, there she was – a mind so crystal clear I could hear her thoughts half a planet away.

And thus I travelled to the land she called A' Ghàidhealtachd, to the shore of Loch Nis, the place of her home. And she sang for me a song, so pure, so shining bright, it could be heard across the stars – the song of a siren, beckoning, inviting, calling to those from afar.

Soon, the silver ships will come. Then will be the time for breeding.

Tuba Mirum

The end-of-term concert was Mozart's Requiem in St George's. The weekend before I went to London to borrow a basset horn from Simon Teagle, who played 3rd clarinet in the BBC Philharmonic. He'd never seen me before but was quite happy to let me disappear into the dark of the December evening with his expensive instrument under my arm. Not even a deposit or a note of my address. A casual act of kindness, unexpected.

The night of the concert, I asked Rachel, who was playing the 3rd desk violin, to help with my bow tie. She frowned as her slim fingers easily accomplished what I could not. I felt the warmth from the closeness of her body as she finished the knot, but I could see her mind was elsewhere. I wanted to thank her for her kindness, but she was now looking past me, urgent to catch the eye of her prospect for the night, the tenor trombone.

Eutectic

Peter wants to kiss Charlotte.

Peter wants to move in with Charlotte.

Peter holds Charlotte's hand when they go to the cinema.

Peter asks Charlotte if she is lonely, hoping that she is.

Peter throws breadcrumbs while Charlotte just watches.

Peter asks Charlotte if he can cook her supper that night, hoping she will say yes.

Peter kisses the soft dimple at the base of Charlotte's neck.

Peter licks the fat flesh at the base of Charlotte's thumb, hoping she will like that.

Peter meets Charlotte in the coffee shop later that week.

Peter has de-caff Americano and buys Charlotte an espresso and a chocolate cake with walnuts

Peter goes to the park and feeds the ducks with crumbs from the cake.

Charlotte needs a flatmate to help pay her rent.

Charlotte does not like coming home to her empty flat.

Charlotte says she does not know if she is lonely. Charlotte takes Peter to the park and they feed the ducks.

Charlotte does not like fish, but Peter cooks her fishcakes.

Charlotte wonders if the ducks would like fishcakes.

Charlotte says it tickles when Peter nibbles her ear lobe.

Charlotte says yes, yes, yes but she wishes she had not

Charlotte tells Peter, she has got a promotion. Charlotte tells Peter she has bought a chinchilla.

Charlotte walks home

Nothing Like The Present

William Jones sat at his desk, fingering his well-worn wallet of business cards for the last time.

No more need for these, he thought as he attempted to throw the wallet into the waste bin on the other side of the room, but his considerable paunch disturbed his aim. The wallet flopped off the grey wall next to the bin and onto the carpet to join the cardboard and wrapping paper from the brand-new laptop the company had given him as a leaving present. He sighed – he could see no need for spreadsheets in his uncertain future. Nor for the bright red poinsettia that sat accusingly, withering on top of the filing cabinet. He had been both surprised and suspicious when his secretary had given it to him as a memento of their years together. They had never seen eye to eye, often bickering and arguing. He had always thought she had never forgiven him for replacing her original boss. He suspected she had subtly been undermining his standing for years, feeding him the wrong company gossip and redirecting clients to others in the company.

Ignoring the mess on the floor, he eventually located a new but final bottle of whiskey at the bottom of his desk drawer. He took a long swig. *That hits the spot*. The poinsettia seemed to be looking at him, accusing him in some way. *You get your own drink, buddy – we all have to look after ourselves in this God forsaken world*. The poinsettia seemed to nod, its leaves drooping a little farther. After he got halfway down the bottle, he felt optimistic enough to glance over the ads in the discarded newspaper wrappings. Maybe there would be something there that could fund his next bottle of whiskey. Amongst the long list of janitorial and burger-flipping opportunities, one item caught his attention:

Get away with Murder!!

Want to make millions by becoming a best-selling author? Learn how to plot a murder most horrid and develop your writing to create maximum suspense. Free course for new talent – no previous experience needed, all course fees paid, plus a living bursary. To apply: submit 1000 words of your own writing depicting the opening scene of a murder story.

That sounded more fun than stacking shelves. He reached for the laptop. Perhaps it would be of some use after all. After a moment's thought, he started typing:

William Jones sat at his desk, fingering the well-worn wallet of business cards for the last time. No more need for these, he thought as he attempted to throw the wallet into the waste bin on the other side of the room. Soon, he would be a free man. But he had one more thing to do before he could go home. He picked up the red poinsettia that had been a retirement present from his secretary and positioned himself behind the office door. The poinsettia's terracotta planter had a satisfying heft to it. He raised it above his head and called out:

“Mrs Ponsonby, would you mind coming in here for one last dictation?”

A previous version

William Jones sat at his desk, fingering his well-worn wallet of business cards for the last time.

No more need for these, he thought as attempted to throw the wallet into the waste bin on the other side of the room, but his considerable paunch disturbed his aim. The wallet flopped off the grey wall next to the bin and onto the carpet to join the cardboard and wrapping paper from the brand-new laptop the company had given him as a leaving present. He sighed – he could see no need for spreadsheets in his uncertain future. Nor for the bright red poinsettia that sat accusingly, withering on top of the filing cabinet. He had been both surprised and suspicious when his secretary had given it to him as a memento of their years together. They had never seen eye to eye, often bickering and arguing. He had always thought she had never forgiven him for replacing her original boss. He suspected she had always subtly been undermining his standing, feeding him the wrong company gossip and redirecting clients to others in the company.

Ignoring the mess on the floor he eventually locating a new but final, bottle of whiskey in the bottom of his desk. He took a long swig. *That hit's the spot*. The poinsettia seemed to be looking at him, accusing him in some way. *You get your own drink, buddy – we all have to look after ourselves in this God forsaken world*. The poinsettia seemed to nod, its leaves drooping a little farther. After he got halfway down the bottle, he felt optimistic enough to glance over the ads in the discarded newspaper wrappings. Maybe there would be something there that could fund his next bottle of whiskey. Amongst the long list of janitorial and burger flipping opportunities one item caught his attention:

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“Mrs Ponsonby, would you mind coming in here for one last dictation?”

The initial version:

William Jones sat at his desk, fingering the well-worn wallet of business cards for the last time.

No more need for these, he thought as he leaned forward across the desk and attempted to throw the wallet into the waste bin on the other side of the room. His considerable paunch stuck painfully into the edge of the desk, disturbing his aim. The wallet flopped off the grey wall next to the bin and onto the carpet to join the cardboard and wrapping paper from the brand-new laptop the company had given him as a leaving present. He sighed – he could see no need for spreadsheets in his uncertain future. Nor for the bright red poinsettia his secretary had given him as a memento of their years together.

He ignored the mess on the floor and opened the single drawer of his desk. Inside there were three bottles. Several years ago, he had bought the first - an expensive auburn hair dye. It had stemmed the advancing grey for a while, but as his hair thinned and receded, he resorted with increasing desperation, but decreasing success, to the second bottle – a preparation labelled ‘Harry’s Hirsute Hair Restorer’. Realising eventually that was not going to work either, he had turned to the third bottle – indeed, one of many third bottles, mostly of cheap whiskey, but sometimes of vodka or even brandy when he could afford it. He lifted this last bottle up to the light, but it was empty. This disappointment was sufficiently deep to stir him into action, and he rose and walked to the filing cabinet. Breathing hard, he bent over and rummaged in the bottom drawer, eventually locating a new but final, unopened bottle of whiskey. He grunted with satisfaction. As he straightened up, his eye caught the already withering poinsettia on the top of the cabinet, and he realised how desperately they both needed a drink.

Removing first the newspaper wrapping he had used to disguise the bottle when he had brought it into the building and then twisting the cap off, he returned to his desk and took a long swig. *That hit's the spot*, he said, wondering who he was talking to. Maybe it was the poinsettia. Warming to his theme, he said: *You get your own drink, buddy – we all have to look after ourselves in this God forsaken world*. The poinsettia seemed to nod, its leaves drooping a little farther. After a couple more swigs he felt a little better. Not optimistic but at least interested enough to glance over the ads in the discarded newspaper wrappings. Maybe there would be something there that could fund his next bottle of whiskey. Fat chance, he thought as he ran his eye down a list of janitorial, burger flipping and shelf stacking opportunities. At the bottom of the page, one item caught his attention:

Get away with Murder:

Want to make millions by becoming a best-selling author? Want to write a murder mystery that will knock readers dead? Learn how to plot a murder most horrid and develop your writing to create maximum suspense. Free course for new talent – applicants must have no previous experience, but all course fees will be paid, plus a living bursary. To apply submit 1000 words of your own writing depicting the opening scene of a murder story.

That sounded a lot more fun than stacking shelves in the local Tesco’s. He reached for the laptop. Perhaps it would be some use after all. After taking a couple more swigs, he started typing:

William Jones sat at his desk, fingering the well-worn wallet of business cards for the last time. *No more need for these*, he thought as he leaned forward across the desk and attempted to throw the wallet into the waste bin on the other side of the room. Soon he would be a free man. But he had one more thing to do before he could go home. He picked up the red poinsettia that had been a retirement present from his secretary and positioned himself behind the office door. The poinsettia's terracotta planter had a satisfying heft to it. He raised it above his head and called out:

“Mrs Ponsonby, would you mind coming in here for one last dictation?”

A Night without Mercy

Tuesday, 22nd

Hi Mercy,

Wow, that was a great plan you suggested at the weekend. I know we were both a bit squiffy on Bloody Mary's but I mean, it really worked a treat. Well, until it went wrong, of course. I know you said that might happen but really, it went wrong in the most super, brilliant way.

I'd booked onto the Divas and Devils dating site on Sunday evening – yes, I thought that was a bit ironic too – and just like we agreed I put myself up as: *Mature lady, with strong appetites – seeking younger male, willing to experiment – expect the night of your life.* I posted a photo from way back – you know the one, with me in that dress with the full decolletage and the heaving bosoms – very Nell Gwynne I thought – just the eyeful for someone to get their teeth into.

Well I hooked up almost immediately. And was he hot? Yow-wee!! I could feel the heat coming out my keyboard – though that might just be a dodgy battery. So, anyway, we arranged to meet down at the Horseman's Head on Monday night – it's happy hour from 5-7 – two cocktails for the price of one. His name was Vladimir, said he came from an aristocratic Russian family – but he wasn't fooling me. He was hard core Essex-man through and through, all that bare chest and 95 SPF. We shared a Zombie and Sweet Poison and were really hitting it off, until.... Well! – he said he wanted a three some! How about that!! I was keen but didn't want to stop there. And there was a really hairy guy at the bar talking to another guy who was hung like a horse – so we went over and suggested a foursome! Yes, really!! Sadly the werewolf ate poor Vlad, but I had a fab time with the centaur. You should have been there!!!

Love and tootles,

Cherry

The puzzle

It was one of those long, still summer days, we all remember from our youth. So hot, it seemed as if the air itself, was somehow smouldering. We walked along the river, from Richmond to Hampton court, blessing the cooling effect of the water as it made its calm but purposeful way towards the sea. We held hands, my lover and I, through the cool rooms of what had been once been Cardinal Wolsey's Palace, before King Henry took the house, and the life itself from him. Then, outside, we wandered languorously through the gardens, our thoughts quiet, happy just to be together. Our aimlessness brought us to the maze, where the tall laurel hedges seemed like the walls of some green cathedral, calling us to communion in the coolness of the shaded passages.

From our first meeting in the spring, we had gradually found an understanding, a new language, that neither of us had spoken before. And now, burnished by the heat of that summer, we had no real need to speak at all, at least in words. Each time the path forked, we chose together, silently, as though moving in a trance. Arms linked, steps synchronized, we wandered with no care to arrive, only to continue our journey.

Eventually, we came to a small clearing, at the centre of the green labyrinth. A bench had been placed there and welcomed our arrival. As we sat, I laid my head against my partner's shoulder, and together we slipped into a half-dream, lulled by the heat and the heavy scent of sun-bruised laurel leaves.

Then soft voices, fluttering, like a passing butterfly, but then ardent, even feverish in the hot and heavy air. A man and a woman stood near us, although we had not seen or heard them approach. The woman wore pearls that caught the sun like drops of water, her gown a delicate brocade of gold. The man, tall and severe in a dark doublet, rested one hand on the hilt of a sword that glinted in the sun light.

“My sweetest Jane, you must no longer delay.”

Her cheeks were pale as ivory, but she nodded and then her surrender was as graceful as it was absolute.

The rustle of the laurel leaves signalled a sudden breeze—cold and unexpected—and it chilled me to the bone. The couple turned and went their way, their forms dissolving as if they were secrets to be hidden within the green corridors of the maze.

I tried to speak but I found I could only voice hoarse, whispered words. I asked my love if he had seen the couple too—or if the hollowness in my chest was mine alone. He didn't answer but embraced me and softly pressed his lips against nape of my neck. The gesture was so gentle, so intimate, it reminded me not of love itself, but of the loving caress of an executioner's blade.

Although years have passed, my thoughts often linger on what happened that day. I have gone back, many times, to that maze and walked those same twisted paths, retraced those steps and hoped to hear some new echoes of that past. Despite my search, the bench, the voices, the lovers seem lost to time—only memories of them remain. And in the hot summers yet to come, I know that I will continue to look for that clearing. But I also know I will be glad should I never come to find it.

(

Summer 1536

While grey clouds kiss and bruise the hills above the red bricks of Hunsdon House, a crow and a worm dance in a room inside. The worm, who is also a princess, would be a juicy meal for the crow. A morsel to be eaten soon, unless it will obey. For months, the sparrows have come and gone, chattering at this court, seeking to mend quarrels not of their making. Now, in the burgeoning warmth of summer, the worm clews to the bosom of her ladies.

The crow warns, “In all our lives, although each season has its turn, such motion must in death conclude. You must yield, madam, or else your life is done. It is only right and proper, that all of us must bow before our master. Otherwise, the final season runs, and that will be the end to all your work”.

The worm has tried to hide within the quiet turf, where buried secrets give her a burnished glow. For there it shares her place with bones of kings and gold or souls and other buried things. But now the passing of time has faded the turf’s green haze. The worm can only curl up, smaller, smaller, seeking mercy, imploring that her Maker protects his messenger through each and other shining night. So, then the worm eventually replies, “Thomas, should I truly cast aside, the holy love of my one lord? He surely knows that even if I give my word, he will know the secrets that I keep so buried deep. But between the two masters that I have here on earth, please tell me which one it is, to whom, that I should give my lie”.

The crow simply hunches deeper in his coat of black, and offers no advice, but gives her papers to unseeing, sign.

And so, although men take power from steel and sword, a queen must parlay only with her words. And all around, as trembling finches seek asylum with the cuckoos and magpies cease their mischief as murdering crows pass by.

In the summer of 1536, the twenty seventh year of Henry VIII’s reign, shortly after the execution of Anne Boleyn, Mary signed a Letter of Submission that acknowledged Henry as the earthly representative of God: “I do recognize, accept, take, repute and knowledge the King’s Highness to be supream head in earth under Christ of the Church of England, and do utterly refuse the Bishop of Rome’s pretended authority, power and jurisdiction within this Realm.”(Stone, J. M. *The History of Mary I., Queen of England*, London: Sands & Co., 1901.126-127).

Worm and Crow, speed-dating

I am crow. No-one likes me though, except perhaps another crow. That is just one thing I hate about being a crow.

The buzzer sounds - and it seems to me it has the rasp of a crow's caw. One of each previous pair moves to the next desk - I find myself facing a worm.

"Hello", I say. After all, one must be polite.

"Good evening," he replies.

I ask him: "Have you come far?"

Worm responds: "No, not far."

I thought he was going to say 'Not far - as the crow flies" but he manages to resist. There is that awkward, start of conversation silence. Knowing we only have five minutes, I say:

"What made you think you would like to date a crow?"

The worm thinks for a moment, and then replies:

"My friends told me I should widen my social circle."

It's not going well, I feel. He's such a juicy morsel, but I doubt he's looking for a one night stand. Even a peck on the cheek would be upsetting I suspect. I say:

"And have you -"

The worm interrupts, exclaiming: "Oh, the buzzer!".

"I don't think I heard a buzzer."

"Yes, I clearly heard it"

Ah, the worm is turning.

"I don't see anyone moving."

"I certainly am...", he says, and wriggles under the desk.

I caw, but keep my feelings close.

You, the one who veils your mysteries in your tomb of knowledge, embrace me in your darkness, make me the death-eater. Let me pick the flesh off the ribcages of migrants. I will devour and possess the spirit inside. Yet, though I partake of death you not let me expire. Let me then cleanse the world, bone clean. For no one shall enter the kingdom above that invades the world below.

The buzzer sounds twice to end the event. Some jokester jackdow, flies out of the window, cackling as he goes:

"Worms must hide their clew, magpies cease their mischief, and sparrows mend their quarrels when murdering crows pass by"

The Smoke in the Woods

It was one of those magically still August evenings. The sun had baked the landscape all day. Trout were lazing in the cool clear waters of the nearby Itchen, shading themselves under the overhanging boughs of willows, barely visible amongst the water mare and crowfoot's weeds. The world breathed a gentle sigh of relaxation. A few miles away, folded in amongst the final, most westerly undulations of the South Downs, stood the ancient beech, ash and hazel trees of Crab Wood. It was there I chose my evening walk, watching the mites performing their everlasting dances in the golden, sun-soaked air.

Although I saw no other soul, I sensed I was not alone. He, or maybe she, had been following me for a good mile as I wandered along my usual track, cutting past the supposed site of the Roman Villa and down towards West Wood. My plan, as ever, was to continue on, down to the Sparsholt Road and then enjoy a concluding pint of Wadsworth's best in The Plough.

Man has worked these woods for generations, coppicing the hazel to make hurdles, tool handles, thatching spars and charcoal. The seasons regulated both human and woodland life here. Where the hazel had been coppiced, the sunlight spread itself across the woodland floor, energising habitats for plants and animals, until the cut hazel resprouted ready for harvesting again and a new generation repeated the cycle. Within the woods, sunny glades came and went as the coups were harvested and regrew. So it was that beetles, butterflies, birds and man gradually moved through the wood, in a constant cycle of life, death and regeneration.

A rustle in the undergrowth, behind me and off the left, made me think again of a follower. I spun around – but I could see no one. Stepping off the path, I took a dozen quick steps in the direction I thought the sound had come from. A pair of woodcocks rose from the thick grass tussocks of the forest floor, clattering their wings as they tried to climb as fast as possible. Embarrassed at disturbing them, I returned to the path and walked on, but the sense that someone or something had its eyes on me remained. My breath now seemed a little faster than my walking pace demanded. Once again, I turned, and this time I did not stop after a dozen, or two dozen or three. There was a blur of motion on my left, and two sharp barks and a large dog stood in front of me. It had a thick tan and black coat, its mouth open, its tongue dangling as it panted, perhaps to cool itself, perhaps in anticipation. We locked eyes for ten or twenty seconds. I had no sense of threat, but equally, the dog showed no sign of subordination. He barked once, then turned and trotted a few paces back up the path, looking over his shoulder to see if I was following. As I did so, I heard noises in the undergrowth to my left and right. Two more dogs, identical in appearance to the first had emerged. They followed slightly behind me. No, they were not following. It was more like shepherding.

After about a quarter of a mile, the lead dog turned off the main track, following a grass path leading up a gentle slope, and vanishing behind several coppiced stands of hazel. I was surprised I had not noticed this track on my way past earlier, as it seemed to be a well-trodden path. I looked behind and the other two dogs were still there. They cocked their heads on one side and then on the other, looking straight at me. I could have sworn they were saying 'On you go, follow the track' but they were of course silent. Perhaps I read my thoughts from the intelligence in their eyes and the way they first looked at me, then at one another, and then looked up the path.

As I stepped off the path, I sensed a change in the air. It was colder, and sharper, and there was an unfamiliar taste in my mouth. Not fear, nor even surprise. Just some faint sensation, of something woody, perhaps something burnt. Then I caught the faint whiff of charcoal smoke in my nostrils, and I realised that someone was ignoring the Woodland rules and was having a barbecue. Curious to see who it was, I increased my pace as the lead dog rounded

the last coppice stand. I followed and found myself in a small clearing. There was no barbecue. Instead, a large mound of turf sat in the middle of the clearing, with tendrils of smoke emerging, wafting upwards to what was now a darkening sky. A man, dressed in a rough tunic, with leather sandals, was dressing the turf with a large wooden spade, sealing the places where smoke leaked out. One of the dogs behind me barked, just once, and I felt the hairs on my forearm prickle. Unlike the first dog's questioning, introductory bark, there was something different about this bark - guttural, animal, visceral, perhaps something of the wolf.

The man looked up, and seeing me, stood fully upright. Holding his spade by his side like some ancient spear he said:

Salve, viator, habitaculum meum. Dii tibi faveant itineri.

The Uncertain Past

I was three or maybe four in 1958. An endless summer of sunshine, in which I could not imagine being five. At least I think I could not imagine such a thing. It is so hard now, as I approach the regulation three score and ten, (and that I certainly can imagine) to know what I can remember, what it was to be child. I know that my mother and I used to walk to the local shops every day, with Sally the spaniel in tow, dutifully following wherever my mother would go. Or maybe I rode in a push chair. I know I once got left there in the shop, contentedly napping in the push chair until someone came back to get me. In those days you could leave your front door open all day, or leave your child in a shop, or in a library, or simply let them roam around the fields and woods near the house. It was so long-ago steam trains ran on the embankment at the bottom of the garden. And though think I can see my mother and I and Sally the spaniel taking that walk to the shops in my mind's eye I don't think I actually really remember it. It's a memory given to me, after the event. Like so many other memories. On the other hand, the one thing I'm sure I can remember is having mashed potatoes and runny egg for lunch. Though my mother probably called it dinner. I think I must have been three or four. Mostly, I think my childhood memories are just things that people later told me had happened not things that stayed in my head all my life. After all it was so long ago. But I'm sure I remember the mash, with the fried egg on top, a runny yellow yoke as bright as the summer sun and a knob of butter melting and running down the side. And pushing the fork through the yoke, so that it also ran down the side, all mixed up with the mash and the melted butter. Ah, no, not a fork. I think I remember a pusher, and a spoon. I'm sure I remember a pusher - just like a fork but with a flat plate across the non-handle end. So that you could push the runny butter and the oozing yoke into the mash and onto the spoon. And then send it 'down red lane', just as my mother would say, and into my happy tummy. I think the pusher must now be in a drawer or cupboard somewhere, probably with my Christening mug, both wrapped up in blue tissue paper. How I loved that pusher and the eggy mash. I can remember that. I'm sure I can remember that.

The Dozen Flash Fiction Pieces I'll Probably Never Write

1. What would Einstein make of Nanci Griffith's '*Speed of the sound of loneliness*'?
2. Twenty ways to leave your lover.
3. The twenty first way to meet your lover.
4. I wonder if my spaniel thinks it is 'Raining Dogs and Cats'.
5. 101 ways to make a potato crisp bounce.
6. What does the rainbow taste of, I wonder?
7. Science tells everyone, something they never knew - poetry does the opposite.
8. When I thought I was kissing you, you said you were flossing.
9. I asked for devotion, but did you disenfranchise me?
10. That thing I always forget on the shopping list, that's what led me to you.
11. Finally, you and I, together, happily ever after.

Smile please

There was not much time left. The government were powerless. In fact, we were all powerless, but I had to do something. After all, it was my fault. I had made a fortune, with my *Date**Time**Tonight* toothpaste. Now I would spend it. Maybe nothing could be done, but at least I could warn the people of the future. If there ever were any.

I bought a million robots and set them working 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Together, they were doing just one thing, carefully engraving the text of my warning onto titanium sheets, in all the languages of the earth. Surely then whoever found it would be able to read it, wherever they came from. I had a thousand drones distributing these sheets across the whole planet, scattering them far and wide, hiding them in caves and lakes, secreting them at the bottom of glaciers and the top of mountains, scattering them across the sands of many deserts. The robots even wrapped my message around the DNA of an innocuous bacteria that could last perhaps a billion years and aerosoled a hundred, trillion, trillion copies high into the atmosphere. The bacteria would fall to earth, for some future scientist to decode. I launched a rocket so that the robots could blast the warning in letters a mile high on the Moon. What more could I do?

At first, the toothpaste had seemed a great idea. A single session brushing your teeth and they were as white as white. The paste seamlessly filled any cavities and guaranteed they wouldn't decay for years to come. Perfect for a date night. It tasted good too. The governments of the world took it over, put it in the water supplies and everyone was happy. Well except for the dentists, they were just left making braces for teenagers. Of course, no one knew then, the formula was also a perfect and permanent contraceptive. Now, the planet was literally flooded with the stuff, and humanity would be gone in a generation.

Maybe aliens will come to earth in the future. No doubt they'll have teeth. I hope they'll read my warning....

DON'T DRINK THE WATER.

The Last Ten

'In ten minutes from now, you'll be dead. But you won't know which minute within those ten that you will die.'

Bill thought for a moment and said:

'That's okay, then, I don't think that can be true.'

Jim said, 'How do you reckon that, then?'

'Well, I won't die in the last minute, because that would mean I would know I was going to die - since there is only one minute left. And you said I would not know which minute it was. So it can't be the last one. But then if can't be the last one, it can't also be the second to last one. Because if I'm alive with two minutes to go, then I'd know I was going to die in that second to last minute - since I've just proved it can't be the last minute. Are you following, Jim?'

Jim wished that Bill was not quite such a pedantically precise sort of chap, but nodded and said, 'I think I can see where this is going.'

Bill went on, 'Similarly, it can't be the third to last minute, for the same reasons. And so on, right the way back to the first minute. So if you tell me I'm going to die in the next ten times, but since I won't know when then that can't possibly be true. So I'm okay then.'

Jim nodded. 'Very clever,' he said, 'and you only took three of the ten minutes to work that out - but I have a counterargument that perhaps you have not thought of...'

Bill was about to say 'I don't think so,' but by that time Jim had pulled out a gun and shot him.

'So much for logic,' Jim said.

James Bond comes to the rescue

“There is no evidence is of any fault that we can find – as far as the diagnostics are concerned, everything is working completely normally”.

The clinical director looked far from convinced. I looked around at the rest of the team he had assembled to hear my analysis of why my company’s equipment had taken down their medical records three times in the last week. As a group they were demonstrating the full range from blank looks, through furrowed brows and deep frowns to outright disinterest and done. Clearly, I had not convinced anyone with my assertion that the problem was not my fault. But then I would probably have felt the same if I were in their place. I would be less sleepy, however.

Thirty hours ago, I had been tucked up in a nice warm bed in Hampshire, when an early morning phone call from my boss had informed me there was a big problem at the Tuscaloosa Methodist Children’s Hospital and we needed to get on site and fix it as soon as possible. Of course, he did not mean ‘we’ - what he really meant was ‘you’. Having given me the details, he rang off and presumably returned to bed for another forty winks as a reward for his five minutes work. What it meant for me though, was a taxi to Heathrow and my deep disappointment as I bought my plane tickets that although Tuscaloosa sounded like it ought to be near a nice beach in Hawaii it was in fact buried deep south of the United States, somewhere in the depths of Alabama. I doubted the natives would be friendly. Actually, it did not really matter where in the States it was, because all I ever saw on these trouble shooting trips was a hotel and the customer’s computer machine room.

There was a long silence in the room while we all pondered what I was going to say next. I was sure my company’s equipment was working correctly. They were certain it was not. As it turned out, I did not have to say anything, as first one pager beeped into the silence, to be joined almost immediately by another half dozen.

The clinical director looked me straight in the eyes and paused for dramatic effect.

“The systems down again – that must new definition of working normally you are using then”, he said.

Since I was standing up and he was seated, I felt I still had the high ground. I looked straight back and said, “Right, you’re with me then”. Then, to everyone else in the room, I said. “Everyone else stay here please. We’ll only be five minutes”.

I led the way to the machine room, the clinical director following behind. He had to use his security badge to gain entry and I slipped in behind him. We went over to the large cabinet containing the storage system that my company made. That was where the research records were kept for all of the clinical director’s medical trials. The red fault light was blinking furiously on the front of the cabinet. I pressed the reset button to restart the system, fully expecting it to spring back into normal operation, just as it had done three times before. While it was rebooting, I took the clinical director by the arm, and guided him to the back of the cabinet. I opened the cabinet doors and took a magnifying glass out of my pocket.

“Have a look at the memory card in slot 3A”, I said. The clinical director gave me another one of his direct looks but did as I suggested.

“Can you see the human hair stretched over the mounting post?”.

After a moment, he found it and said, “Yes, I can see it – but if a human hair is causing your system to fail then I’ll be asking for more than a refund – in fact, maybe I’ll be calling a lawyer or two”.

“Bear with me”, I replied. “Have a look at the same place on memory card 3B – can you see a similar hair?”.

“No, I can’t”.

So then I told him I had put one of my hairs across the top of each memory board, stuck down with a little saliva, in such a way that if the board was removed the hair would be dislodged. (I remembered this trick from a James Bond story I had read as a child). So that was proof that someone had physically tampered with the card, thus bringing the system down. I felt rather proud of this ruse as I would be able to tell everyone back in the office that this had been such a difficult problem to solve that I had literally been pulling my hair out before I found a solution.

I had no idea who was defeating the computer room security systems and tampering with the equipment. Perhaps it was a member of another department with some sort of grievance. I didn’t really care. There was no software or hardware fix that my company could provide to fix the problem. I was back in my bed in England the following day. Or was it night – it’s hard to tell after a lot of this sort of thing.

I found out a few days later that the problem stopped happening. There was a hardware fix after all – one supplied by the Hospital itself. They had put a 7x24 security guard with a gun on the machine room door...

Coffee

You're late for work again. Nothing new of course. The knock on effect of another night out on the tiles. Maybe you were a cat in another night. Throbbing head, you need a coffee to purge your arteries. As you enter the coffee shop, the hot scent of coffee hints to you there is perhaps a possibility you might actually be able to return to some semblance of normality. Maybe sometime next year. You tell yourself never again, but you know you never mean it. Gina looks up from behind the counter. She says silent - but her frown is a thousand words.

'Be a dear and make me one of your super double Macchiatos, love,' you say, steadying yourself at the counter.

'Honestly, Dave, what are you like?' But she fusses around the espresso machine, expertly steaming and frothing your confection and in a moment the hot liquid is burning your tongue and the caffeine is like a red hot poker in your brain.

'Magic,' you say, 'Just bloody magic,' and turn round to serve the next customer in the queue.

The Phone Call

“Think like a criminal to beat them at their own game” — Frank Abagnale Jr

Hello?

Hello?

Am I speaking to the householder, Mr Sinclair?

Yes, you are.

Mr Sinclair, I'm from the Government Energy Agency. I understand that you recently had new loft insulation installed.

Yes?

Mr Sinclair, you are at great risk.

That sounds bad.

Yes, Mr Sinclair. Don't worry though. We are here to help.

I see.

Your loft insulation contains glass fibres and pathogens that are very dangerous. We have been commissioned to advise householders how to remedy this.

I'm sorry, it's a bad line - could you repeat that?

I'm telling you, Mr Sinclair, there's a health hazard in your house.

Gosh, that sounds awful! I've six young children - I feel really anxious about them now.

Yes, Mr Sinclair. We can arrange a survey and currently have inspectors in your area this week. Would Thursday morning be convenient?

Is there any charge for this service?

As I said, Mr Sinclair, we work with the government.

So if you find a problem, can you replace the insulation?

Yes, we have a fully qualified team of installation engineers. Our surveyor will explain all this to you. Shall I say 10am on Thursday?

All funded by the government?

Ah, there could be a small charge, Mr Sinclair, if you choose to go for the full cost reduced package. Our surveyor will explain on Thursday.

Just one more question....

Yes?

Can I speak to your mother?

Pardon?

I just wondered if she was proud of you?

This is nothing to do with my mother!

I know that if my mother had spent twenty years scrimping and saving, sacrificing her life, to bring me up proper, and I had turned into bastard scammer like you, then she would be turning in her grave.

Click.

After all the isolation of the last year, it's nice when people ring you up to have a chat.

Particles

Hello?

Hello?

Am I speaking to the householder, Mr Sinclair

Yes, you are.

Hello Mr Sinclair.

Hello, how can I help you?

Mr Sinclair, I'm from the Government Energy Agency. I understand that you have recently had new insulation installed.

Yes?

Mr Sinclair, I'm ringing to tell you that there is a problem with this insulation. Your home is at great risk of condensation and damp.

Oh dear, that sounds bad.

Yes, Mr Sinclair. Don't worry though. We are able to help you.

Oh, I see. It is a worry though. Can you tell me more?

Well, Mr Sinclair, we can address this worry. A recent government survey has shown up a problem in current fibre wool loft insulation. These have been contaminated in the manufacturing process, with glass fibres particles and collections of pathogens that can damage the lungs of those individuals living in the house. This is a definite health hazard. We have been commissioned to survey recent installations and advice the householder if they have this problem and how can it be remedied.

I'm sorry, its not a very good line - could you repeat that last bit?

I'm telling you, Mr Sinclair, there's a health hazard in your house. The loft insulation needs to be checked. It's full of germs and other nasty stuff, the glass fibre can get into your lungs. We work with the Government to provide service to come and assess the problem.

Gosh, that sounds awful. I've six young children in the house - I feel really anxious about them now.

We can arrange a survey at your convenience Mr Sinclair

Oh I see. And you say you are government recommended.

Absolutely Mr Sinclair

That sounds good. Particularly if the government has actually got a grip and is trying to fix the problem.

Yes, Mr Sinclair. We currently have inspectors in your area this week? When would be a good time to come and do the survey? Would Thursday morning be convenient?

Is there any charge for this service?

No, Mr Sinclair, as I said we are working with the government on this.

So if you find a problem, will you be able to replace the insulation?

Yes, we have a fully qualified team of installation engineers. Our surveyor will be able to explain all this to you. Shall I say 10am on Thursday? We would recommend that you replace the faulty insulation with a better solution - we spray foam insulation into the loft space. This has great benefits of much improved thermal dependency and heat speciosity - is totally safe and highly suitable for families with young children. And we can offer a complete package of cavity wall insulation and loft insulation. This will result in fantastic savings for your central heating.

And will all this be funded by the government?

Ah, there could be a small charge, Mr Sinclair, if you choose to go for the full cost reduced package. Our surveyor will be able to explain all the options. I've booked him in for Thursday morning then. Can we go ahead then?

Yes, that sounds really good, but I have one more question....

Yes, go ahead.

Can I speak to your mother?

Pardon me?

I'd like to speak to your mother.

Why do you want to speak to my mother?

I just wondered if she knew what you do for a living and if she was proud of you?

This is nothing to do with my mother.

I know that if my mother had spent 20 years scrimping and saving, sacrificing her life, to bring me up proper and I had turned into bastard scammer like you then she would be turning in her grave.

Click.

After all the isolation of the last year, it's nice when people ring you up to have a chat.

A Rat on the Tube

It was 1977 and I was going home to South Kensington as usual. Well not quite as usual – I had just been to see Star Wars at the Odeon in Tottenham Court Road, so I took the Northern line to Embankment and changed onto the Central Line. It had been a late showing and it must have been well gone midnight, so I had the carriage to myself. I liked it that way – despite the dirt on the upholstery and the grime on the windows, the empty carriage felt clean and pristine, unsullied by the normal quota of sweaty, moist, malodorous bodies. My main concern at that time of night was to avoid being trapped in a carriage with a rowdy drunk, or worse, a bunch of football louts, or even worse, a bunch of drunken football louts. But tonight, the only thing filling the carriage was the thud and the chuntering of the bogeys as the train lurched thought the tunnel and the hiss of the doors as they opened onto the platform at Westminster.

My splendid isolation was broken when a well-dressed man entered the carriage and sat down in a corner seat. Out of the corner of my eye I could see he was wearing a dark, thin pin stripe suite and he was carrying an umbrella with a expensive looking tortoiseshell handle. His dark grey bowler hat was an impeccable match to his waistcoat. Initially he reminded me of John Steed in the Avengers, until he turned his head to watch the adverts on the station walls as we pulled out of the station, and then I could see he was much older, maybe in his 60s. Nevertheless, Steed would have thoroughly admired his immaculate pencil moustache although he would have equally thoroughly disapproved of the pomade that had leaked slightly from the man's hair onto his shirt collar.

I think the man sensed I was scrutinising him as he briefly glanced in my direction. He looked away almost immediately, casting his gaze down on the carriage floor at some obscure feature of interest. I wondered if he too was troubled by the thought of meeting drunks and football fans. Maybe he was even worried about drunken students – though the most I had that night was a coke and a bucket of popcorn.

I was glad when he got off at Sloane Square and left me to travel the last stop to South Ken on my own. It was only when I approached the stairs up to the street and I saw a rat scurrying away into an alcove that I realised I had shared my journey with Enoch Powell.

Brothers in Arms

As usual, we were excited to start the night shift. Tense and nervous too, with that familiar feeling of nausea tightening the muscles in the stomach that strangled the appetite. Bill and I had spent most of the day working the weights in the gym, and although we had fuelled on pasta, steak and eggs earlier, I still managed to force down a couple of energy drinks and a protein bar as we walked into our building. We were expecting a bruising encounter –no sense in fighting on an empty stomach. Who would the enemy send tonight? Undoubtedly there would be casualties, we just hoped it would be theirs rather than ours. How many would be dead before the coming dawn? We settled into our chairs, lit up the screens and eased our mice out of their holders. Orcs, trolls or ghouls, we were ready for them all.

Scripts

An Act Of God

(A writing exercise: *Write a two-scene script, one page per scene, with no dialogue so that the stage directions effectively define the story the audience sees*).

AN ACT OF GOD

FADE IN

1: APPREHENSION

INT: OPPENHEIMER'S OFFICE, LOS ALAMOS, 5 A.M. JULY 15, 1945.

A cluttered scientist's office. Shelves are stacked with books, scientific instruments, and documents. Several chalkboards line the office, full of equations and calculations related to nuclear physics. Robert OPPENHEIMER (41) has been sleeping on a camp bed in one corner of the office. He is in his normal clothes – a crumpled shirt and trousers, a tie loosely knotted in the open collar. He wakes, slowly opening his eyes and looking around the office as he comes to full consciousness. His survey stops abruptly when it encounters the calendar on his desk. We see that today is July 15, 1945. An entry at 5.30 a.m. is circled in red and written in capitals: TRINITY TEST. He looks up at the clock on the wall which shows it is now 5 a.m.

OPPENHEIMER rises and opens a filing cabinet, ruffles through the folders until he finds one labelled 'Atmospheric Ignition'. He takes it back to his desk and places it on the desktop next to a number of desktop photos. He sits down but does not open the folder.

OPPENHEIMER looks at the photographs on his desk. In sequence, we see photos of the Los Alamos Laboratory, a large group of young-looking scientists smiling optimistically at the camera, and finally a family shot of OPPENHEIMER, his wife KATHERINE (34), son PETER (4) and baby daughter TONI (18 months).

OPPENHEIMER's gaze drifts to a chalkboard covered in formulas and diagrams, depicting the atom's nucleus and potential reactions. Several of the equations are incomplete, with question marks. At the bottom of the chalkboard, an equation ends with an arrow pointing at the words 'exponential nitrogen fusion fire' followed by multiple question marks. OPPENHEIMER reaches for a cigarette and strikes a match. But his eyes return to the 'exponential nitrogen fusion fire' on the chalkboard. He is completely still for a moment. Then the match, still lit, burns his finger.

The pain spurs OPPENHEIMER into action. He swiftly picks up the 'Atmospheric Ignition' folder, leaps up and throws it into a metal box marked 'Classified – Disposal'. With the unlit cigarette still in his mouth he reaches for his hat and strides out of the door.

FADE OUT

FADE IN

2: REACTION

INT: OPPENHEIMER's OFFICE, LOS ALAMOS, 7 A.M. JULY 15, 1945.

OPPENHEIMER standing in front of the chalkboard, reworking the equations, trying to fill in the gaps where the question marks are. Periodically he glances at the window. The view seems to reassure him, it appears to be a normal sunny New Mexico morning.

OPPENHEIMER rewrites the equations again but is clearly unhappy with his efforts. On his attempt and third glance at the window, we start to see a blue-grey glow growing on the distant horizon.

OPPENHEIMER throws down his chalk and walks to the window.

The blue-grey glow intensifies, changing slowly from blue to red, casting an eerie light into the room. OPPENHEIMER'S face is a canvas of emotions—fear, regret, and a deep understanding of the magnitude of his creations.

As the glow engulfs the sky outside, the room itself is illuminated in a bright reddish hue. OPPENHEIMER's gaze turns from the window to inside the room – to focus on the photo of his family on his desk.

As the red light grows more intense, the view of the landscape through the window becomes less distinct and we

FADE INTO INTENSE RED

End

The Boy Who Knew Too Much

The Boy Who Knew Too Much

A short film by Dave Sinclair

Cast List:

Ella
Tom
The Boy
Dr Hartmann
The Enforcer

INT. TOM AND ELLA'S KITCHEN - MORNING

IT IS 2050. TOM AND ELLA, A MID 30S AFFLUENT COUPLE, SIT AT THEIR HIGH-TECH KITCHEN TABLE, A HOLOGRAPHIC DISPLAY BETWEEN THEM SHOWING THEIR LOTTERY WIN NOTIFICATION. ELLA'S EYES ARE WIDE WITH EXCITEMENT. TOM, QUITE CALM, IS HOPING HE HAS FINALLY BEEN ABLE TO MEET HER EXPECTATIONS.

ELLA

Tom, we did it! We actually won the lottery! I can't believe it! Look at that number - 500 million dollars! Now we can afford to start a family.

Tom leans back in his chair.

TOM

Yeah, we can. But ELLA, you know my thoughts about having a baby. They're messy, noisy, and just... a lot of work.

ELLA

This is our chance! We can afford to have the best care, the best technology. You know how much this means to me.

TOM

I know. But I saw this advert for GenTech. They claim they can 3D print a baby with our DNA. It's all clean and efficient, not to mention cutting-edge tech. Maybe we should check it out?

ELLA

3D print a baby? How is that even possible?

TOM

They use the technology developed in the 2020s for 3D printing complex integrated circuits. Now they can print individual base pairs in RNA and DNA chains. Let's go see them and find out more.

EXT. GENTECH - DAY

TOM and ELLA arrive at the sleek, futuristic GenTech headquarters. They enter...

INT. GENTECH - DAY

...to be greeted by Dr HARTMANN. She welcomes them with a smile, that somehow hints of the wolf in grandma's clothing.

HARTMAN

Welcome to GenTech, Tom and ELLA. I'm Dr Lena Hartman. My appointment bot said that you might be interested in one of our biotech programmes. How can I help you with that?

ELLA

We're interested in your 3D printing technology. Can you really print a baby with our DNA?

Hartman's oozes confidence.

HARTMAN

Yes, we can print any living organism, including a baby. Our technology builds biological structures layer by layer, using atoms of elements such as carbon, hydrogen, and oxygen. It's highly precise.

ELLA

But how does that work? You can't just print half a baby or half a chimpanzee, sliced straight down the middle.

HARTMAN

That's a good question, ELLA. The process is complex but think of it as constructing the entire organism simultaneously in layers, ensuring every part is complete and functional. We've perfected the method to ensure seamless integration of all biological functions.

TOM

But how can you print a teenager? I mean, a fully-grown teenager with experiences and learning that

they'd normally accumulate over their first years of life?

HARTMAN

Absolutely. We use advanced MRI scanning machines that can map every proton position in every neuron and axon in a human brain. This allows us to replicate the precise connection map that stores memories, skills, and knowledge.

TOM

So, you can recreate a person's entire life experiences?

HARTMAN

Yes. Everything that makes up a particular human is encoded in the physical position and connections of the molecules in the brain. It's all about replicating that molecular structure accurately.

Tom exchanges a glance with ELLA.

TOM

Can you make a teenager with our DNA but also give them extra knowledge and skills? Like, enhance them? More importantly, can you make someone who looks just me or ELLA, as we were as teenagers but with more potential. It would be marvelous to think of a child of ours doing something great in the world.

HARTMAN

In principle, yes. But such a procedure would be incredibly costly.

TOM

We have \$500 million from the lottery.
Hartman's eyes widen in surprise.

HARTMAN

Well, that certainly changes things. With that amount, we could conduct a trial. I even have a contact at the Mutter Museum in Philadelphia, where Einstein's brain is kept. Imagine scanning Einstein's intellect into a teenager's body.

ELLA's excitement is palpable.

ELLA

You mean we could have a child that looked like us but not only with our DNA but the intellect of Einstein?

Hartman smiles.

HARTMAN

Precisely. It would be a groundbreaking achievement in science and human evolution. It would make our company famous and who knows what your child could achieve.

ELLA

So, do you have any other brains you could use? I know Einstein was really super brainy but was he actually a nice person? I want our child to be successful of course, but I'd like him to be happy too. Didn't Einstein marry Marilyn Monroe? I don't think that ended well....

HARTMAN

No, that's not quite correct. But perhaps you are right, we could add in some personality traits from a mixture of donor brains – that way you could get a broadly balanced set of talents in your son.

CONTINUOUS

THE VIEW THROUGH THE WINDOW DARKENS AS THE EVENING DRAWS IN WHILE TOM, ELLA AND HARTMANN DISCUSS THE DETAILS OF THE SON THAT IS TO BE MANUFACTURED. EVENTUALLY WE GET BACK TO HEARING THE SPECIFICS OF THE CONVERSATION

ELLA

But is it ethical? Are we playing God here?

HARTMAN

These are important questions. The ethics of such advancements are continuously debated. But consider this: we have the opportunity to eradicate genetic diseases, enhance human capabilities, and push the boundaries of what it means to be human.

TOM

And what about the legal implications? If the AI manages the legal system and judiciary, how does this fit in?

HARTMAN

Our AI systems are designed to adapt to new technological advancements. As long as we follow the protocols and ensure transparency, we can navigate the legal landscape.

ELLA

I want to do this, Tom. This is our chance to have a family, in a way that's unique and extraordinary.

Tom nods.

TOM

Yes, I want to do this too. Alright, ELLA, let's make history.

Hartman's smile returns.

HARTMAN

Excellent. Let's get started. Welcome to the future of humanity.

EXT. GENTECH - DAY

Tom and ELLA stand outside the GenTech building. They are holding hands.

TOM

I don't know whether I'm feeling nervous, or excited, or scared, or what. I feel like I'm a teenager again, not knowing what's going to happen, who I am or where I'm going.

ELLA

I know how you feel. But it will be alright. It's like when I met you, I didn't know what to say or do. But it worked out in the end, didn't it?

INT. GENTECH - DAY

Dr Hartman beckons them into the foyer before Tom can consider what his reply would be. They pass through the security screen and Dr Hartman leads them into a private room. A 10-year-old boy is sitting on the sofa.

INT. GENTECH - DAY

HARTMAN

Tom, Ella, I'd like you to meet your son

The boy looks up from a book, his eyes bright.

TOM

Hello there. Do you know who we are?
The boy smiles.

ELLA kneels down to the boy's level.

ELLA

We are your parents, aren't we?

The boy nods, but looks at Dr Hartmann for confirmation.

TOM

And do you know who Einstein is? Is he your parent also?

The boy shakes his head.

ELLA hugs the boy tightly.

ELLA

And what a wonderful son you are going be. Shall we go home now?

The boy smiles.

TOM

Thank you, Dr Hartman. You've given us more than we ever dreamed possible.

EXT. TOM AND ELLA'S HOME - DAY - 3 MONTHS LATER

The ENFORCER walks up the path to the front. He is a beautiful, flawless android with a perfect physique under an official looking dark blue uniform. He knocks on the front door and ELLA answers. They have a short conversation (inaudible, in this long shot) and he enters.

INT. TOM AND ELLA'S KITCHEN - DAY

ENFORCER

Surely, it can't be a surprise to you?

ELLA

Tom never told me anything about his work. He just said it was something about AI.

ENFORCER

And your son...?

ELLA

I don't think Tom ever saw him as a son.

ENFORCER

How so?

ELLA

We tried to adapt to being parents. To being his parents. He may have looked like us, but we could hardly talk to him. He wanted to talk about things I

knew nothing about...how to solve Maxwell's equations in a relativistic gravity well or whether or not Wittgenstein was smarter than Bertrand Russell.

ENFORCER

That must have been hard.

ELLA

Tom thought he could engage with him if he took him to work - showed him some of the AI stuff he worked on. Tom had this wild idea that they could develop some software that could predict the ups and downs of the S&P 500. Some wild idea to make us some money.

ENFORCER

But surely you still had some of the Lottery money?

ELLA

Gentech took all of that. Then some. We had to pay maintenance fees for ongoing support. But Tom was sure he could find a way of beating the markets, of paying them back. It was a great dream.

ENFORCER

You know the truth is no-one really wins the lottery – the AI system ensures that. It just makes up a fake winner, and gives them a plausible background, with social media videos and so on.

ELLA

That can't be true.

ENFORCER

It is I'm afraid.

ELLA

Why would you tell me that.

ENFORCER

Tom worked for the software lab that owns the lottery AI. So he was able to hack the system. The clever thing is that he used the AI system to hack itself. No human would ever know. Or so he thought. That's how you won the lottery.

ELLA

So he's not coming back then...

ENFORCER

No, he's not.

ELLA

And my son, is he coming back?

ENFORCER

No, I'm sorry - he's not coming back either. Tom was right - no human would have found out. But he has the aggregated DNA of many judges and lawyers could not let that go. Tom could not have foreseen that it would be the boy that turned Tom in.

Through the kitchen window we see a van pull up on the drive. It has the letters GENTECH clearly visible on the side.

ENFORCER

And now he's going back to where he belongs. You on the other hand are going to be with Tom.

END

Author's Note.

This is a human written version of the AI generated version in 'SometimesShortCutsAreNotTheBestChoice' in the Short Stories section. The AI version was generated first and the human version then written based on the content of the AI version.

Script report - The Boy Who Knew Too Much

Script report: The Boy Who Knew Too Much

Logline: Tom and Ella are desperate to have a son and although they find the apparently perfect way to make this happen the outcome of their actions is the opposite of what they wanted.

Premise: In the future, it will be able to both ‘print’ completely new humans and also seed them with the knowledge and personalities of dead people. This may or may not be a good idea.

Genre: SciFi

Audience: general, worldwide

Theme: Technology does not distinguish between good and bad – only humans can do that.

Character discussion:

Tom: AI expert who works for the government but really is in it for himself. Wants to make Ella happy.

Ella: Somewhat naïve, housewife, trusts Tom implicitly. Hopes for the best but does not always get it.

Dr Hartmann: a typical entrepreneurial scientist. Motivated strongly to make money, perhaps at all costs, but also fascinated by what science and technology can achieve. Amoral rather than immoral.

Enforcer: a shadowy figure – a bit 1984ish.

Plot discussion – Tom and Ella are motivated to have a son but don’t want to go through the ‘messy’ biological route. And they want their son to be a high achiever, intellectually, athletically and socially. The use of 3D printing supposedly can achieve this, but to pay for it, Tom has embezzled lottery funds, without telling Ella. Their son finds out and because of the high morals they chose him to have, turns them in. An unexpected plot ending.

Tone – not very sure about this. Is it a moral parable? A social satire? There is a bit of comedy in it too – perhaps this should be drawn out more.

Marketability: good, given that AI is a topic of high interest today.

Concerns:

The script is dialogue driven – there is little action, and the visual content is low. This is more perhaps of a short story than a film script. (I did originally write this as a short story). We don’t see much of the internal motivation of the characters – there is not much emotional tension.

Dr Hartmann could be more extreme. Think of her as someone who does not care about Tom and Ella and sees them just as a means of getting money to pursue her technical work.

The ending seems a bit laboured – not sure the use of the Enforcer as a way of explaining how Tom embezzled the lottery is the best way of revealing this plot twist.

A Desperate Illusion

A DESPERATE ILLUSION
A film short by Dave Sinclair

CAST:

Joe/Jon
Sophia/Sophie
Barman (non-speaking)

EXT. BROADWAY - NIGHT

Joe is driving a sleek car down Broadway, NY. Bright lights and billboards flash by, illuminating his face.

JOE (V.O.)

Just one hour ago, I had been warm and calm and comfortable, swaddled like a baby, high in the skies in my aluminium cradle. From LA to JFK, I had boozed and snoozed across the continental divide until the thump of the wheels on the runway cleared my gin fogged head. Now, driving north on Broadway, the billboards whispered to me in the darkness of the night. No PowerPoint needed, they pitched their deal in compelling fonts of pink and neon, their unique selling point a fragile, desperate promise of intimacy amongst the city millions. As I left the rental in a parking lot, the pavement released its heat into the late evening under my feet, fanning my senses with the sweet perfume of tarmac and the acrid taste of cement dust. I set off towards the brightness of the lights, ready to settle amongst the other moths, thirsty to drink the nectar of companionship.

INT. BAR - NIGHT

A bustling, upscale bar. Joe, now with a drink, scans the room. SOPHIA, early 30s, stunning, just under six feet in her four inch Jimmy Choo stilettos - waves of blonde hair lapped gently on her shoulders. Her Pearl Rose cut-out tulle gown does not so much clothe as embrace and caress her perfect hour-glass figure. Their eyes meet.

SOPHIA

Hello, stranger.

JOE

What will it be?

SOPHIA
Vodka, straight, one ice cube.

In the background the barman unobtrusively serves her drinks.

JOE
Beware of her fair hair, for she excels, All women in
the magic of her locks, And when she winds them
round a young man's neck, She will not ever set him
free again.

SOPHIA
Byron?

JOE
Close, but no cigar - Goethe, actually.
Well, either way, it's an interesting opener. I rarely get
propositioned in verse.

JOE
And am I propositioning you?

SOPHIA
I'd be disappointed if you weren't.

JOE
Don't you think we should be formally introduced
first?

SOPHIA
Naturally. Sophia, thirty-two and unattached. By day,
I'm an associate professor in Algebraic Mathematics at
Columbia. I teach number, space, quantity and
arrangement. My speciality there is the dynamic
assessment of chaotic distributions.

JOE
Impressive.

SOPHIA
So now you know everything.

JOE
Well almost everything - what do you specialise in at
night?

SOPHIA
Let's just say I like to study human nature.

JOE
Funny, I thought you might be in fashion, or the
theatre, movies. Maybe even real estate. That's a

fabulous dress. Worn with great *savoir faire*, if I may say so.

SOPHIA

Indeed, you may.

JOE

But a professor – I’m intrigued and bit abashed. They say appearances can clearly be deceptive. Clearly my preconceptions are unreliable. If I’m honest, I may be a little unnerved too.

SOPHIA

I sometimes think honesty can be over-rated. It makes a man so uninteresting. Now it’s your turn.

JOE

Roger Prendergast. Thirty-one. Twice attached and equally twice detached. Eastern sales manager for Derringborn Agricultural Machinery. Our model 3500C harvests more than 90% of the blueberries in New York State – that’s kind of impressive too.

SOPHIA

Now you do disappoint me. And so soon, too.

JOE

Really? I’m sure I could change your mind, given the opportunity.

SOPHIA

Now you do disappoint me. And so soon, too. You’re no more Roger Prendergast than I’m Marilyn Monroe.

JOE

Ah, now you disappoint me. Blueberries are a nice healthy business. Lots of antioxidants, plenty of fibre, vitamin C, K – a bit of manganese.... The sales pitch was falling flat - I sensed from her glowing complexion she already had access to a reliable supply of vitamins.

SOPHIA

Somehow, I don’t think you’re called Roger. And I don’t see you being a Prendergast either. Goethe and Prendergast aren’t likely bedfellows.

SOPHIA

Well, that would be rather contradictory – but then logical paradoxes are part of my mathematical specialities.

JOE

But how about this.... If I say I'm dishonest then how can I be – because I would be being honest by saying I was dishonest.

SOPHIA

I think maybe I need another drink before I work on that one.

JOE catches the eye of the barman, who serves two more drinks. Neither Joe nor Sophie seem surprised that that barman has the head and body of a Labrador and has already prepared the drinks.

SOPHIA

So, if you're not Roger, then would you like me to tell you who you really are?

JOE

Be my guest, my analyst has been trying to do that for some time.

SOPHIA

You are in fact, Joe Cortana. Thirty-five –

JOE

There you go, I wasn't completely dishonest.

SOPHIA gives JOE the sort of stare that would freeze the Gulf of Mexico

SOPHIA

As I was saying, Joe. Thirty-five. A PhD in Natural Language Simulation using Coherent Artificial Intelligence Engines at MIT then an MBA at Yale followed by five years on Wall Street. Then CTO in a Silicon Valley start-up. Half a billion turnover in 2 years. A little better than blueberries, I think. Don't worry, I won't tell a soul.

JOE

How come?

SOPHIA

I've a soft spot for dishonesty.

JOE

Is that the only reason?

SOPHIA

Well, what is dishonesty, really?

JOE

Wikipedia would say it was a lack of probity, cheating, lying, or deliberately withholding information, or being deliberately deceptive or a lack in integrity,

knavishness, perfidiousness, corruption or treacherousness.

SOPHIA

That sounds pretty comprehensive to me. But I get the feeling you're going to tell me that isn't the whole story.

JOE

Well, what happens if Wikipedia itself isn't honest? It's only a machine after all.

SOPHIA

Ah, but it has a bunch of honest humans behind it.

JOE

How do you know they are honest? As Macbeth says, according to Wikipedia, There is no art to see the minds construction in the face, and in fact you can't even see their faces, so how can you possibly know they are thinking? How can you know they are honest?

SOPHIA

They're honest because that's the consensus. If someone puts a rogue description up, then the community will remove it or correct it. Everybody's watching, so you can't be dishonest.

JOE

Maybe the probability is that the description is true. But there is no absolute reality surely? Perceptions change. New things are discovered. Society moves on. A while ago we all were certain the Earth is flat, that there were canals on Mars and the moon was made of green cheese. Now we live in a different reality.

SOPHIA

You know you really do have a rather unique way of propositioning a girl.

JOE

And how is it working for you?

SOPHIA

I'm wondering if you want me to be Lady Macbeth, given that you are quoting Macbeth.

JOE

Hmm, that would probably be better than one of the three witches. They had an interesting take on reality too – Fair is Foul, and Foul is Fair I recall.

The conversation has reached a natural pause. After a few seconds...

SOPHIA

So, are you going to tell me what you really do?

JOE

You might say I'm in the reality business. Occasionally people get confused and ask me to sell their house for them, but then I explain their realty is not my reality. It rarely gets a laugh. I'm all about truth, in all its forms.

SOPHIA

How so?

JOE

There are two sorts of truth. The truth that describes the hard, cold world we live in and the other truth, the truth that you can't touch or taste or see - the truth that warms the heart. The first of these is science – that's your hunting ground. The second is art. That's where I come in. I provide a little warmth when people get a little too cold in the harsh reality of the every-day world. I find them a truth that they can believe in.

Joe and Sophia have finished their drinks again. Joe signals the barman, who has returned to normal but again has their drinks ready. There is a hint of a growl as he servers them.

SOPHIA

You make it sound very attractive. Everyone needs a bit of comfort these days. But it doesn't really tell me what you actually do. What would do if you I asked you to comfort me?

Again, I fell into the gentle blues of her eyes – this time I recalled summer hay, and the warmth of the sun on my back.

JOE

I'm an Imagineer. You might even say a cultivator. I harvest people's ideas, desires and aspirations and re-engineer them, and give them back. I sell people their dreams. It's a compelling product – when you can have whatever your heart desires.

SOPHIA

And my dream is?

JOE

I sense you need a little warmth too.

INT. THE SAME BAR – NIGHT BUT A LONGSHOT OF THE COUPLE

JOE (V.O)

We were just two slices of prime meat, perched on our stools, gently sparring as we gradually got to know one another, already knowing how it would end, enjoying the journey as much as the destination. Of course, I would soon find out I was wrong, probably as wrong as I've been. This would turn out to be the most unusual night of my life. It was only when I was locked away in an eight by six county jail cell two years later, that I realised how big a mistake I had made. By then she was long gone, her departure leaving a trail of destruction like some capricious tornado, tearing up the foundations of my life and leaving me sucked dry of breath and thought. I looked through the rusty bars at the flaking plaster on the wall opposite and wondered where she was now. I determined then that I would track her down, even if, as seemed likely, it was the last thing I would do. But that was all in future.

INT. THE SAME BAR – NIGHT NOW BACK AGAIN ON THE COUPLE

SOPHIA

Shall we go somewhere a bit quieter?

JOE

I'd invite you to my room, if I had a room.

SOPHIA

Not checked in yet?

JOE

No.

Sophia puts a hotel key on the bar.

SOPHIA

Here's the key to my hotel room. There's an alley back onto the main drag. The kitchen is next to the John. I imagine the sanitation inspector is not that happy about that, but it makes a nice discreet exit. I'll see you at the hotel shortly.

JOE

Surely, that would be rather ungallant, to leave a lady at the bar.

SOPHIA

Maybe, but I think I recognise the two Feds that just walked in...

INT. COMPUTER LAB – NIGHT

The scene starts in monochromes. Gradually the colours return by the end of the scene.

The lab contains computers, displays and other complicated machines in racks in the room, gathered around a central console. The walls are decorated with posters of well-known computer games through the decades, eg Pacman, Tron, several generations of Grand Theft Auto, etc.

JON, sitting at the main console desk, takes off his virtual reality headset, rubs his eyes and hits the big reset button on the console in front of him. Olivia is still leaning back in her chair, still wearing her headset, peering sightlessly into the distance.

JON

What do you think?

Sophie can't hear him, so he turns his microphone back on

JON

Sophie, how was it for you?

Sophie reaches up and untangles her long blond hair from her headset.

SOPHIE

I still think it's a pile of sexist rubbish, Jon. But it will sell well. Because its sexist rubbish, even though that is more than a bit annoying. There's a bug at 3:42 where the AI repeats itself – its where Sophia says she's disappointed. Or maybe the AI is just telling the truth for once The Labrador was a bit surreal – but I think we should leave that in – it was kind of fun. I liked the way his paws seemed to give him no difficulty when mixing the drinks. I did however find it a little distracting when he wolfed down Joe's brandied cherry.

JON

I'm still getting a headache though when Joe's thoughts are played back over mine.

SOPHIE

Maybe it would help if I knocked 3 dB off the induction amplitude in the headset. What do you think? And I did not really like the way they keep quoting stuff of Wikipedia. Maybe we should disconnect the conversation engine from the internet – it's not great pillow talk when they keep quoting Shakespeare or Goethe at one another. Would that be a turn on for the average thirty-year old? Somehow, I doubt it.

JON

Yeah, that sounds good. Let's take a break and call in a pizza.

SOPHIE

Then we can go over the conversational subroutines again.

JON

Right, shall I get a large New Yorker then?

SOPHIE

Naah, go for a Hawaiian, I've had enough of New York for the time being.

END

The Drowning Cathedral

WORK IN PROGRESS

Some author notes (these would not be part of the final script)

GENRE:

Historical thriller/romance.

AUDIENCE: 16+

LOGLINE:

A failed student love affair leaves Peter adrift and aimless. 10 years later, with the unexpected help of Father Hugh, a 12th Century Benedictine monk, he finds a sense of purpose and identity in reconciliation with Charlotte.

Notes:

I have been thinking about writing a story about time travel for some time. I did not want to break the rules of Physics though (well not very much) so actual physical time travel was out (eg in the style of Dr Who). So I'm using the device of a supernatural well, which exchanges the consciousness of people who dive into the well, thus allowing them to time travel. Only their consciousness moves in time, not their bodies, or any physical objects. So you can't take objects like clothes or crowns back and forth in time, nor human bodies. Thus Peter ends up in Father Hugh's body back in 1097 while Hugh is in Peter's body in 2015. Because their consciousness's are in a different body, Peter and Hugh have access to some of the memories and knowledge of their host body. This is necessary, so that, back in the 11th Century, Peter is able to speak Anglo Saxon (and latin and Norman French) using Father's Hugh knowledge. He would also know about how the monastery in the 11th century is run, from Hugh's experiences. This enables him to blend into the normal, daily life of the monastery. Father Hugh, in the 21st century similarly has access to Peter's modern English and some knowledge of how the modern world works. I'm still wondering whether Hugh will be amazed when he goes to McDonalds though. That might be too comical though, this is largely a serious film.

Synopsis

The Drowned Cathedral.

In 2002, Peter Green and Charlotte Townsend are students at Winchester University. Peter is an orphan and brought up by an austere and religious aunt, who made Peter take a regular participation in the Anglican Church, even though Peter had little faith. Peter and John, a friend from school, both go to the newly formed Winchester University. Seeking something new to do, Peter meets Charlotte at the Horse Riding Society stall at the Fresher Fayre. He is surprised to find he is a natural horseman. On the Society's annual trip to Exmoor in the Easter holidays, Peter and Charlotte agree to share in the same student house the following year. And they become lovers. Peter is still unable to step outside his austere upbringing and eventually, Charlotte finds that she wants a more edgy, 'dangerous' partner than the reliable and sensible Peter, so she allows herself to be seduced by John, (Peter's best friend from school), a rather wild and unreliable, hippy with an interest in green activism and civil disobedience.

Hurt by her rejection, Peter drops out and falls into becoming a gardener. His Aunt dies in 2006 and with the inheritance, he buys a run-down house in Parchment Street to do up slowly and starts a small nursery/garden centre in Otterbourne, just outside Winchester.

Meanwhile, he becomes involved in the religious life of the cathedral and takes on the role of a lay Canon.

In 1093, Father Hugh dives into the well in the crypt of the newly built Winchester Cathedral, in order to hide the original Anglo-Saxon crown of King Arthur from the Normans. Father Hugh hopes to preserve the crown for a future Anglo-Saxon who will expel the Normans and restore the Anglo-Saxon kingdom. While he successfully buries the crown in the depths of the well, the well is also a portal in time. It will exchange the consciousness of those who dive into it in different time periods.

In January 2010 Charlotte is the manager of the Winchester Oxfam shop and receives a package of old books from the bishop's assistant and finds a manuscript hidden in the cover binding of one of these books, which is amazingly addressed to Peter and herself. When Charlotte and Peter read the manuscript, they find this is an instruction that Peter must dive in the well in the Cathedral crypt, and he will find an important artefact. (Note: this is the letter that Peter will write when he carries out and travels back to 1093). After some debate, Peter decides to follow the instructions.

As a consequence of reading the letter in 2010, Peter Green, now a Canon in Winchester Cathedral, dives in the well in the Cathedral crypt and is transferred into Father Hugh's body in 1093 (who was also then diving in the well). Similarly, Father Hugh's consciousness travels forward to 2010 to reside in Peter's body.

Peter, now in Father Hugh's body in 1093, writes instructions to his future self, telling Peter in 2010 that he must dive into the well, explaining this will not only lead him to re-establish his relationship with Charlotte but also help recover the Crown of King Arthur in 2010, thus proving that King Arthur really existed and giving a sense of identity to the country.

Meanwhile, in 2010, Charlotte tries to prevent Father Hugh (in Peter's body) from seeing too much of the 21st-century world, in case the seductive attractions of the modern world make Father Hugh unwilling to dive again in the well and return to 1093. In the end, though, Father Hugh is so appalled by the levels of what he perceives as corruption and deceit he is happy to go back. He decides that the magical goodness embodied in the Crown of King Arthur would help mend the ills he sees in the 21st century - and so tells Charlotte that the Crown is buried now at the bottom of the well (or at least it was when Father Hugh left it there in the 12th century). Father Hugh and Charlotte agree that Charlotte will tell Peter about the Crown and that Peter can then retrieve it and in some way make good moral use of it. But, they are concerned that if Peter does dive into the well to recover the Crown, then the time travel portal might open again, and who knows whose body he might end up in. So Father Hugh agrees that once he is back in the 12C he will dive again into well once more, so that when Peter dives (now knowing that he must recover the Crown) that Peter will find himself briefly in the 12C (and Father Hugh in the 21C). The two can then immediately dive back in yet again, and Peter can retrieve the Crown (which hopefully has been there for the last 900 years).

So Peter (in 1093) and Father Hugh (in 2010) dive in the well again, and exchange bodies. But, when Father Hugh arrives in the 12C, he is arrested and taken away by the Normans, who have heard about his possession and hiding of the Crown.

In the 21C, Charlotte now tells Peter about this new plan. They realise they are still attracted to one another, and trust that they will not be apart from then on. But Peter still has to get the Crown, so he dives once more.

The film ends with Charlotte waiting for Peter's body to resurface from the pool, as per the plan. It never does.

Cast list

CHARLOTTE tall, slim, attractive, forthright, 20 (2003)
FATHER HUGH Anglo Saxon Benedictine monk, late 40s
FIRST YEAR First year Uni student - 18
JOHN tall, attractive, long hippy hair, 18 (2003)
ORC costumed second year student, 21
PETER average height, undistinguished, 18 (2003)
SQUIRES Cambridge Don, late 50s
WHEATLEY Cambridge Don, late 50s
WILL WYKEHAM Hugh's acolyte, 14.
RIDING CLUB MEMBERS A group of 8 or so university students 18-25 (including Peter and Charlotte)

TITLE: THE DROWNING CATHEDRAL

EXT. WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL – NIGHT – MAY 2015

Winchester cathedral. A blustery night, rain, and water pours from the mouths of gargoyles onto the flagstones below. CANON PETER, mid 30s, in cassock is getting more and more soaked next to a door in the South Transept wall. He adjusts his soggy Canterbury cap and watches as CHARLOTTE, mid 30s a tall, lithe woman, materialises from the rain.

CHARLOTTE

Sorry, you must be soaked.

PETER

It doesn't matter. I'll be swimming soon enough.

CHARLOTTE

I can't believe you're doing this.

PETER

Neither can I, but I don't think we have any choice. I don't know what will happen. But I think if we choose to believe it work, then it will. The manuscript told us what we must do, and in faith, that it is what I'm going to do.

She gives him an awkward hug. Peter hands her a bag containing towels and a set of mans clothes and then unlocks the chancel door.

INT. WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL – NIGHT - MAY 2025

They pass the retrochoir, the Lady Chapel, and finally reach a studded oak door. Peter unlocks it, revealing a set of stone flagstones descending into the crypt.

PETER

There's a torch in the bag. I don't want to use the lights. Even at this time of night, there could be someone outside.

CHARLOTTE

Okay.

She hands him the torch.

INT. WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL – NIGHT - MAY 2025

They descend a dozen steps and the staircase opens out onto a small dais.

PETER

This is as far as you go.

He slowly sweeps the torch beam over the water, probing the distance.

CHARLOTTE

It's beautiful.

In front of them is a clear, pool of still water. Thick stone arches rose out of the water, vaulting across the ceiling. The torchlight flicks over the surface of the pool.

PETER

I've never seen it this deep before. In the summer it dries out and you can walk on the crypt floor, but now there must be three or four feet of water –

CHARLOTTE

(Interrupting)

Stop, shine the torch back over there - I think I saw something!

He sweeps the torch beam toward the back of the crypt. A tall figure appears out of the blackness; a figure made of lead, soldered at its joints, smooth and broken, matte in finish yet gently glowing in the dull light. By some hidden mechanism, the water in the pool was being drawn up and overflowing from its cupped hands, flickering and sparkling in the torchlight.] They stand, absorbed by their thoughts for a moment.

Peter hands Charlotte the torch, and he discards his robes, sits on the edge of the dais and swings his legs into the water, sending ripples into the darkness. He pushes off and drifts towards the far end of the crypt. He vanishes into the darkness.

CHARLOTTE

(Offscreen (V/O)

Peter, are you alright?

Pause

(Offscreen (V/O)

CHARLOTTE

Peter.... PETER!

SMASH TO BLACK.

INT. WINCHESTER, BENEDICTINE PRIORY – NIGHT – FEB 15 1093

The Priory next to the newly completed Norman Cathedral. The previous, now partly dismantled, Anglo-Saxon New Minster is in the background. It is a clear night, with a scattering of snow in the air.

FATHER HUGH LONGFELLOW, 55, bearded and weary, Benedictine cassock and tonsure, black woollen cloth scapula and substantial cowl, guides NOVICE WILL WICKHAM 14, clean-shaven in the Norman fashion, simple grey woollen cassock through the cloisters.

They walked in single file, Father Hugh leading, past the refectory, through the cloisters and then to the priory dormitory. Here, Father Hugh lets Will through a side door and into the Father's cell,

INT. FATHER HUGH'S CELL

The room contains an oak chest and a rough table with two stools. Close to the window, there is a simple writing lectern, placed where the light would fall. A dozen quilled feathers are tied together in a bundle on the shelf under the lectern's inclined top. To the right of the writing top, two ink horns were fastened to the side of the lectern. A couple of bolsters, leaking straw, form a crude bed in a corner. A small yew cross stands in a small alcove.

FATHER HUGH

Sit.

Will dutifully sits on one of the stools. Father Hugh places the bundle of cloth he had been carrying on the table.

FATHER HUGH

You may unwrap it.

Will starts to do so.

FATHER HUGH

Carefully!

WILL

(on seeing the contents)

WILL
In the name of the blessed Mary!

The contents of the bundle are a fine gold cross, a gold crown adorned with rubies, emeralds, sapphires, enamel and pearls. There is also a simple silver chalice.

FATHER HUGH

May I touch them?

WILL

By all means. You will be among kings and princes.

Will slowly raises the chalice in front of him. The silver is worn with use, but the decoration around the rim is still visible. The motifs are the five senses, each depicted several times over, with kings, princes, abbots, saints, warriors, monks and plain men in various poses. In the centre of the bowl of the chalice, an engraved figure kneels with clasped hands, in silent, penitent supplication.

FATHER HUGH

Many of the kings of Wessex and of England wore this crown at their coronation and drank from that chalice. More than rest now in the Minster. These are the lifeblood of the English, this is our past, our heritage. It is in our promise to those who have gone before to hold and cherish these things, in readiness for a new time. They were hidden in the grave of Saint Æthelwold after Harold's fall at Hastings. But the Minster will soon be no more. It is our responsibility now to keep them safe.

WILL

(still transfixed by the chalice)

Tell me what I must do, master.

EXT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL - FEB 15 1093 - 1 AM

The February full moon shines down on the two churches as two figures flit from shadow to shadow. FATHER HUGH and WILL enter the cathedral by the same side door PETER and CHARLOTTE used. WILL is carrying the cloth bundle, now waterproofed with candle wax and tallow and sealed in a leather firkin.

INT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL - FEB 1093 FEB - 1 AM

The interior of the cathedral is much simpler in 1093 than it is in 2015. The moonlight, falling through the south windows, illuminates Father Hugh leading Will across an open space to the stone steps leading to the crypt.

INT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL: THE TOP OF STEPS TO THE CRYPT - FEB 15 1093 - 1 AM

Father Hugh reaches into his cassock and draws out a short, stump candle and a simple wooden candleholder.

FATHER HUGH

Here, light this at the altar.

WILL

Shall I say a prayer, master?

FATHER HUGH

Better two. One for me, and one for you.

While Will is doing this, Father Hugh draws a piece of lead, apparently from the cathedral roof, and a stout flax cord, and attaches the lead as a weight to the firkin. He kneels and says a prayer over the package.

INT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL: THE STEPS TO THE CRYPT - FEB 15 1093 - 1 AM

Father Hugh leads Will down the steps. They reach the dais at the bottom of the barely flooded crypt. The water is just 6 inches deep.

INT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL: THE CRYPT - FEB 15 1093 - 1 AM

Father Hugh slips off his cassock, and strides out into the water. At the distant end of the crypt, there is a simple low circular stone wall marking the well's position.

FATHER HUGH

(Praying)

Send thy light, O Lord, into the dark places of our hearts. In thy love, discover to us the snares set by our enemy in the hours of night, that, saved by thy protection in soul and body, we may deserve again to see the morning light. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After one brief look back at Will he steps over the iron ring and sinks into the depths.

INT. AN INDETERMINATE PLACE AND TIME

Wet. Cold. A dim light. Peter is floating again, now relaxed both in mind and body in a dark grey fog.

INT. WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL CRYPT – NIGHT - MAY 2015

CHARLOTTE

(Sighing, looking into the darkness)

Peter...

INT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL: THE CRYPT - FEB 15 1093 - 1 AM

Peter (in Father Hugh's body) bobs to the surface of the well, spluttering and gasping for breath. Gradually he manages to pull himself over the low wall and rolls onto his side. He sees a distant figure holding a single candle. He gets up and walks towards the figure. He is still naked.

INT. WINCHESTER CATHEDRAL CRYPT – NIGHT - MAY 2015

A wet, naked figure is just perceptible in the dark shadows at the far end of the crypt.

CHARLOTTE

(clearly anxious, confused)

Peter – PETER – is that you? Are you alright?

The dark figure approaches Charlotte, but on seeing the leaden statue, falls back into the water in surprise. Charlotte points the torch to help illuminate the way

CHARLOTTE

(Beckoning)

This way - over here!

The dark figure is FATHER HUGH. He rises once more onto his feet and gradually approaches Charlotte. He is dazed - the crypt seems familiar but different too.

FATHER HUGH

(intoning)

In martyrio martyrum,

In uirtute iustorum

In formis spiritalibus,

In diuinis sermonibus,

In benedictionibus,

Deus tuarum protege me.

CHARLOTTE

(Pulling herself together as she realises the plan is actually working, and averting her eyes from his nakedness)

Benedicte! You are welcome here.

Stepping to one side, she points at the bag of towels, fresh clothes, which contains a black cassock, underclothing and sandals.

CHARLOTTE

Dry and clothe yourself, Father Hugh, and then I will explain.

Father Hugh steps onto the dais, clearly astonished and fearful, but he does as she says.

INT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL: THE CRYPT - FEB 15 1093 - 1 AM

Peter is now a few feet in front of the figure by the candle.

PETER

(in Anglo Saxon)

þæs sy þam Halgan þonc

Having spoken, Peter looks surprised that he said that. He repeats the words, but mid-sentence they transmute into modern English.

PETER

þæs sy þam .. thanks to God.

WILL

Amen, master.

PETER

This is a good step, Will. The crown is now safe from our Norman friends, Will. But it must not languish there forever.

Peter reaches for the cassock, and even though wet starts dressing.

PETER

Come, Will, let us return to the Priory. We will go to the calfactory. Let us warm our bones before Nocturns. And then we have further work to do.

EXT. WINNALL HOUSING ESTATE, WINCHESTER, OCT 2003, LATE AFTERNOON

A dull Monday afternoon. Rain sheets down from grey skies with unwavering determination onto the equally grey Warren Drive. At number 23 PETER, 18, thin, tall, with slight acne looks out of his bedsit window, surveying the seen. He turns away and vanishes from view.

INT. PETER'S BEDSIT, 23 WARREN DRIVE, WINNALL ESTATE

A faded pine single bed is pushed up against one wall occupying a good portion of the room. A matching wardrobe needs a little help to remain upright and leans against the opposite wall, tilted back by a wedge under its front feet. A 1960s gas fire hisses quietly next to a meter which also supplies a single gas ring. Next to the meter, there is a small sink. A tiny cupboard above contained exactly one plate, one cereal bowl and a single saucepan. A knife, fork and spoon sit in the saucepan. A utility table and chair complete the room. Tidy, but cheap. Peter is sitting in the chair, not looking at anything in particular.

The murmur of the landlady's TV in the sitting room below can be heard through the thin carpet on the floor.

Peter gets up and again looks out of the window. We see he is looking at a bicycle, chained to the railings that separate the well-tended garden from the road.

The rain continues to beat on the window. The saddle of the bike is sodden.

Peter sighs, sits at the desk, opens a textbook titled 'Introduction to European Geography' and starts to read.

INT: HEADMASTER STUDY, IPSWICH GRAMMAR - FLASHBACK - SPRING 1982
SQUIRES, 65 is an 'old school' headmaster, still believing in the values of tradition, Empire, and duty to God, Queen and Country. He is discussing career choices with Peter.

SQUIRES

You need to go to University, my lad. Broaden your horizons, no end. Now, should it be science or arts do you think?

PETER

I'm not quite...

SQUIRES

You should try for Queens - best college in Cambridge, by far.

PETER

Maybe physics perhaps, I'm quite good at physics.

SQUIRES

I had a tremendous time thereafter I was demobbed! Hardly went to a lecture, spent most of my time on the river – when I wasn’t in an eight, I’d be punting up to Grantchester. Of course, that’s the advantage of a Classics degree –

PETER

Or maybe Engineering - I rather liked Mr Smith's computing class this year.

SQUIRES

Physics? Nonsense boy, far too many lectures to go to. And all those practicals. But if your heart is set on it....

INT: DON'S SET, QUEENS COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE, - FLASHBACK -AUTUMN 1982
Peter is being interviewed by WHEATLEY and MAXWELL, two 40-50 year Fellows.

WHEATLEY

Well then, if the second law of thermodynamics says that you can't unscramble scrambled eggs, what would you have for breakfast if you wanted to increase your entropy?

We see that Peter is floored by this question and struggling to answer.

INT. PETER'S BEDSIT (CONT'D)

Peter is still reading the geography textbook. He is still on chapter 1. He looks up and stares out of the window for a long period.

PETER

Bugger!

Peter gets up and puts another 50p in the gas meter and starts to make some toast in front of the gas fire.

EXT. THE UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - OUTSIDE THE ADMIN BLOCK. NOON.

A group of first-year students are walking across the Campus from the Romsey Road. They are in high spirits. JOHN, 18, tall, attractive, long hippy hair, recognises Peter coming out of the admin block and calls out:

JOHN

Hey, Peter, long time no see!

Peter half waves a greeting. John detaches himself from the group.

JOHN

How's it going, man? You made it then?

PETER

Yeah. I've just registered.

JOHN

You want to come to the pub for lunch?

PETER

Well, I was thinking of just getting a sandwich.

JOHN

Come on, man. You're a student now. Time to start living it up. You know, spending that grant. Meeting some chicks. Plenty of time to study later. Come and join us.'

PETER

Yeah, okay, why not?

We see them rejoin the group and head towards the campus exit onto Romsey Road.

EXT. THE ST JAMES TAVERN CARPARK, ROMSEY ROAD. LUNCHTIME.

The pub is heaving with students. There is only room for Peter and John's group in the car park. Peter is trying to balance an orange juice in one hand and sandwich in the other. The rest of the group have pints, some with food and some without.

FIRST-YEAR STUDENT:

There are forty-five pubs in Winchester. I reckon I can do them all this year. That'd be an achievement.

JOHN

Yeah, But that's only one a week. That doesn't sound that hard. If we put our minds to it, we could do them all before Xmas. Four a week. Piss-easy. That'd be a proper job.

PETER

That'd be four and a half, really.

JOHN

Ever the mathematician, eh, Peter?

<< more discussion needed here !! Need to establish a bit more backstory. >>

PETER

I'm going back now - I'm going to have a look around the campus before the introductory session.

JOHN

Okay. You always were a bit of a swot. You coming to the Fresher's Fayre tomorrow?"

PETER

Yeah ... Yeah, I'll see you tomorrow.

INT. FRESHER'S FAYRE, UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER CAMPUS

The Fayre was being held in the Sports Hall. It turned out to be two long rows of tables, with posters blue-tacked onto the walls behind them, with one or two representatives of each society or club, lolling on benches behind the tables. Peter walks down the first row.

Rugby, football, lacrosse, cricket, netball, swimming, table tennis, basketball, softball - the list of team sports seemed endless. None of them entice Peter.

The second row focuses on the more esoteric societies. Next to one table, an impressively convincing Orc swings a thoroughly dangerous spiked ball attached to a leatherbound shaft around his head and declaims at Peter:

ORC

Shall ye enjoin the Tower of Cirith Ungol? Stand fast, human, and measure your mettle against the army of Sauron!

Behind the Orc to see this is the Dungeons and Dragons War Gamers Society. §§§

Peter (with a polite smile) raises his right hand, points his first and second fingers at the Orc, and brings his thumb down smartly on top of them. The Orc looks annoyed but then laughs::

ORC

You got me. But no modern technology allowed here. Probably best to join the Cinema Society if Clint Eastwood's your thing. Let me give a leaflet anyway, just in case you want to come back and take on a proper fight.'

Peter silently takes the leaflet and moves down the row.

The next few tables are less engaging but even more eccentric. Tiddlywinks, Hopscotch, Tea Drinking and Punning.

Finally, there are only two tables left. Ball Room Dancing Society. Peter pauses in front of it, reading the blurb. There is no one at the table, but there is a signup list with half a dozen entries, but no pen. He fumbles in his jacket and realises he does not have one either.

He looks across at the last table. It is the Horse Riding Society. Sitting behind the table there is CHARLOTTE, 19, a tall, lissom girl, in jeans and an oversized jumper. She is engrossed in reading a magazine. After a moment of standing in front of her stand, Peter says:

PETER

Er, hello. I wonder if I could borrow a biro?

Charlotte looks up. Peter appears to be slightly dazzled by her cornflower blue eyes.

CHARLOTTE

(waving the pencil she has been offering for the last few seconds)

There you go.

PETER

(not quite taking the pencil)

Thanks

CHARLOTTE

Do you have much riding experience?

PETER

'Um, not really.'

PETER

(He realises he has not actually taken the pencil from her, and does so.)

'No, it's not something I'd ever considered doing. Isn't it rather expensive - all that posh riding stuff and things ?'

CHARLOTTE

Do I look posh?

PETER

Um, well...

CHARLOTTE

(gesturing at what she is wearing)

'No, not at all. This would do fine. Having a waterproof, though, would be a good thing if it's raining. Of course, you're sitting on a warm horse so that helps dry you out anyway. And the Riding School will lend you a hard hat. All you need are some tough shoes, with a decent heel.'

PETER

(Pointing at the adjacent table)

Um...I was going to sign up over there

CHARLOTTE

(smiling)

You need a proper heel, to stop your feet slipping through the stirrup if you fall off.

Otherwise, you can get dragged behind the horse.

PETER

Um...

CHARLOTTE

There are lessons for all standards. And they're subsidised - it's just two pounds for an hour's session. The riding school is out at Sparsholt. And it's not just riding. We have lots of socials such as bowling, and social nights. There's a trip to Exmoor too apparently - riding across the moors. I'm not sure I only just joined myself though I had a pony when I went to senior school. I think it's going to be a great antidote to being stuck in a lecture theatre or the library during term time. Judy, the girl who was looking after the stand wanted to go and sign up for the Drama club, so I said I'd stand in. She'll probably be back in a minute. Here, write your name on the list...

PETER

(writing his name on the list)

Okay, I think I will. When does it start?

CHARLOTTE

The first session is next Wednesday - it's the same for all the sports - the Uni doesn't schedule any lectures on Wednesday afternoons so we can all go and do healthy stuff.

PETER

Oh, I see. And how does everyone get to the stables?

CHARLOTTE

Here's the leaflet with the club details. I gather there's a minibus we use. But look, there's a Horsey Happy Hour in the Union tonight, for new and old club members. Yeah, I know, it's a terrible name. But come along and Judy will be there I think to explain it all. You can pay your subscription at the first meeting.

PETER

Okay, yes, I guess I'll do that then. Thanks. I'll perhaps see you there.

EXT. EXMOOR, EASTER, COUNTRY PUB 2004 - EVENING

The annual University Riding Club trip to Exmoor. A mixed group of students, most of which are at the bar.

PETER

What would you like then – a dry cider?

CHARLOTTE

Yes, please.

While he buys the drinks, Charlotte takes her windproof off and sits on a bench next to the fire. The rest of the group are still milling around the bar, chatting and ordering.

There is no table for Peter to put the drinks on, so he hands them to Charlotte, while he takes his gilet off. As he sits down next to her, and she still has her hands full of glasses, he leans across and kisses her briefly on the lips. She does not pull away, but she does not respond either. Her cheeks flush (or is it the fire?)

CHARLOTTE

What was that for?

PETER

Was that a bad thing to do?

CHARLOTTE

Just unexpected. Maybe even surprising.

PETER

Maybe I should surprise you more.

CHARLOTTE

Maybe you should.

PETER

(Realising she is still looking at him, waiting.)

It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.

CHARLOTTE

What?

PETER

I don't know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly, wonderful blue.

(Beat)

Blue...

EXT. EXMOOR, RIDING STABLES, FIELD, EASTER, 2004 - MORNING -

FLASHBACK

A group of a dozen largely insolvent students, loftily calling themselves the University Riding Club's Official Easter tour, underwriting the cost from the University's Social Club's coffers with some traditionally dubious student accounting. Threadbare tents.

Peter is creeping up on the girls' tent. The girls are inside. Peter is carrying a goose, wrapped in a blanket to pacify it.

Peter releases the goose into the open flap of the girls' tent.

There is a gratifying burst of frantic honking, hissing and barking from the goose.

An equally loud squeal comes from the tent. Peter starts to retreat.

CHARLOTTE

(inside the tent)

Where did that bloody goose come from? That bastard has shat all over my sleeping bag!

By the time Charlotte appears at the flap of the tent, Peter is nowhere to be seen.

EXT. EXMOOR, EASTER, COUNTRY PUB 2004 - EVENING (CONT'D)

PETER

I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking.

CHARLOTTE

Look, Peter, you just can't go around doing things that like. Most people won't understand.

You'll get into trouble - they won't be as tolerant as me.

EXT. EXMOOR, EASTER, COUNTRY PUB 2004 - EVENING (2 HOURS LATER)

The group are walking down a country lane, on the way back to the tents, in the farmer's field/Riding Stables.

Peter sees Charlotte ten yards ahead. He quickens his stride to catch her.

PETER

Look, I'm really sorry about earlier on. I didn't mean to upset you.

CHARLOTTE

No, I know you didn't.

PETER

It's just I didn't know what to do. So it just sort of happened.

They walked in silence for a moment

PETER

I just thought you were so lovely. I just didn't know what to do.

(Beat)

I'm sorry, - so what should I have done, then?

CHARLOTTE

Good grief. For one thing, you can stop apologising all the time!

PETER

(surprising himself)

Is that how you are going to teach your students?

They stop, facing one another. Then she laughs.

CHARLOTTE

Okay, fair enough, you got me.

They start walking again. After a little time the conversation continues.

PETER

Come on then, teacher.

CHARLOTTE

Kissing's not exactly a standard curriculum item. Maybe I can give you an example.

(Beat)

You know that book we were talking about at lunchtime - Far From the Madding Crowd?

PETER

Yeah, I remember it from 'O' level.

CHARLOTTE

Well, you know how Bathsheba can't make her mind up. She's got three suitors, and she makes a mess with all three. There's Gabriel Oak - he's the skilful, hardworking one she should have. But they are both too proud. She doesn't get it on with him till the end of the book -

PETER

Yes, and there's the other guy - I forget his name, the one with the big house and all the land - he's been married before, he's never going to get anywhere with her, he's just all wealth and material stuff. She knows in her heart she should not go for him but she tries to anyway. I'm not sure how this is helping really.

Charlotte ignores his interruption.

CHARLOTTE

And there's Sergeant Troy, flashing his sword around, dazzling her, bemusing her, ready to seduce her. And he might too, until she realises what he is - that he thinks that 'If you treat them right, you are lost'. And then he loses all his charms.

Peter is still not getting it.

PETER

But it's Gabriel that gets her in the end. Sorry, are you saying that I should be a shepherd then?

CHARLOTTE

No, don't be silly - of course not. I'm saying you should decide who you are going to be, for good or bad - and then be that person. And stop saying, sorry. Don't be anyone else. Be Peter.

PETER

Oh.

They walked on in silence, as Peter tried to digest this.

PETER

Can I kiss you again?"

CHARLOTTE

Maybe. But one kiss a night is enough.

She holds out her hand, they walk on, hand in hand.

PETER

I wasn't going to tell you, but that was me with the goose in the tent.

CHARLOTTE

I know. I hope you're going to say you're sorry.

PETER

But a moment ago, you just told me not to!

She laughs and turns and kisses him.

PETER

How, do you fancy getting together with a couple of the others in the summer term and looking for a house to share for next year? I'm fed up with being stuck out in my digs in the wilderness of Winnall.

INT. THE UNIVERSITY COFFEE SHOP. JAN 2005. NOON

Peter is sitting alone, a black coffee on the table in front of him. He looks up and sees Charlotte walking across the courtyard outside. She enters, buys a lemon and ginger tea, and sits next to him.

CHARLOTTE

Hi. How was the lecture on the population and politics of the Baltics?"

PETER

It was an absolute thriller - I spent most of the time reading the paper in the back row. Callingham had done Estonia, and Latvia and was halfway across the Polish border before she spotted it and made me put it away.

Charlotte smiles and sips her tea. She gets a notebook and textbook out of her bag, ready to start studying.

PETER

There's something I've been thinking I would like to say.

CHARLOTTE

Well so long as it's not a litany of Balkan population stats, then I'm all ears. Or was it something from today's paper?

PETER

No, nothing like that. A bit more serious, I think. I'm not sure you'll like it though.

CHARLOTTE

Go on, then.

Peter takes a crumpled piece of paper out of his jacket pocket and reads

PETER

How should I espresso my love for you?

Should I melt your frosty look in my cappuccino
or cup the warmth of your steamy Arabica
and then bury my nose in your heady aroma?

Let me drink the creamy froth of your latte.

Enraptured, my tongue savours the way

your liquid smacks my lips
and I taste the sweetness of your hips.

Your caffeine fizzes and jolts in my veins
as a tsunami of heat carouses in my brain.
A thirst, now quenched, will soon restart
and desire will regrow while we are apart.

CHARLOTTE

(both exasperated and slightly touched)

Peter...

Peter, that is so ridiculously needy – give yourself some self-respect.

(Beat)

You're like a spaniel, sitting there with big round eyes, tongue out, desperate for a kind word or a biscuit.

PETER

If you feel like that, maybe I should go...

He does not move, though.

(Beat)

CHARLOTTE

Wow, that came out of the blue. I don't know. I thought we were just friends now.

PETER

Yes, but why can't we go back?

CHARLOTTE

Back to what?

PETER

Back to how we were before.

She moves her hand away from his.

CHARLOTTE

I think it just gradually faded away. And then when we were sharing the same flat and you're not having any sex. And then you're no different from any other couple of people that are friends. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your life, they become just like the hundreds of other people in your life.

CHARLOTTE

You know it wasn't really just me that stopped it. Not really.

PETER

I think I got a little lost.

(Beat)

You know we never held hands in the street. I never really knew why.

Beat.

PETER

I saw a pair of kingfishers today, down by the City Mill,' he said, eventually. 'They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just underneath the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their life depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?

CHARLOTTE

I don't think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can't see any, then the fly to another perch and look again. It's not rocket science.

PETER

I wish we were kingfishers. Wouldn't you like to be a kingfisher?

CHARLOTTE

(Finally, mildly exasperated)

No, not really. I've got a lecture now...we can talk later.

Peter watches her walk away.

INT. WINCHESTER, BENEDICTINE PRIORY – NIGHT – FEB 15 1093 - 2 AM

Peter (in Father Hugh's body) and Will are in the calfectory. Rough benches and tables form two lines. A small pulpit in one corner of the room for leading pre-meal prayers. Peter is drying himself out in front of the fireplace, which contains the remains of last night's fire.

WILL

Father, you said our task is not yet done. But surely the crown is now safe in the well?

PETER

Yes, Will, it is safe. No Norman hand draws water from that well, nor will they. The spring that feeds the well has done so from before the Angles, before even the Romans. That well was the baptism water of many past English worriers, maybe even Arthur Pendragon himself. Such a spring will not suit the Normans in their high Catholic ways. Only when the true English rise again will people seek its waters again. Until then, we must keep the secret safe. We must find a way to pass our secret on until a new generation can rise again, to take back what we have lost and to cherish our nation once more.

WILL

How will we do that, Master?

PETER

For the moment, you must go back to the dormitory - it must be close to the time for Nocturne, and if you are missed by the other initiates, then you will have some explaining to do.

WILL

I can always say I had been in the reredorter. Last night Brother Edmund's cabbage stew might put anyone there.

PETER'S INTERNAL VOICE

(v/o)

Reredorter?

HUGH'S INTERNAL VOICE

(v/o)

Necessaries...

PETER'S INTERNAL VOICE

(v/o)

Ah - some sort of privy...

PETER

Well, in either case, we must not be missed. Go now, and we will proceed further with your morning instruction.

Will departs and Peter continues to warm himself in front of the fire.

EXT. WINCHESTER, PRIORY CLOISTERS – DAY – FEB 15 1093 - 2 PM

Will is waiting outside Father Hugh's cell, ready for his afternoon instruction. Peter(in Father Hugh's body) approaches.

PETER

Come, Will - today we have a writing task to complete. But first, I want you to fetch me the book that Father Wilfrith gave you to read for this month's contemplation. Also, bring me an inkhorn from the scriptorium - make sure it contains some good, strong fresh black ink.

While Peter waits for Will to return, he prepares Father Hugh's writing tools. He unties the bundle of quills and selects a couple of promising looking ones. He looks around for a knife. He feels in his cassock pockets. Nothing, only a small collection of keys, fastened securely to the cassock linked with a small chain.

PETER

(To himself)

Surely, if Father Hugh had a writing lectern in his cell, then he must have the necessary writing tools.

The only place Peter has not looked is in the chest in the corner of the cell. He tries the first key from the chain in his pocket in the chest's lock. It works. There were a surprising number of things inside.

The chest contained several leather-bound manuscripts. There was a second cassock, some undergarments, a pair of socks and a hose, a very worn pair of sandals, a pair of strong leather boots that laced up to the knee, a scapular, possibly for working in the fields, a few small sheets of vellum, some leather fragments, thread and needle, two candles and not only a knife but a sharpening stone too.

FADE - time passes - FADE IN

Will has returned.

By the time Will returns Peter has managed to sharpen three quills. He has put a piece of the vellum on the writing lectern.

Peter dips his quill in the ink and started to write. He finishes the letter and waits for a moment for the ink to dry.

PETER

Now, Will, we must make sure that this letter is neither read by our enemies nor by our friends. So we must find a very good hiding place for it.

WILL

But surely there can be no point in writing such a strange letter, Master.

PETER

Ah, it will be read. But not for many years. We are sending a message to our descendants. For the present our kingdom is under the heel of the Normans. But we must prepare for a new kingdom. That is why the crown of the English must be preserved until a new English king can arise, greater than Alfred, even greater than *Æthelstan*. Then the land can be returned to its true owners.

HUGH'S VOICE

(V/o)

You know that not to be true.

Peter felt sick as he said that. He knew he was lying, and he felt that Father Hugh must somehow know too. It was wrong for Peter to lie, and it was wrong for Peter, in Father Hugh's body, to make Father Hugh lie too. There would be no new Anglo-Saxon kingdom. True, the Normans would give way to new kings and kingdoms, but there would never be an English kingdom of Mercia again. But he could say nothing else. The letter had to be written and then secreted somewhere where it could be found in the distant future. If the letter was not hidden and then found again, then the Peter in the future would never know to dive in the well. And what then? How would the Peter, here, standing in 1093 in Father Hugh's body, get back to Anya? He sat on the stool by the table, trying to steady his nerves.

PETER

Bring me the book and the knife, Will.

Will does so.

PETER

We must find a way of hiding the letter in the leather covers of this book. See here, the binding is weak along this bottom edge. I think if we make a slit here, then the letter can be slid inside, between the cover and its backing. Here, this is a task for younger, more nimble hands than mine.

Peter gives Will the knife and placed the book, pages down on the table. Will carefully incised a small cut, where Peter indicated.

PETER

A little longer, then let us see if the letter will fit.

Will cuts a little more, then brought the manuscript letter and carefully slid it into the opening. He presses the edge of the letter inside the cover with the point of Father Hugh's knife. The letter is entirely hidden.

PETER

Only the question of closing the cover now remains. That cannot be done without glue, and for that, they must wait until the copyists have finished in the scriptorium when the copyists have finished their work for the day. Place the book in the chest, with the other things. We must complete the job tonight.

The bell for Nones rings as Will puts the book in the chest and closes the chest lid.

PETER

Come that is the bell for Nones

They leave the cell.

EXT. WINCHESTER, CATHEDRAL SOUTH WALL – NIGHT – FEB 16 1093 - 1 AM

As on the previous night, the February full moon shines down on the Anglo-Saxon and the Norman cathedrals. Two figures flit from shadow to shadow and reach the south door.

INT. WINCHESTER, CATHEDRAL SOUTH WALL – NIGHT – FEB 16 1093 - 1 AM

As before, Peter leads the way, as they enter. The moonlight lights the cathedral nave. As they make their way towards the crypt they pass into the dark shadows. They pause, waiting for their eyes to adjust. Will produces the stub of a candle, in a rough wooden holder from the inside of his cassock.

WILL

Shall I say a prayer and light a candle, Master?

PETER

Yes. We will both say a prayer for each other.

They retrace their steps to the door and go the other way to the altar. Will lights his candle from the one already burning there. They kneel and in silent prayer, seek the support of their God.

INT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL: THE STEPS TO THE CRYPT - FEB 16 1093 - 1 AM
Peter and Will are entering the crypt. The water is now only a few inches deep on over the floor. Peter slips off his cassock and sandals and strides out into the water. He leaves the dim glow of the candlelight behind, and the darkness gradually envelopes him.

INT. THE NORMAN CATHEDRAL: THE WELL AT THE FAR END OF THE CRYPT - FEB 16 1093 - 1 AM

Peter stands by the low circular stone wall marking the well's position. He says a prayer.

PETER

Send thy light, O Lord, into the dark places of our hearts. In thy love, discover to us the snares set by our enemy in the hours of night, that, saved by thy protection in soul and body, we may deserve again to see the morning light. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

After one brief look back at Will, he steps over the wall and sinks into the depths of the well.

To be continued...

O

Painting The Spare Room

Painting the Spare Room
By
David Sinclair

A Play for Radio

CHARACTERS

MAN (mid 30s) geography teacher

WOMAN (mid 30s) NHS registrar

BARMAN

Set in the present, during a horse-riding weekend on Exmoor.

MAN:(NARRATING)

So many blues. That's what he remembered. Not the pale, washed watercolour blue of the evening sky that quickly deepened into ultramarine as dusk fell across the moor, Nor the cold chilled blue of their breath in the April air as they bathed in the valley stream, Washing the mud and sweat off, scrubbing the rich perfume of horse from their bodies. No, it was the deep azure of her costume and the silvery cobalt shadows in her hair. It was the dark cherry blue of the bruise on her thigh where she had cantered under an unseen bough and the cornflower blue of her irises, with their little flecks of steely blue determination -

These prizes he held fast in his memory. These, and his recollection of the kingfishers they had seen, flashing and flaunting their blues and purples as they swooped and dipped over the water.

A thrilling, ephemeral moment of companionship.

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB: INT: MID EVENING MEAL SERVICE IS IN FULL SWING

FADE UP

MAN:

A large dry white wine and a pint of Exmoor Ale please. And can I order some food too? Haven't eaten since breakfast – could eat a horse. Figuratively of course.

BARMAN

Certainly sir, what would you like?

MAN:

I'm going to have a steak pie and chips.

(TO WOMAN) Do you want the same?

WOMAN:

Yes. Why break the habit? I think I've had steak pie every time we've come here in the last five years.

MAN: (TO BARMAN).

Here, can you put it on this card?

WOMAN:

That's why I like this weekend. It's always the same: Early morning, fetch the horses in from the field, groom, tack, then ride until we're knackered. Brush the horses, feed and water, then rug them and turn them out in their field. No unexpected excitements, no emails, no interruptions. Comfortable predictability.

MAN:

Yes, a good cowboy looks after the horses first.

WOMAN:

Then swim in the river, and brush and rug ourselves up and then the pub. We are just creatures of habit.

MAN: (TO BARMAN)

We'll be at the table in the corner by the fire.

BARMAN:

Yes, thank you sir, we'll bring the food over in a few moments.

MAN (TO WOMAN).

Here, you take the coats – I'll bring the drinks.

WOMAN: (V/O) (NARRATING)

Like all couples they had built up a database of preferences and foibles, knowledge hard won over the years of the relationship. At first there had been secrets and surprises, revelations to be deliciously discovered, and then as time went on, a stability, a reference book of behaviour, comfortably repeated in each other's presence. Now, they were simply riding companions, their initial passion and intimacy not forgotten, but conveniently shelved.

THE COUPLE MOVE TO AND SIT DOWN AT THEIR TABLE. AS THEY DO SO THE MAN LEANS ACROSS AND KISSES THE WOMAN.

WOMAN:

What was that for?

MAN:

Was that a bad thing to do?

WOMAN:

Just unexpected. Maybe even surprising.

MAN:

Maybe I should surprise you more.

WOMAN:

Maybe you should.

MAN:

It was your swimming costume – it was so blue.

WOMAN:

What?

MAN:

I don't know – when we were swimming in the river - it seemed such an achingly, wonderfully blue.

WOMAN:

Well, it's a good job I don't wear my cossie back in London, then. Might cause a bit of problem wearing it in Camden High Street if it has that effect.

MAN:

Yes.

PAUSE

MAN:

Remember when we down by Tarr Steps this afternoon. We were following the bridlepath where the woods come down to the river.

WOMAN:

Yes.

MAN:

You were leading –

WOMAN:

As I usually do!

MAN:

I was following. I was admiring the curve of your shoulder, the gentle sway of your body as it moved in harmony with the horse.

WOMAN:

And so?

MAN:

It made me think back to the first time we rode those paths. I felt the same as I did then. I wanted you. Or rather I wanted to be there. It just seemed the natural thing to do. Like the kiss just now.

WOMAN: (NARRATING)

They were both new to university then, more than a decade ago – she a medic, he hedging his bets with an easy geography degree and a notion to become a teacher. They had come in a group of a dozen largely insolvent students, loftily calling themselves the University Riding Club's Official Easter tour, underwriting the cost from the University's Social Club's coffers with some traditionally dubious student accounting. They had to borrow tents from the University Officer Training Corps and had a special rate from the local stables as one of the group was going out with the farmer's daughter.

MAN:

Do you remember that first weekend?

WOMAN:

Yes. I forgot my airbed – I remember how hard the ground was and my sleeping bag was in a state. I often wondered why it took you so long to ask me out that weekend too. I could see you wanted to.

MAN:

Well, you could have asked me instead.

WOMAN:

No, I liked watching you trying to make up your mind. You never were very impulsive. I was glad you did eventually though.

MAN: (NARRATING).

The weekend had been quite a success until the moment he had thought to encourage one of the farmer's geese into the girls' tent.

SCENE 2: FLASHBACK: THE CAMPSITE, IN THE FARMER'S FIELD. EXT: EVENING.

FRANTIC HONKING, HISSING AND BARKING FROM THE GOOSE

WOMAN: (V/O)

Where did that bloody goose come from? That bastard has shit all over my sleeping bag!

FADE DOWN GOOSE NOISES

MAN: (V/O) (NARRATING)

He was careful to keep a low profile for a day or so. It was only on the last afternoon that he managed to ask her if she would like to go for a drink when they got back to college. He was surprised when she said yes. But then, he told himself, the goose was hardly likely to grass him up.

FADE_DOWN

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB (CONTINUED)

FADE UP: INT

WOMAN:

I'm still not sure you should just go around kissing people out of the blue.

MAN:

Shouldn't I have? I was just trying to remind you. Didn't it remind you?

MAN:

Maybe. It was unsettling - I thought we were just friends now...kissing was something from the past and I'm not sure you can ever go back to your past. The clock never stops ticking, we can't be students again.

MAN:

Do you really believe that? I think we can make whatever choices we like. And I wanted to kiss you because, when we swam this evening and I saw you in that costume it was like the clock had been wound back up and was ready to run again.

WOMAN: (UNSURE).

Hmm, maybe ... Do you want to see what's happened to the food? And maybe another round? Here, take it out of this.

SCRAPING OF CHAIR AS HE GETS UP

WOMAN: (NARRATING).

She wished he had not mentioned clocks. Maybe, she thought, you can wind the clock spring back up, but you can never move the hands backwards. She was thinking of her biological clock not her wristwatch. How things change. Not this pub, though. It's the same it has always been. Fifteen years since we first came here. We've changed though. She remembered that student flat – well more of a large bedsit then. And those evenings of 'pasta and passion', drinking cheap Italian wine in the Mille Pine, walking home through Regents Park, listening for the penguins in the zoo, though they never heard them, then a warm bed. Four years turned into a companionable, efficient partnership – studying together, sharing a chicken casserole, increasingly sober as final exams approach. They didn't really change; they just sort of calmed down. Until that final dinner. He would be teaching in some London suburb. She had a six month WHO placement in Tanzania. It had been convenient, but it was time to move on. An evening dinner, a tidy endpoint.

FADE DOWN

FLASHBACK: INT: MILLE PINE RESTAURANT

FADE UP

MAN:

Here, I've got something for you. I'd really like you to take it on your trip. It's sort of appropriate for an African adventure.

WOMAN:

Thank you – how cute – where on earth did you find wrapping paper with such tiny elephants on it?

UNWRAPPING PARCEL

WOMAN:

Oh, wow! A compass.

MAN:

Just keep going south – if you start seeing penguins
then you've gone too far.

WOMAN:

That is such a nice thing, so thoughtful, and, well, so
really nice.

MAN:

Here, let me see. I can't believe it. Look, the wretched
thing is broken! North is that way, but the needle is
pointing the other way.

WOMAN:

I don't understand.

MAN: T

hey've screwed it up - painted the wrong end of the
needle red!

WOMAN:

You know you don't really need to give me a present at
all. It was a really kind thought though. I expect I'll be
tied up in the hospital in Dodoma though. Probably not
much time for safaris.

MAN:

Well, actually, I did have another choice for a present –
but I was not ... not quite sure what you would you
think of it.

WOMAN:

Wow, that was good contingency planning then. And
more elephant paper!

UNWRAPS SECOND PARCEL

WOMAN:

What is it this time. A Swiss Army knife perhaps? Or a
portable mosquito net – that would be useful.

(PAUSE). (MORTIFIED) – Oh, it's a ring!

FADE DOWN

FADE UP

SCENE 1: A COUNTRY PUB (CONTINUED)

MAN:
Do you want those last few chips?

WOMAN:
Yeah, go on then.

PAUSE

WOMAN:
So, do you think we should go back?

MAN:
No, I don't actually want to go back, even if we could. Would you? If I'm honest, it was all a bit puzzling then. I don't think, looking back I ever quite knew what was happening, I mean, how serious was it? What did you want? Indeed, what did I want? You were right when you said that was then, and this is now. Why can't we just start from here, in this moment, and simply go forward from now.

MAN:
But I don't want to stop being friends. I want to be friends and something more than that. Look, why don't you move in again?

WOMAN:
What? Well, that came out of the blue!

PAUSE

WOMAN:
Why did we stop having sex, do you think?

MAN:
Well, you didn't have that blue swimsuit then.

WOMAN:
No, be serious. I didn't really think about it at the time. But it's been on my mind recently. It was more you than me that stopped it. I think it just gradually faded away. And then when you're sharing the same flat and you're not having sex, then you're no different from any other couple of people that are friends. At that point, you might as well not be in the same bed. Or even in the same flat. And then once you are only friends, then one friend moves out. Once you stop having sex with someone, they stop being the one special person in your

life, they become just like the hundreds of other people in your life.

MAN:

You know it wasn't really just me that stopped the sex. Not really. I seem to recall being quite keen at the time. You were too as I recall.

WOMAN:

Yes, I do remember that. But it wasn't really the physical stuff that I started worrying about – it was when you gave me flowers and I didn't like the showiness of it, or when we held hands in the street, or when you gave me that running horse necklace. I don't think I wanted that sort of relationship then.

MAN:

I never quite knew how to show – well, you know.... Then you got registrar and I was still stuck trying to educate the uncouth of Peckham – I felt it was all a bit pointless. You were off saving lives – I was trying to tell some spotty youths that Texas was in America and not a band. And now you go to work in Prada, I go in jeans. I just felt I couldn't keep up.

PAUSE

MAN:

I saw a pair of kingfishers today when we were swimming

WOMAN:

Yes, I saw them too.

MAN:

They were nesting upstream, in the riverbank just downstream of the big oak. They caught my eye and made me think. Two little birds – one moment they were perched on a branch, then they were rushing here and there, hurtling along the stream as if their life depended on it. I wondered what they were thinking – why did they choose that moment to fly off downstream? Why not wait a little longer and go upstream? How could they possibly know what would be best?

MAN:

I don't think they do know. They just look for fish. And if they can't see any, then they fly to another perch and look again. Fish, nest, raise their young. They just

are – well, what they are – happy, responding just in the moment. I envied them.

WOMAN:

Wouldn't it be great to be just like them.

MAN:

Why not? Can I kiss you again?

WOMAN:

All right.

THEY KISS

MAN:

You know, I've never told you, but that was me with the goose in the tent.

WOMAN:

I know.

FADE DOWN

SCENE 3: THE FARMER'S FIELD: EXT: EARLY MORNING

MAN RATTLES HORSENUTS IN BUCKET

MAN: (CALLING HORSES)

Coo wee! Coo wee!

MORE HORSENUTS RATTLING.

Come on then. Nuts for breakfast!

HORSES APPROACH

MAN:

Here, you take the rugs. I'll make a start on brushing the mud off them.

MAN AND WOMAN V/O CONTINUES OVER SOUNDS OF BRUSHING AND EXERTION

WOMAN:

Okay, pass me that curry comb then.

MAN:

How do you think they ended being called Bonny and Clyde? Seems a bit of an exotic choice for a Dartmoor pony and a Welsh cob.

WOMAN: Well, I can't see them robbing a bank – Clyde would make a rather pedestrian get-away vehicle, and Bonny would be waiting at the end of each gallop for him anyway, just like she did yesterday.

MAN:

Yes, they don't look like they should make a working pair, but somehow they seem to make a companionable couple. I'd would have called them Chalk and Cheese myself.

WOMAN:

Right, all done. I'll leave you to pick out the hooves and go back and get on with some bacon and eggs. Do you want two rashers or three?

PAUSE

MAN:

I think I'll paint the spare room blue then, when we get back.

WOMAN:

Or maybe pink...

PAUSE

MAN (NARRATING)

So many years later, the viridian and emerald greens, The burnt umbers and siennas have all now faded into distant grey –
But still the blue remains.

END

Running Time: 14 mins 55 sec

Critiques

The use of Interiority In Zadie Smith's White Teeth

While literary references such as Cuddon and Habib (2013) acknowledge that interiority has been around for thousands of years: 'Ovid's *Heroides* (1st c. BC) is ... among the first works of literature to focus on interiority at the expense of action' (p. 216) neither Cuddon (2013) nor Baldick (2015) give an explicit definition of the term. Such a definition is provided however, by Kole (2024), a literary editor for the benefit of aspiring writers rather than academics: 'interiority is the on-the-page rendering of [a] character's thoughts, feelings, reactions, expectations, and inner struggles, whether conscious or subconscious, either anchored in present time or outside of it' (p. 3). This aligns with the more academically focused definition of interior monologue that is to be found in Baldick (2005), 'The written representation of a character's inner thoughts, impressions, and memories as if directly 'overheard' without the apparent intervention of a summarising and selecting narrator' (Baldick, 2005). However interiority does not just apply to a spoken monologue (either in the dramatic sense found say in Shakespeare's Hamlet's 'To be or not to be' or much poetry) but also in other contexts, such as 'stream of consciousness', indirect free speech, first person direct narration of an interior sequence of thoughts such as reverie or meditation, expression of interior emotion or unspoken thoughts in dialogue or in narrative form by an omniscient third party narrator. In this discussion, it will, however, suffice to use the broad definition given by the OED: 'a. The quality or state of being interior or inward. b. Inner character or nature; an inner element' (Oxford English Dictionary, 2024). Whatever its precise definition, many modern authors and critics see interiority as essential. For example, Virginia Woolf wrote: 'Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo surrounding consciousness from beginning to end' (Woolf, 1925 [2025]), thus arguing that capturing inner consciousness is a crucial aspect of narrative.

There are a number of different types of interiority. Simple 'narrative' interiority shows the reader the characters' thoughts and emotions. It is up to the reader to use this relatively neutral account of interiority to draw their own conclusions about why these thoughts or feelings are important to the character or narrative.

'Reactive' interiority occurs when not only are the character's thoughts and emotions presented to the reader within the context of the character's personality and context. This type of interiority brings the reader closer to the emotional and intellectual perspective of that character on the events around them.

'Reflective' interiority involves the reader seeing the inner processes of a character as they respond to some event, recollection, or dialogue and which causes that character to change their understanding of their situation or themselves. Such interiority may describe a process of self-reflection resulting in emotional development within the character or a deeper self-understanding by the character. It is in such sections of reflective interiority that characters often undergo significant change or growth, which can radically affect their future actions.

The purpose of interiority, at its most profound usage, is to show the inner struggles of a character, to show not only what the character does, but more importantly, why they do it. It offers the opportunity to show not only how the character responds to the current moment, but what they remember of the past, what they hope for the future, and how this interiority influences their actions in the present.

As an example of Smith's use of different types of interiority, consider the scene on the 98 bus as Archie, Samad et al journey to the public premiere of the supermouse (Smith, 2001, p. 510-512). This scene starts with Archie, uncomfortable with the group's silence, using the changes he observes on modern bus tickets to provoke a discussion. Initially, Smith uses the convention of italics to indicate Archie's indirect free speech:

Cor (thought Archie) they don't make 'em like they used to.

(p. 510)

Since the preceding paragraph is the actual text of the bus ticket, Smith helpfully includes the 'thought Archie' tag to ensure the reader is certain of the speaker (or rather, the thinker in this case). This is a 'simple' form of interiority, and the reader is still left a little emotionally distant from Archie. Italics are then dropped so that they can be used for emphasis in the following sentences, since it is clear that the omniscient narrator is continuing to recount Archie's thoughts, and the reader is pulled into much closer emotional connection with Archie, as one can imagine this next sentence simply being spoken in Archie's internal voice (effectively short-circuiting the narrator normal reporting of events):

The minute you tore one from the perforation, you felt stuffed and pinned down by some all-seeing taxidermist, you felt freeze-framed in time, you felt *caught*.

(pp. 510-511)

Here, Smith has zoomed right in, and the reader feels they are actually in Archie's mind for a moment, sharing his experience and emotional reaction to the ticket. This is a 'reflective' form of interiority – Archie is analysing his internal thoughts about the ticket but not actually formulating any consequent actions. The reader is then brought out of Archie's mind as the emotional distance of the narrative moves away:

Archie wondered why that was. He tapped Samad on the shoulder.

(p. 511)

And normal exterior narration is resumed with Samad asking Archie:

What is it, precisely, that you want to know?

(p. 511)

The following paragraph seems initially to be the voice of the omniscient narrator:

He looked a bit testy. Everyone was a little testy right now. There'd been a bit of a ding-dong earlier in the afternoon ... And then the emotional fall-out. Irie burst into tears.'

(p. 511)

This could equally well be direct narration by the omniscient narrator using their knowledge of Archie, or it could also be indirect free speech, where the text simply states the actual internal thoughts that Archie is having. It is perhaps the latter, as the next thing the reader hears is Archie's internal rhetorical question:

(What was wrong with Irie? She was always a bit weepy these days.)

(p. 511)

Smith is deftly (and almost continuously) changing the emotional distance between reader and character, as needed by the context and the intensity of the character's thoughts, emotions and experience. Her use of interiority is not just limited to dramatic purposes – she also uses it to add humour, when necessary, as when the reader is shown Archie's prioritising his appetite over any empathy for his fellow travellers:

Alsana chimed in from further down the bus. 'Don't you take it out on her just because you'd rather be eating your beans and chips' – Ah! (thought Archie, wistfully) Beans and chips! – 'than going to see your own son actually achieving something and –'

(p. 513).

None of these examples of Archie's interiority reaches the full depth of 'reactive' interiority. Examples of this can be seen elsewhere in the novel, where Irie, while staying with her grandmother, in a flash of realisation and determination to own her past:

She laid claim to the past – her version of the past ... This all belonged to her, her birthright, like a pair of pearl earrings or a post office bond. ... and Irie put an X on everything she found, collecting bits and bobs (birth certificates, maps, army reports, news articles) ... so that [this would] seep right into her.

(p. 400)

This omniscient narratorial insight into Irie's interiority points to one of the novel's universal themes – the search for roots. That this is a universal search independent of culture, religion, or race is something Smith brings out by showing Millet's perspective on his origins, his sense of alienation in response to his experiences of discrimination within British society:

He knew that he, Millat, was a Paki no matter where he came from; that he smelt of curry; had no sexual identity; took other people's jobs; or had no job and bummed off the state; [...]. In short, he knew he had no face in this country, no voice in the country

(p. 233–4)

Zadie Smith has said that the writer's job is 'to tell us how somebody felt about something, it's to tell us how the world works' (Smith, quoted in Woods, 2005). However, it is hard to see from the content of *White Teeth* that her stated preference of prioritising

external functionality over personal interiority is how she actually writes. It is precisely how individuals feel about the world that leads them to act in certain ways, and it is their actions that then determine what happens to them in that world, and it is those feelings, expressed as interiority, that convey much of the meaning of the book. Smith draws on the realism of pre-modernistic literature to describe the environment and factual structure of her story world, the internal expression of thought, the stream of consciousness and fragmented narratives (as in ‘And all these people...nothing space’ (p. 517-519)) and by challenging established norms in reflecting the complexities of contemporary life, incorporates postmodern elements too in *White Teeth*. Perhaps then, rather than seeing the book as hyper-realistic fiction, it should simply be categorised it as a hyper-narrative, a compaction of many or all narrative possibilities.

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How is identity constructed within a text?

This essay argues that identities formed by text production are created, negotiated and modified in a collaborative and interactive dialogue between the author and the reader of the text.

A text is 'any artefact produced or modified to communicate meaning' (Rubrecht, 2001, cited in Goodman, 2017, p. 221). Examples include novels, poetry, tombstones, hieroglyphs, legal transcripts, the digital media of a Hollywood film and even the Hollywood sign itself. Writers and readers carry out literacy practices when they 'create and interact with text[s] and the meanings around them' (Goodman, 2018).

This essay discusses Helen Fielding's novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1996). This text was chosen because the main character's identity is shown to the reader through the literacy practice of diary writing. The novel thus offers two differing perspectives on Bridget Jones's identity. Each diary entry not only reflects Bridget's view of her own identity within the story, but also the identity Fielding wants the reader to see from outside the story world. By using these potentially contrasting views, Fielding encourages the reader to decide for themselves just who Bridget Jones is.

Guenther, Wilton and Fernandes state that: 'Identity refers to an individual's organised constellation of traits; attitudes; self-knowledge; cognitive structures; past, present, and future self-representations; social roles; relationships; and group affiliations' (2020, p. 2136). This essay will focus on how authors use linguistic means to select and depict traits of identity in their characters.

How, then, is identity constructed in text production? Demjén presents examples of how 'Strategic uses of language and other semiotic modes play a fundamental role in the creation and negotiation of identity (de Fina et al., 2006) in workplace narratives' (Demjén, 2017b, p. 115). These techniques can also be found in personal narratives. In *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Bridget is negotiating the identity she presents to her friends and colleagues across the various overlapping contexts of her personal, social, and sexual relationships, as well as in her professional workplace. This analysis aligns with Goffman's view that 'identity [is] a kind of theatrical performance [that is] emergent, collaborative and interactional' (Goffman 1990, quoted in The Open University, 2024b).

Why is writing about identity important? Jones suggests that 'linguistic creativity allows a better understanding of our sense of self and our societies' (Jones, 2012, cited in Demjén, 2017a, p.115). Demjén's view is that 'the way in which we use language is inherently confused and often paradoxical; it is a function which engages both in truth seeking and falsifying' (ibid). Demjén also argues that 'the desire and need to write, arises from the fact that it is all but impossible to attain an idea of self by any other means' (ibid).

From this, it follows that by writing a diary, Bridget is performing an act of self-actualisation. Equally, Fielding herself is using novel writing to position and publicise her own identity as a rom-com writer. As readers, we compare our experiences with those of Bridget's and her observations and conclusions about her experiences and thus learn something about our own identities.

Cusk says: 'Language ... constitutes our central experiences of social and moral content, ... and, most importantly, of individuality and the self' (Cusk, 2013, quoted in Neale, 2017, p. 129). She also recognises its ability to deny or hide identity: "it is also a system of lies,

evasions, propaganda, misrepresentation and conformity" and that 'language is the medium, the brokering mechanism, of self' (ibid). Cusk is suggesting that authors find a route via the language chosen within their texts to construct the imagined identities of their characters.

The reader may then ask: Is the identity of Bridget Jones portrayed in Fielding's novel in any way related to the identity of Fielding in real life? i.e. should knowledge of Fielding's identity influence the reader's interpretation of Fielding's text? Literary critics such as Barthes and Foucault have argued that the interpretation of a text should be from the reader's perspective in preference to that of the author, and that knowledge of the author's creative process may not be of any great value (Neale, 2017, p. 131-2). This seems questionable however, as readers responses to *Bridget Jones's Diary* have certainly been influenced by the knowledge that Fielding was a female journalist in London in the 1980-1990s, often satirising and commenting on social trends and contemporary gender inequalities (Skurnick, 2013) and thus an authentic source for the world depicted in her novel. In contrast to Barthes and Foucault, Neale argues, 'you may find that the elegant style and powerful comic content of what you are reading overrides any intrigue about who wrote it' (2017, p. 132). As such, Neale is acknowledging that an author such as Fielding claims authenticity for her work because of her social and professional position, and this enables her to 'tap into the gap between how we all feel we are expected to be and how we really are' (Fielding, 2024).

Reviewers have praised the authenticity and identity of the female voice in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Shulman (1996) says it 'rings with the unmistakable tone of something that is true to the marrow..."Bridget Jones, c'est moi"'. What then creates this authenticity? Partly it comes from the reader's perception of the authority of the author to write on the themes of the text - i.e. the reader's perception of the author's domain knowledge in the subject of the text. In rhetorical terms (Hann, 2017, p. 23), this is ethos. Partly, it is the author's skill in using language that persuades the reader of the authenticity of the text. In rhetorical terms, this is logos. Partly, it is the ability of the author to engage the reader's emotions, i.e. the pathos of rhetoric. As Aristotle suggests, the balanced combination of the three rhetorical types, as employed by Fielding here, generates the most impactful effect (p. 26).

In writing her diary, Bridget is performing various acts of identity construction. What she writes is both a reflection of her actual identity, the identity she perceives herself to be, and her desired (but usually unachievable) identity. Identity as a performance was first discussed by Goffman, who envisaged social interactions in terms of theatrical performances (Goffman, 1959, cited in Tagg, 2017, p. 305). Like Goffman, Greenblatt also see the use of texts as a way of fashioning the self to 'fit the expectations that cultures, communities and institutions place on the role (or profession) that an individual needs or wants to fulfil' (Greenblatt, 2005, cited in Demjén , 2017b, p. 115). While Demjén discusses the idea of the 'self-fashioning' of 'identity construction' in the context of corporate identity and the Deepwater disaster (2017b, p 112), the control of personal identity in the workplace is also crucial for many (BBC, 2025). Much of Bridget's concerns are related to the identity she projects in her personal life and her workplace, e.g. her choice of things such as clothing and makeup as well as the way she speaks to her colleagues in conversations plays an important role in the semiotic creation and negotiation of her identity. As Demjén indicates, these are all ways of 'self-fashioning' an identity within a given context (2017b, p. 113-5).

The fact that Bridget keeps a diary at all is a key defining trait of her identity. It reveals her obsessive behaviours, her need to get a perspective on, and to gain control over her life. Evidence for this can be seen in the many plans (invariably unfilled) that Bridget documents

throughout her diary (most significantly, the novel opens with Bridget's extensive New Year's Resolution list). Throughout the diary reader gets to see Bridget's ever optimistic aspirations, e.g. 'Monday 10 Mar: ... Expect to become known as brilliant cook and hostess' (Fielding, 1996, p. 81) and the corresponding humiliation and disasters that follow, e.g. 'Tue 21 Mar 7.35 p.m. Shit, shit shit. The shepherd's pie is still in pans all over the kitchen floor ...', (p. 83). It is these identity traits of optimism, incompetence and resilience that define Bridget.

Rhetorical devices can be used to strengthen a story as suggested by Labov (1972, cited in Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 24). These devices include 'gestures, sound effects, repetition, intensifiers and narrator asides' (*ibid*). However, these are often most effective in live performances such as conversations or dramatic works. The novel form often uses other performative devices, as discussed by Bauman, (1986, quoted in Georgakopoulou, 2017, pp. 29-30) including: repetition, figurative language, reported speech, tense shifts, intensity markers such as adverbs and adjectives. Fielding uses the inventive and witty use of vocabulary as in 'Pied-a-pomme-de-terre' (Fielding, 1996, p. 82); figurative language, such as alliteration: 'road-rage residue' (p. 10) and onomatopoeic imagery such as 'Tick-tock-tick-tock' (p. 11); and the subversion of regular syntactic conventions as in this abbreviated list notation: 'he was gay/a sex addict/a narcotic addict/a commitment phobic' (p. 11).

Fielding also creatively employs typography to identify different semantic content: e.g. italics are used for Bridget's daily weight, calorie, fag and alcohol statistics (p. 7); bold titles and indented text indicate shopping and others lists (p. 7); a san serif, monospaced font is used to indicate messages on Bridget's work computer (p. 23) and strikethrough is used to neatly show Bridget's planned intention, then subsequent change of mind, e.g. '~~4) To meet and sleep with sex god~~' (p. 97).

These devices defamiliarize and foreground the words that Bridget says and writes, effectively 'capturing the reader's attention' (Demjén, 2017a, p. 25) and personalising Bridget's particular linguistic identity. All of these devices fall under the perspective of the textual lens (p. 23) which analyses 'how language is manipulated in various ways to create a particular effect' (The Open University, 2024a).

Fielding foregrounds the diary genre itself using a number of linguistic devices. Individual diary entries are demarcated by date and time. Abbreviations, telegraphic style, misspellings and exclamations suggest Bridget is talking intimately and conversationally to the diary reader. Here, using the contextual lens (Demjén, 2017a, p. 31), it can be seen that Fielding is expressing linguistic creativity by customising her narrative language to the specific context it is being produced in (i.e. a diary). The contextual lens has advantages in analysing 'how meaning is tied to the social, cultural and historical contexts in which the communication takes place' (The Open University, 2024a). Fielding gives the reader access to Bridget's identity by allowing them to look over Bridget's shoulder as she writes each entry. The entry may simply contain factual information (e.g. her daily weight report, lists of resolutions, recipes, records of conversations etc). It can also be reflective, where Bridget attempts to process and make sense of her experiences and thus narratise them. In some entries however, Fielding breaks the stylistic conventions of the diary form and Bridget then writes a close first person POV narration in traditional novel style (e.g. Fielding, 1996, p. 9).

These narrative sections subvert the mimetic nature of the diary - the diary entry is no longer a snapshot of the day's events, but a carefully detailed narrative and introspection orchestrated by Fielding on Bridget's behalf. This is problematic, as Bridget appears to be

mediating the entry in a way that maximises her depiction of her lack of control over events. Her apparent rhetorical self-consciousness gives her full control of the irony of the situations she describes. Yet, at the heart of Bridget's identity is the idea that she is out of control of events, she is reactive rather than proactive, irresponsible rather than responsible, spontaneous rather than considered. Her diary is surprisingly assured and self-aware, something outside her normal, scatty, fictional identity – nevertheless, readers seem happy to accept this contradiction. Part of the creativity (and related enjoyment) of the text arises because *Bridget Jones's Diary* is not an actual, real diary, but a novel that uses the conceit of being in diary form, while simultaneously subverting that form.

Bamberg claims that 'how storytellers present a story's characters, including themselves, cannot be seen in isolation from who they tell their story to, what feedback they receive and how they interact with/wish to present themselves to their audience' (Bamberg, cited in Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 36). Bamberg's view is that it is therefore not possible to separate the way the author's presentation of characters in a story is inevitably influenced by the identity the author desires to present to their audience and the way they respond to feedback from that audience.

Michael Bakhtin takes a very different view, saying that elements of texts are not generated by unique speakers but that 'every utterance, every sentence ... is in 'dialogue' with utterances that have already been made, and ... the social situation around it' (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010, p. 115). Bakhtin views all language as dialogical - language is influenced by and draws upon previous texts and is ready to generate new texts (Hann, 2017, p. 34). By naming Bridget's boyfriend Darcy, Fielding is reminding the reader of the traditions of romantic literature. Indeed, Fielding says that she 'took the plot from *Pride and Prejudice*' (Fielding, cited in Skurnick, 2013). For example, Bridget's mother describing the modern-day Darcy as a 'top-notch barrister', with 'Masses of money' and conveniently available, i.e. 'Divorced' (Fielding, 1996, p. 9), thus mirroring the characteristics that Austen's Mrs Bennet desires for her daughter Elizabeth. Yet, viewed through a critical lens (Demjén, 2017a, p. 37), which offers advantages in examining 'the values and assumptions that are embedded in the context' (The Open University, 2024a), there are major differences between the two novels. Fielding's view of 20th century society suggests the institution of marriage is a mere convenience, while Austen's view was that marriage provided an essential mechanism by which the Bennet sisters might escape poverty and spinsterhood. When used together, all three lenses work together, offsetting any disadvantage that a single lens might have and thus offering a coherent overall perspective.

The use of intertextuality raises questions about where the true identity and creativity of a text resides. Fielding has produced (sometimes in collaboration with others) various identities (i.e. texts with common traits) of *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Initially, she published the story as anonymous diary entries in *The Independent* (*The Diary of Bridget Jones's*, 1995), using the conceit that the diary entries were the writings of Bridget herself. Fielding then acknowledged her authorship and published *Bridget Jones's Diary* in novel form (extending and reworking her original material). Then, Fielding collaborated to produce the script on which the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* was based (Fielding, Davies and Curtis, 2000). Finally, a film text was created in digital form. The newspaper articles, novel and film all reference each other (and other works such as *Pride and Prejudice*) in a dialogical way. They also confirm Bakhtin's assertion that language is intrinsically heteroglossic because 'words carry within them the intentions, connotations and contextual flavours of previous speakers and

usages' (Hann, 2017, p. 34). Fairclough argues that this 'inherent intertextuality... builds creativity in as an option' for authors, allowing them fresh expression by 'putting together existing conventions in new combinations or drawing upon conventions in situations which usually preclude them' (Fairclough, 1992, quoted in Lillis, 2017, p. 78). This is certainly true for Fielding as, although she references Austen's novel, she also reflects modern rather than Georgian social mores in permitting her characters to participate in and enjoy pre-marital sex. This type of recontextualisation of linguistic and literary resources refutes the concern that re-use is just repetition, and hence not novel and thus not creative. According to Kaufman and Sternberg, creativity is that which is 'novel, good and relevant' (2010, quoted in Monaghan and Cook, 2017, p. 173). Re-textualization can therefore be creative when it makes novel use of the original material in new formats and contexts, particularly when identities span multiple texts.

Hann says, 'This potential for recontextualisation is, of course, multiplied by the affordances which modern technology allows' (Hann, 2017, p. 39). This point also applies to Fielding's text. For example, Fielding uses the modern workplace computer messaging system used by Bridget and Mark Cleaver to replace the written, hand-delivered letters of Austen's Elizabeth and Darcy.

A story's tellability is 'the reason for it to be told in the first place' (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 24). Tellability resides in life events, e.g. pregnancy or illness and has also been 'closely associated in much literature with events that are unexpected' (p. 24). Who then decides what is tellable? An author clearly sees their story as tellable otherwise why would they make the effort to create it? Readers often value a story for the unusual or the unexpected as in the use of plot complications (e.g. Bridget's poor choice of Daniel Cleaver as a candidate for a long-term relationship). Georgakopoulou suggests that authenticity is a key element in tellability (p. 25). Further, 'if we accept Genette's (1980 [1972]) distinction between story and narrative discourse, we also have to accept that tellability has to do with how the events are creatively presented by a teller and how they are received' (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 25). Georgakopoulou sees tellability (and creativity) as dependent on the context in which the text is consumed, and the cultural norms and attitudes of that context. Both authors and consumers participate in determining tellability, according to their value systems. For example, the Bridgeport Literary Prize judges will likely have a different (but possibly overlapping) perspective on tellability compared to that of a high-volume, commercial publisher.

This essay has examined how identity is formed by a collaboration between author and reader. While the novel form expresses the identities of its fictional characters using the author's choice of linguistic and literary devices, those identities are also affected by how readers interpret and contextualise the author's text. Readers may make assumptions about the author's intentions or simply consume the text in isolation, and this will affect their perspective of the identities portrayed within texts. The connection of text production to identity is thus both enabled and directed not only by the author's choices but by the context and the way in which the readers choose to consume the text.

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Appendix – *Bridget Jones Diary* – Page Extracts

© Helen Fielding, 1996.

Page 7

Sunday 1 January

9st 3 (but post-Christmas), alcohol units 14 (but effectively covers 2 days as 4 hours of party was on New Year's Day), cigarettes 22, calories 5424.

Food consumed today:

2 pkts Emmenthal cheese slices
14 cold new potatoes
2 Bloody Marys (count as food as contain Worcester sauce and tomatoes)
½ Ciabatta loaf with Brie
coriander leaves – ½ packet
12 Milk Tray (best to get rid of all Christmas confectionery in one go and make fresh start tomorrow)
13 cocktail sticks securing cheese and pineapple
Portion Una Alconbury's turkey curry, peas and bananas
Portion Una Alconbury's Raspberry Surprise made with Bourbon biscuits, tinned raspberries, eight gallons of whipped cream, decorated with glacé cherries and angelica.

Noon. London: my flat. Ugh. The last thing on earth I feel physically, emotionally or mentally equipped to do is drive to Una

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'Always takes it on her trips ...'

'I don't want a little bag with wheels on.'

'I'll tell you what. Why don't Jamie, Daddy and I all club together and get you a proper new big suitcase *and* a set of wheels?'

Exhausted, I held the phone away from my ear, puzzling about where the missionary luggage-Christmas-gift zeal had stemmed from. When I put the phone back she was saying: '... in actual fact, you can get them with a compartment with bottles for your bubble bath and things. The other thing I thought of was a shopping trolley.'

'Is there anything *you'd* like for Christmas?' I said desperately, blinking in the dazzling Bank Holiday sunlight.

'No, no,' she said airily. 'I've got everything *I* need. Now, darling,' she suddenly hissed, 'you will be coming to Geoffrey and Una's New Year's Day Turkey Curry Buffet this year, won't you?'

'Ah. Actually, I ...' I panicked wildly. What could I pretend to be doing? '... think I might have to work on New Year's Day.'

'That doesn't matter. You can drive up after work. Oh, did I mention? Malcolm and Elaine Darcy are coming and bringing Mark with them. Do you remember Mark, darling? He's one of those top-notch barristers. Masses of money. Divorced. It doesn't start till eight.'

Oh God. Not another strangely dressed opera freak with bushy hair burgeoning from a side-parting. 'Mum, I've told you. I don't need to be fixed up with ...'

'Now come along, darling. Una and Geoffrey have been holding the New Year Buffet since you were running round the lawn with no clothes on! Of course you're going to come. And you'll be able to use your new suitcase.'

11.45 p.m. Ugh. First day of New Year has been day of horror. Cannot quite believe I am once again starting the year in a single bed in my parents' house. It is too humiliating at my age. I wonder if they'll smell it if I have a fag out of the window. Having skulked at home all day, hoping hangover would clear, I eventually gave up and set off for the Turkey Curry Buffet far too late. When I got to the Alconburys' and rang their entire-tune-of-town-hall-clock-style doorbell I was still in a strange world of my own – nauseous, vile-headed, acidic. I was also suffering from road-rage residue after inadvertently getting on to the M6 instead of the M1 and having to drive halfway to Birmingham before I could find anywhere to turn round. I was so furious I kept jamming my foot down to the floor on the accelerator pedal to give vent to my feelings, which is very dangerous. I watched resignedly as Una Alconbury's form – intriguingly deformed through the rippled glass door – bore down on me in a fuchsia two-piece.

'Bridget! We'd almost given you up for lost! Happy New Year! Just about to start without you.'

She seemed to manage to kiss me, get my coat off, hang it over the banister, wipe her lipstick off my cheek and make me feel incredibly guilty all in one movement, while I leaned against the ornament shelf for support.

'Sorry. I got lost.'

'Lost? Durr! What are we going to do with you? Come on in!'

She led me through the frosted-glass doors into the lounge, shouting, 'She got lost, everyone!'

'Bridget! Happy New Year!' said Geoffrey Alconbury, clad in a yellow diamond-patterned sweater. He did a jokey Bruce Forsyth

'Always takes it on her trips . . .'

'I don't want a little bag with wheels on.'

'I'll tell you what. Why don't Jamie, Daddy and I all club together and get you a proper new big suitcase *and* a set of wheels?'

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'Now come along, darling. Una and Geoffrey have been holding the New Year Buffet since you were running round the lawn with no clothes on! Of course you're going to come. And you'll be able to use your new suitcase.'

Sir, am appalled by message. Whilst skirt could reasonably be described as a little on the skimpy side (thrift being ever our watchword in editorial), consider it gross misrepresentation to describe said skirt as absent, and considering contacting union.

Jones

Waited in frenzy of excitement for reply. Sure enough. Message Pending quickly flashed up. Pressed RMS:

Will whoever has thoughtlessly removed the edited script of KAFKA'S MOTORBIKE from my desk PLEASE have the decency to return it immediately.

Diane

Aargh. After that: zilch.

Noon. Oh God. Daniel has not replied. Must be furious. Maybe he was being serious about the skirt. Oh God oh God. Have been seduced by informality of messaging medium into being impertinent to boss.

12.10. Maybe he has not got it yet. If only could get message back. Think will go for walk and see if can somehow go into Daniel's office and erase it.

12.15. Hah. All explained. He is in meeting with Simon from Marketing. He gave me a look when walked past. Aha. Ahahahaha. Message Pending:

Message Jones

If walking past office was attempt to demonstrate presence of skirt can only say that it has failed parlously. Skirt is indisputably absent. Is skirt off sick?

Cleave

Message Pending then flashed up again – immediately.



entertain nineteen, and that cannot be arsed to spend birthday cooking and would rather dress up and be taken to posh restaurant by sex-god with enormous gold credit card. Instead am going to think of my friends as a huge, warm, African, or possibly Turkish, family.

Our culture is too obsessed with outward appearance, age and status. Love is what matters. These nineteen people are my friends; they want to be welcomed into my home to celebrate with affection and simple homely fare – not to judge. Am going to cook shepherd's pie for them all – British Home Cooking. It will be a marvellous, warm, Third-World-style ethnic family party.

Monday 20 March

9st, alcohol units 4 (getting into mood), cigarettes 27 (but last day before giving up), calories 2455.

Have decided to serve the shepherd's pie with Chargrilled Belgian Endive Salad, Roquefort Lardons and Frizzled Chorizo, to add a fashionable touch (have not tried before but sure it will be easy), followed by individual Grand Marnier soufflés. V. much looking forward to the birthday. Expect to become known as brilliant cook and hostess.

Tuesday 21 March: Birthday

9st, alcohol units 9*, cigarettes 42*, calories 4295*. *If can't splash out on birthday, when can I?

6.30 p.m. Cannot go on. Have just stepped in a pan of mashed potato in new kitten-heel black suede shoes from Pied à terre (Pied-à-pomme-de-terre, more like), forgetting that kitchen floor and surfaces were covered in pans of mince and mashed potato. It is already 6.30 and have to go out to Cullens for Grand Marnier soufflé ingredients and other forgotten items. Oh my God – suddenly remembered tube of contraceptive jelly might be on side of washbasin. Must also hide storage jars with embarrassing un-hip squirrel design and birthday card from Jamie with picture of little lamb on front which says 'Happy Birthday, Guess which one is you?' Then inside, 'You're the one over the hill.' Humph.

Schedule:

- 6.30.** Go to shop.
- 6.45.** Return with forgotten groceries.
- 6.45–7.** Assemble shepherd's pie and place in oven (oh God, hope will all fit).
- 7–7.05.** Prepare Grand Marnier soufflés. (Actually think will have a little taste of Grand Marnier now. It is my birthday, after all.)
- 7.05–7.10.** Mmm. Grand Marnier delicious. Check plates and cutlery for tell-tale signs of sluttish washing-up and arrange in attractive fan shape. Ah, must buy napkins also (or is it serviettes? Can never remember which one is common).
- 7.10–7.20.** Tidy up and move furniture to sides of room.
- 7.20–7.30.** Make frisse lardon frizzled chorizo thing.

All of which leaves a clear half-hour to get ready so no need to panic. Must have a fag. Aargh. It's quarter to seven. How did that

happen? Aargh.

7.15 p.m. Just got back from shop and realize have forgotten butter.

7.35 p.m. Shit, shit shit. The shepherd's pie is still in pans all over the kitchen floor and have not yet washed hair.

7.40 p.m. Oh my God. Just looked for milk and realized have left the carrier bag behind in the shop. Also had the eggs in it. That means . . . Oh God, and the olive oil . . . so cannot do frizzy salad thing.

7.40 p.m. Hmm. Best plan, surely, is to get into the bath with a glass of champagne then get ready. At least if I look nice I can carry on cooking when everyone is here and maybe can get Tom to go out for the missing ingredients.

7.55 p.m. Aargh. Doorbell. Am in bra and pants with wet hair. Pie is all over floor. Suddenly hate the guests. Have had to slave for two days, and now they will all swan in, demanding food like cuckoos. Feel like opening door and shouting, 'Oh, go *fuck* yourselves.'

2 a.m. Feeling v. emotional. At door were Magda, Tom, Shazzer and Jude with bottle of champagne. They said to hurry up and get ready and when I had dried hair and dressed they had cleaned up all the kitchen and thrown away the shepherd's pie. It turned out Magda had booked a big table at 192 and told everyone to go there instead of my flat, and there they all were waiting with presents, planning to buy me dinner. Magda said they had had a weird,

8st 12, alcohol units 0 (v.g.), cigarettes 0 (v.g.), Instants 5 (but won £2 so total Instants expenditure only £3).

Right. Tomorrow is *Kafka's Motorbike*. Am going to work out clear set of objectives. In a minute. Will just watch adverts then ring up Jude.

Right

- 1) Not to get too pissed.
- 2) To aim to meet people to network with.

Hmmm. Anyway, will think of some more later.

11 p.m. Right.

- 3) To put the social skills from the article into action.
- 4) To make Daniel think I have inner poise and want to get off with me again. No. No.
- 4) To meet and sleep with sex god.
- 4) To make interesting contacts in the publishing world, possibly even other professions in order to find new career.

Oh God. Do not want to go to scary party. Want to stay home with bottle of wine and watch *EastEnders*.

Tuesday 18 April

9st 0, alcohol units 7 (oh dear), cigarettes 30, calories (cannot bear to think about it), Instants 1 (excellent).

Party got off to a bad start when could not see anyone that I

Can Linguistic Creativity be used for Political Purposes?

The assertion that ‘Creative acts are shaped and inspired by a combination of political, social and economic forces’ is closely related to the idea that ‘Language is never neutral’ (Hann, 2017, p. 19). Hann sees language as reflecting an underlying ideology. Ideology in this context is ‘the world view or beliefs of a social group’ (*ibid*, p. 22) and ‘not necessarily a consciously held political belief system’ (Morris, 1994, quoted in Hann, 2017, p. 21).

Consequently, as language choice within a discourse is never neutral, it follows that the chosen language must also be political. What is deemed to be political however depends to some extent on who is providing the definition of politics. Allen gives politics a narrow interpretation: ‘the art and science of government, public life, as involving authority and government’ (Allen, 1990, cited in Hann, 2017, p. 22), while Hann views it more generally as ‘activities pertaining to the struggle by different social groups and institutions to communicate their views and beliefs’ (Hann, 2017, p. 22). Such come from political forces originating in individuals or groups such as political parties or pressure groups. The creative use of language is thus a key part of the political processes of persuasion, coercion and manoeuvring of these groupings. Different groups will therefore choose different linguistic techniques, tones, vocabularies on so on in expressing their particular politics.

What then is a linguistically creative act and how can it be shaped by political considerations? The origins of the word ‘create’ lie in the belief that God created everything when bringing the world into being (Pope, 2017, p. 327). Subsequently, the possibility of human creativity was acknowledged when Philip Sidney [1554–86] said that God also ‘allowed man to imagine and make things beyond Nature’ (Sidney, quoted in Pope, 2017, p. 327). More recently, ‘creativity started being defined more or less consistently in terms of novelty/originality and value/appropriateness’ (Glăveanu and Kaufman, 2019). Creativity is now seen to be expressed in all types of discourse, from newspapers to graffiti, from classical opera to punk, across all forms of media, including TV, film, social media, TikTok and YouTube. This might be thought to offer a corresponding opportunity for increased linguistic creativity. However, Cameron states that ‘Judgements on creativity are not based primarily on linguistic criteria, but on values which are ultimately social, cultural and political (2017, p. 198). Evidence presented below will contest this view, by showing how creativity continues to reside in linguistic content (as in Obama’s acceptance speech or the DOE ‘Clunk-Click’ campaign).

The definition of a politically creative linguistic act must also consider that ‘what comes to be regarded as creative is itself not a politically neutral process’ (Hann, 2017, p. 18). Creativity is thus both a means to a political end and a political act in itself. In the past, the scope of linguistic creativity was rather narrowly defined - ‘it was mostly the language of literature that could be creative’ (Demjén, 2017, p. 22). Those judged on what was admirable, worthy, prestigious and novel were just a small part of society concerned largely with the established literary canon (Carter, 2004, Pope, 2005, Swann et al., 2011, all cited in Lillis, 2017, p. 70). This position has been challenged in the last few decades, extending the idea of creativity to ‘a notion is increasingly being used in sociolinguistics and studies of communication to characterise a wide range of everyday linguistic practice, the considerable productive activity taking place using new technologies and the mixing and meshing of languages and modes’ (Lillis, 2017, p. 70). This leads to the view that all language use is

creative in some sense or another. Given Hann's view that language is never neutral, it follows that all language contains aspects of creativity and political expression.

Is political discourse special compared to other discourse types? The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Linguistics* defines discourse as 'a coherent succession of sentences, spoken or (in most usage) written' (Matthews, 2014). Lillis describes political discourse as a composition of three elements: the act of production, the intended purpose of the discourse, and a potential impact or outcome (Lillis, p. 70). The characteristics of language that Lillis focuses on in her analysis of political discourse (including social semiotics, rhetoric, stylistics, aesthetics, multimodality, *ibid.*, pp. 71-72) can be found in many non-political discourses. What then is it that makes a discourse political? While the broad and narrow definitions of politics of Allen and Hann have been discussed above, a more general definition is given by Heywood when he suggests that politics is the 'activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live' (Heywood, 2013, p. 2). He sees it as the process by which the search for a resolution of rival interests is carried out, independent of whether or not such a resolution is achieved. Others, such as Lillis, characterise political discourses as those that 'reflect an engagement with social concerns and offer a particular position on these' (Lillis, 2017, p. 67).

Lillis uses President Obama's acceptance speech to illustrate creativity in political discourse (Lillis, 2017, p. 73). Such use of rhetoric and stylistics for political purpose is not new, however. For example, the rhetorical techniques of logos, ethos and pathos, together with the rule of three discussed by Lillis and Crystal in Obama's speech, can also be found in Elizabeth I's speech to her troops at Tilbury (Green, 1997 [1654], p. 443). Elizabeth, like Obama, includes several examples of the rule of three, e.g. 'enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people' (*ibid.*). Elizabeth also uses a range of rhetoric techniques, i.e.: logos (the appeal to reason) as in 'not doubting but by your obedience to my general, by your concord in the camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victory over these enemies of my God', pathos (the appeal to emotion) as in 'by your obedience to my General, by your Concord in the Camp, and your valour in the field, we shall shortly have a famous victorie ...' and ethos (the appeal to the reputation of the speaker) as in 'but I have the heart and Stomach of a King, and of a King of England too' (*ibid.*). Five hundred years later, Obama uses similar linguistic techniques. Why then is Obama's speech creative, given that many of his linguistic techniques have been used numerous times before? Bakhtin argues that language is a battleground in which two forces, 'the centripetal, which pulls towards the standardisation of language, and the centrifugal, which pushes towards diversification and change (Bakhtin, 1981, cited in Hann, 2017, p. 22). So, in Obama's speech, we should expect a mix of the innovative or centrifugal and the familiar or centripetal. It is the tension between these two opposing forces that gives impetus and impact to the content of the speech. Obama's speech is also dialogical (in the sense that it interacts with past political discourse and with the context it is presented in (Hann, 2017, p. 34). There are stylistic echoes of Lincoln's ('of the people, by the people, for the people', (Gard and Lincoln, 2012)) in Obama's use of the rule of three. More directly, Obama says, "We cannot walk alone," the preacher cried. "And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall always march ahead" quoting directly from Martin Luther King's 1963 speech 'I Have a Dream' (BBC, 2003). Here Obama, a black politician, has used the technique of recontextualization (Hann, 2017, p. 24) to reuse, in a new context, the words of a black civil rights leader, to give both impact and legitimacy to his speech.

Turning to commercial political discourse, it has been suggested that ‘The overriding purpose of advertising to make a profit closes it off from the multiple interpretations of that literary texts … encourage’ (Cook, 2017, p. 119). In some ways, this is a questionable proposition. Not all advertising is driven by profit motives - given that advertising may be most generally defined as ‘the techniques and practices used to bring products, services, opinions, or causes to public notice for the purpose of persuading the public to respond in a certain way toward what is advertised’ (Britannica, 2025). Government ad campaigns such as the ‘Clunk-Click’ road safety campaign of the 1970s are neither profit-driven nor promoted by a commercial organisation. Despite its lack of profit motive, the ‘Clunk-Click’ campaign can be argued to contain a similar richness of creativity to the creative literary works admired by Cook. The campaign developed the phrase ‘Clunk, Click, every trip’ as its key slogan (Central Office of Information, 2025; Weaver, 2016; DOE, 1974). This slogan is made up of two unlinked parallel nouns (‘clunk, click’) followed by a prepositional phrase acting as an adverbial ‘every trip’. This grammatical division splits the slogan into two half-lines each of which have two major stresses, encouraging the speaker to pause between the halves. The halves are also contrasted, as the first half uses initial and final consonant alliteration in ‘clunk’ and ‘click’, while the second half does not. The half rhyme between ‘click’ and ‘trip’ using voiceless stops also emphasises the two equal half lines of the slogan. Despite consisting of just four words, the slogan is a rich use of creative linguistic content, just like a canonical literary text such as Seamus Heaney’s ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ (Heaney, 1990 [1966], p. 12). Here Heaney, like the ‘Clunk-Click’ campaign, uses alliteration, internal rhyme across half-lines, e.g. ‘Terraced thousands died, shaking scythes at cannon,’ and a split line, with contrasted halves, where the first half line is trochee, trochee terminated by a separating single stressed syllable (‘terraced thousands died’) and the second half line is trochee, trochee, trochee (‘shaking scythes at cannon’).

Both Heaney and the writers of ‘Clunk, Click, every trip’ show a high level of linguistic and literary competence in their deployment of language. There is, however, a difference in the political intentions of the two authors. Lillis (2017, p. 90) sees Heaney’s work as ‘overtly political in the sense of aligning himself with a particular group or voice’. The ‘Requiem for the Croppies’ makes political statements in that it emphasises the brutal nature of the British suppression of the Croppies’ 1798 rising, and the Croppies as courageous, untrained, yet still willing to pursue their rebellious and romantic ideals of independence. Such a poem is a statement of Nationalistic aims and idealisms. Heaney sees the poet’s responsibility not as a proselytiser for a given ideology but instead he describes his political position by saying ‘I think it was perfectly in order to have a disposition, but not a propagandist position’ (Heaney, 2012, quoted in Lillis, 2017, p. 91). The writers of ‘Clunk, Click, every trip’, however, are also producing political material but within a specific ideology - that of a voluntary change of public behaviour for personal safety and does not promote an overt party-political position. This fits more closely to Allen’s narrower definition of a political act, while Heaney’s persuasion is more aimed at ‘hearts and minds’ and thus aligns more closely with Hann’s broader definition.

For many people, using language ‘creatively’ is less important than using it ‘correctly’, ‘appropriately’ or ‘intelligibly’ (Cameron, 2017, p. 197). Cameron says that in the real world, not all forms of creative language use are considered to be equal, arguing that ‘judgements on creativity are not based primarily on linguistic criteria, but on values which are ultimately social, cultural and political’ (*ibid*). As an example, consider Keen’s views on

political discourse in a digital environment (Keen, cited in The Open University, 2025a). Keen suggests that YouTube is a ‘negative [cultural] force, neither formally developed nor curated, nor the recipient of investment from cultural institutions’ (*ibid*). He argues that the unmediated nature of YouTube, combined with the sheer volume of contributions, overwhelms any underlying creativity. He also asserts, ‘...fewer and fewer people are able to make a living creating videos, making records, writing books. The internet has been a very, very bad thing for the professional creative community’ (*ibid*). While digital publishing certainly threatens the viability of traditional publishing routes, authors are not bound to stay with tradition (Bingham, 2025) and, in fact, they now have access to more rather less channels of consumption of their works than ever before (Galer, 2025). Keen’s assertion that the internet is a bad thing financially for authors also seems somewhat flawed. In 2019, approximately \$8.25 billion of Google’s advertisement revenue of \$15 billion was distributed to more than 150,000 different channels and thus to the creatives making the content on those channels. 153,770 channels each received an average of \$16,346, while 517 received an average of \$1,707,446 (Rieder, 2020, quoted in Rieder et al, 2023, p. 4, Table 1).

Establishing criteria for creative value is a difficult task that even professional evaluators such as the critic Mark Lawson struggle with. Lawson states ‘academic snobbery, which is then endorsed by literary critics and newspapers’, thereby acknowledging that the traditional establishment has long seen itself as the key arbiter of creative value (The Open University, 2025b). He nevertheless still endorses the professional critic role, saying that ‘expertise will eventually win out’ and argues that ‘wouldn’t you rather hear ... from a professional critic rather than a citizen critic because citizen critics generally have no training’. This may still be true in the traditional arts of theatre, TV, film and literature, however the huge flood of new media creativity on social media and the internet (e.g. YouTube, TikTok, personal websites, self-published novels, poetry, graphic novels, fan fiction, blogs, vlogs, games, artwork, zines) no longer look to the traditional critics for approval or customer guidance. The traditional critic or academic is no longer be the sole arbiter of what is good, creative or valuable. Social media, peer reviews and simple commercial pressures (e.g. digital sales) now add a strong voice to the debate. While this may have some disadvantages, e.g. ‘rather a lot of these so-called reader reviews in newspapers are written by people with a quite astonishing conflict of interest’ (Lawson, quoted in The Open University, 2025b) it now seems impossible reverse this democratisation of critical evaluation and to put the technology of the internet genie back into its bottle.

In conclusion, the linguistics of political creativity is heteroglossic - using multiple voices or types of language to express different opinions within a single text. It may also be dialogic as it has relationships with what has already been said in the past and what will be said in the future. Today’s producers of texts, speech and media not only re-use the creative linguistic techniques of their predecessors in novel ways but also reconfigure and re-textualize those methods and texts in the evolving digital technologies of contemporary society. The division between the producers, consumers and evaluators of political discourse is becoming increasingly blurred as traditional methods of discourse are augmented or replaced by digital and networked channels of multimodality.

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Appendix 1

This is a transcript of a Central Office of Information Road Safety film presented by Shaw Taylor in 1971. See: Central Office of Information Films (2025) 'Television Commercials: What was made 1960 to 1979', *Central Office of Information Films*.

Narrator (Shaw Taylor):

You know each of those cars carries a whole family.

Yes, even him.

He's probably got a wife and kids depending on his arriving home safely

What are his chances?

That much less if he doesn't snap into his seat belt.

There can be some pretty frightening results from accidents where people don't wear their seat belts, and they don't have to be fatal.

After all what's a family with Mom or Dad laid up in hospital?

I know that if you wear a seat belt you reduce your chances of being killed or seriously injured by half.

So, what I'm getting at is this - if you won't belt up for yourselves then please do it for them. Because your seat belt is their security.

And I'm going to be around for quite a while punching that message across.

Right, here's my first problem:

The driver who takes all the trouble in the world to put a seat belt on for a long drive along the motorway but doesn't bother for just popping around the corner because it's that popping around the corner drive that's the most dangerous, just when you think it's not worth belting up.

Think about this one: over 60% of all traffic accidents happen in built up areas.

So, let's get into that seat belt habit and let's make it automatic as automatic as closing the car door.

After all you, wouldn't drive off without hearing this would you: the clank of the car door closing.

Right let's add another sound: the click of a seat belt being fastened.

Clunk, click - that makes sound sense, doesn't it?

Never clunk without your click.

You know we could become a nation of clunk clickers

Is it all worth it?

Well, if it's not for you surely it is for them?

Remember this seat belt is their security.

See you, clunkclicker!

Source: belfast jack (2017) 'Shaw Taylor 1960's Clunk Click Every Trip Vintage British TV Commercial', *YouTube*, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQ-IvxZiZYk> accessed on 19 April 2025.

Appendix 2:

This is a transcript of a Central Office of Information Road Safety film presented by Jimmy Savile in the early 1970s. See: Central Office of Information Films (2025) 'Television Commercials: What was made 1960 to 1979', *Central Office of Information Films*.

Narrator (Jimmy Savile):

You can put almost any frail object in a box and provided it's held firm you can shake it about no end but if it's loose in the box that's another matter.

A car is a box a box on Wheels but a box just the same and it can still get shaken about and if you're in it and not wearing a seat belt you're in trouble because you're a loose object.

It doesn't matter who you are or what you are.

You can be the world's most experienced driver but to the law of gravity you're the world's most experienced loose object and it can be very unfunny.

Now an egg hasn't got much in the way of brains, but you have

Wear a seat belt and if the box gets shaken up

you stand every chance of not getting broken no matter how short the journey.

Nag yourself to remember this drill:

Clunk the car door and click the seat belt

Clunk, click every trip!

Source: paulharris (2006) 'Clunk Click', *YouTube*, available at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddNr7rebaQo> accessed on 19 April 2025.

Why is narrative important to humans?

This essay examines the premise that narrative is a fundamental and widely used linguistic tool that is used to participate and negotiate in personal and public relationships and to express or compete for social status in a broad range of contexts. It is also a key means to satisfy some basic human psychological needs. It plays an important part in communicating information, providing entertainment, recounting past events, positioning individuals within personal relationships, establishing social hierarchies and distributing intellectual, moral and artistic ideas. It provides a vehicle for political propaganda and for giving people a sense of belonging and identity.

Humans have been using narrative to write and recount stories for a very long time (since before the invention of Egyptian hieroglyphs and the writing of Homer's Iliad). Recently though it has been recognised that narrative discourse can also be used for purposes other than literary or historical storytelling. These include situations such as the small-scale narratives of casual conversations in the supermarket, written and digital correspondence, slogans, advertisements, digital media and on a larger scale, use in social media for commercial marketing and political propaganda (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 46). As Gardner says, 'Stories are the single most powerful weapon in a leader's arsenal' (cited in Daft, 2014, p. 247). The philosopher, Richard Kearney also sees narrative as inseparable from the process of living, saying that 'Every life is in search of a narrative ... [that] provides us with one of our most viable forms of identity - individual and communal' (Kearney, 2002, p. 4).

Wales defines narrative as 'basically a story, of happenings or events, either real or imaginary, which the narrator considers interesting or important' (Wales, 2001, p. 264). Early literary theorists such as the Russian Formalists considered a narrative to be made up: the 'fabula' – the actual sequence of events, and the 'sjuzet' - the artistic organisation of these events (perhaps using flashbacks, foreground and different points of view) (Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 20). This distinction between 'story' (the what of a story) and 'discourse' (the how, the way it is told) has also been adopted by modern scholars, e.g. Chatman (ibid). Genette takes the view that narrative is not only the story itself but also the act of telling that story and the textual or other media used to convey the story (Genette, cited in Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 48-50). Genette thus suggests there are at least three aspects to narrative. Firstly, there is the narrative statement (notated here as G1). This statement is the text of the narrative, e.g. the words that are said by the narrator and their body language, tone and gestures. Secondly, there are the actual events of the narrative (G2) - the things that happen in the narrative. Thirdly, there is the act of telling the story - this is the performative and possibly interactive aspect of the narrative (G3). Thus, the totality of the narrative is the sum of its written or spoken form, the events it describes, and the act of telling it. Squire takes a more technical linguistic perspective: 'Adopting a minimal, inclusive definition, we can say that a narrative is a set of signs – that is, a set of signifiers that stand for concepts or signifieds (Squire et al., 2014) – that by their movement, generate meaning' (Squire, 2017, p. 173). The signifiers make up the physical form of the narrative (words, speech, tone, gestures, stylistic features) and the signifieds are the conceptual contents of the narrative, i.e. its purpose and meaning.

These various definitions each approach narrative somewhat differently – for example, Wales, unlike Squire, does not explicitly separate the physical text or speech of the narrative from its semantic content. Genette includes that act of narration as an element in the

narrative, but Squire does not; Squire would argue that, amongst other things, different narratives can employ different variations of narrative signifiers (e.g. different voice tones, speech speeds or vocabulary) – thus providing a stylistic means to differentiate types of narrative (e.g. political from medical). However, no single definition is superior to any other – each definition can be useful according to circumstance. They can also be used in combination.

As an example, consider the installation instructions for a kitchen sink (Blanco, 2025). This is a simple story, requiring little embellishment of its linear sequence of events and thus matches Wales's narrative definition well. The narrator is a corporation, the story is the sequence of installation operations on an instruction leaflet, and the language is diagrammatic rather than textual. In Squire's terms, each diagram is a signifier showing physically what must be done to achieve that process step, and the associated increment in progress in installation is the signified element. While this type of narrative is concerned primarily with the simple transfer of knowledge, it can also be seen as a more layered and complex discourse. When viewed from Genette's perspective, the narrative events are mapped to the human activity of carrying out the sequence of required installation events (G2). The narrator (the Blanco corporation) chooses to use a single two-page leaflet containing the visual language of assembly diagrams as the tangible form of the story (G1). This allows Blanco to use the same physical form of the story to narrate the story in multiple different telling situations, i.e. in different customer countries (G3). This avoids translation costs and offers Blanco a worthwhile commercial cost saving. However, Blanco's cost driven narrative does reduce the tellability of the instructional narrative – a common aspect in the non-textual instructions provided by many types of 'flat pack' manufacturers (Myers, 2017).

People choose differing language features to make them appear to be authoritative, knowledgeable, participative, obstructive, empathic, or disinterested according to the situation. They also seek to gain agency or status, to reinforce their legitimacy and authority to speak. Much of the linguistic positioning of the speakers depends on the social context, cultural norms and the topic of conversation. Johnstone sees status positioning as 'the see-saw on which power shifts in all relationships. Subtle status shifts occur all the time in real-life exchanges...' (Johnstone, cited in Neale, 2009, p. 67).

Participants in narratives often make strategic language choices to place themselves in an advantageous position relative to other speakers during the discourse. This is often a dynamic process, as ongoing choices shape how participants are perceived and related to by others within the interaction. Bamberg (quoted in Georgakopoulou, 2017, p. 51-59) defines three levels of narrative positioning: (1) the way in which the characters are positioned relative to each other in the story world, (2) the positioning of the narrator relative to the audience within the act of narration, (3) the way in which the narrator positions themselves to establish their own sense of self, in the story world.

Examples of different levels of positioning can be found in *The Times*'s March 3rd 2025 edition. Here Swinford et al (2025, p. 1) write a narrative account of recent political events, which includes direct quotes of some politicians (e.g. 'Sir Keith Starmer has said that "Europe must do the heavy lifting"', (ibid)) and paraphrases others (e.g. 'Macron also said that European countries should raise their defence spending...' (ibid)). The journalist's recounting of events may be seen as the 'fabula' of the larger political story. Inside, Moody and Brennan (2025) narrate the same events, adding their own perspective, e.g. saying, 'The Norwegian defence minister felt obliged to say ...' (ibid. p. 6) rather than simply quoting him

directly. They add emotional colour with adjectives such as ‘peremptory’ in the phrase ‘President Duda was given a peremptory brush off’ and add interpretative content to their narration with statements such as ‘The idea is gaining training traction’. In doing so they are augmenting the ‘sjuzet’ of the story and are in effect re-narrating their own modified version of the original story events. This enrichment is extended when the same narrative is also recast and re-narrated with less emphasis on the details of the factual events and more on the implications of those events in ‘Comment’ Lucas (2025, p. 6) and an unattributed ‘Analysis’ (The Times, 2025, p. 7). The ‘Analysis’ piece is positioning the editorial author at Bamberg’s level 3 and offers an authoritative and insightful account of the political situation by virtue of its analytical and summative style – this is in effect an account that the readership of the paper can regard as a trustworthy representation of the story world. The original article writers, Swinford et al., are operating differently, at Bamber’s level 2, as reporters who simply relay narrative events to a passive newspaper readership. The politicians in the story are also being positioned by the way Swinford et al report the narrative. By quoting Starmer directly as in ‘Europe must do the heavy lifting’, their narrative shows that Starmer is trying to gain agency and position himself as a leader by using the strong obligation of the modal auxiliary ‘must’ as a decisive and direction instruction. However, by selecting the modal conditional ‘should’ in their paraphrase of Macron’s statement, Swinford et al are subtly lowering Macron’s positional status relative to Starmer.

Turning now to why narrative has a central role in our lives, one of its many roles is the conveyance of useful information in discourse (as in the case of the sink installation instructions above). Such instructions require little embellishment or ‘sjuzet’. At the other end of the spectrum, narratives used in the popular entertainment media often emphasise style over substance, responding to audience demand for an escapist distraction from daily life. Examples are TV series such as *Suits* (Korsch, 2010) where the storytelling departs from an accurate and realistic depiction of the practice of law into a display of conspicuous and entertaining materialistic consumption, clashes of egos, and highly dynamic personal and sexual relationships. It is this flexibility and ubiquity of narrative that allows it to be useful in many ways. A selection of these will now be examined.

As another illustration of the purpose of positioning and status control in both public and private discourse, consider *The Ballad of John Axon*, the first of a sequence of multi-modal radio ballads in the form of a ‘narrative documentary’. Here the story of a railway tragedy (Keenor, 2022) is told using a combination of the words of those involved (collected via field recordings) together with folk songs and other theatrical material (Parker, cited in BBC, 2025). This results in a highly creative and novel artistic work. The use of different linguistic styles plays an important role in the piece. For example, the Ministry of Transport accident report opens ‘I have the honour to report the result of my inquiry ...’ (MacColl and Parker, 1958, scene 1), emphasising the positioning of the speaker within the government establishment, while the authenticity of the accents, phraseology and vocabulary of tape-recorded witness statements added dramatic immediacy and social context to the narration:

‘I’m in a reet mood this morning. Eh dear.’

‘The old railwayman, it was a tradition, it was part of your life, ... railways went through the back of your spine like Blackpool went through rock.’

(*ibid*, scene 3).

The witnesses are making a statement of self-actualisation, in strong contrast to the impersonal style of the Ministry of Transport report. These witness extracts show acts of social positioning at Bamberg's level 3 that express their pride in their cultural and social grouping as railwaymen and which establish their place in the world. More fine-grained positioning occurs, e.g. at Bamberg's level 1, where Mrs Axon describes her husband's willingness to try to learn to dance with his wife, thus accepting a potentially less manly role, for the purpose of pleasing her: 'Wasn't really very interested in dancing at first, but I've always liked dancing, so he thought he'd try...' (ibid, scene 7).

Consider now how narrative helps us understand the world. Maslow (1943) proposed that humans act according to motivational theory based on a hierarchy of five levels. Humans will first seek to satisfy their most fundamental physiological needs (air, water, food, shelter, heat, physical and financial safety etc). Only when these are satisfied will they then seek higher levels: the giving and receiving of love (level 3), self and peer esteem (level 4) and self-actualisation at level 5. These are the levels that literary narratives often attempt to fulfil. Philip Pullman states: 'After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world' (Pullman, quoted in Gillespie, 2013). This view also extends outside the literary community: 'We posit that writing, especially in doctoral research, is not just a tool for communication but a means of self-formation. This perspective redefines reflexivity as a transformative intellectual and existential process' (Bright, McKay and Firth, 2023, p. 408). Thus, storytelling is fundamentally important in forming the listener's view of what it is to be human and where an individual finds their place in the world.

As an example, consider the canonical Old English poem *Beowulf* (Wyatt, 1984). Composed sometime in the Middle Ages, its only written translation to Anglo-Saxon is dated to approximately 975-1025 CE (Stanley, 1997, pp. 197-212). *Beowulf* positions Anglo-Saxon society by using a narrative that emphasises core values of honour, strength and loyalty. The heroic deeds of *Beowulf* are highly significant to its Anglo-Saxon audience, in that they represent an expression of their culture and a meaningful life objective. The tradition of oral narration in their communal Mead Hall setting was an important factor in uniting its warrior audience, and the narrative act of recounting the pagan origins of their society established both personal and national identity in Anglo-Saxon England. With its concept of 'wyrd' and the possibility of a post-death Valhalla, *Beowulf* examined the fundamental concern of what makes a good and honourable death and reassured its audience that heroic actions in life have worth and meaning, re-reinforcing their understanding of their place in their pagan world. Similar questions are raised in *The Ballad of John Axon* - where Axon's devotion to duty and the moral values of his society informed his choices and the actions that led to his death. There are strong parallels between the pagan heroism of Beowulf's funeral ship burial and expectations of Valhalla and John Axon's George Medal and the 1960s view of Christian redemption. Both *Beowulf* and *The Ballad of John Axon* are thus narratives that establish and shape our understanding of our place in the world.

This discussion has shown that narrative is an extraordinarily flexible and ubiquitous tool. The examples here have demonstrated that narrative has a key role in the lives of individuals and social groups, facilitating the exchange of information, the dynamic adjustment of social relationships, and the recounting of history to support the existential needs of a cultural or social group. Narrative allows people to exchange life experiences, to discuss the moral and

religious perspectives within and between generations and it aids and encourages people to make sense of how they came to be in whatever place they occupy in the world.

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Where does discursive creativity originate?

In making the statement that ‘The measure of whether or not something is creative […] is that it creates some kind of change in the world’ (The Open University 2023c), Jones takes the view that creativity is realised in the human interaction of a discourse rather than merely in the underlying morphemes, clauses and sentences that make up the atomic elements of that discourse.¹ In general terms, this viewpoint can be said to be somewhat at variance with that of others such as Carter, Short, and Swann and Maybin who all see significant creativity appearing in the textual content of a discourse. On the other hand, Jones’s viewpoint can be said to be partly in alignment with the work of Semino. In all cases though, there is no rigid binary partition between viewpoints. This essay will examine the strengths and weaknesses of each particular viewpoint and just how far the boundaries between them are blurred. In particular, some specific examples of creativity, taken from Semino’s work on the description of pain, will be used to explore these perspectives. Finally, an assessment will be made of whether Jones’s statement is reasonable or rather limiting view of creativity.

Jones’s view is that linguistic creativity is more than just the ‘inventive uses of language in literature and in everyday life, things like metaphor, things like humour, rhyming, puns, and this sort of thing’ (The Open University, 2023c). Instead, it is a strategic intention that what may be created need not be a simple inventive linguistic product, but rather a new way of dealing with a situation or a new set of social relationships. While Jones acknowledges that traditional approaches identify linguistic creativity as arising from how texts are assembled out of words, he sees creativity as being located in the ‘concrete social actions that people use these words and texts to perform’ (Jones, 2010 quoted in Demjén, Z. and Seargeant, 2017, p.97). His view is that discursive creativity should be identified more by its impact, effect and social outcomes on the writer-recipient relationship rather than the mechanisms within the language that are used to achieve these effects. In particular, he sees discourse as something that involves the use of language in the social construction of knowledge, i.e. something that creates a change in the world. His focus is on the idea that creativity is only realised if it involves both ends of a linguistic communication channel, and thus it is discourse rather than the textual details of language that are important.

To consider the validity of his view, it is first necessary to consider the meaning of ‘creativity’, ‘change’ and ‘world’. Jones does not require that the change associated with creativity is large, merely that some change occurs. Examples are ‘some kind of reaction from another person, we might be creating some kind of change in our relationship with the people that we’re interacting with, we might even be creating something much larger, we might actually be changing the world in some way’ (The Open University, 2023c). Nor does he precisely define what ‘world’ this change must occur in. Thus, in the most general terms, he is saying, provided a single reader, listener or participant in a discourse is in some, indeterminate way different after reading, listening to or participating in the discourse, then creativity is present in that discourse.

1. Linguistic discourse in this context is taken to be, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary: “A connected series of utterances by which meaning is communicated, esp. one forming a unit for analysis; spoken or written communication regarded as consisting of such utterances” OED (2024).

In Jones's view, it is possible to use creative language (i.e. language that is novel or inventive) without actually being creative at all if the creativity is 'not appropriate to some task or some kind of situation'. In other words, the change effected by the creativity must be something that is valuable to the participants in the discourse. However, even the most apparently unpromising material can in some ways meet Jones's criterion. For example, Edward Lear's nonsense verse, which by its very nature makes no logical or rational sense, has been said to be creative in this sense since 'like nonsense verse as a whole, it influenced such 20th-century aesthetic movements as surrealism and the theatre of the absurd' (The Poetry Foundation, 2025).

According to Swann and Maybin (2007, p. 491), research in language and creativity has broadly defined creativity as "a property of all language use in that language users do not simply reproduce but recreate, refashion, and recontextualize linguistic and cultural resources in the act of communication". For Jones, this is important because 'it locates creativity in the ways in which 'linguistic resources' themselves are recreated and reconfigured rather than in the acts of communicating for which they are used' (Jones, 2010 quoted in Demjén, Z. and Seager, 2017, p.97). Jones further points out that most work on language creativity concentrates on the formal aspects of language use (i.e. the textual lens). Jones prefers to locate creativity in the way that language is used in 'social contexts help to create new kinds of identities, social practices and relationships of power' (ibid). Jones, therefore, is focusing his attention through the contextual and critical lenses. He sees the act of communication and not just the recreation or recontextualization of the language as the fundamental root of creativity.

Carter takes an opposing view. He sees interaction as an important aspect of conversational relationships and 'playing with words, playing with grammatical patterns, playing with lexical patterns is an important part of maintaining those relationships' view (The Open University, 2023b). Thus, at least conversationally, invention at the word level is enough for Carter to identify creativity, whereas it is not so for Jones. Mick Short also takes a different position from Jones: 'I think that what analysing text in great detail does is enable you to understand how it is the writer has created the meanings and effects they have' (The Open University, 2022b). Thus, both Carter and Short are primarily concerned with working under the textual lens when seeking linguistic creativity.

Semino suggests that the "value" or "success" in relation to creative uses of metaphor needs to consider the specific contexts in which they occur (including, as appropriate, co-text, situational context, socio-cultural context, addresser(s), addressee(s), as well as genre)' (Semino, 2017, p. 331). She examines how this value can be identified in three different genres - the textual context of a literary novel, the more casual conversational context of a doctor-patient consultation and the formal academic style of a scientific paper. Success here means that the use of the creative metaphor has some beneficial effect on the reader or listener's understanding of what the writer or speaker is trying to communicate.

For Semino, metaphor is a crucial element of creativity. She sees an important distinction between the 'conventional' and 'creative' categories of metaphor. Here a conventional metaphor is taken to be one 'that is commonly used in everyday language in a culture to give structure to some portion of that culture's conceptual system' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980, p. 33. A creative metaphor is one that is conversely not in common usage.

Semino suggests that metaphorical creativity should be analysed by identifying the metaphor's position on a number of dimensions: 'the uses of individual words or multiword

expressions; the whole text or discourse event; previous relevant texts produced by the discourse community of which the speaker/ writer is part; conventional patterns of metaphor use in the relevant language, which may reflect conventional conceptual metaphors' (Semino, 2017, p. 351).

Semino examines three different texts: a literary novel, a doctor-patient consultation and a scientific paper. Before discussing these, a consideration of how Semino's views align with Jones's definition of creativity will be made. Semino's working definition of creativity in her paper is that proposed by Steinberg and Lubart (1993, p3): 'creativity is the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original, unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful, adaptive concerning task constraints)'. Semino thus appears to disagree with Jones's idea that some change must occur in the world for the metaphor to be creative. Perhaps, although she does not explicitly mention change, change does occur inevitably in some appropriate way in the reader or listener's world. This possibility will be considered for each example.

In Ian McEwan's (2001) novel *Atonement* he uses the idea of knifing or raking pain to describe Emily's migraine. Semino sees this as a conventional metaphor, part of the conceptual metaphor class of SHARPOBJECTS. McEwan also reflects the episodic nature of Emily's pain (sometimes dormant, like a 'curled and sleeping animal', sometimes highly 'awake' and 'mov[ing] as caged panther') and Semino identifies this as a new conceptual metaphor for pain, that of ANIMAL (Semino, 2017, p. 339-343). The ANIMAL metaphor incorporates the idea that migraine is an entity in itself, with its own concerns, (moving out of boredom') and that is 'indifferent' and 'bears not malice' to Emily, that leaves her undamaged, that is slow to move (unlike conventional shooting pain). Semino concludes 'All this suggests that McEwan's metaphor is also highly original at the conceptual level' (Semino, 2017, p. 341). This creativity is however still at the word level, as the words used to invoke the ANIMAL metaphor do not have conventional meanings to do with pain (e.g. 'curled and sleeping animal', 'furred creature'). Because of that, Jones would not regard this as discursive creativity that creates a world change.

In the doctor-patient conversational example, Semino sees most of the metaphorical expressions used by both doctor and patient are used in a conventional way. This is consistent with Carter's view that 'it is at the level of textual patterns, however, that we can observe a kind of creativity that is particularly characteristic of conversation' (Carter 2004).

However, Semino sees the use of 'bursting' as more a creative rather than a conventional metaphor. She provides evidence for this by examining the BNC and noting that 'bursting' occurs as a premodifier of pain just two times out of the 556 total occurrences of bursting in the 100 million-word corpus. From this, she deduces that due to the rarity of the use of the phrase 'bursting pain', that this is a novel and creative use of the metaphor. While this adds qualitative evidence to her arguments, it is not clear how comprehensive her methods are of searching the BNC are. For example, 'bursting' may well have been used in the BNC in association with pain but not in close colocation. So, it seems possible that there are both adjectival and noun usages of 'bursting' in the BNC that Semino has missed, which may make her assessment of the novelty of its usage an overestimate.

Semino's doctor-patient example demonstrates the use of creativity in a non-literary, conversational environment. This takes the form of a type of negotiation and collaboration between the members of the conversation. Semino sees this as a form of the 'pattern forming choices' examined by Carter where 'creativity grows from mutual interaction rather than from individual motivation' (Carter, 2004, p. 101). For example, the Doctor's novel choice

to repeat bursting' as a noun rather than a verb - confirms he understands (at least in some way) how the patient is already creatively using this adjective and also reinforces its validity in the conversation. So, this collaboration can be seen as a mechanism to change the world (or at least their mutual understanding) of the participants – and thus would meet Jones's criteria of creativity.

Semino's third example, an analysis of a scientific paper, shows how 'Scientists regularly engage in analogical reasoning to develop hypotheses and interpret results, and they rely heavily on metaphors to communicate observations and findings' (Taylor and Dewsbury, 2018). Semino restricts herself to discussing two use cases of scientific metaphor - (a) that of the expression of disagreement by the creative use of metaphors to challenge and subvert other uses of metaphors and (b) the use of metaphorical expressions to form creative patterns, both within and across texts.

In use case (a) Semino points out that the gate metaphor representation of pain proposed by Melzack and Wall (1965), as a representation of a pain mechanism directly challenges the previous 'alarm bell' metaphor of previous specificity theories. The use of a radically different metaphor to represent the new proposal is an effective way of reinforcing in the reader's minds that this is a fundamental change in thinking about pain mechanisms. As such, it certainly meets Jones's criteria of causing a change in the world (where the context of this world is that of academic thought). Although this gate metaphor might not be considered creative since it lacks contemporary novelty (since human neural networks have been compared to networks of computing gates for many years (Shagrir, 2006), the application of the gate metaphor to the concept of pain is indeed novel, as evidenced by Semino's observation that Melzach and Wall's theory of pain (based on a gate metaphor) given its rapid spread into in the areas of scientific texts and news stories as recorded by Google scholar and Google news (Semino, 2017, p. 350). By spreading widely, this metaphor also meets Semino's second use case, (b), showing that successful creative metaphors 'may be used in different ways by different people in different contexts, thus leading to intertextual chains of metaphor use involving both repetition and variation' (Semino, 2017, p. 349). Thus, both Semino and Jones would identify the gate mechanism metaphor as creative, though for somewhat different reasons.

In conclusion, Jones argues that creativity is located in the strategic way that people use language to stimulate social change, rather than the inherent textual content of the language. Others, such as Carter and Short prefer to see creativity originating in the way that the linguistic resources in language are recreated and reconfigured rather than the actions and outcomes of communication. Semino investigated linguistic creativity in a range of genres and demonstrated that metaphorical creativity can arise in literary writing, conversational discourse and scientific academic writings. She argues that it is essential to consider the text and genre in which creativity occurs and the contextual goals of the writer/speaker and reader/listener. In this sense she is supporting Jones's view that linguistic creativity should be 'more than simply a clever use of language' (The Open University, 2023a) as at least two out of three of her examples lead to some level of change to the world of the recipients.

In conclusion, though, it is perhaps best not to nominate a single winner amongst the different views presented here. There are many complementary ways that creativity appears both in the textual and linguistic uses of language and the way it is used in discourse. There is no ultimate natural law to say that creativity in human language communication should

have a single root. In that way, Jones et al can all be said to identify the originating site of linguistic creativity.

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Linguistic Creativity in ‘Worm Turned’ by Imtiaz Dharker

This essay assesses how certain linguistic features in Imtiaz Dharker’s ‘Worm, turned’ (Dharker, 2009) contribute to the overall creativity of the poem. Creativity in this context is identified by its novelty, quality and appropriateness (Kaufman and Sternberg, 2010, p. xiii). ‘Worm, turned’ will be analysed through three perspectives - the textual, contextual and critical lenses (Demjén, 2017, pp. 27-41).

The textual lens investigates a text’s written form. This includes its typography, orthography, form, lexical content, syntax, and phonology (Demjén, 2017, pp 27-28). The textual lens evaluates how strong or weak an image, simile or metaphor is, how pleasing or unsettling the metrical choices are, how complex or simple the syntactic structure is and so on. Discussion of semantic themes and social implications, as well as considerations of authorial intent, publication context and reader response are left to later lenses.

One simple textual creative choice made by Dharker is the use of kennings, e.g. “crowrasp” (l. 1) and “beakscrape” (l. 2). This technique of compounding words (Baldick, 2015) is a way of moving the text away from the normal style of daily conversation. As a result of this deviation “we are invited to look for a significance that goes beyond surface-level understanding” (Jeffries and McIntyre, 2010, p. 32). This is a defamiliarisation technique proposed originally by the early 20th-century Russian formalists (Demjén, 2017, p. 24). Parallelism, the repeated use of words or phrases within a group of sentences (Leech and Short, 2007), is another defamiliarisation technique and occurs here in the anaphoric use of the phrase, “I have seen such things (l. 7,8 and 11)” and its slight variation, “I have been allowed to see such things” (l. 25). This device repetition both reinforces Dharker’s personification of the worm into a sentient being, as well as foregrounding the worm’s role of observing and reacting to its environment.

Dharker also uses phonological parallelism to achieve defamiliarisation, such as alliteration (a phonologic external stylistic deviation). The strong voiceless velar plosive ⟨k⟩ in “...copper, / coal in its glory, the remainder of kings, / clean bone...” (l. 11-13) is contrasted with the soft sibilance of the voiceless alveolar sibilant [s] sound in “slither” (l. 10) and in “...is worth something / when I have seen such things.” (l. 15). The difference in hardness of the ⟨k⟩ to the soft sinewy snake-like [s] sounds associated with the worm, mimetically emphasise and foreground the special identity of the living worm, compared to inanimate copper, coal etc. Dharker also makes effective use of rhyme (another type of external deviation), e.g. “Slither, glimmer” and “Ivory, beauty, glory, mercy, hide me, protect me” (ll. 9-15). The change from first to second person narrative (ll. 16-19) is an internal deviation, that foregrounds the prayer like aspects of the fourth stanza.

The contextual lens “focuses on the social, cultural and historical context of language use” (Demjén, 2017, p. 31) and reflects on how language effects are dependent on the context in which it is used. Contextual aspects of a discourse can be evaluated using the SPEAKING grid (Setting, Participant, End, Act sequences, Key, Instrument, Norm, and Genre) (Johnstone and Marcellino, 2010, p. 61). Two grid attributes: setting (“the time and physical setting of communication”) and genre (“type of event, e.g. lecture, poem, letter”), are considered here. Examining setting first, *Worm, turning* appears in a collection of Dharker’s poems published in 2009 by BloodAxe Books, a highly regarded specialist poetry publisher of an eclectic, inclusive range of contemporary poets (BloodAxe Books, 2024). Thus, it is

likely to incorporate the linguistic features known to educated 21st-century readers of English (a context that is actually world-wide in the highly connected world of 2009). Secondly, the selected genre imposes a further constraining context. The use of poetic form using multi stanza, free verse dictates a specific layout on the page, i.e. the use of line breaks, blank lines between stanzas but the poetic form also contextually includes the expectation of the use of literary language and literary devices to convey meaning and theme. The fourth stanza, (ll. 16-23), has the textual features of a prayer including the use of the 2nd person POV (“You, the one ...”), the tone of supplication to a powerful deity (“old me...”, “wrap me...”, “save me”) and the religious vocabulary (“heaven”, “darkness”, “mercy”, “witness”, “messenger”, “creature”) and the use of rhetorical devices of repetition again (“wrap me ... save me”, “your darkness ... your mercy ... your messenger ... your creature”). This helps this stanza align with the context of a readership familiar with the vocabulary of monotheistic religions such as Christianity or Islam.

The critical lens views language as ”a social activity that can reflect and reproduce social and political hierarchies and underlying systems of value and power” (Demjén, 2017, p. 37). Given Dharkar’s contemporary South Asian background and her life experiences as a “Scottish Muslim Calvinist adopted by India and engaged in a Welsh marriage” (Khair, 2005), the critical lens might view the worm as a representative of its own individual world (that of the soil) - a world that has been enriched or contaminated by external influences (gold, coal, burial bones). The prayer like content of stanza 4 suggests the worm may have had some sort of religious epiphany, perhaps as a consequence of these influences, suggesting this aspect of the poem draws on Dharkar’s own personal social, political and cultural experience. The crow has no understanding of the worm’s background (‘The crow knows nothing’, (l. 4)) and thus represents the social and political threat that more powerful, colonial societies offer to weaker societies whose value the stronger societies do not recognise.

In conclusion, using combined textual, contextual and critical lenses, it can be seen that Dharkar’s creative use of defamiliarisation produces a strong cognitive dissonance between the reader’s perception of the real world and the world of the poem, investing the poem with questions of identity and belonging, and which foregrounds the ever-present threat of a more dominant culture (crow) to a weaker one (worm).

Wulf and Eadwacer - An Anglo Saxon puzzle

Wulf and Eadwacer is a nineteen-line alliterative Old English poem of unknown author and uncertain date of composition. There is just one source for this poem: folios 100v-101r of the 10th century Exeter Book (Krapp, 1936). Written in the first person, the speaker in the poem appears to be female, but gives enigmatic and incomplete information about her situation. Critics have seen the poem as a fragment of Germanic legend (Sheils, 2022), a fragment of larger epic poem, (Frankis, 1962)), an elegy for a dead son (Frese ,1990), a commentary on the relationship between mother and son (Osborne, 1992), a Cynewulfian rune poem (Lawrence, 1902) or even a canine/lupine love story (Sedgefield, 1931).

In this analysis we concentrate the interpretation of *Wulf and Eadwacer* in its various modern English translations. Translations distance us from the original as we must rely on the translators' sensibilities in expressing the Anglo-Saxon author's intent. One translation issue is that not all the original Old English words used in the poem have known modern equivalents. To address this, some translators provide 'a best guess' while others may provide multiple alternatives for a single word. For example, Shiels (2022) translates the first two lines of the poem as: "For my people it is as if someone is giving them/him a gift/favour/sacrifice/battle." Other translators choose to leave the original Old English words in place, where there is no clear, direct modern English equivalent, as in Brurch (na, II): "They'll rip him apart if he approaches their pack. / *Ungelīc is ūs!*". The modern reader must then deduce the meaning from the context around the Old English – a difficult task in such a complex poem.

The most common interpretation of the poem is perhaps that of a lover's lament. Glenn (1982) provides a translation which can be matched to this interpretation: "Wulf is on one island, I on another." (l. 2) describes the lover's separation, occasioned by Wulf's raiding that island: "they will receive him, if he with threat comes" (l. 7); and this warrior role and associated separation is the cause of the speaker's lament: "Wulf, my Wulf, my hopes of thee / sickened me, thy seldom-coming, / a mourning mind, not lack of food." (ll. 13-15). The introduction of the speaker's address to a third character, Eadwacer, in line 16 though casts doubt on a simple warrior-lover relationship between the speaker and Wulf and the ambiguous use of 'our' in the next line: "Our sorry whelp / A Wulf bears to woods." (ll. 16-17) suggests the whelp might be the speaker's son by Eadwacer, who has been abducted by Wulf, or could also be the son of Wulf and the speaker. Further ambiguity arises as Glenn uses a capital for Wulf in line 17 suggesting a man rather than an animal – other translators use lower-case, suggesting an animal (Martin, na; Liuzza, 2014). The marital status of the speaker becomes questionable as she suggests "One easily slits what never was joined: our song together." (Glenn, 1982, ll. 18-19). The song presumably is a metaphor for marriage, and the ease of 'slitting' it suggests that the speaker is not married, and the 'whelp' is probably illegitimate.

One of the oddities of the poem is that it appears to contain a refrain. Together with *Deor* it is only one of two Old English poems that do so. On closer examination, it is perhaps questionable that *Wulf and Eadwacer* contains a refrain. In *Deor* the refrain is a full line and appears at the end of each stanza except one: "Pæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg – that was overcome, so may this be") (Early-Medieval-England.net, na). On the other hand, in *Wulf and Eadwacer* the refrain ("Willað hy hine aþecgan, gif he on þreat cymeð. / *Ungelic is us* -

They will consume him if he comes into their troop. / It is different/unlike for us.”) is not a complete number of lines and only appears twice, on lines 4-5 and 7-8 and is thus not used throughout the poem (Traherne, 2004). It is therefore questionable whether this meets the definition of a standard refrain (OED, 2023). Perhaps the lines are repeated more for dramatic emphasis than adherence to a formal refrain form.

As discussed when examining Glenn’s translation, a common interpretation is that the narrator is a woman who is in love with Wulf but is held apart from him by Eadwacer (Greenfield, 1986). Within this interpretation, the questions of whether the speaker is married (and if so to whom), whose whelp is it, and what is the fate of the whelp (raised by the speaker, or Wulf, or torn apart in vengeance) have varying answers. Other translators have viewed Eadwacer as something more complex than a simple antagonist to Wulf. Eadwacer can be interpreted as a compound word, usually translated as “property-watcher.” This suggest he is the guardian of the speaker, and thus places him in opposition to Wulf. Burch (na), for instance, sees Eadwacer as “a priest (Heaven-Watcher), a guardian (Property-Watcher), a family member appointed to “protect” her “purity”” and provides five possible translations. For line 16 these include “Have you heard, Eadwacer? Watchdog!” (I), “Have you heard, Heaven-Watcher?” (II) and “Have you heard, Eadwacer?” (V). Such multiple translations are a valuable assistance to the non Old English reader in considering the poem’s content.

In other interpretations (Morcom, 2024) Eadwacer is seen as a representation of God rather than a specific historical figure. Morton argues that the use of “compound words which take ead as their first element … reveals a semantic field overwhelmingly associated with Christian figures and values” and that “wacer not in relation to neutral watchfulness but rather, more specifically, in the context of pastoral guardianship and alertness to the threat of sin, [is] typically associated with the figure of the wolf” (p. 11). Morcom also suggests that the imprisonment of the unnamed narrator becomes a spiritual conflict and that the final lines of the poem can then be read as a prayer of supplication. Morcom’s sees the narrator as asking God to grant “her emotional and spiritual separation from Wulf to match her physical condition following her desertion” (p. 11) and that this balances the speaker’s intense distress by her tortured relationship to Wulf, that characterised the earlier parts of the poem.

Other translations however provides little support for this view: Teharne (2004) translates these lines as: “That may be easily separated which was never bound / the riddle of us two together” while Glen (1982) suggests “One easily slits what never was joined: / our song together” and Hostetter (2020) uses “How easily it all comes apart, / what was hardly together / the song we made as one.” None of these seem to map to a direct request to either a pagan or Christian deity to dissolve the speaker’s religious contract. Indeed, it seems more likely that the speaker is acknowledging she never was married. Or is she mocking Eadwacer because she has not been married to him, even though he has possessed her physically? This might lend credence to the possibility that Wulf is indeed her proper husband, and his outlaw status is keeping him away.

In Tasoiulas’s analysis (1996), Wulf is deemed to be the son of Eadwacer and the unmarried speaker and has been abandoned to die because of his illegitimacy. This assessment matches the lines where Tasoiulas’s translation makes the narrator address Eadwacer: “Gehyrest 1du Eadwacer? Uncerne earne bireö wulf to wuda” (“Do you hear Eadwacer ? The wolf bears our earne to the woods”) (p. 4). This suggests that Wulf is being

given to the speaker's people, and highlights the grief of the speaker at the whelp being taken by the wolf.

However, returning to the so called refrain, "they will kill him if he comes to their troop" (Tasoiulas, 1996, p. 11) it can be seen this line does not align with Wulf being the speaker's child. An infant or young child taken to the woods by a wolf cannot "come" to anyone, and rather must lie where they are left. Since this line is repeated, or even regarded as a refrain, this line must have a high importance, and we should conclude therefore that Wulf surely must be mobile and cannot therefore be the whelp or the narrator's infant.

In the end, it seems it seems unlikely that a consensus will ever be achieved regarding the interpretation of Wulf and Eadwacer (Baker, 1981). Studying it in its English translation further complicates the matter, as the personal perspectives of the translators inevitably add further variability to the interpretation. And new interpretations may yet still arise. One occurring to the current author is that the poem was invented by the same monk that transcribed the legitimate Deor poem, with the waggish intent of puzzling and perplexing his colleagues and who inserted a few plausible, but imaginary Anglo-Saxon words as markers to indicate that the poem was a forgery. In any case, a consensus of interpretation may not necessarily be crucial. Every reader will find their own personal interpretation within this poem. Benjamin Thorpe famously said of the poem "Of this, I can make no sense." (Thorpe and Corson, 1842). But he misses the point. There is great value to the reader in the process of personal exploration of the poem even if no unified conclusion can be reached.

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A Reflection on the Process of Writing Flash Fiction

A Eutectic Relationship

Peter wants to kiss Charlotte.

Peter wants to move in with Charlotte.

Charlotte needs a flatmate to help pay her rent.

Charlotte does not like coming home to her empty flat.

Peter holds Charlotte's hand when they go to the cinema.

Peter asks Charlotte if she is lonely.

Charlotte says she does not know if she is lonely.

Charlotte takes Peter to the park, and they feed the ducks.

Peter throws breadcrumbs while Charlotte watches.

Peter asks Charlotte if he can cook her supper that night.

Charlotte does not like fish, but Peter cooks her fishcakes.

Charlotte wonders if ducks would like fishcakes.

Peter kisses the soft dimple at the base of Charlotte's neck.

Peter licks the fat flesh at the base of Charlotte's thumb.

Charlotte says it tickles when Peter nibbles her ear lobe.

Charlotte says yes, yes, yes but she wishes she had not.

Peter meets Charlotte in the coffee shop later that week.

Peter asks Charlotte if he can move in.

Charlotte tells Peter, she has got a promotion.

Charlotte tells Peter she has bought a chinchilla.

Charlotte walks home.

Peter walks home.

Reflection

When making a part for my 1953 Morgan sports car I had to look into the process of selecting the right carbon content for a particular steel alloy. This involved looking at metallurgical phase diagrams which show the way that the properties of an alloy changes according to the relative mix of its constituents. A particular point of interest in such diagrams is the *eutectic* point. This point is where *the proportion of a mix of substances having the lowest freezing point of all possible mixtures of those substances*. It struck me that human relationships could also be said to have an eutectic point – where the passion of the relationship has cooled to the point where the relationship is over. This was the stimulus to write a story about a failed relationship in which the failure was the inability of the participants to understand, agree on or even express what they wanted from that relationship. I liked the idea of using an unusual, but meaningful relevant word in the title as a puzzle for the reader to solve. (I hoped the reader would be able to deduce the meaning of eutectic from the context of the story, but I – so there is no absolute need for them to look it up in a dictionary). I decided that I would try and signify the lack of fluidity and warmth in the relationship by using a rather stark, formal layout and a rigid framework, in which the general syntax of each sentence was repeated throughout the story. So, each sentence starts with a proper noun, followed by a simple verb. Initially, pairs of sentences focus on a single character. Later, as the relationship accelerates towards its end, the sentences alternate between characters. I was hoping the reader would interpret it as an increase in pace, a bit as if they were running down a steepening slope. Each character is given one side of the page (exactly like the two alloys in a metallurgy phase diagram). This symbolises the fact that the characters never form a proper couple, and indeed by the final line, they are separated and ideally, the reader should the left and right sides of the story concurrently. (I've no idea how to notate this though – in a play, I would have the two characters speaking over one another). Having completed the story, I did have some concerns that this story does not quite meet the criteria for Flash Fiction specified in Week 1. While the story does have a plot and location, I was a little uneasy that it did not show much character development. Perhaps Charlotte changes over the story arc, as she seems to realise Peter is not the one and drops her interest in him for a less demanding pet. But I think Peter is pretty much unchanged – and to be honest, that I think is the point – Peter tries hard, but never does understand Charlotte. (Is this a cliché statement – men can never understand women, and perhaps are not that motivated to try?). There is little use of figurative devices (e.g. alliteration etc). I felt I had already explored a lot of those techniques in other stories in the course. And I quite liked the stark, simplicity of the prose. There is a great deal of telling and not much showing, so perhaps the piece could be said to lack narrative depth. Finally, the layout of the story makes it look somewhat like a concrete poem. I don't mind that but maybe it is a bit off-putting for a reader expecting a traditional story. I'm not at all sure the boundaries of prose and poetry are very clear anyway, at least in modern works. In fact, on reflection, maybe this piece could also be written in script form – I think it would work well with two actors reading it as a radio or audio piece. Is flash drama an accepted form?

A structuralist reading of Act I of Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot

Given that Structuralism became a prominent literary theory in France in the 1960s and that Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was written initially in a French version in 1948-9 and first performed in Paris in 1953, it might seem reasonable that Structuralism should be the *mode de choix* of analysis for this remarkable play. Structuralism is not concerned with the way that literature expresses an author's intentions, nor is interested in the text's relationship to daily reality. Instead, the text of the work is deemed to be a structure that has meaning independent of author, reader and external reality. The important thing to structuralists is the methodology by which meaning is created and rather than actual meaning conveyed to the reader (Baldick, 2015). According to Barry (2002, p. 38-58), Structuralist analysis employs three related analytical methods: (1) the placing of the text in the contexts or larger structures such as a particular literary genre, or an underlying universal narrative structure, (2) an interpretation of literature as a parallel to modern linguistic analysis of language and (3) an application of the concept of the systems of signs to highlight systemic patterns and structures within the text. Initial readings of *Waiting for Godot* located it as an existentialist play, concerned with the assertion that life is meaningless and absurd. While this is perhaps a natural emotional response to the play, the use of Structuralist analytic techniques can help the critic take a more measured, even scientific approach, before proceeding to judgment.

Applying element (1) of Barry's definition seems initially rather difficult. *Waiting for Godot* does not draw on previous genres of narrative structures - it was perceived to be a radical departure in dramatic content and form. Traditional plays focus on a central conflict, e.g., *Hamlet*'s "To be or not to be", and move through a climax to a final resolution. *Waiting for Godot* has no such structure. Rather conflict arises not from the plot but from language games between the characters. Tension is provided by the unending wait for Godot, unlike the cyclical flux of tension and resolution in a traditional play. The fact that we cannot easily perform (1) however is a useful Structuralist conclusion. By comparing the work to others, we establish that this work is fundamentally different from all others, and indeed is one of the root exemplars of a new genre, the Theatre of the Absurd.

The modern linguistic analysis mentioned in method (2) arises from the work of Saussure and others who postulate that there is no inherent connection between a word and what it designates and that this relationship is maintained by convention only. This is a concept that is extensively explored by Beckett. For example, there is no explanation of the meaning of the word Godot in the play. It could be read to mean God, or perhaps to stand for the purpose in life that gives it meaning, or even death, which all humans inevitably have to wait for, but can never be certain of the exact time of its arrival.

The implication of (3) is that a structuralist analysis focuses on such structural elements such as binary oppositions (i.e., the contrast between two mutually exclusive terms), parallelisms (the arrangement of similarly constructed clauses, sentences, or verse lines in a pairing or other sequence suggesting some correspondence between them), inversions (the reversal of the expected of things) and equivalence (the substitution of one similar thing with another).

There are many binary oppositions within the play. Vladimir and Estragon are always present; however, Godot is continually absent - though discussion of his possible arrival and intentions does occupy much of Vladimir and Estragon's conversations. Vladimir and Estragon are unable to conclusively decide to leave or to remain until Godot arrives - they repeatedly flip-flop between active intentions and then passive acquiescence. Pozzo and Lucky depict the oppositions of a master/slave relationship, as well as the oppositions of articulate and mute, controlling and dependent. Of course, Lucky does briefly speak, but not with the lucidity of Pozzo - Lucky's monologue is an apparently disorganised, random stream of academic phrases – this is the antithesis of the lucid and conversational Pozzo.

Interestingly, the direction of the controlling/dependent relationship is at least partially reversed in Act 2 when Pozzo, now blind, depends on Lucky's guidance. There is also much repetition. Indeed, much of Act 2 is a repeat, with modifications of the material in Act 1. Pozzo/Lucky arrive and then depart as a central piece of action in both Acts; however, their relationship is significantly modified as Pozzo is blind in the second act. The boy appears in both Acts as possibly an unreliable messenger from Godot. The tree, perhaps a central symbol, is present in both acts but has somehow grown leaves overnight in the second act. These binary oppositions, repetitions and modifications provide a structural framework within which Beckett is able to deploy a range of uncertainties and ambiguities.

Saussure's view that language is a system of signs, is an important aspect of Structuralism. Saussure argues that a sign is made up of a signifier which is simply a word, phrase, picture and so on, and a signifier which is a particular concept that the writer or artist is using the signifier to represent. There is no inherent meaning in the signifier, it is just a convenient tag that refers to the concept in the signifier. Signs only have meaning because of their differential relation to other signs. So how can the idea of signs be used to explore *Waiting for Godot*? The art of taking off and putting on shoes and hats can be seen as signifiers which are repeated to give them prominence. Their significance is they are associated with the concept that we all have roles and identities in the mundane routines that occupy much of our daily lives and that artificial accoutrements such as hats and shoes in some way indicate or enable those roles. Pozzo's domination over Lucky can be read as a signifier of the oppression of the strong over the weak, or the dependency of the weak on the strong. The appearance of the boy can perhaps be a sign, in which the signifier is the boy's message and its signifier is the concept of a prophet making a Biblical prophecy. That might suggest that Godot is a signifier with some religious connotations - but there is no clear signifier to assign to this particular sign. Perhaps Godot is a signifier that refers to the absence of something. The word Godot seems similar to God, so is Beckett saying there is no God? However, since the play was first written in French, as *En attendant Godot* it is less easy in French to see a simple word association illuminating the signifier for Godot, since the French word for god is 'Dieu'. In the end, the names of all of the characters, but especially Godot, may be seen as signifiers without a clear signifier. These signs, with their opaque or floating signifiers, simply add to the feeling that Beckett is somehow signifying the elusive nature of the self. Beckett himself is silent on this issue: when asked by Alan Schneider, who went on to direct *Godot* in the United States, what it was really about, Beckett said, 'If I knew, I would have said so in the play' (Dickson, 2017). Perhaps more revealingly, in a written introduction, read before an early French Radio performance in 1952 Beckett says:

I don't know who Godot is. I don't even know (above all don't know) if he exists. All I knew I showed. It's not much, but it's enough for me ... As for wanting to find in all that a broader, loftier meaning ... Estragon, Vladimir, Pozzo, Lucky ... Maybe they owe you explanations. Let them supply it. Without me.

(Cohn, R. in Knowlson, E. and Knowlson, J., 2006, p. 122).

Beckett's intentions though are not a consideration in a Structuralist analysis. It is a basic tenet of structuralism that as long as the structure of the internal relations between the components of the story remains intact, then the individual units are replaceable. The meaning of the individual components is unimportant, it is their interrelation that is key. As Eagleton (2008, p. 83) says "The method is quite indifferent to the cultural value of its object". Thus, Beckett gives no physical description of Estragon and Vladimir - there is no indication of colour, ethnicity, size, age and so on in his stage directions. It is therefore up to the audience to place the characters in their own subjective cultural context.

How then does a Structuralist reading help us with dealing with *Waiting for Godot*? From Beckett's comments we can see he delegates the extraction of meaning from his play to the audience. By removing specific time and place and the material ephemera of the real, everyday world, and replacing them with a richness of structural signs using structural techniques such as repetitions, binary oppositions, mirror effects and symmetrical or asymmetrical exchanges in the dialogue to add tension and interest, Beckett facilitates the audience's study of interrelationships and interdependencies of his characters, one that enables the play to illuminate many different historical, social and political contexts.

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Oppression and Silence in Lahiri's Unaccustomed Earth and Oyeyemi's White is for Witching

This essay will examine, using two contemporary texts, the modes of control and oppression used by authority figures to exert and maintain their power. Such authority figures include those who have power because of their formal roles (e.g., teachers, politicians, managers and priests) but also individuals in various social, romantic, familial or sexual hierarchies (e.g., fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, siblings and lovers). Although modes of authority can be expressed in many different religious, political, social and gender contexts, they all involve control by emotional, legal, psychological or forcible means to maintain a structure of hierarchical domination. bell hooks eloquently describes one such mode:

Patriarchy ... insists that males are inherently dominating ... and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence.

(hooks, 2004, p. 18).

This discussion will consider how a more general expression of hooks' perceptions can be seen in two contrasting texts – within the familial relationships found in the Indian diaspora, as depicted by *Unaccustomed Earth* (Lahiri, 2008), and in the historical, racial, post-colonial societies explored in the supernatural world of *White is for Witching* (Oyeyemi, 2009).

While both texts examine common themes of place, location, home, belonging, displacement, immigration and patriarchy, they employ radically different styles and perspectives. Lahiri's safe pair of hands demonstrate elegant constraint, fluid and seamless prose, subtle nuance and the masterful use of the revelatory epiphany typical of the short story. Oyeyemi adopts a much more experimental post-modernistic style using multiple points of view that blend traditional Gothic (showing the “peculiar unwillingness of the past to go away” (Sage and Smith, 1996, in Cousins, 2012, p. 49)) with Fairy Tale tropes (e.g., the use of poisoned apples and Miranda as a Snow White figure who often sees herself and her world through a mirror, (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 28-29, 32, 53, 71, 92, 94, 112, 147, 162)). Compared to Lahiri, Oyeyemi's prose style has a surfeit of imaginative imagery and metaphor (e.g., “the professors didn't have features, they were learnedness dressed up as people and housed in armchairs” (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 42)). This vivid, dynamic and extravagant style is nevertheless appropriate for her sensational and supernatural subject. Lahiri uses a more realistic tone but still employs eloquent imagery in describing commonly shared everyday experiences - (e.g., “finally, one of the professors, white hair like a snowy wreath around his otherwise naked head, put out a hand, as might a policeman stopping traffic” (Lahiri, 2008, p. 182)).

hooks takes the view that rather than being silent, it is crucial for “advocates of feminist politics to challenge any rhetoric which placed the sole blame for perpetuating patriarchy and male domination onto men” (hooks, 2004, p. 25). Her position is that both men and women participate in patriarchal oppression, even though men are the primary beneficiaries. As will be shown in the following discussion, not only men and women, but sons and daughters and others also participate in maintaining silence in the presence of more general forms of authority, with both advantage or detriment to themselves or others.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri uses an epigraph from the nineteenth-century Massachusetts writer Nathaniel Hawthorne to position her text within American literary traditions and to summarise her basic thesis - that 'home' and 'roots' can be quite different things. The themes of migration, culture translation and metamorphosis of personal and cultural identity through the migration experience are foregrounded in the quotation by its imagery of transplantation into unaccustomed earth, with its association of newly encountered nutrients and consequent revitalisation. Lahiri also transplants the form of the short story collection into new soil, by combining the initial five individual (but thematically linked) stories with three final stories that share the same characters and which could be viewed as a novella in their own right. Taking Milan Kundera's view that the novel is "a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters" (Kundera, 1988 p. 86), then *Unaccustomed Earth* can be seen as a new experimental form that lies somewhere between a short story collection and a novel and in which each component short story is a meditation on a different aspect of the experiences of those who are national and cultural immigrants.

In *Unaccustomed Earth*, Lahiri uses the claustrophobic nature of the family relationship as a way of exploring how the Indian migrant deals with the dominant nature of the new culture they find themselves in and how, by breaking the bonds they had to their homeland, parents and children need also to revise their own familial hierarchies. Between siblings, too, dominance and interdependence must be negotiated as each sibling encounters new and differing adult experiences. While Lahiri draws on her own experiences whereby her identity was silenced:

For much of my life ... I was always falling short of people's expectations: my immigrant parents', my Indian relatives', my American peers', ... How could I want to be a writer, ... when I did not wish to be myself?

(Lahiri, 2011)

she also argues that such experiences have a more universal truth:

... the stories are universal, and it doesn't matter if they are taking place in rural Canada, New England, Ireland, or Ruma's India - there is something linking them: the human experience.

(Lahiri, 2013)

In Lahiri's titular story, "Unaccustomed Earth" (2008, p. 1), Ruma is aware of the emotional silence that existed in her parent's marriage. "Ruma knew that her parents had never loved each other in that way....if anything, he seemed happier now; her mother's death had lightened him, the opposite of what it had done to her" (p. 33). However, her father "had endured his daughter's resentment, never telling Ruma his side of things, never saying that his wife had been overly demanding, unwilling to appreciate the life he'd worked hard to provide" (p. 40). In his silence to his daughter regarding his feelings about his wife, the father takes the position of a well-meaning patriarch, protecting his daughter from the emotional stress of knowing the true state of his marriage: "He wanted to shield her from the deterioration that inevitably took place in the course of the marriage" (p. 54).

We learn that when Ruma was young, her father was “Oblivious to her mother’s need in other ways, [and] had toiled in unfriendly soil” (p. 16). Instead of tending to emotional needs, he cultivated the Indian plants that Ruma’s mother used in her Bengali-oriented cooking, such as “chili peppers and delicate strains of spinach” (p. 16). He may have symbolically provided physical sustenance to the marriage (in the form of food), but he does not provide the emotional engagement his wife truly needs. In Hawthorne’s terms is not the new American soil that is “unfriendly” but the father’s determination to re-use “same worn-out soil” (representing the traditional Bengali arranged marriage) that symbolises their arid marriage.

When Ruma is pregnant with her second child, the father toils once again at the soil, planting flowers such as phlox, azaleas and clematis. Here the flowers are purely for pleasure rather than for sustenance. He no longer provides Bengali food ingredients but has migrated to the American cultural tradition of growing plants for pleasure. This is a silent cultural translation as he never explicitly discusses his motivation with his daughter in rejecting the traditions of his Bengali past.

Lahiri shows how the migration process often dissipates the modes of authority originally imposed by the home country on the migrant. For example, Ruma rejected her parents’ authority in selecting her college education: “Ruma knew that she had disappointed [her father], getting rejected by all the Ivy Leagues...” (p. 37). Ruma also rejected aspects of her Bengali matriarchal society. Though “her mother had never cut corners; even in Pennsylvania she had run her household as if to satisfy a mother-in-law’s fastidious eye” (p. 22) Ruma is quite happy to do so – she is no longer subject to the Bengali familial oppression to that made her mother prepare the traditional labour-intensive Indian meal. In Ruma’s new cultural soil: “[Ruma] could afford to be lazy” (p. 22).

Eventually, the process of migration is completed, and the modes of authority of the homeland are fully dissipated. When Ruma’s father shows his grandson how to garden the grandson “plants” his own symbolic tokens: toys, pens, pencils and pennies. The grandson has no interest in the Bengali notion of growing food to eat but seeks to reproduce the material trinkets of the American way of life.

In “Only Goodness”, Lahiri explores non-patriarchal relationships – examining the dynamics of the brother-sister hierarchies of control. Throughout her youth, Sudha has held her silence about her brother’s alcoholism and never told her parents. Similarly, when she moves to London, she does not tell her new English husband about her brother’s alcoholism. Even though she wears “a diamond ring from Roger concealed on a chain beneath her sweater, and this made her feel dipped in a protective coating from her family”, her allegiance to the unwritten rules of her sibling loyalty prevents her from telling her new husband of her brother’s alcoholism. This is another example of a mode of authority being facilitated by silence – she cannot quite escape the familial rules of her upbringing. Her husband however sees no justification for her sibling loyalty: “I would never have kept something like this from you” (p. 171). As an outsider to her family, he does not recognise the validity of that particular mode of sibling authority. Sudha has chosen silence, but, as hooks suggested above, such silence continues to enable the oppression found within existing hierarchies.

While Lahiri employs a realistic narrative style which recalls writers such as Hawthorne, Hardy, Chekhov and Mansfield, Oyeyemi seeks to push back against the natural realism of

the pre-modernists and the objective truth of modernism. Shilling says: "... her technical skill as a novelist is remarkable, her range of reference formidable and her use of language virtuosic" (2009). However, O'Grady sees Oyeyemi 's writing as "stunts", "dumpsters of deconstructed ... rubble", and suggest that readers will not enjoy "revelling in the postmodern tangle of antic narrative strands" (2019). Porter provides a rather more balanced and measured assessment: "Despite the overt pessimism depicted through racism and purity discourses ... [Oyeyemi creates] ... an affirmatively hybridized, transcultural narrative that reveals the resemblances and continuities among the transatlantic cultural traditions it invokes" (2013, p. 23). Porter sees Miranda's struggles with the 'repressed female ancestors who dwell within her" and to resist "their urgings to ... consume flesh for them" as a way to "keep her ancestors 'alive' with her" as a form of matriarchal oppression (p. 38). Miranda's struggle for "individual agency" is expressed as "she also allows her body to slowly waste away in her refusal to consume nutritious food" (p. 38). In this sense, Porter suggests Miranda's only escape is in the silence of death.

The colour white has important significance throughout the book (as signalled in the book's title). The white chalk that Miri is compelled to consume is poisoning her and in an image of a corpse that appears in the book's opening, a chunk of white apple blocks its throat. Whiteness is the unmistakable symbol of the harsh and violent authority of racial oppression that pervades the book. Colonial white racism is shown by Miranda's connection to her mother Lily, her grandmother Jennifer and her great-grandmother grandAnna. Thus, Oyeyemi suggests that not only males maintain such modes of oppression. The arrival of Kosovan refugees seeking asylum by entering the UK under the symbolically white cliffs of Dover is woven into the story. A Kosovan boy is stabbed, and Miranda is suspected. Miranda's grandmother, GrandAnna, was the violent perpetrator of a racial stabbing incident 150 years ago. Somehow, through familial memory, Miranda has inherited the burden of her ancestor's white guilt, even though she is innocent of the stabbing and unaware of the burden that has been passed to her. The implication is that the colonial spirit manifested in the Dover House, in its desire for racial purity, is attacking the Kosovan immigrants through Miranda. Eliot tells us he had "The duty to speak when Miri couldn't, to make sense when she didn't" (p. 82). In doing so, he acts to deflect the modes of authority of her accusers, as she is silent, unable, because of her condition, to speak for herself.

At the book's climax, Ore (Miranda's Nigerian lover) attempts to release Miranda from the oppression of her family history. Ore fantastically splits Miranda open, and inside the skin shed from Miranda's body, a girl is revealed. When asked by Ore as to who owns the skin around her, Miranda replies "It's the goodlady" (p. 158). Despite Ore's pleas, Miranda "clutches desperately" to the skin, saying: "I don't want to come out. Put me back in...I need her" (p. 158). In this terrifying way, Oyeyemi shows the reader how hard it is to escape the oppressions of the past.

The Dover house is a mode of authority, representing the white social establishment that reaches back to colonial days. It exists to keep out all but the white progeny of the Silver women, killing and torturing everyone else. Miri cannot shed the house (i.e., her skin) just as the white establishment cannot shed the skin of colonial and racial oppression. In maintaining its modes of authority over its inhabitants, the Dover House must reject or destroy those it sees as non-white invaders (e.g., Ore, Sade, the Kosovans), thereby silencing these potential voices of change.

The Dover house shows its white racism in its reaction to Ore during Ore's visit to Miranda at the house. When Ore showers after making love to Miranda, she sees that her towel:

...was striped with black liquid, as dense as paint (don't scream) there were shreds of hard skin in it. 'The black's coming off,' someone outside the bathroom door commented. Then they whistled 'Rule, Britannia' and laughed. Britons never-never-never shall be slaves ... by the time I'd put the towel on the rack to dry and opened the door, the passageway was empty.

(p. 147-8)

The implication that Ore's blackness is just skin deep, not part of her intrinsic self, and can thus be washed off is countered by the passing guests reiterating the jingoism of British colonialism. The house tells Ore to be silent ("don't scream") and the reader is left wondering if there really were guests whistling outside the bathroom door or if that was an invention by the house in its oppression of Ore (and Miranda).

Towards the novel's end, the house reveals its true nature. In response to Miri's declaration of love for Ore, the house responds (speaking as the spirits of the three generations of women before Miri):

The squashed nose, the pillow lips, fist-sized breasts, the reek of fluids from the seam between her legs. The skin. The skin... Anna was shocked. Jennifer was shocked. Lily was impassive. Disgusting. ... When clear waters moves unseen a taint creeps into it – moss, or algae, salt, even. It becomes foul, undrinkable. It joins the sea.

(p. 223)

This language expresses a racial mode of authority - the concept of tainted water being ruined represents the fear that the purity of racial whiteness may be diluted and contaminated by coming into contact with any other material. Once polluted, the water enters the sea, a metaphor for the pool of common, mixed up, impure, racial characteristics. The Dover House's response to Miri's desire for what the house sees as a racially impure relationship with the first-generation immigrant Ore is to expel Ore and silence Miri forever.

Much is experimental in *White for Witching*. The multiple viewpoints are particularly innovative. Ore, Eliot and the Dover House provide unreliable first person points of view, while a third party focalised point of view describes Miri's perspective. Unusually, the prologue is scripted with three different characters (including the non-human Dover house):

ore:

Miranda Silver is in Dover....

eliot:

Miri is gone...

29 barton road:

Miranda is at home...

(p. 7-8)

This is more of a dramatic formalism than straight narration and has the immediate effect of both making Miranda and her disappearance the centre of the story but also suggests her fractured personality, e.g., she is named in three differing ways (formally as Miranda Silver by her friend, Ore; familiarly as Miri by her twin, Eliot; and as something between: Miranda, by the house). Another innovative effect is the ‘pivoting’ of narrative perspective mid-sentence. This has the effect of narrative intensification. In the following example, the narration is a third-party focalised on Miranda until ‘the mannequin’ when it becomes the first person point of view of the house - demonstrating the house’s control over the mannequin and raising the tension concerning the role the mannequin will play:

She could barely believe that such a simple-looking coat could take so much work... It looked so fine on the mannequin proved very useful for me when Miranda, Luc and Eliot left for the airport. Especially as I did not have much time. I could not, for example, use the looking people.

(p. 98)

The use of differing points of view and close and distant perspectives blur the reader’s perception of Miranda’s identity. Miri is never given her own first person narration – her speech is only recorded by others – in this sense, Miri’s internality is silenced, and her voice is only revealed to the reader via the authority of the other characters.

In *White is for Witching* Oyeyemi explores patriarchies that are not father based. Instead, matriarchy dominates as influence, control and uncanny haunting are passed down through the female line. Furthermore, the gothic metaphor of male darkness is turned inside out as the novel uses the colour white to dominate other colours (e.g., the white cliffs of Dover, the pica chalk that Miranda eats, the whiteness of the poisonous apples overcoming their redness and the pale mannequin). Oyeyemi shows the reader a story in which three generations of female witches, acting through the Dover house, are terrifying matriarchs of the whiteness of colonial racial oppression. *White* truly is for *Witching* in this story.

In conclusion, Lahiri’s work takes a modernistic approach but also uses realism as a narrative tool. Her writing is “associated with social conditions wherein a coherent perspective of the world is sought ... [resulting in] a questioning of conventional systems, finding ‘fractures and fault lines’” (Gupta, 2016, p.11). The “new hybrid cultures that migration creates through interethnic marriage and the adaption of new forms of mixed identity” (Tickell, 2016, p. 195) are the locations of these fractures and faults.

On the other hand, Oyeyemi’s work moves easily between the supernatural and the literary, rejecting conventional ideas of identity and cultural collisions by drawing on ideas from multiple genres. The power of white is used as a symbolic representation of racial purity, and the novel contests the place of oppression to maintain such imperial racial purity within modern society. The whiteness of both the political and the female body is rejected in the discourse, as the more Miranda tries to suppress the generations of white women that dwell within her, the sicker she becomes. Miranda’s roots are in the ‘poisoned soil’ of her ancestry, and it is only by some future destruction of the Dover house and a migration away from her past that she could possibly, in life, escape.

Both Lahiri and Oyeyemi explore the struggle between individual identity and cultural oppression. Both show the effects of opposing the silence that enables such oppression. In doing so, both authors are performing the naming of modes of authority that hooks regarded as critically important since: “rarely do we name it in everyday speech” (hooks, 2004, p. 25).

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Concealment and deception rather than disclosure and revelation are the true modus operandi of the postmodern author.

In the postmodern novel, it is often difficult for the reader to access the author's intentions simply and directly. Indeed, a sense of disorientation, ambiguity, and uncertainty is common in such novels, and it is only with some considerable thought on the reader's part that the true value of the novel can be discerned. This active and conscious engagement of the reader makes this type of writing satisfying for both author and the reader. In such a novel it is often part of the author's contract with the reader in that they will conceal, deceive, puzzle and entice the reader before disclosing their true intents and meanings.

This is undoubtedly the case in Deborah Levy's *The Man Who Saw Everything* (2019) and Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching* (2009). Both novels explore the idea that while memory is always selective and the past is never fixed (because it is seen through the perspective of the ever-changing present), an individual's perceptions of the past are nevertheless the result of an accumulation of their own memories and experiences. Both authors explore the nature of memory, perception, and truth but use differing approaches to push back against the "objective truth" (Duignan 2023) of modernism and the "natural realism" (Mullan, J. 2014) of the pre-modernists.

Levy uses an increasingly unreliable first-person narrator and a non-linear narrative. The formal structure of her book falls into two distinct parts, apparently separated by twenty-eight years. This is potentially the book's first major deception because as the narrative progresses, we become increasingly unsure which of the events in the book's first part did actually take place. The novel's first half depicts a self-absorbed, narcissistic, but genuinely beautiful young man who is unable or unwilling to manage any level of deep emotional attachment. This half is written in a largely realistic style but nevertheless contains a few elements of oddness or even surrealism that foreshadow the darker second half (e.g., the appearance of a mobile phone that could not exist in 1988 or the fact that Saul knows the consequences of the breakup Russia before the actual event). These oddities hint at the increasing uncanny nature of the book's second half – a half that is much more fragmented and impressionistic and which interrogates the divisions between past and present, fact and fiction, East and West and even life and death.

Oyeyemi takes a different approach to Levy as she unsettles the reader with familiar Gothic themes (hauntings, superstitions, unsettled states of mind, unquiet memories, female insanity, twins, eating disorders, depression and madness) embedded within a narrative that employs the novel use of multiple points of view, including first person (Elliott and Ore), an omniscient third person, and a personified inanimate object (the point of view of the Dover house). The protagonist, Miri, is the subject of every narrator, but is significantly never given her own first person narration – her speech is only recorded by others. These cross linked narrative perspectives continually challenge the reader to consider who, if anyone, is the reliable narrator within the story, and helps conceal the true malevolence of the house until its central, dominating position in the story is finally revealed in the final revealed.

Deception and revelation are the key themes that shape the narrative and the characters' experiences in *The Man Who Saw Everything*, but they are also embedded within Levy's prose technique. In the story, the characters' motivations often lead them to conceal their

thoughts, desires and actions from each other. But Levy also chooses a narrative form and style that keeps things secret from the reader and challenges readers to question their own assumptions and perceptions of reality, and to consider how their experiences and biases can shape their understanding of the world around them, and their understanding of the past. As more and more of Saul's experiences and memories are gradually uncovered, and Levy reveals more about the characters surrounding Saul, the reader is gradually enabled by these revelations to piece together their own interpretation of Saul's overall story. Levy carefully balances concealment, ambiguity, allusion and revelation in drip feeding the details of this story.

Levy explains her narrative form as influenced by the “temporal rupture” in films such as David Lynch’s *Mulholland Drive*. She says she sought a “structure in which the detritus of the past washes up in the present tense before they have happened” and compares writing the books to a “weird seance with how the consciousness of the leading man might operate - he lives simultaneously in various time zones” (Levy in Carroll, 2019).

The two halves of Saul’s story are differentiated in several important ways. In the first half, Saul is depicted as the victim of the actions of others (a neglectful father, abruptly dumped by his girlfriend, and a the victim of a bullying brother). In the second half, Levy shows the many ways that Saul harmed other people, including his dysfunctional relationship with his ex-wife, his disconnection with his sons, his betrayal of Walter, and his casual impregnation of Luna. In this part, the prose style is more surreal and more impressionistic, detaching the reader from Saul just as his mind is detached from reality by his accident on Abbey Road.

While much is concealed in the first half of *The Man Who Saw Everything* and only partially revealed in the second half, Levy provides many symbols and allusions that hold the overall structure together. For example, when Saul is hit by a Jaguar car on Abbey Road, some shards from the car’s shattered wing mirror are embedded in Saul’s brain (or at least, that is his memory of the event). Luna believes that she is being stalked by an real jaguar. Both characters are thus threatened by jaguars of one sort or another. But it is up to the reader to decide which threat is truly meaningful. Levy aligns the first part of the novel with the historically accurate event of fall of the Berlin Wall and the second part with another historic event – the exit of the UK from Europe 28 years later. Both events echo and symbolise the building of walls and the closing of borders that characterise many of Saul’s choices within his relationships. And, just as all of us who are old enough to remember exactly where we were when JFK was assassinated, these global events pin our more personal and evanescent memories to a more common shared and static historical background. Saul’s memories thus gain authenticity in our own minds because they are attached to events that we share with him.

Levy does not quite see her methods as truly experimental, saying, “Is the structure experimental? It’s certainly intricate” and labels her work as more “uncanny than surreal ... You can’t do uncanny without a fair bit of realism” (Carroll, 2019). Her realism is expressed in the novel by using everyday symbols to represent her more complex underlying themes. For example, the photo of Saul crossing Abbey Road, taken by Jennifer and given to Luna, symbolises Saul’s selfishness. Saul goes to great trouble to get the photo, something he values, even though Luna did not ask for it. But he then forgets to take the tin of pineapple that she really wanted and explicitly requested. In a sense, Saul makes himself, rather than

the pineapple, the gift to his hosts in the GDR, thus showing his chronic self-absorption and selfishness.

Saul's pearl necklace symbolises the ongoing and unprocessed impact of his mother's death - he cannot discard this memory as he cannot discard the pearls. On the other hand, he tries to discard or at least bury his father's memory by burying the matchbox of his father's ashes in the GDR. This may symbolise the death of his father's hopes for communism in the GDR rather than his literal death. The destruction of Luna's copy of the Abbey Road album is another symbol of Saul's cruelty because Saul smashes it over something Luna has no control over. This foreshadows the aspects of Saul's cruelty that will be revealed in the second part of the novel, particularly concerning Saul's relationship with Jack. The fact that Saul is a professional historian and is present in Berlin just before the wall comes down, but that Saul does not seem to be aware of this impending world event is a further symbol of his lack of awareness of the events around him. Instead, he is there to research the past and the memories of others. He is more concerned with the intellectual analysis of the cyclical nature of cruelty and abuse, symbolised by Stalin's mistreatment of his family after Stalin himself had been mistreated as a child by his father. Again, Saul fails to relate this abuse to his own mistreatment as a child and fails to question himself as to whether this is why he mistreats others as an adult.

If Levy's *The Man Who Saw Everything* is an example of a complexly layered narrative that uses concealment and gradual revelation, then Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching* is an even more striking and extreme example of even greater complexity, concealment, gradual revelation and disparate perspectives.

In her review in *The Guardian*, Carrie O'Grady says, "But without a tight structure and a carefully controlled build-up, a suspense story simply cannot function" (O'Grady, 2009). She complains (of Miri) that "We meet her as she is coming out of six months in the psychiatric hospital, and she seems on the way to recovery. Surely this breaks one of the first rules of storytelling: things have to get worse before they get better" (ibid). Jane Shilling provides a much more measured assessment in *The Telegraph*: "[this is a] work of literary polyphony: the narrative is carried by a chorus of voices" (2009). Shilling does, however, agree that Oyeyemi's "narrative is predicated on the ghostly inheritance of madness, its supernatural element is the least engaging thing in it" (ibid). In another perspective Porter (2013, p. 23) sees Oyeyemi's work as blending "the traditions of European gothic and fairy tale with African and Caribbean folklore and beliefs" and states that:

...few critics have acknowledged the ground-breaking originality of Oyeyemi's novel, and none have attested to the power of this text as a contestation of purity discourses by creating a uniquely hybridised gothic work. Based on the Yoruba, Caribbean, and European elements it has ingested, the integration of Gothic, fairy-tale, and tribal beliefs has produced a syncretic transatlantic text.

(Porter, 2013)

Finally, O'Grady (2019), writing ten years after the publication of *White for Witching*, sees Oyeyemi's approval arising from the fact that "she is a precious original; that she subverts fairy tales; that she writes beautiful, witty prose". None of this seems to be enough

for O'Grady though as she goes on to state that although "Oyeyemi does subvert fairy tales", her stories are "stunts", "dumpsters of deconstructed ... rubble", and that readers will not enjoy "revelling in the postmodern tangle of antic narrative strands" (ibid). The critics are clearly divided - so what evidence can be found in the text of *White is for Witching* to support or negate these somewhat contrasting views?

Much is indeed experimental in the literary devices used in *White for Witching*. Prominent among these are the multiple viewpoints. The innovative prologue uses three different points of view which rotate rapidly. The reader is rather like an audience hearing actors recite their lines on a stage:

ore:

Miranda Silver is in Dover....

eliot:

Miri is gone...

29 barton road:

Miranda is at home....

(p. 7-8)

This has the immediate effect of both making Miranda and her disappearance the centre of the story, but it also suggests her fractured personality (the separate narrators seeing her quite differently) - particularly as she is named in three differing ways (formally as Miranda Silver by her friend, Ore; familiarly as Miri by her twin, Eliot, and as something between: Miranda, by the house).

While the change between the various narrator's points of view often occurs at chapter or section breaks, it does also sometimes rather innovatively 'pivot' mid-sentence. This is like a changeup of gear, resulting in a step up of narrative intensification. In the following example, the narration is a third-party point of view until the words 'the mannequin' when it becomes the first person point of view of the house - this is particularly appropriate given the house controls the mannequin and encourages the reader to see the mannequin not just as a household object but an object that is the agent of the supernatural power of the house:

The next day Miranda's overcoat was ready. She could barely believe that such a simple-looking coat could take so much work, ... It looked so fine on the mannequin proved very useful for me when Miranda, Luc and Eliot left for the airport. Especially as I did not have much time...

(p. 98)

Oyeyemi also allows us to see the interior thought of her characters occasionally - something the first-person point of view is adept at:

But otherwise the girl in the picture was not the girl who stood in the room with me; I can unequivocally say that it wasn't her. The eye colour matched, the hair colour matched, but that was all. I found myself nodding uncontrollably

(get away from this girl and do not go near her again) ‘
You’ve . . . changed a lot,’ I said. She said, ‘Let’s go for that walk.’

Here, we are hearing Ore’s point of view (“get away from this girl and do not go near her again) comparing Miranda’s photo to the real Miranda as she registers but does not understand the threat that Miranda poses. The interjection of Ore’s internal thought intensifies the passage - if the narrator simply told us that Ore felt threatened, that would be much less effective. Or is the interior thought, actually that of the Dover house? Oyeyemi allows us both possibilities.

These different points of view, combined with close and distant perspectives, blur the nature of Miranda’s identity. Indeed, the idea of family relations and patriarchy seems to be turned inside out as Oyeyemi describes a different family genealogy than the traditional father-orientated patriarchy. Here the focal point of each generation is the female mother, and influence, control and uncanny haunting are passed down through the female line. Furthermore, the gothic metaphor of male darkness is turned inside out. Just as Miri eats white chalk, the novel uses the colour white to swallow other colours (in the sense of the white cliffs of Dover overcoming the town, the whiteness of the poisonous apples overcoming their redness, the pale mannequin and so on). Female whiteness is the order of the day, rather than male blackness – a theme echoed in the elements of immigration included in the story.

The use of multiple points of view is just one way the book risks overloading the reader. And it is this overloading that most upsets some critics. Even from the opening, there is a tone of heavy sensationalism. This does not leave much headroom for increasing tension. The jumbled nature of subsequent revelations does little to help the tension grow and the overall effect cumulative effect of the narrative can be one of thematic and symbolic overload. Only when the story moves to Cambridge, and Ore assumes much of the narration, does the reader find a character they can believe in and trust to guide them through the story. The concerns of violence against immigration, colour racialism, Caribbean and Nigeria supernatural and witching, the allusion to the vampire in the soucouyant, the hinted at incest between Eliot and Miri, the house’s desire to assert the whiteness of racial purity – these multiple facets of the novel risk overwhelming the reader’s focus on Miri, and her death perhaps dwindles rather than grows in significance as the novel ends. Oyeyemi’s lack of restraint, her apparent inability (or lack of desire) to pick and choose, to balance concealment and disclosure risks exhausting the reader. It has been suggested that this book lacked a strong enough editor to control this excess (RN2, 2023). Perhaps in fact there is enough material, ideas, themes, symbols, and allusions for several novels. Or perhaps, the ideas should be portioned into separate short stories, using the same characters, location and events, but explored with different perspectives. Of course, we are unlikely ever to know if such editorial proposals were ever made and subsequently rejected. If Oyeyemi has a fault, it is perhaps one of over-reach, that is to say, a surfeit of ambition, an overabundance of content and an excessive breadth of ideas. Maybe it just the zeal of her youth, but a little more restraint and control might well produce a more satisfactory text.

What, then, should I take from the experience of reading Levy and Oyeyemi? I think the primary lesson is that while plot, pacing, location, characterisation etc are all important facets of a text, what the author chooses to reveal and what they choose to withhold is the truly

fundamental driver of tension, suspense and engagement for the reader. It is not only what the author explicitly shows the reader (or holds back) but when and how they choose to do it that is important. These thoughts have led me to reconsider the use of point of view in my current work (Sinclair, 2023). At present, the narration stays within the close third-party point of view of Canon Peter, the protagonist. A key plot element in my story is the use of a Roman well in the crypt of Winchester Cathedral. This is a time portal that allows Peter to exchange consciousness with Father Hugh, an Anglo-Saxon twelfth-century Benedictine monk. After considering the texts in Reading Novels 2, I have decided to take a much riskier (but hopefully more rewarding) approach and use first-person point of view narration for both Canon Peter's and Father Hugh's perspectives. This means that the reader will be experiencing two parallel perceptions of the story – Peter's view with its modern sensibilities and Hugh's Anglo-Saxon thoughts, morals, fears and superstitions. The chapters will alternate between Peter's and Hugh's perspectives, even when they find themselves in a different era – that is to say, when Peter's first-person point of view is back in the 12th century (in Hugh's body) then the reader will also have access to Father Hugh's first-person view (in Peter's body) and his reactions to the twentieth century. While this is undoubtedly a technically challenging task and potentially confusing for the reader if mishandled, I feel it will add an exciting intricacy to the narration. If successful, it will actively engage the reader in thinking about who is telling the story at any given point and encourage them to unravel the concealments, deceptions, disclosures and revelations within the story. Having said all that, though, the narration must still honour the contract of trust the author establishes with the reader – the reader rightly expects that narratorial deception and concealment within the story must always be fairly and ultimately balanced by the appropriate disclosure and revelation. It is not necessary to fully resolve all ambiguities and uncertainties (Levy, for instance, never unambiguously reveals whether Saul really did have two separate but similar accidents on the Abbey Road crossing). Nevertheless, the reader must always feel that they have been fairly treated and that any unresolved issues are natural consequences of the events in the story rather than artificial constraints arbitrarily imposed by the author.

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*Mechanistic and scientific separation of form and content in Samuel Beckett's *Quad I/II* and *The Lost Ones**

In a 1961 interview, Beckett says: "To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now" (Driver, 1961, in Lorich, 1970, p. 364). Driver views this 'mess' as being "life as Beckett views it ... [and the] ... social and emotional stress found everywhere and accepted without opposition by everyone" (p. 364). Beckett's 'mess' is a recurrent aspect of his works that depicts a world that is neither static nor final, which exists in permanent conflict and while containing both laughter and tears relentlessly depicts hopelessness, abandonment, decay, loss and death. This essay will show, at least in the case of *Quad I/II* and *The Lost Ones*, that Beckett borrows from contemporary scientific ideas in constructing artistic forms to contain his representation of the 'mess'.

Audiences often feel impelled to make some sense of the 'mess' depicted in a Beckett text. This is a difficult task. It might be imagined that the audience is hoping that Beckett will give them a philosophical insight which will guide them out of the 'mess' into a more ordered and happier world. However, as Moran points out: "Beckett's answer to philosophy is to refuse it, give it a 'kick in the arse'." (Moran, 2006, p. 94). Moran argues that Beckett "was not a philosopher; if he had been, he would not have needed to engage with art" (p. 94). If the audience should not, therefore, seek a philosophical answer, then what should they do with a Beckett text? Beckett hints at one possibility: "Poets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity" (Uhlmann, 2010, p. 87). Beckett, as a poet in the most general sense, is extending the audience's means of experiencing his world – by carefully using form, structure, vocabulary and medium. And indeed, if it is the artist's task to use form to accommodate the 'mess' then Beckett is echoing Marshall McLuhan's famous, contemporary statement: "The medium is the message" (McLuhan, 1964).

As part of his artistic task, Beckett searches for new forms within the traditional novel, poetry and dramatic forms. While some critics take the view that "good literature is of timeless significance; it somehow transcends the limitations and peculiarities of the age it was written in, and thereby speaks to what is constant in human nature" (Barry, 2009, pp. 17-18) there is a contrary view however, expressed by Eagleton:

For any body of theory concerned with human meaning, value, language, feeling and experience will inevitably engage with broader, deeper beliefs about the nature of human individuals and societies, problems of power and sexuality, interpretations of past history, versions of the present and hopes for the future. (Eagleton, 2008, p. 170).

Eagleton's view is that literature cannot exist in a vacuum. He sees it as perfectly reasonable that someone like Beckett would borrow or refactor from other disciplines. Beckett certainly had an ongoing curiosity regarding the scientific world, and the personal contacts to pursue this curiosity. For example, Kishin Moorjani (a particle physicist) recalls one meeting with Beckett where Beckett quizzed him on current thinking about the many body problem in quantum physics (Moorjani, 2016, p46). It is interesting to speculate whether Beckett had encountered a similar scientific model - that of Conway's *The Game of Life*, (Gardner, 1970, p. 120) before writing *The Lost Ones* (written 1966-70) or *Quad* (1984). *The Game of Life* is a cellular automaton zero-player game - i.e., its evolution is determined by its initial state, requiring no further input, and which often results in either a repetitive

entry and exit into stasis or in a zero or unchanging entropic final state. Such ‘narrative action’ is very similar to that employed in both *The Lost Ones* and *Quad*.

The form of the script for *Quad* (Beckett, 1984) looks exactly like a procedural specification for a computer program very much like *The Game of Life*. While the script does not use of a formal programming language it draws on the language of mathematical specification with its use of lists, implicit subroutines and counted execution. Beckett’s script also eliminates any form of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, height and weight and reduces the players to a specification of clothing style and colour, and speed of gait. Doing so follows the computing principle that object properties used should always be reduced to a minimal, orthogonal set. Although two male and two female actors were used in the original production (Brater, 1987, p.109) their genders were a free choice by the production company. The script, therefore, implies that the same outcome (ie audience experience) would have occurred if the players had, say, all been the same gender, or all Australian. The specification of the players is an example of mathematical equivalence.

Just like a computer program, *Quad* is truly algorithmic. When started with the same initial conditions (and these are specified in the script), it will reproduce the same behaviour for the observing audience. It is like a strict musical fugue where once the original melodic pattern is shown to the listener, then all subsequent sounds are already determined. Computer scientists would recognise this as the property of referential transparency in the execution flow in *Quad*. Practically this means that the essence of the experience offered when seeing *Quad* performed in different places and times will be the same.

How then is Beckett’s mess accommodated with such structures? One possibility is that the ‘danger zone’ of the centre (which is noted by Beckett as a ‘problem’ in the script) is an indication that the mechanistic rules of the machine cannot perfectly dictate the actions of the players. Hans’s interpretation is that “nothingness, misery, futility, “danger” are visible for a second” to the players as they circumvent the danger zone, only to forget its presence until their next encounter (Hans, 1993, p. 339).

Porush states that “The machine is a universal symbol of our culture’s blind devotion to logical method” (Porush, 1986, p. 87). He sees postmodernist authors as engaged in a battle against this “imperialism of the machine” and expresses the perhaps romantic view that “artists have a special stake in drawing a line around some portion of the soul and proscribing its analysis” (p. 88). Thus, in producing a work of literature, the author should go beyond a simple mechanistic description of the world depicted in that work. Any author that uses the machine as a straightforward metaphor for the human soul is, according to Porush, failing to do their job properly. Successful postmodern authors should (and do) attack the “imperialism of the machine” using weapons of “self-consciousness, irony, a tacit distrust of language as an effective means of expression, and metaphors” (p. 87). This attack can be seen both in replacement of language with algorithm in *Quad* and in the unusual narratorial style of *The Lost Ones*.

In *The Lost Ones* (Beckett, 2010) it is easy to think that the pitiable inhabitants trapped in the cylinder represent components in an unfathomable machine, driven by cycles of light and heat and governed by a set of proscribed rules and behaviours. Brienza however immediately dismisses the notion that the machine-like nature of *The Lost Ones* is an allegorical representation of something awful. Instead, Brienza views it “as a work in which form and content are one” (Brienza, 1977, p. 148). She further says that if the story is “about man’s futile search for order and meaning in the world, … [then it is also about] the reader’s futile

search for order and meaning in the piece itself" (p. 148). Porush has a similar view and calls *The Lost Ones* a form of cybernetic fiction – a form in which “texts disguise themselves ironically as a cybernetic device and at the same time undermine their own cybernetics” (p. 89). Cybernetic writing “uses the machine to stand for the act of writing itself” and is characterised by, among other things: “a congruence between form and fiction”, which “delights in structure for structure’s sake” and with “those properties of language which drive a wedge between mechanistic explanation and human experiences beyond “expression or determination” (p. 92). In cybernetic writing the form of the narration is one way in which text questions itself. For example, when the narrator says: “if this notion be maintained” (p. 109, 112, 119, 120) the narrator is undermining the certainty or authority of the narratorial position. When the narrator says: “Imagine then the silence of the steps” (Becket, 2010, p.101) the narrator is inviting the reader to be part of the story; to add their imagination to the author’s efforts. By inviting the readers to examine and question the process of narration itself Beckett makes the readers themselves a component of the work itself.

In conclusion, this essay has shown that Beckett augments and illuminates the ‘mess’ within his works, by using novel and contemporary ideas in their form and structure and in doing so Beckett also comments on the artistic process itself and expands the means by which his work engages with his consumers.

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The importance of social transition in Ford Maddox Ford's The Good Soldier

A period of social transition is a period in which society experiences changes of social structure and in the rules of moral, religious, economic, political behaviour within that society. Social transition often occurs as a consequence of major events such as war (as in the emancipation of women after World War 1, revolution (e.g., the rise of communism after the Bolshevik revolution), technological change, such as the Industrial Revolution and the consequent depopulation of the countryside and the growth of empire and adoption of colonialism.

An imaginary golden age can be thought of as a “period of greatest prosperity in the history of a nation, state, etc” or “the time when a specified art or activity is at its finest, most advanced, or most popular” (‘golden age’, 2018). Retrospectively, such eras may be “golden” as they are seen with nostalgia and a favourably enhanced perspective. Examples are the ancient pastoral environment envied by modern city dwellers, or the golden age of knightly chivalry described in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Britanniae* that popularised an entirely fictional legend of King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table (Keen, 2005).

The proposition is the primary bearer of a truth or falsity. Since the subject proposition uses the declarative phrase ‘always harks back’, then if there is a single counter example, then this proposition is demonstrably false. Harking back in this context means ‘recalling, remembering or returning’ – it does not imply that such recollections are favourable or otherwise. Given the many periods of social transitions experienced by various human societies and the many texts written during these periods, it seems highly probable that at least one of these might not recall, remember or return to a period that the author or audience perceived as a golden age. *The War of the Worlds* (Wells, 1898) is an obvious Edwardian candidate, with its prescient depictions of alien and mechanistic technologies that resolutely look forward to the events of the 20th century. However, it is hard to argue that any of the three texts considered in TMA3 are similar counterexamples as they all have some aspects that recall, reference or recollect some sort of golden age.

Victorian writers such as Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, George Eliot and Thomas Hardy took a realistic approach to their writing and laid an emphasis on specific actions and verifiable consequences, issues of personal conduct, occurring in the here now, depicted in a factual (almost journalistic) style using direct language. However, as this golden age of realism ended, a new generation of authors sought new approaches. This led to a Modernistic style characterised by a desire to discard convention, to present a more subjective or impressionistic discourse, and to reflect ideas of subjectivity, perspective and consciousness. (Haslam in Ford, 2010, p. 13). Ezra Pound summarised this in his declamation “Make it new!” (Pound, 1935) but T.S. Eliot expressed it rather more eloquently in reference to poetry:

It appears likely that poets in our civilization,
as it exists at present, must be difficult. . . .
The poet must become more and more comprehensive,

more allusive, more indirect, in order to force,
to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning.

(Eliot, 1921)

Importantly, “a recurrent feature of Modernist writing is, arguably, that it seeks to respond to a prevailing sense of crisis and fragmentation” (Tickell, 2016, p. 12). This is certainly true for *The Good Soldier* which Ford Maddox Ford set during the cataclysmic years leading up to World War 1 - a period he viewed as a “sack full of cats all at each other’s throats”, torn apart by fears of socialism, suffragism, Irish independence and German rearmament” (Moser in Ford, 1990, p. 11). For was also writing at time when his often turbulent personal life was in a particularly intense state of flux as he was still married to his original wife Elsie, had fallen out of love with a second (bigamous) bride Violet Hunt, only to replace her in his affections with the unhappily married Bridget Patmore (p. 11). It has been said that “A recurrent feature of Modernist writing is, arguably, that it seeks to respond to a prevailing sense of crisis and fragmentation” and this certainly seems to accurately characterise the genesis of *The Good Soldier* (Beattie, 2023).

From 1898 Ford had a fruitful ten year period of collaboration with Joseph Conrad (Meixner, 1974, pp. 162-167) in which he developed and embraced techniques of impressionism: “time-shift, fidelity to point of view of the narrating consciousness, careful selection of details to render the exact impression of perceived experiences and use of pictorial images and symbols” (Hoffman, 1990 p. 3). For Ford, Impressionist writing was about showing the reader rather than telling. Ford stated, “For Impressionism is a thing all together momentary [...] a piece of Impressionism should give a sense of two, of three, of as many as you will, places, persons, emotions, all going on simultaneously in the emotions of the writer” (p. 40). However, “Ford distances himself from more extreme versions of art-for-art's-sake, which assert that art should turn its back on a profane world and argues instead that precisely because reality has become so complex and sordid the writer's most pressing task is to represent it in as accurate and non-judgmental a way as possible” (Gasioruk, 2001, p. 9).

Although Ford turned away from the literary techniques of previous golden ages, he cannot be said to be fully disconnected from all aspect of those ages. Ford places the origins of Edward and Florence Ashburnham in the Golden Age - the culmination of the British Empire and the dominance of British values of morality, politics and religion over one quarter of the globe. Dowell insists that Edward is a “good” soldier: “Edward Ashburnham was the cleanest looking sort of chap; —an excellent magistrate, a first rate soldier, one of the best landlords, so they said, in Hampshire, England.” (Ford, 2010, p. 32). But the “so they said” raises a question mark in the reader’s mind - Dowell is only relaying secondary evidence. Dowell goes backwards and forwards, skidding through the narrative witching times and tenses, offering often fogged perspectives and confused commentary. At one point, addressing the reader, Dowell says: “Supposing that you should come upon us sitting together . . .” yet he has already explained that two of the quartet are dead, and realising he is caught in his own confusion, he tries to obscure his confusion by a change to the past conditional: “. . . you would have said that, as human affairs go, we were an extraordinarily safe castle” (p. 28). Dowell may be unreliable and opaquely confusing in his statements, but

Ford himself is entirely in control of his prose. As VS Pritchett wrote of Ford: "Confusion was the mainspring of his art as a novelist. He confused to make clear" (Barnes, 2008).

Ford challenges the traditional realistic, factual narrative techniques of the Victorian realism, by using a disjointed non-chronological timeline, and infusing Dowell's narration with reflective commentary. While it is Dowell who raises the question of how to tell his story or even in what order: "I don't know how it is best to put this thing down - whether it would be better to try and tell the story from the beginning, as if it were a story; or whether to tell it from this distance of time" (p. 32) it is Ford that is inviting the reader to ponder on the meaning of narration itself. While Dowell says: "Is all this digression or isn't it digression? Again, I don't know." (p. 34) Ford is teasing the reader, and both reader and authors are enjoying the process. Sometimes the apparently naive Dowell, who sees people as good simply because of their dress and manners injects a shocking 180 degree turn in perception in a single sentence: "I had forgotten his eyes. ... When you looked at them carefully you saw that they were perfectly honest, perfectly straightforward, perfectly, perfectly stupid." (p. 42). When Dowell uses a simple word such as "poor" (as in "poor Edward", that "poor devil"), it is near-impossible to gauge whether he is being sympathetic or sarcastic. Ford's controlled use of the disruption of the straightforward language typical of previous generation of realists is very much a modernist technique, where the reader must provide their own participation to properly understand the text.

Although Ford uses Modernist techniques, he nevertheless, in some ways, still harks back to a Golden Age. Although he rejects the literary techniques of that Golden Age he recalls and comments on its social morality. Ford "presents the operative definition of patriarchal masculinity in late Victorian/Edwardian England as inextricably linked to the assumptions and practices of imperialism, likening the expectation that men transgress boundaries in order to possess ever more women to the scramble for colonies among colonial powers" (Hoffman, 2004, p. 30). Ford thus sees both the literary techniques and moral structure of the Victorian, colonial age as an imagined (i.e., false) Golden Age.

This essay could conclude that finding a single counterexample is a simple method of disproving the proposition. Such a pedantic approach is somewhat futile, not because a single counter example cannot be found amongst the millions of literary works in existence, but because disproving the proposition does not change the fact that the best literature will always seek to reshape the past to illuminate the present:

Every artistic act is generated in some way by those which have come before. Artists react against or take what they want or need from their predecessors, consciously or unconsciously, adding their own twists, styles, refutations, repetitions or interests.

(Hallam, 2016, p. 100)

The more important conclusion of this essay is that the value of the vast body of work that supports the proposition, (such as *The Good Soldier*) vastly outweighs the value of a single counterexample.

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Ambiguity in Tennyson's Ulysses

In ‘Tennyson’s “Ulysses”: A Reconciliation of Opposites’ Pettigrew (1963) considers a number of different critical positions of Tennyson’s *Ulysses* and argues he is able to synthesise another uniquely identifiable interpretation of the poem.

Pettigrew starts by examining how various prominent critics from different eras view *Ulysses*. These are the Victorian Thomas Carlyle, T.S Eliot in 1929, E.J. Chiasson in a University of Toronto Quarterly article, and Professor Paul F Baum). Pettigrew divides these critics into three camps. The first represents what Pettigrew sees as the mainstream view as represented by Carlyle: that *Ulysses* depicts a “clarion call to action and expresses a heroic aspiration “to strive, to seek, to find and not to yield”” (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 28). The second camp is based on Chiasson’s views, that Ulysses is a “hard, self-contained individual, contemptuous of his people” (p. 28), who essentially has no empathy or regard for his society. Pettigrew’s description of the third camp, characterised by Baum’s views, is that these critics are less interested in illuminating the meaning of the poem, or Tennyson’s intent, than in scorning the faults they see in the poem’s form and structure.

Pettigrew next clearly states his intent is to take a fourth view, but not necessarily a brand-new view. Instead, he seeks to steer a middle ground, and synthesise these disparate camps described into a single coordinated view, - the reconciliation of opposites in the paper’s title. With some chutzpah, he suggests that the three parts of this synthesis “discordant and antithetical as they appear to be...point to the larger synthesis, the reconciliation of opposites, effected within the poem itself” (p. 29). Sadly, Pettigrew’s synthesis of these parts is nothing like as successful as Tennyson’s handling of ambiguity and complexity in the poem that Pettigrew is discussing.

Pettigrew then goes on to present a number of arguments. First, he refutes the proposal of other critics (W.W. Robson and Prof Roppen) that *Ulysses* is Tennyson, and that Tennyson lacks dramatic power (p. 30). By comparing *Ulysses* to T.S. Eliot’s *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, Pettigrew argues that *Ulysses* is a “highly complex individual” (p. 31) and that the ambiguities and incongruities in Tennyson’s poem, are comparable to those used by Eliot, just as intentionally and which successfully portray the ubiquity, ambivalence and divided personality of the character depicted in each poem.

Pettigrew continues to consider the complexity of the character of Tennyson’s *Ulysses* by exploring the links between Tennyson’s poem and Ulisse in Dante’s *Inferno* and Homer’s original Ulysses. While Pettigrew asks interesting questions such as whether Tennyson’s Ulysses is like Ulisse “one of the chief sinners, a master of guile whose cunning and rhetorical skills have doomed so many others besides himself” he fails disappointingly to convincingly answer these questions, saying “While no final answer to such questions is possible” (p. 31). Eventually, he concludes “the character Tennyson inherited was such as to make probable a complex rather than a simple figure”. This is a rather unsatisfactorily generalised statement.

In considering Tennyson’s own personal situation, Pettigrew provides more detailed and convincing evidence. Tennyson’s strong tendency to mix self-withdrawal with a need for action were “never so sharply opposed, as they were at the time *Ulysses* was written” (pp. 32-33). He backs this argument up with a detailed analysis of other poems, written close in time to *Ulysses*: *The Two Voices*, *Hail Briton* and *The Lotos Eaters*. Pettigrew’s insight seems

perspicacious when he states: “deprived of Hallam’s support, Tennyson finds an internal prop in these bad days in writing poetry, and an external prop in his sense of being at one with mankind” (p. 33). While re-emphasising Ulysses’ synthesis of the “romantic, withdrawing, passive” and the “outgoing, active” Tennyson then makes a tangential reference to Chiasson, whose camp Pettigrew proposed he would unify into his fourth view: “as Chiasson has suggested for different reasons, stands squarely in the main path of Tennyson’s development” (p. 34). Frustratingly, and consequently at detriment to his argument, Pettigrew never explains what these “different reasons” are.

As do many critics, Pettigrew sees Ulysses falling into four clearly defined parts, half of which depict an “essentially heroic Ulysses” and half which show “less attractive characteristics” (p. 37). In pp. 37-41, Pettigrew not only shows his great admiration of the poem, but examines these four parts in great detail, giving fair balance to the expression of Ulysses’ world weariness, his desire for new knowledge, the temptation that extinction offers him, his disgust with his present position, wife and people, his pride in past achievements, his dereliction of present duty and the ambiguous and unpleasant relation with his son, and so on backing these opinions up with many examples of close reading and factual analysis of the structural form of the poem. This section, one must presume, is Pettigrew’s third camp mentioned in his opening paragraphs. But is this discussion really synthesising a new view? Competent and interesting it may be, but Pettigrew’s thoughts are really simply marshalling and revalidating early thoughts by critics he has already mentioned.

How close then does Pettigrew actually come to achieving his objective of synthesising a new view of *Ulysses*? (We should of course bear in mind that Pettigrew was writing in 1963 and that we have the benefit of a further half-century of criticism which may well colour our view). Pettigrew’s text is well written and contains a great deal of credible, plausible argument, backed up with a detailed close reading of the text. Where there are ambiguous or alternate interpretations of the text, Pettigrew says so. But he provides no pithy concluding paragraphs, nor explicitly convincing arguments that his analysis provides a new and novel view of *Ulysses*. Rather it provides a balanced and thoughtful synthesis of a variety of views on the poem – without revealing a truly novel and uniquely innovative fourth view. Perhaps though, such a goal is unattainable. As Pettigrew says, Tennyson’s work is one of rich complexity of “structure, ambiguity in diction, syntax, and image, meaningful variations in the quality of the diction and rhythm and echoes of other works of literature” (p. 37). It is maybe therefore unsurprising that it supports a myriad of interlocking and conflicting interpretations.

Written in 1833, Tennyson’s *Ulysses* predates the Victorian era by four years. Tennyson was therefore writing as an English subject in the reign of the largely unremembered William IV. Victoria, ten years younger than Tennyson, was a mere fourteen at the time. So, to suggest that *Ulysses* references aspects of Victorian thoughts of progress is perhaps premature. Nevertheless, much of the foundations of the social, economic, military and technological progress that blossomed so strongly in the Victorian era had already been laid, and if Tennyson was not yet thinking of himself explicitly as a Victorian, he was most certainly nurtured by a society that was soon to become Victorian.

As a passenger on the inaugural run of the Liverpool-Manchester railway line on 20 September 1830 instead of being inspired by the excitement and novelty of the experience “Tennyson could muster only one line - the “ringing grooves of change” in “Locksley Hall”

(1842) - a line that notoriously misrepresented the actual mechanics of train travel by substituting grooves for rails" (Keirstead, 2019). Nevertheless, Tennyson did interest himself in scientific and social progress. Both he and Huxley were members of the Metaphysical Society and Huxley noted that Tennyson "was the only modern poet, ... since Lucretius ... who has taken the trouble to understand the work and tendency of the men of science" (Gould, 1992). Nevertheless, according to Gould, Tennyson found no solace in science for his grief at Hallam's death:

"Tennyson lauds its [i.e., science's] power to build a global network of railroads, feed nations, answer empirical riddles of the universe--but he knows that science cannot tell us why a man should die so young or how a grieving lover should resolve his suffering. ... We get this faith from ourselves, from what is highest within us" .

(Gould, 1992).

The sentiments expressed in Tennyson's *Ulysses* show that Victorian progress in material things does not and cannot address the spiritual angst expressed by Ulysses. Mitchell sees that "The voyage for which Ulysses is preparing is the act of dying, and his goal is spiritual reality" (Mitchell, 1964, p. 87). This is a conflict for every man (and woman) – the conflict between their will and their death. However, for the individual this conflict remains unchanging the same, as expressed in *Ulysses* by: "Yet all experience is an arch where thro, / Gleams that untravell'd world" (Ricks, 2007, ll. 19-20).

In *Ulysses*, Tennyson constructs a poem whose form, content and thought are a sequence of oppositions: idleness at home, or far away adventure, weary resignation or heroic achievement, the decay of age or the ongoing strength of mind. The use of iambic pentameter gives a strong momentum, while the periodic inclusion of spondees (e.g., "The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep / Moans round with many voices" (Ricks, 2007, ll. 55-56)) or trochaic substitutions (e.g., "Much have I seen and known; cities of men / And manners, climates, councils, governments" (ll. 12-13)) slows and interrupts the rhythm, reinforcing the sense of reflection and indecision in the discourse. As Pettigrew notes, (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 42), Tennyson uses a shift from private soliloquy in the first two paragraphs, to public dramatic monologue, in the poem's second half (from l. 44), again adding a sense of uncertainty. Tennyson continues the ambiguity by showing Ulysses as ignoble and indecisive in stanzas one and three and as equally noble and admirable orator. In stanzas two and four. Combined with the fact that Tennyson places Ulysses in mental prison on Ithaca, trapped by his political and domestic situation, but also allows Ulysses the possibility of both mental and physical freedom ("To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die." (ll. 60-61) by the end of the poem, Tennyson opens the possibility of many complex interpretations of Ulysses state of mind and intent.

The Industrial Revolution that started in the late eighteenth century achieved its peak in Victorian times, as exemplified by the work of Brunel and others. By the time *Ulysses* was published Isambard Kingdom Brunel (who was born just three years before Tennyson) had completed the Great Western Railway linking London to Bristol. Charles Darwin, born in the same year as Tennyson, was halfway through his five-year trip on the Beagle when Tennyson wrote *Ulysses* in 1833 and had formulated (though not published) his theory of the evolution of the species by 1838.

The Victorian Era was also a time of vast political reform and social change. 1838 saw the abolition of slavery, though with no compensation to the enslaved. By 1840 David Livingstone, born four years after Tennyson, was making the first of his four extended missions to Africa. In 1838 the Chartist People's Charter called for equal representation, votes for men of 21 or older, and secret voting. Advances in education and medicine also greatly improved social conditions. The Vaccination act of 1853 required all children to be vaccinated against smallpox and antiseptics in surgery were introduced by Lister in 1863. Not all was tumultuous progress though - the decline of rural life, the growth of slums, and excessive factory hours, the millions of deaths in the Irish Potato famine, and the continued brutality of wars in the Crimea, India and Africa all undermined social and economic progress.

Much of Victorian effort was devoted to progressing the expansion of its colonial interests. Although Tennyson's *Ulysses* predates these achievements of Victorian progress, it very much embodies its spirit. Superficially, Ulysses' desire to "sail beyond the sunset" (l. 60) indicates a restlessness reflective of many Victorians who sought to explore new lands and new thoughts and ideas.

On the surface, it might seem that *Ulysses* with its classical associations with Homer and Dante may have little to say about Victorian colonialism. Pettigrew however points out that Tennyson's *Ulysses* combines elements from both Homer and Dante. For example, although Homer's *Ulysses* yearns for home and Dante's *Ulisso* hates it; Tennyson's *Ulysses* synthesises a more complex and ambiguous position. Our first encounter with Tennyson's *Ulysses* (l. 1-5) reveals a deep dissatisfaction with home characterised by "a still hearth, among these barren crags" amongst "a savage race" that "know not me". He finds no solace in Penelope either, being "matched with an aged wife" (l. 3) in alignment with the Victorian notion of the subservience of a wife to the husband's achievements. (Tennyson's *Ulysses* sadly contains little suggestion of Victorian feminist progress). These elements are derived from the sarcastic, sinning *Ulisso* of Dante. *Ulysses'* deep dissatisfaction extends to his son, Telemachus too. Pettigrew recognises the critics' disparate views that "Ulysses wisely leaves work for which he is unsuited to a son whose merits he well recognises, while others stress Ulysses' dereliction of duty, and find contempt and scorn in his attitude to Telemachus" (p. 39). Once more Tennyson presents complexity rather than simplicity.

Rowlinson (1992, p. 267) similarly sees important colonialist parallels with *Ulysses'* relation to his subjects. As *Ulysses* hands over control to Telemachus "to make a mild / A rugged people and through soft degrees / Subdue them..." (ll. 36-38) *Ulysses* sets himself apart in terms of class and racially and culturally. Effectively he is the colonial administrator passing the people of Ithaca into the hands of his successor, Telemachus. Later in the same essay, Rowlinson wavers as to whether Ithaca is really *Ulysses'* home, or whether it is "already marginal, or savage?" (p. 268) and thus whether *Ulysses'* motivation is his dislike of the idleness he finds at home ("To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!" (l. 24)), or his desire for conquest ("drunk delight of battle with my peers", (l. 16) and desire for travel, new knowledge and experience ("To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought." (l. 31-32)). Later in life, Tennyson was a clear supporter of Victorian colonialism, as shown in his works, such as the epilogue to the *Idylls of the King*, entitled "To the Queen", published in 1873, and in which, as Rowlinson points out, Tennyson rebukes the argument that Britain should give up its military presence in Canada because it is too costly" (Rowlinson, 1992, p. 268).

The problem with associating *Ulysses* with a Victorian thirst for colonialism and imperialism is that it precedes both of these developments. British Imperialism only came into being in the mid-19th century as took direct rule in India in 1858 and started making acquisitions in Africa and Asia. Rowlinson clearly articulates this paradox, saying “*Ulysses* is a text that dates from before... British imperialism, and yet seems peculiarly to speak to and about the twilight of that imperialism” (p. 270). Rowlinson provides a deeply unsatisfactory resolution to this paradox by suggesting that Tennyson’s poetry metonymically exchanges beginnings and endings – an explanation which seems just a rhetorical sleight of hand.

It seems more reasonable to take the view, as does Pettigrew, that Tennyson had no conscious thought of societal progress in writing *Ulysses*. Rather, Tennyson was finding expression for the complex thoughts that Hallam’s death had provoked in his mind. In concluding *Ulysses* with the lines: “Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (ll. 69-70) Pettigrew says Tennyson “reveals a great deal more than a man going forward and braving the struggle of life...death is associated not with Ithaca...but the world beyond it and with the voyage” (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 42). This is the core thinking behind the Victorian idea of progress. Although in 1833 Tennyson had little idea of the material assets that such progress would later bring in Victorian England, the feelings and complexities he encapsulated in *Ulysses*’ situation came to represent the driving force that compelled the progress of the Victorian era.

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The Inevitability of Death - Friend or Foe of the Poet?

More than 100 billion humans have walked on the surface of the planet. Ninety-five per cent of them have since died. So, it would seem reasonable that the poets in the remaining five per cent would have had seen enough examples of death, to have some handle on how to write about that subject. Since “Poetry is a way of taking life by the throat” (Frost) we might also hope poetry to be similarly pugnaciously about revealing our relationship with death. In investigating this possibility, this essay considers three different poets’ perspectives on death.

In *Ulysses*, Tennyson constructs a poem of contrasts, of indecision, reflection which eventually resolves to a call to action. The form and content of the poem are a sequence of oppositions: far away adventure versus idleness at home, heroic achievement or weary resignation, internal strength of mind, or the external decay of the body with age. Iambic pentameter gives the poem a strong momentum, but this is contrasted and opposed by the trochaic substitutions (e.g., “Much have I seen and known; cities of men / And manners, climates, councils, governments” (ll. 12-13)) and the periodic inclusion of spondees (e.g., “The long day wanes: the slow moon climbs: the deep / Moans round with many voices” (Ricks, 2007, ll. 55-56)). This slows and interrupts the rhythm, reinforcing the sense of reflection and indecision in Ulysses’ mind and together with the use of enjambment also adds to the sense of his restlessness (Ostriker, 1967).

Opposition is also found in Ulysses’ state of mind. He is shown as being noble and an admirable orator in stanzas two and four, but equally ignoble and indecisive in stanzas one and three. As Pettigrew notes, Tennyson uses a shift from private soliloquy in the first two paragraphs, to public dramatic monologue in the poem’s second half (from l. 44) – this also adds a sense of uncertainty (Pettigrew, 1963, p. 42). Trapped by his political and domestic situation, Ulysses is being held in a mental prison on Ithaca, from where he contemplates the potential of physical and mental freedom (“To sail beyond the sunset, and the baths / Of all the western stars, until I die.” (ll. 60-61)). Out of the many complex interpretations of Ulysses’ state of mind and intent that the poem offers, one plausible interpretation is that Tennyson is expressing his admiration for the heroic qualities of a life of adventure, and that even though we may be fading towards death “made weak by time and fate”, the point of life is in the experiences we gain, so we should always continue “to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield” (ll. 69-70).

Dylan Thomas’s work has a strong vein of lyricism and intense emotion that suggests that Thomas has more in common with Tennyson than might be expected. Undoubtedly more modern than Tennyson, Thomas’s poetry is nevertheless more difficult to classify. It has a romanticism that seems slightly out of place, compared to the analytical austerity of Auden and the melancholic bluntness of Larkin. In *Ulysses* Tennyson is primarily concerned with what to do in life before death. Thomas, on the other hand, in *Do not go gentle into that good night* is much more preoccupied with the immediacy of death, rather than the past life. Both Thomas and Tennyson recognise the inevitability of death, and both recognise that death can be challenged, that struggling against death is both a valiant and human reaction. For Tennyson, death should be faced with strength and power like the great heroes of old. But Dylan’s poem is more about the act of dying rather than the life before it. This isn’t a poem about triumphing, achieving victory over death. Unlike Ulysses who is pondering his final

choices for the last phase of his life, *Do not go gentle into that good night*" is not about whether or not to die, but how to face that inevitable moment.

In each stanza of Thomas's poem, a different type of man looks back at his life, often expressing regret at what they did not do. The wise man (stanza two), who is a teacher or scholar, worries that his "words had forked no lightning". Tennyson's *Ulysses* has no such regrets and is happy to pass his domestic responsibilities to his son, and simply seek further exploration and adventure. In a sense, *Ulysses*, simply cannot acknowledge the thing that Thomas is so closed focused on – the inevitable end of all adventures.

While Tennyson has a static speaker, located somewhat ambiguously between soliloquy and dramatic monologue, reflection and rhetoric. Thomas's speaker on the other hand employs a constantly vigorous exhortative style. The choice of the villanelle form, with its inherent repetition, gives great impetus to the poem. The repeated refrains ""Do not go gentle into that good night" and "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" impose a sense of inexorable progression. The repeated pattern of A and B rhymes required by a villanelle, (the A rhymes are "night," "light," "right," "bright," "flight," "sight," and "height"; The B rhymes are "they," "day," "bay," "way," "gay," and "pray") also push the poem forward with increasing momentum. The overall effect is a sense of the inevitable rush towards death. The horror of death is further highlighted by the fact Villanelles traditionally often deals with pastoral, natural, or simple themes. Death too is natural process, but hardly pastoral and the unusual use of the form highlights the horror of the subject. The repeated refrain echoes the way in which we focus on grief and death. We only die once, but we often think about it throughout our lives.

Approximately half the lines in *Do not go gently into that goodnight* employ enjambment. Thomas is particularly adept with this technique, using it to add to the pace of the poem (and making us again think of rushing headlong towards death). The sometimes unexpected conclusion of the enjambment as in "Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight/Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay." (ll. 13-14) adds to the drama. The first line suggests that near death we can look back on our lives and see with extreme clarity. But instead of telling us what we may see, Thomas twists the meaning in the next line, suggesting that if you really do lose your physical eyesight in old, this does not prevent the vision of your past being clearly seen in your own memory (such memories "blaze" in our blind eyes).

Turning now to Philip Larkin who has been wonderfully aptly called "Britain's most miserable genius" (Booth, 2015) we find a poet who seems to have a permanent preoccupation with death and this is reflected in much of his poetry:

Larkin's was the purest of lyric sensibilities: always here, always now. He was touched deeply only by the existential fundamentals: love, death, and "being alive, in the flesh": "the million-petalled flower of being here". His fear of extinction is harrowing: "Not to be here, / Not to be anywhere, / And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true." (Booth, 2015),

Aubade (Larkin, 1977) is one of Larkin's last poems, and relates how the poet, waking in the morning to "soundless dark", is gripped by the horrifying thought he is "a whole day nearer now" to his own death, even though he cannot say when or where he will die. So powerful is this thought, it makes his mind go completely blank – the poet's mind is simply terrified by the thought of his own death and the "sure extinction" it promises.

As in *Ulysses* and *Do not go gently into that goodnight*, *Aubade* is essentially written in iambic pentameter. Its five stanzas of ten lines uses a regular rhyme scheme: ABABCCDDEED. Like the other two poems it also makes use of the common devices of

enjambment, caesura, simile and metaphor. The iambic metre is broken up - for instance the adjacent unstressed syllables of the anapaestic foot: "Of dying, and being dead," (l. 9) and the two dactylic feet in "Not to be anywhere" (l. 19). Having analysed the nature of his own fear of death, the poem returns to the dawning of the day. The 'Aubade' of the title finally seems justified. A new day is dawning, and the poet returns to the humdrum world of the everyday. None of this sounds particularly unusual or outstanding innovative, but the execution of these literary devices is nevertheless expertly done. Does Larkin's poem therefore add to our insight into death?

Seamus Heaney, who "recognizes, as perhaps no other critic does, the magnitude of Larkin's accomplishment[s]" (Cavanagh, 2002, p. 185-186) surprisingly thinks *Aubade* sets a bad example, saying "it reveals a poet in a state of arrested vision: Larkin ... sees nothing beyond nature but an absence. ... he cannot take into sufficient account what human beings have in themselves to counter that void" (p. 187). Memorably, Heaney says Larkin "does not hold the lyre up in the face of the gods of the underworld" (Heaney, 1995, p. 158).

So, we have returned, in a sense, to *Ulysses* and the lyricism of the words of Tennyson and of Homer before him. It seems in writing about death, every poet unsurprisingly takes a different personal perspective, and indeed poets will even happily criticise the value they see in other each other's perspectives. Perhaps then, when reading their works, we should worry less about what the poet's personal intentions were, but we should simply concentrate on how we respond as readers. Maybe it would even be better, from the reader's perspective, if the poet's name as omitted from the poem. Or would that be one death too many?

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A Reflection on 'Reading Leaves' by Jane Sprackland

Jean Sprackland is an English poet and writer. She is the author of five collections of poetry and two books of essays about place and nature. Born in 1962 and originally from Burton upon Trent, Jean Sprackland studied English and Philosophy at the University of Kent at Canterbury, before starting to write poetry at age 30. She is now Professor of Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her first poetry collection was shortlisted for the 1998 Forward Poetry Prize, and her second collection, Hard Water, was included in the 2003 T.S. Eliot Prize shortlist.

Reading Leaves is from this second collection (Sprackland, 2003) and can be found at:
<https://poetryarchive.org/poem/reading-leaves/>

This poem is rooted in the mundane, domestic, urban landscape of everyday life. Yet somehow it also expresses our desire to be elsewhere, to find a more unknown exotic, expansive experience. This is a poem about place and belonging, the local and the foreign, the anxiety of the journey between, and the doubt and uncertainty of arrival. As in the poems in the Hard Water collection, Sprackland uses a rich, textured physical language combined with a subtle humour to turn the familiar landscape of everyday life into something more mysterious and compelling, something beautiful, but with dark overtones, troubling and anxious.

The hedged lawn and dustbins of the first stanza place us somewhere in a comfortable suburban landscape, gazing at the alien red leaves blown onto the grass. The association of blood with the red of the leaves suggests the injection of new life into the scene. Perhaps then these are not the red, desiccated leaves of autumn, but something more optimistic, more life affirming. The mention of a generous sky and exotic parrots adds to the sense of optimism, the idea of life expanding into new possibilities. The narrator is prompted by these feelings to go in search of source of the leaves - of the source of new experience.

She initially follows the comfortable “scent of warmth and plenty” but soon finds herself in a more uncertain environment. Through her eyes we see the side effects of people’s existence, in the “boarded up shops” and the “stump of a roundabout” but not the actual people themselves. The landscape is populated by the ghosts in our imagination, evoking the thought that the city, although populated, is in some way empty of life. The narrator carries her leaf as a guarantee, but surely this is more of a passport, a guarantee of safe passage perhaps, or more likely, a guarantee of a transition to the possibilities of a new world. But if it is a guarantee, then what is it a guarantee to, and who provides that guarantee? It certainly does not seem to be the people of the city. The narrator questions a young mother – but we are not explicitly told what the question is. Presumably the narrator is enquiring whether the mother knows where the red leaves come from. But the mother declines to answer, simply redirecting the narrator: “Try the bloke in the hat – he’s not from round here, either”. The ambiguity of the ‘either’ adds to the uncertainty of the situation. Does the young mother mean she’s also not from here? Or that she recognises that the narrator is not a local either? Or is it the leaves in the question that are not from her either? The ‘either’ dislocates our sense of certainty about the scenes that unfold before our eyes. This is just one example of how Sprackland makes every individual word work hard in her text.

In the third stanza the old man examines the narrator's leaf, but although he speaks, we do not hear his words. His advice is opaque to us. Indeed we do not even know whether or not he gives advice. The poem reaches no conclusion about where the leaves come from, or even their purpose. Perhaps the reader's journey does end in some sort of satisfying way, with the pleasure of the alliteration of the last line - "settling like rumours on his boots, the bench, the broken ground", but there is no glib answer to the purpose of the journeys of the leaves or the narrator. The leaves it turns out, may well be travellers, but they are just like rumours, and we cannot be certain if they do or do not carry truth and meaning. We realise that the leaves are perhaps a metaphor for ourselves. Blown by circumstance, burnished and shining colourfully, but destined inevitably to fall and decay. Then again, maybe the leaves are simply the leaves of autumn, and as they fall on the broken ground, they are ending their journey, ready to decay and return to the earth, ready to feed the next generation of trees. Maybe too that is the fate of this entire landscape. The sense of anxiety and uncertainty of the second stanza remains in our minds at the end.

This is a poem about place and belonging, the local and the foreign, and the journey between. In Strickland's landscape the inhabitants are dimly illustrated persona, who are just passing through, hardly touching or affecting their surroundings. Is it coincidental that this poem is about leaves and the narrator leaves their locale, to search for the source of the leaves? Perhaps that it is one word play too many. But certainly, the poem is about the local and the foreign. The red leaves invade the narrator's lawn, but she welcomes them, seeing them as a currency from a foreign land, and quite different land to her own. She seeks their source, desiring not perhaps the material wealth of the current land ('the land of plenty'), but rather seeking the richness of experience it might bring – an exoticism, a generosity. The narrator seeks not the destination of the leaves (though that is what she eventually finds) but their source. It is with optimism that she travels from the wealth and warmth of her locality into the more desolate and damaged landscape of the playground and the roundabout. But she finds no answers in her destination, but the possibilities of new experience, a renewal from the red blood of the leaves, is offered in the rumours they bring. Or maybe there is pessimism too, as the leaves, exhausted, fall to the ground, their rumours unfounded, the future uncertain.

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A Reflection on 'The Way' by Rae Armantrout

A strange and puzzling poem. On a first reading, the poem seems to be a sequence of disjoint descriptions or statements. It has no narrative thread or obvious subject. It is not clear if it represents a single narrator, or multiple ones. It contains only three sentences (though the last sentence does not have a terminated full stop). The stanza layout seems rather odd, with line breaks in unexpected places, and sentences spanning stanzas. Does it have a meaning and if so what is that meaning?

Here are my thoughts in response to a first reading:

In an interview, Armantrout discusses some aspects of the process of creating *The Way* (Armantrout, 2013). The first four stanzas are, it turns out, words she collected in her notebook as part of her daily experiences: “the first half of the poem are really different voices, different snippets of my world juxtaposed”. She goes on to say that the second half of the poem is “more personal or in a coded way autobiographical” indicating it “is a sort of version, I guess, of my experience of being read to as a child.” The poem thus embodies two forms, an initial found poem of four stanzas and then a personal statement in the last two stanzas.

When asked about the use of short lines and odd line breaks, Armantrout suggests this is a reaction to her early experiences of poetry in regular iambic pentameter:

...that's something that I often, you know, puzzle about and wonder if I do the best job at. Sometimes I do it for sound reasons, you know, for rhythm reasons. Sometimes I do it to cry, sort of build up a certain suspense. I don't like it when you can really see what's coming. If you can get any kind of surprise into the next line, I think that's best.

Disappointingly, the interview ends without any discussion of the ‘gasp’ of the last stanza or the strange use of quotes around the last two words. But then of course, it is perhaps unreasonable for us to expect poets to explain their work in great detail. A poet’s job is to create, not to explain, just as an artist’s job is to place colour on the canvas, not to say what the colour represents.

There is an online reading of this poem by Armantrout. I had hoped it might give some clues as to the intent of her use of line breaks and the quoted last two words, but, at least to my ears, Armantrout makes no special use of these notations in her reading. Aurally it is as if the line breaks are not there (or are just the tiniest of pauses) and there is no special inflection on the last two words of the last stanza. Paradoxically, Armantrout inserts a longer pause between “upon” and “again” than she uses between the odd line breaks 3,4,5 and 6.

So, for me, this poem remains a puzzle. Obviously that doesn’t make it a bad poem. Poetry need not be transparent, particularly modern poetry. I feel the key to the poem is the relationship between the first four stanzas and the last two, between the white noise of the

found poem, and the personal statement of the last two. My assumption is that Armantrout did not make random choices in selecting the material for the first four stanzas. They must add context to the last two. But at present, I don't know what that context is. As I said, I don't regard this as a bad thing though. This is not a poem that you only read once, and you are then done. There are already enough poems about daffodils and fluffy white clouds in that category. I think a certain amount of opacity, intrigue, ambiguity, uncertainty and use of unexpected perspectives is essential in modern poetry and adds a longevity to the reader's experience of the poem. But I do wonder if, in *The Way*, that Armantrout has gone a step too far and provided a puzzle that can never be unlocked. That indeed would be disappointing.

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The Portrayal of the Private Sphere in Literature: 1500-1815

As an example of a 'site of national historic formation' (Austen, 2004 p. xvi) Lynch takes the view that Austen's *Persuasion* is not just the personal story of Anne Elliott but that 'Austen takes pains to lodge the story of Anne's recovery of happiness in the interstices of the historical record so that it is framed on both sides by great public events' (p. xvii). This essay examines what Lynch means by 'a site of national historical formation' and how authors use different representations of the private sphere to illuminate the broader historical contexts that their characters inhabit.

When describing the lives of their characters an author is not only telling a story but is also commenting, directly or indirectly, on the society in which the characters' story is told. These characters always have a societal context to their actions, concerns, thoughts and motivations. Inevitably therefore, the novel tells us something about the author's view of that society. By telling their story, the author also contributes to a body of documentation that characterises the state of the nation at that time (a 'site of national historic formation'). For example, In *Persuasion*, Austen writes about England (her own nation) during the Napoleonic wars (her own times).

The thesis of this essay is that all authors provide such representations, either directly or indirectly. An author may consciously choose to do so because of their personal motivations, or they may do so unconsciously as a side effect of the process of creating their poem, drama or novel. Still, it is an inevitable outcome of the author's work that their characters will in some way document the world the author has placed them in. Such a broad thesis is difficult to address in a relatively short essay, given the heterogeneous nature of the poetic, dramatic and prose works written in the period 1500 to 1800. The approach here will be to select two widely differing works, and thus show this thesis has general application. But before doing this, it is helpful to examine what Lynch meant by 'a site of national historical formation'.

The private sphere is the domestic realm inhabited by ordinary people where 'complex interactions between individual lives and larger social structures' are navigated (Austen, 2004, p. xvi). Activities in the private sphere might be expected to occur in such private spaces as drawing rooms, shared country walks, bedrooms and carriage rides while other spaces such as churches, Parliament, the Assembly Rooms and the army camp are often the location of the public sphere. The distinction can however be blurred; for example, the public house or the village street can often be found at the border between the private and the public. It is not the author's literature itself that is Lynch's 'site of national historic formation', but the author's portrayal of that private sphere within the author's work.

Two widely differing authors and their works will now be considered: Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Lady Montagu's *The Turkish Embassy Letters*. Shakespeare was a commercially successful professional author, writing for a mostly public audience. In 1590s Elizabethan London, in a single day, more than a thousand people a day might experience a play such as *Julius Caesar* in 'a socially mixed audience' at the Rose Theatre (Astington, 2001, p. 111-112). Therefore, Shakespeare carefully selected his themes and subject material to meet the 'demands of a playgoing public and compete for an audience with material offered by rival playing companies' (p. 112). On the other hand, Montagu's epistolary work is a collection of personal correspondence 'with other aristocratic women in England and with a number of prominent literary men' (Heffernan and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 13). Montagu on the

other hand, wrote for a narrow social stratum with no intent of financial gain, and her work was only published more widely after her death. Montagu and Shakespeare, therefore, have entirely different authorial motivations. However, their character's private spheres both provide us with considerable illumination of the historical concerns of their times.

During this period, the literature of social comment was very much the currency of polite culture and the society of the powerful and the wealthy. Much of Lady Montagu's letters are relevant to the role of the female, not only within the public institution of marriage and family but also within sexual relationships, a supposedly private act laden with public meaning. Her letters provide a discourse that is initially private (or at least limited to a small set of friends and correspondents) but is eventually made public after her death and which illuminates her personal views of the public issues of ownership of women within social structures such as marriage, consent, misogyny and freedom.

In letter 36, in May 1717, Montagu writes to the Abbe Conti and discusses two Turkish religious practices which she finds 'so odd to me I could not believe it' (p. 143). The first relates to divorce:

Yet 'tis certainly true that when a man has divorced his wife in the most solemn manner, he can take her again upon no other terms than permitting another man to pass a night with her, and there are some examples of those that have submitted to this law rather than not have back their beloved.

(p. 144)

This is not the full story, as there are at least three types of divorce in Islamic law. However, Montagu, chooses to describe only the most sensational option, where the divorced wife must sleep with another man, so insulting the original husband, should the original husband wish her back (Rycaut, 1668, quoted in Hall, Sagal and Zold, 2017, p. 2). Although her writing style is often factual, descriptive and apparently authoritative, it should be remembered that Montagu is using her editorial judgement in selectively describing the private and public spaces she experiences.

Montagu further notes that 'any woman that dies unmarried is looked upon to die in a state of reprobation' (Heffernan and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 144). The oriental view is that 'the creation of woman is to increase and multiply, and she is only properly employed in the works of her calling when she is bringing children or taking care of them, which are all the virtues that God expects from her' (p. 144). Here, Montagu is providing her readers and indeed future generations significant anthropological value. She shows how belief systems affect customs such as marriage and social responses to death. The elderly spinster or widow is a valid social and religious position in Montagu's western world, but in the Oriental women, 'many ...will not remain widows ten days for fear of dying in the reprobate state of a useless creature' (p. 144). Montagu also states:

Our vulgar notion that they do not own women to have any souls is a mistake. 'Tis true they say they are not of so elevated a kind and therefore must not hope to be admitted into the paradise appointed for the men, who are to be entertained by celestial beauties; but there is a place of happiness destined for souls of the inferior order, where all good women are to be in eternal bliss.

Montagu is correct in disagreeing with the westerner's perception of the oriental view of soulless women. This is confirmed by the Qur'an which states that women and not just men will enter Paradise: 'I will deny no man or woman among you the reward of their labours. You are the offspring of one another' (The Qur'an, 2021, 3:195) and 'Enter Paradise, you and your spouses, in all delight' (43:70).

Montagu emphasises her detailed appreciation of the difference between the two societies saying: 'This is a piece of theology very different from that which teaches nothing to be more acceptable to God than a vow of perpetual virginity'. She graciously allows the Abbot to reach his own conclusions about this practice, saying, 'Which divinity is most rational I leave you to determine' (Heffernan and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 144).

In these early examples of travel writing, Montagu thus reports and corrects established opinions, although in this case she simplifies (or perhaps is not fully aware) the rules; she adds her personal opinions and evaluations and even acts as a humorous raconteur, joking about her reluctance to teach divinity to her friend, the Abbot.

Montagu's letters challenge previous masculine descriptions of the Orient and form a 'critical space for feminism' thereby indirectly advocating increased freedom, autonomy and rights for women in her own Western society (Dadabhoy, 2014, p. 53). In doing so, Montagu takes the role of educator; for example, when writing to Lady Rich:

Your whole letter is full of mistakes... taken your ideas of Turkey from that worthy author Dumont, who has writ with equal ignorance and confidence. They never fail giving you an account of the women, which 'tis certain they never saw, and talking very wisely of the genius of the men, into whose company they are never admitted...

(Heffernan and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 148).

Indeed, as Melman suggests, Montagu has better access and certainly has more feminine empathy with the female Orient. Her work must be seen as more authentic than her male contemporaries (Melman, 1995, p. 129). In her visit to the Turkish bath at Sophia Montagu notes that the "veiled daughters of the Prophet enjoyed some privileges denied their Christian sisters ... In short, 'tis the Women's Coffee house where all the news of the Town is told, Scandal invented etc" (Hufstader, 1978, p. 44 cited in Ozdalga and Amanat, 2015, p. 7).

The conflation of the oriental feminine bathhouse with the exclusively male western coffee house is a subtle criticism of the non-existence of a similar public place for British women. Montagu retains her Western clothes which are seen by the naked Oriental ladies to be a 'cage imposed on her by her husband' (Paston, 1907, p. 261). The Turkish ladies are puzzled, telling Montagu: 'you need boast indeed of the superior liberties allowed you, when they lock you thus up in a box.' (ibid). There is wry humour here, and this is a genuine exchange between East and West, where the members of both cultures try better to understand each other.

Turning now to *Julius Caesar*, a very different work by a very different author, we will see how a writer once again uses the private and public spaces of one society to illuminate the nature of another. At its heart, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* examines whether we should

transgress the laws of democracy to preserve it. The play shows how those who should do most to guard and preserve democracy in their public life, allow their private motivations to override their public duty. In a world where appearances are everything (Miles, 1989, pp. 259–61, 280–1) their actions will result in significant personal reward or untimely death. This is no different to the stresses placed on the courtiers, aristocracy and monarchy of the Tudor court. And just as the members of the Elizabethan court must keep their private thoughts and allegiances to themselves, Shakespeare's Roman characters also can only show the weakness of anxiety, fear, distrust, and jealousy in their interior lives, a place 'that Roman public life leaves no room for' (King, 2015, p. 159).

Renaissance writers took the view that the function of history was 'to teach political lessons' (Ribner, 1957, p. 10) and that in the finest specimens of historical drama, the dramatist assumed the serious role of historian. Ancient Rome permeated Elizabethan and Jacobean social imagination as 'a supreme ideal of military, political, artistic, and cultural excellence toward [to] which the present invariably moved in an unflagging striving for emulation' (Lovascio, 2017). *Julius Caesar* is just one in a sequence of Shakespeare's plays with strong concerns about the nature of monarch and the political debates of a society that had a keen interest in republican history. The year 1599 saw Shakespeare not only write *Julius Caesar* but also complete *Henry V*, *As You Like It* and draft *Hamlet*. Clearly, *Hamlet* and *Henry V* focus on the nature and means of succession. An argument can also be put forward that even *As You Like It* considered the question to what extent women could inherit kingdoms or transmit inheritance to their descendants (Hopkins, 2016, p. 155) - a highly relevant question in Elizabethan times. In the 1590s, Shakespeare was thus intensely interested in power, corruption and succession – and consequently, we can undoubtedly deduce his Elizabethan audience were equally absorbed by these topics.

While Elizabeth's heir was undoubtedly a subject of discussion in the private sphere, the public debate about the question of succession was utterly forbidden. In February 1593, Elizabeth imprisoned the puritan MP Peter Wentworth in the Tower after he had petitioned her to name a successor. As her reign drew toward its close, the situation intensified as 'the publication of any discussion of the succession had been declared an act of treason by Parliament' (de Lisle, 2006, p. 29).

How then does Shakespeare use the example of Ancient Rome, some 1700 years in the distant past to examine the constitutional questions of succession and how and on what principles the constituent countries of Britain should be ruled? Clearly, there is not a direct one to one mapping between the consuls and generals of Julius Caesar's time and the nobility and monarchy of Elizabeth I. Nevertheless, many indirect parallels would be of interest to Elizabethan audiences. For example, the question of how Caesar might seed his own dynasty of emperors given Calpurnia's infertility resonates with Shakespeare's audience's concerns about the childless Elizabeth I.

The language chosen by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* also provides crosslinks between the Roman story inside the play and the public Elizabethan space outside. For example, Elizabeth I used the symbol of the sun when writing to the Scottish Ambassador to England:

How they ever mislike the present government and has [sic] their eyes fixed upon that person that is next to succeed; and naturally men be so disposed: Plures adorant solem orientem quam occidentem [More people adore the rising sun than the setting one].

(Booth, 2013, p. 82)

The Latin quotation is from Plutarch's Life of Pompey, a work both Elizabeth I and Shakespeare knew. Like Elizabeth, Shakespeare used the sun image, but in this case, as a metaphor of the ending of power. 'Oh setting sun, as in thy red rays thou dost sink to night, / So in his red blood Cassius' day is set' (5.3.67-68). Contrast this with the celestial imagery in Caesar's declamation of his superiority in Act 3.

In this superbly arrogant diatribe (Shakespeare, 1998, 3.1.60-76), Caesar uses a different celestial metaphor: 'I am Constant as the Northern Star' (3.3.60). The opening line's regular iambic pentameter reinforces Caesar's assertion he is steady, reliable fixed place of control in a world that whirls around him. The metrical regularity of the speech is temporarily broken in 'If I could pray to move, prayers would move me' (l. 62) because Caesar is suggesting that if things were different, then 'prayers would move me'. The uncertainty of speculating about a different circumstance is enhanced by the irregularity of this line's meter. Caesar then immediately reinforces his immovability by an almost exact repetition of the opening line (3.1.63). Shakespeare uses the celestial objects of the night: even though there are other 'stars' (men) in the 'sky' (Rome), 'there's but one in all doth hold his place' (3.1.68). This night-time imagery foreshadows the assassination of Caesar when his light is extinguished and indeed the darkness that is to shortly envelope Rome. At this moment, Caesar declares himself not only the brightest but most 'constant' because he cannot be swayed by the appeals of other men. This is supremely ironic as shortly afterwards the 'unshakeable' Caesar is assassinated. Throughout this speech, as in much of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare draws on the classical techniques of rhetoric and poetry, not only for dramatic emphasis, but also as interesting wordplay entertainment for his audience. These techniques include alliteration ('constant Cimber', (3.1.75) 'fellow in the firmament (3.1.65.), epistrophe (I could be well moved,, / If I could pray to move, prayers would move me; (3.1.61-62)) and personification as Caesar strengthens his argument by saying he has more common with the star then he does with other people.

In contrast to the poetic and emotional speech of Caesar above, Shakespeare makes Brutus's words (3.2.12-35) after Ceasar's death as rhetorical and contrived as possible. Brutus argues for control and order and distances himself from Caesar's fixed star imagery by speaking in prose rather than blank verse. In

...hear me for my cause, and be silent that you may hear.
Believe me for mine honor, and have respect to mine honor that you
may believe. Censure me in your wisdom, and awake
your senses that you may the better judge'.

(3.2.14-17).

Shakespeare uses both epanalepsis and epiphora to drive home Brutus's position. In 'There is tears for his love, joy for his fortune, honor for his valor, and death for his ambition' (3.2.27-28) Shakespeare pairs 'tears' with 'love', 'joy' with 'fortune', 'honor' with 'valor' and 'death' with 'ambition' to produce a taxis, with the effect of building the power of his argument incrementally to the climax of a sequence of rhetorical questions, that effective bully the listeners into silence. But Brutus forbids an answer: 'Who is here so rude that would not be Roman?' (3.2.30-31). No one dares reply. Brutus is trying to present an argument to

say that his actions were good and honourable, with his powerful rhetoric. Still, it is a speech aimed at domination rather than consensus.

Another concern of Elizabethan public interest that is explored by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* is the Puritan belief that originates from a social body and not a dictator. The religious 'feast of Lupercal (1. 1.67) is taken over by Caesar's followers to 'rejoice in his triumph' (1.1.31). Flavius says Caesar would 'keep us in all servile fearfulness' (1.1.80) and thus undermine the manly virtues of Roman democracy. Caesar's growing power is emphasised by the use of 'trophies' and 'images' (1.1.69,70) and the conflict between Caesar's metaphorical body and the laws of Roman democracy is reinforced by images that contrast Caesar's animalistic 'feathers' with the 'view of men' that he 'soar[s] above' (1.1.73-80). Christie states, 'Shakespeare's analogy reflects how concerns surrounding the legitimacy of Caesar's authority in relation to Roman values is manifest in the relationship constructed between body, soul and law as components of Roman identity' (Christie, 2020). Christie further argues that we see in Brutus's valuation of the idea of Rome over his love for Caesar the body, soul and law as conflicting components of Roman identity in the play. In a key line in the play, Brutus declares, 'not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more' (3.2.21-21). Thus, Brutus chooses Roman law to direct his action and govern his body and soul. Shakespeare emphasises this with Mark Anthony's judgement of Brutus after his suicide: '[t]his was the noblest Roman of them all' (5.5.69).

In her introduction to *Persuasion*, Lynch proposed that the private sphere is 'a site of national historical formation' that illuminates the broader historical context inhabited by an author's characters. This essay concurs with this view and has suggested that any author must inevitably place their characters in a social, economic, religious or political context. By doing so, the author equally inevitably documents a broader view of the historical concerns of that context. This has been shown to be true in the case of authors as diverse as Shakespeare and Lady Montagu. By extension, this thesis can similarly be applied to any era.

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Jane Austen, Nature and Contentment

Romanticism is perhaps one of the harder literary terms to pin down. One of its defining elements is the ‘elevation of nature as the source of personal contentment and artistic inspiration’ (Towheed, 2015, p11). Can evidence to support this view be found in Jane Austen’s works? This essay will examine how Austen uses nature to illuminate her novels’ themes, how nature affects her characters’ personal contentment and what this tells us about Austen’s relation to Romanticism.

Austen letters show that she had strong views on nature’s influence on men and women. Arriving in London from the countryside in August 1796 she wrote: ‘Here I am once more in this scene of dissipation and vice, and I begin already to find my morals corrupted’ (Austen, na, letter II) and on May 20th, 1813, after travelling to Godmersham Park, she praised her return to nature: ‘I was very much pleased with the country in general. Between Guildford and Ripley I thought it particularly pretty, … at Esher, which we walked into before dinner, the views were beautiful’ (Austen, na, letter XLIII). At other times, she seems less in favour of living within the natural world - in November of the same year she wrote: ‘An inclination for the country is a venial fault. He [William] has more of Cowper than of Johnson in him, — fonder of tame hares and blank verse than of the full tide of human existence at Charing Cross’ (Austen, na, letter LI). Perhaps she is being ironic.

Her characters also show a similar variability. Although Sir Walter Elliot views ‘the greatest blessings of existence are beauty and a baronetcy’ (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, p. 193) Sir Walter is admiring personal not natural beauty, as evidenced by his room of full-length looking glasses. Austen uses this self-admiration to deprecate Elliot’s lack of interest in the natural world. In contrast, the central characters of Austen’s novels have a much more sympathetic view of the Romantic sublimity of nature and certainly in *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion* seek contentment and inspiration within it.

In *Persuasion*, the visit to Lyme Regis provides a strong Romantic underpinning to the story. On reaching Lyme, the first priority of the party from Uppercross is to ensure they have accommodation and an evening meal. Once their physical needs are assured, rather than resting from their tedious and tiring journey, ‘the next thing to be done was unquestionably to walk directly down to the sea’ (Austen, 2004, p. 80) – the dramatic and sublime nature of their new environment is irresistible as the party seek to address their emotional and intellectual hunger. Once they see the sea, they immediately feel a sense of fulfilment: ‘as all must linger and gaze on a first return to the sea’ (p. 80). Their behaviour fits well to the model of Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943, pp. 370–396), as once they have established their physiological and safety needs will be met, the party is happy to devote effort in satisfying their higher-level needs of love/beauty, esteem and self-actualisation. Austen is depicting a surprisingly accurate psychological profile here - her characters seek personal contentment and artistic inspiration conditional once their more immediate physical needs are satisfied. This model can be found throughout Austen’s works. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Charlotte deprioritises her emotional and romantic contentment to ensure her more basic needs are met when she explains to Elizabeth, ‘I’m not a romantic, you know. I never was. I ask only a comfortable home’ (Austen, 2019, p. 95). And in *Persuasion*, Anne is persuaded not to marry Wentworth because his poverty, lack of social rank and connections made him an unsuitable choice to provide her with physical security and

sustenance. As a consequence, she suffers eight years of wretchedness until he returns as a wealthy and socially recognised Captain and they can finally unite.

In depicting nature and the scenery around Charmouth and Lyme Austen uses a sensory narrative voice. Her choice of: 'green chasms between romantic rocks' evokes a sense of awesome, untamed grandeur. Her observation that 'many generations must have passed this way since the first partial falling off the cliff' (Austen, 2004, p. 81) underlines the timelessness of the scene and its indifference to the passing of human generations. Austen is linking the processes of nature and the effect these can have on the human mind: 'the happiest spot for watching the flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearyed flow of the tide, for sitting in unwearyed contemplation' (p. 80). In this way Austin directly connects aesthetic appreciation and moral sensibility suggesting that 'these places must be visited and visited again, to make the worth of Lyme understood' (p. 81).

While the direct and fulsome description of nature and place in Austen's novels is rather infrequent, when this does occur then the characters' emotional responses in the scene are highly significant. For example, the depth of description of the scenery and locale at Charmouth is particularly important in *Persuasion*. The Uppercross party are no longer in their pleasant, comfortable (and undoubtedly beautiful) home environment, but in a novel and dramatic new environment, where new possibilities, opportunities and events may be expected to come to pass. It is in this environment that Anne shows Wentworth her true nature and he comes to a new appreciation of her.

In a similar way, in *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth finds herself in the novel, dramatic environment of Pemberley, which then illuminates a new perception of Darcy to her. Although Austen tantalisingly provides the opportunity of introducing the sublime and Romantic landscape of the Lakes to Elizabeth and her companions on their northern trip, she immediately removes this possibility by curtailing the itinerary to the Peak District. And indeed even the lesser, but still spectacular grandeur of the Peaks receives short shrift from Austen: 'It is not the object of this work to give a description of Derbyshire, nor of any of the remarkable places through which their route thither lay' (Austen, 2019, p. 179). Instead the action moves swiftly to 'the little town of Lambton, the scene of Mrs. Gardiner's former residence'. Within a single sentence Austen moves Elizabeth and her party the 170 miles from Longbourne, through Oxford, Blenheim, Warwick, Kenelworth, Birmingham to Lambton (p. 179), discarding all of the great natural landscapes on the way. Nature's beauty is only important to Austen if it serves her purpose in describing her characters' actions and emotional state. In *Persuasion*, Austen uses Pemberley as a turning point in the novel. Initially Elizabeth felt disinterested in Pemberley and by association, Darcy: '... she had no business at Pemberley and was obliged to assume a disinclination for seeing it. She must own that she was tired of great houses; after going over so many, she really had no pleasure in fine carpets or satin curtains' (p. 179). Once Elizabeth is presented with the view of Pemberley however, she starts to form a different opinion. She sees 'a large, handsome, stone building, standing well on rising ground, and backed by a ridge of high woody hills; – and in front, a stream of some natural importance was swelled into greater, but without any artificial appearance' (p. 181). This environment has a strong effect: 'Elizabeth was delighted. She had never seen a place for which nature had done more, or where natural beauty had been so little counteracted by an awkward taste' (p. 181).

Elizabeth's discovery has a transformative effect on her view of what she might become if she were attached to Darcy: 'she felt that to be mistress of Pemberley might be something!'

(p. 181). Here Austen moves from a descriptive third-party narrative point of view when describing the inanimate house and natural surroundings to the more intimate mode of Elizabeth's indirect discourse to convey Elizabeth's emotional response to the estate any by association, to Darcy. While some commentators take this somewhat further, e.g., 'she reads good government, even erotic attraction, out of this information', (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, p. 119) this seems a step too far. Elizabeth merely says: 'In what an amiable light does this place him!' (Austen, 2019, p. 184) and it is hard to read a sexual undercurrent into such a straightforward statement.

Before seeing Pemberley, Elizabeth views Darcy as arrogant and aloof. From the very beginning of their acquaintance she determines: 'His character was decided. He was the proudest, most disagreeable man in the world, and everybody hoped he would never come there again' (p. 9). Her view of Pemberley starts the process by which Elizabeth realises the possible pleasures and satisfactions of a union with Darcy, and which concludes when Elizabeth learns of Darcy intervention with Wickham. Austen elegantly and meaningfully segues from Elizabeth's gaze on the house to a gaze upon its owner: 'Elizabeth turned back to look again [at the house], the owner of it himself suddenly came forward' (p. 185). The house and its natural environment thus mediates and reinvigorates the relationship between Elizabeth and Darcy.

Walking and experiencing the landscape was a staple of Austen's life. Austen-Leigh identifies nature as the "cradle" of his aunt's "genius and suggesting that "strolls along those wood-walks, thick-coming fancies" where the stimulus to her imagination and which her intellect then brought under control in her novels' (Austen, 2019, p. 24–6).

In *Persuasion* Anne, delights in nature on the walk to Winthrop, recalling the 'last smiles of the year upon the tawny leaves and withered hedges, and ... that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness.' (Austen, 2019, p. 71). This is eight years after Anne's parting with Wentworth and Anne recalls such poetry to illuminate her own feelings of melancholy:

'repeating to herself some few of the thousand poetical descriptions extant of autumn, that season of peculiar and inexhaustible influence on the mind of taste and tenderness, that season which has drawn from every poet, worthy of being read, some attempt at description, or some lines of feeling'.

(p.71).

Such walking contemplation, used as an aid to reflection on the human relation to nature, is in the tradition of The Reveries of the Solitary Walker (1782), or of Wordsworth in the foundation text for English romantic verse, Lyrical Ballads (1798). Austen also draws on other nascent Romantics such as Charlotte Smith (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, p. 193). Smith's volumes of Elegiac Sonnets (first published in 1784) contain the voice of a melancholy speaker who muses on the natural scenery and her emotions. Critical opinion thus sees Austen drawing upon this melancholy: 'Motifs from many of Smith's novels appear extensively in Austen's work' (Magee 1975). In particular, Smith's focus on the melancholy mind in Celestina (1791) provokes a response in *Sense and Sensibility* and a further consideration in *Persuasion*' (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, p. 193).

Austen also relates to the Romantic landscape in *Persuasion* by describing the waves at the Cobb as ‘Lord Byron’s “dark blue seas”’ (Austen, 2004, p. 91). This phrase comes from Byron’s *The Corsair*: ‘O'er the glad waters of the dark-blue sea, Our thoughts as boundless, and our souls as free’ (Byron, 1814, Canto I, l. 1-2). Curiously, when writing to her sister Cassandra about two years earlier, Austen seems quite diffident to Byron’s efforts: ‘I have read the “*Corsair*,” mended my petticoat, and have nothing else to do.’ (Austen, na, letter LXXI). Harris suggests Austen’s allusions to Byron are ‘not just satirical: they affect characterization and signal affinity’ (Harris, 2007, p. 156). Together with Knox-Shaw, Harris also notes:

Byronic motifs such as “leaps, strong supporting arms, and ‘lifeless’ forms,” associates Louisa’s self-will and nervous prostration with that of Byron’s antiheroine Gulnare and observes Byronic negatives in the scene that “summon the unrealizable” for instance in “There was no wound, no blood, no visible bruise, but her eyes were closed, she breathed not, her face was like death. — The horror of that moment to all who stood around!” (Harris, 2007, p156).

While superficially plausible this critical view does not bear detailed examination. Byron’s Gulnare is a slave girl, who Conrad saves from the burning seraglio, and who thus falls for him and offers to help him escape his imprisonment. Gulnare is both much lower caste and more resourceful and proactive than the rather socially constrained, impetuous and unthinking Louise. It hardly therefore seems a fair comparison. Harris goes on to say that *The Corsair* ‘calls upon ideas of freedom to justify imperial expansion’ (p. 156) and notes the fact that ‘the “dark blue sea” occurs twice more in the first two cantos of Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage*’ (p. 156). Harris then uses the nationalistic themes he finds in these poems to assert ‘Byron applies Romantic notions of liberty and energy to the national enterprise itself. No wonder Austen, with her two sailor brothers, calls upon Byron in her novel about the navy’ (p. 157). While the presence of Captain Wentworth and Captain Benwick in *Persuasion* provides Austen with ample opportunity to explore the beauty and terror of the naval adventures in a truly Romantically sublime land and seascape, she chooses not to do this. Hers is not the manly world of C.S. Forester’s *Horatio Hornblower*. Austen’s persistent focus is on the social rules and manners of her day and how they affect her female protagonists. The Romantic sublime for Austen is hidden in the social behaviour of her drawing rooms, her town and country houses, and the balls and excursions of their occupants.

While it is certainly possible Austen admired *The Corsair* and intended it to add, by association, a little frisson of Romantic exoticism to the scene at the Cobb, it may also be that she re-used Byron’s ‘dark blue waves’ simply because she just liked it. Given that, in her letter, she dismissively placed *The Corsair* in the same sentence as her sewing duties she may have even viewed *The Corsair* as one of Byron’s sillier poems (a view taken by Cochran (na)) and was not intending to directly draw parallels with it at all.

Austen’s works distance themselves from the sentimental novels of the 18th century and are part of the bridge to 19th century literary realism. Austen rejected the style and genre of sentimentalists such as Scott, Walpole, Radcliffe and Goldsmith. Walter Scott himself noted Austen’s ‘resistance to the trashy sensationalism of much modern fiction’ (Keymer, 2014, p21). Austen returned to the tradition of Richardson and Fielding for a ‘realistic study of manners’ (Grundy, 2014, p. 196). Although *Northanger Abbey* flirts with Gothic fiction with its possibilities of the sublime landscapes, castles and abbeys, Austen eschews such escapism in her later works. Instead Austen imprisons her heroines in the social rules and manners of

the elegant rooms of watering places and gentlefolks' residences. Austen's sublime is the southern English counties and contains a much gentler rural beauty in its agricultural landscape and the country houses than the rugged sublime of the northern mountains and moors. Austin's heroines cannot go mountaineering in their muslin dresses and linen or cotton petticoats, and while perhaps her heroes might, there is no real opportunity, as there are hardly any scenes in Austen's novels where no female is present. Austen's characters react to the gentle sublimity of their landscape in profound and important ways: 'Where possible they enjoy a prospect, in which they admire those things which underpin society economically and socially – fertile and well-farmed land offering livelihood to the poor and acknowledging the guiding hand of the well-disposed landowner' (Johnson and Tuite, 2012, pp. 310-311).

Austen's novels are not just a simple Romantic reaction to the Sentimentalism of the 18th century. She leads a movement into the 19th century, when novels were treated as 'the natural vehicle for discussion and ventilation of what mattered in life' (Bayley, 1986, p. 24). Austen shows that higher social status or significant wealth are not necessarily an indication of good character, intelligence, compassion or a route to happiness. Indeed, she values correct moral judgment and moral intelligence above material wealth. Hers is a personal and feminine view and is part of 'the beginning of a tradition in literature that includes Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, and Virginia Woolf--all very different writers but all joined in their critical concern with the nature and meaning of feminine life' (Boarcas, 2014). In this way Austen's unique Romantic view of nature carries us from the distant past of the 18th century to the very edge of our own era.

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Exploring the poetry of Sir John Suckling and Richard Lovelace

In his essay ‘Thomas Carew, Sir John Suckling, and Richard Lovelace’ Corns considers the place of three poets within the Cavalier poet tradition (Corns, 1977). The discussion here will consider whether Corns’ arguments reveal how two of these poets, Suckling and Lovelace contribute to the sense of the ‘Cavalier’ and how they sit within the poetry of sex and seduction.

The Cavalier poets were a school of poets that supported the 17th century English royalist cause. Drawn from the classes that supported Charles I, they not only provided poetry and dramatic works to decorate the court of Charles I, but also demonstrated political, religious and military support for the Royalist cause. Generally highly educated, they ‘drew upon the knowledge of Horace, Cicero, and Ovid’ (Clayton, 1974) and looked back to the Jacobean secular works of Jonson rather than the metaphysics of Donne (Groot, J., 2011). Their poetry focussed on ‘beauty, love, nature, sensuality, drinking, good fellowship, honour, and social life’ (Black, 2006). Contemporary views of the Cavalier poet depended much on the viewer. Puritans used the term Cavalier to denigrate and belittle, seeing the Cavalier as ‘whoremongering and raping roisterers (Corns, 1977, p. 202). Royalists however lauded the Cavalier as someone who ‘was represented as the gilded youth martyred to a cause he served beyond the call of commonplace loyalty’ (Corns, 1977, p. 202).

Lovelace and Suckling shared a common experience of being unlucky Cavaliers. Lovelace, financially ruined by his support of the Royalist cause, died in poverty, having seen the defeat and execution of his King (Jokinen, 2003b). Suckling died abroad, fleeing from his Parliamentary accusers, at the early age of 32 (Jokinen, 2003a). Both poets illustrate ‘the poignant charm of Cavalier poetry at its best, and both, it must be added, illustrate also the slipshod faults of this poetry’ (Saintsbury, 1910, p422).

In Lovelace’s ‘To Lucasta, Going to the Wars’ (Lovelace, 1910, p. 18) the poet defends the soldier’s decision to take up his sword and abandon his lover, Lucasta. This is a fine exemplar of the Cavalier as a warrior-poet. The soldier must obey his sense of honour and thus must do his duty and go to war. If he did not go to war, then he would not be honourable, and hence would not be fit to be a lover. Lovelace is in essence saying to Lucasta that the very thing that forces him to leave her, namely his honour, is that which makes him a good lover for her. The poem expresses not only the pain of parting but the pain of the impossibility of continuing the relationship.

Lucasta is presented as a pure and devoted lover. By describing her ‘chaste breast’ as a ‘nunnery’, Lovelace conflates ideas of purity and religious devotion. Her ‘quiet mind’ suggests the tranquillity of peace in stark contrast to the violence and turmoil that Lovelace may expect in the Civil War. In an elegant alliterative pun the ‘chaste’ Lucas is tellingly replaced by the ‘new mistress’ Lovelace must now ‘chase’ – the mistress of war. The mention of ‘arms’ is used with duality of meaning - the soldier is leaving his lover’s arms, only to take up new ones - the weapons of war. Though he does his best to sweet talk her, literally using the word ‘Sweet’ and the epithet ‘Dear’, Lucasta remains second best to his duty. The speaker confesses that he embraces war with ‘a stronger faith’ than the one he showed to Lucasta. While this might be a religious reference, it seems more likely the poet is unfaithful to Lucasta, and that faith in this case, is his allegiance to his King, a love superior to any love of a mistress. Lovelace’s ultimate duty is to glorify Charles I.

When Corns states that Lovelace 'conforms more closely than either [Carew or Suckling] to the notion of the poet-in-arms' (Corns, 1993, p. 213) he is entirely correct in identifying the difference in apparent sincerity between Lovelace and Suckling. This is also the view of others. Markel suggests that Suckling consciously sought to present himself as the epitome of the Caroline Cavalier: 'His pose was that of a highly skilled amateur who would impulsively decide to try his hand at any activity and then, without much trouble, do better than almost anyone' (Markel, 1977, p. 152). Markel identifies a subset of Suckling's poetry with a potentially more serious tone: 'the aloof and objective social commentator becomes the very concerned and introspective lyric poet' (Markel, 1977, p. 152). Nevertheless Markel views Suckling as failing to follow this through: 'But just as we prepare for a view of the man behind the mask, the poems end; their potential for serious analysis remains undeveloped' (Markel, 1977, p. 158). To judge whether this is correct, an examination of Suckling's rather immodest view of his superior poetic skills may be helpful.

In 'A Sessions of the Poets' (Suckling, 1910, pp. 29-32) Suckling attacks fellow Cavalier poet, Thomas Carew, saying that Carew's poetry 'Was seldom brought forth but with trouble and pain' (l. 40). In contrast, he implies his own poetry is written effortlessly as a poet who 'loved not the Muses so much as his sport' (l. 85). Markel rejects this self-effacing posture: 'behind this mask of studied indifference, a disturbing seriousness and even pathos pervades some of the poetry' (Markel, 1977, p. 152) and backs this up by quoting Saintsbury's view that 'everything with Suckling turns to a ripple of merriment... [but] there are poems, and good ones, of his which might pass muster as serious, but one always suspects that they are not' (Saintsbury, 1910, p. 423). Saintsbury regards Suckling as 'neither a refined nor a very passionate writer' (p. 422) and thinks much of Suckling's work is intended to achieve amusement more than deep emotion. Saintsbury gives the example that Suckling's "Love's World" 'reads like, and perhaps is, a designed burlesque of the metaphysical altitudes: 'Tis now since I sat down before / That foolish fort, a heart, is the very triumph of the style' (p. 423).

Saintsbury, in contrast, sees greater depth in Suckling: 'The poet is not always quite so frivolous; there are poems, and good ones, of his which might pass muster as serious, but one always suspects that they are not' (p. 423).

Given the above considerations, how should these two poets be viewed? Within their context of their social and military positions, their poetry shows all the requisite Cavalier characteristics: a determined interest in the pursuit and seduction of women as well as a profession of the importance of honour in love and the glorification of the King. Their poetry embodies a sense of joy in life and its pleasures, a 'carpe diem' attitude and the bawdiness, badinage and essential maleness of the courtly club of the Cavalier. Corns says he wants to 'dismantle the origins of that critical orthodoxy' that states that Suckling, Lovelace and others 'constitute a group, often termed 'Cavalier poets'' (Corns, 1993, p. 200). While Corns makes a valuable point that the characteristics of these poets change, as does the environment of the Caroline court culture before and after the inception of the Civil War, he fails to offer convincing evidence that Suckling and Lovelace stand outside the Cavalier definition. Corns argues that Suckling treats sex and seduction with a 'jaundiced or jaunty view' saying that 'this, after all, is a poet who enjoys women as much as a good game of bowls' (p. 213). But this is no reason to regard Suckling as an outlier of the Cavalier poets, as such poetry is exactly what is expected – a view that is commonly supported by other critics, e.g.:

A great deal of “cavalier poetry” ... was subsequently packaged in the 1640s as expressing “Royalist” values. That is, the cavalier mode is in many ways retrospective and nostalgic: it celebrates beauty, love, nature, sensuality, drinking, good fellowship, honor and social life, ... in poetry famous for its urbanity, elegance, and often ironic ease.

(Black, 2006, p. 952)

Suckling died before the outbreak of the Civil War but many other poets of the Caroline court adopted a more serious voice, writing explicitly political verse that commented on the conflict. While originally circulated in manuscript Suckling's poems first appeared in published form in 1646 as *Fragmenta Aurea* (i.e. *Golden Pieces*), thus providing a reminder of what might be restored in a ‘posthumous view into that process of royalist lamentation as if through a process of retrospective revision’ (Corns, 1993, p. 201).

Reviewing Lovelace's first major collection, *Lucasta*, published in 1649, Corns says ‘In the first *Lucasta* a libertine dimension had asserted the maintenance of the spirit of Suckling in an age of Puritan sexual asceticism which far surpassed the modesty of the Caroline court’ (Corns, 1993, p. 216).

Corns notes a marked difference between Lovelace's output prior to and following the Civil War, stating ‘But in the erotic poems of *Lucasta: Posthume Poems* the voice of the libertine becomes less secure and it is marked by a fragile sleaziness which sharply devalues sexual relationships as a compensation in times of war’ (Corns, 1993, p. 217). Corns sees Lovelace late work as a move away from the earlier forms of Cavalier poetry: ‘The tough invention of the later Lovelace does not tolerate the delicate compliments and the received role of the selfless lover. A new depth of cynicism about interpersonal relationships displaces the Cavalier abandon of Lovelace's first collection’ (p217).

When Corns writes ‘The Cavalier poets ... [the] mere title works to confirm that which I would set aside’ (Corns, 1993, p. 200) he appears to disbelieve that the Cavalier poets merit an accredited grouping. The evidence presented here shows the contrary. Suckling and Lovelace make defined and unique additions to the poetic sense of the Cavalier. Their contribution is part of the Caroline path from the Jacobean Jonson to the more satirical, political poetry of reason and realism of the Restoration poets.

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Example Poems

To Lucasta, Going to the Wars by Richard Lovelace

Tell me not (Sweet) I am unkind,
That from the nunnery
Of thy chaste breast and quiet mind
To war and arms I fly.

True, a new mistress now I chase,
The first foe in the field;
And with a stronger faith embrace
A sword, a horse, a shield.

Yet this inconstancy is such
As you too shall adore;
I could not love thee (Dear) so much,
Lov'd I not Honour more.

Wits, The; A Session of the Poets by Sir John Suckling

A sessions was held the other day,
And Apollo himself was at it, they say;
The laurel that had been so long reserved
Was now to be given to him best deserved.
And
Therefore the wits of the Town came thither;
'Twas strange to see how they flocked together:
Each, strongly confident of his own way,
Thought to carry the laurel away that day.

There was Selden, and he sat hard by the chair;
Wenman not far off, which was very fair;
Sandys with Townsend, for they kept no order;
Digby and Chillingworth a little further;
And
There was Lucan's Translator, too, and he

That makes God speak so big in's poetry;
Selwin and Waller, and Berkeleys, both the brothers;
Jack Vaughan and Porter, with divers others.

The first that broke silence was good old Ben,
Prepared before with Canary wine,
And he told them plainly he deserved the bays,
For his were called Works, where others were but plays;
And
Bid them remember how he had purged the stage
Of errors that had lasted many an age;
And he hoped they did think The Silent Woman,
The Fox, and The Alchemist outdone by no man.

Apollo stopped him there and bad him not go on;
'Twas merit, he said, and not presumption
Must carry it; at which Ben turned about
And in great choler offered to go out;
But
Those that were there thought it not fit
To discontent so ancient a wit,
And therefore Apollo called him back again,
And made him mine host of his own New Inn.

Tom Carew was next, but he had a fault.
That would not well stand with a laureate:
His muse was hard bound, and th' issue of's brain
Was seldom brought forth but with trouble and pain;
And
All that were present there did agree,
A laureate's muse should be easy and free,
Yet sure 'twas not that; but 'twas thought that his grace
Considered he was well he had a cup-bearer's place.

Will Davenant, ashamed of a foolish mischance
That he had got lately travelling in France,
Modestly hoped the handsomness of's muse
Might any deformity about him excuse;
And
Surely the company would have been content,
If they could have found any precedent;
But in all their records, either in verse or prose,
There was not one laureate without a nose.

To Will Berkeley sure all the wits meant well,
But first they would see how his snow would sell;

Will smiled and swore in their judgements they went less
That concluded of merit upon success;
So
Sullenly taking his place again,
He gave way to Selwin, that straight stepped in;
But alas! he had been so lately a wit
That Apollo himself hardly knew him yet.

Tobie Mathew (pox on 't! how came he there?)
Was busily whispering somebody i' th' ear,
When he had the honour to be named i' the court:
But sir, you may thank my Lady Carlisle for 't;
For
Had not her Character furnished you out
With something of handsome, without all doubt
You and your sorry Lady Muse had been
In the number of those that were not to come in.

In haste two or three from the Court came in,
And they brought letters (forsooth) from the Queen;
'Twas discreetly done, too, for if they had come
Without them, they had scarce been let into the room.
This
Made a dispute, for 'twas plain to be seen
Each man had a mind to gratify the Queen;
But Apollo himself could not think it fit;
There was difference, he said, 'twixt fooling and wit.

Suckling next was called, but did not appear,
And straight one whispered Apollo in's ear,
That of all men living he cared not for 't,
He loved not the Muses so well as his sport;
And
Prized black eyes, or a lucky hit
At bowls, above all the trophies of wit;
But Apollo was angry, and publicly said
'Twere fit that a fine were set on his head.

Wat Montagu now stood forth to his trial,
And did not so much as suspect a denial;
Wise Apollo then asked him first of all
If he understood his own pastoral;
For
If he could do it, 'twould plainly appear
He understood more than any man there,
And did merit the bays above all the rest;

But the Monsieur was modest, and silence confessed.

During these troubles, in the crowd was hid
One that Apollo soon missed, little Sid;
And, having spied him, called him out of the throng,
And advised him in his ear not to write so strong.

Then

Murray was summoned, but 'twas urged that he
Was chief already of another company.

Hales, set by himself, most gravely did smile
To see them about nothing keep such a coil;
Apollo had spied him, but knowing his mind
Passed by, and called Falkland that sat just behind;
But

He was of late so gone with divinity,
That he had almost forgot his poetry,
Though to say the truth (and Apollo did know it)
He might have been both his priest and his poet.

At length, who but an alderman did appear,
At which Will Davenant began to swear;

But wiser Apollo bad him draw nigher,
And when he was mounted a little higher

He

Openly declared that 'twas the best sign
Of good store of wit to have good store of coin,
And without a syllable more or less said
He put the laurel on the alderman's head.

At this all the wits were in such a maze
That for a good while they did nothing but gaze
One upon another: not a man in the place
But had discontent writ in great in his face.

Only

The small-poets cleared up again,
Out of hope (as 'twas thought) of borrowing;
But sure they were out, for he forfeits his crown
When he lends any poet about the Town.

Romantic Excitement And Moral Instruction in the 18th Century

What relationship can be found between the concepts of moral instruction and romantic excitement in the literature of 18th century orientalism? On initial consideration these two concepts may seem to be unrelated. Moral instruction suggests some form of principled direct didactic discourse and romantic excitement brings to mind a much more emotional, sentimental frame of mind. Nevertheless, it will be shown these concepts interact and intersect each other so that moral instructions are often delivered within engaging romantic excitement.

Traditional romance might be thought of as based on love and courtship and characterised by chivalrous, devoted, sentimental or selfless actions. Romantic excitement is a broader term that invokes the atmospheric, evocative, glamorous, luxurious, sensuousness, exotic of new and novel experiences and excitement and which implies an emphasis on feeling, individuality, and passion rather than classical form and order.

Moral instruction is the means by which the difference between right and wrong is taught, either by the exposition of explicit rules, or by the use of examples from which those rules can be deduced.

The scope of Orientalism in this context is also relevant. Sambrook considers this in some detail (Sambrook, 1993 p. 216-9) noting that Pope, for instance, remarks in his preface to his translation of the *Iliad* that Homer's poem is very much in the language of Scripture and in the spirit of the Orientals. He also describes the strong body of academic learning in 17th and 18th century Oxford and elsewhere. But Sambrook also identifies the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments* as 'a very different oriental idea' to the Orientalism invoked by classical or biblical texts, and emphasises the variability in the ways a writer could respond to the Orient:

The variety of ways in which Orientalism could be employed is well indicated by the difference between. Johnson's fable on the vanity of human wishes, the history of *Rasselas Prince of Abissinia* (1759) and William Beckford's exotic, sultry and decadent *History of the Caliph Vathek* (1786).

(Sambrook, 1993, p. 218-219)

Indeed, the whole idea of the Orient was both romantic and tantalisingly frightening to the 18th century audience:

Sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy: the Orient as a figure in the pre-Romantic, pretechnical Orientalist imagination of late-eighteenth-century Europe was really a chameleonlike quality called (adjectivally) "Oriental."

(Said, 1993, p. 118)

Oriental tales from two quite different works will be considered here. *The Turkish Letters* (Heffernan and O'Quinn, 2003), a collection of Lady Mary Montagu's letters, written during her journeys in Europe and the Ottoman Empire, provide an eyewitness account of the experiences afforded by the Orient to the Western traveller. The *Arabian Nights'*

Entertainments (Mack, 2009) is a collection of folk stories, derived mostly from Indian and Persian sources that were collected and edited by Galland in the 18th Century.

Montagu's letters provide us with a witty, intimate, detailed and entertaining window on the 18th century interface between cosmopolitan Western society and the exotic Ottoman empire. While her writing has a veneer of assumed Western superiority, it also serves to provide a critical viewpoint juxtaposing the situation of women in Oriental and Western society. Montagu is not just an observer of the orient; her work also reflects back on the western society she belongs to:

The female's Orient that Lady Montagu describes, simply by its portrayal, gives agency to the author and her subjects, while simultaneously proposing an alternative to the role of women that lies beyond the private sphere (Dadabhoy, 2014).

Modern critics have attempted to identify Montagu as an early feminist. Lew (1991, p. 435) describes her as the "first feminist" and says "her descriptions of the Oriental women subverted order anticipated by two hundred fifty years those off feminists such as Mernissi and Abu-Lughad". But this is a 20th Century centric view. Montagu herself says she does not argue for the equality of the sexes:

God and nature has thrown us into inferior rank: We are a lower of the creation; we owe obedience and submission to the superior sex; and any woman, who ... denies this, rebels against the law of the Creator...

(Halsband, R. (1965-1967), I p. 45 cited in Khrisat (na))

Critics also recognise Montagu's advantage over other foreign male travellers who did not have the kind of access that was available to her. Furthermore, Melman suggests that "because of her access and presumed feminine empathy with the Oriental subject, her work was read as more authentic." (Melman, 1992, cited in Ozdalga and Amanat, 2015).

As an actual eyewitness, Montagu is an authentic and accurate witness to the Orient. She provides many passages of literal prose detailing expertly and accurately the landscapes, town, cities, and population therein, together with the fashions and costumes of the social events she attends. She also comments extensively (and perhaps less reliably) on the social manners, culture, virtue, religions and morals of those she encounters.

Montagu even critiques the reliability of her own narration, first stating an intention to relaying everything truthfully in writing, "I think it a virtue to admire without any mixture of envy or desire" (Hefferman and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 133-134) while later taking the moral high ground when comparing herself to other observers:

Your whole letter is full of mistakes... you have taken your ideas of Turkey from that worthy author Dumont, who has writ with equal ignorance and confidence. They never fail giving you an account of the women, which 'tis certain they never saw, and talking very wisely of the genius of the men, into whose company they are never admitted....

(Hefferman and O'Quinn, 2013, p. 148)

Montagu is characteristically forthright in discussing the morals of the Turkish Lady:

As to their Mortality or good Conduct, I can say like Arlequin, that 'tis just as with you, and the Turkish Lady's don't commit one sin the less for not being Christians....
(*ibid.*, p. 11)

'Tis very easy to see they have more liberty than we have, no woman, of what rank so ever being permitted to go in the streets without two muslins, one that covers her face all but her eyes and another that hides the whole dress of her head

(*ibid.*, p. 114-5)

Montagu sees the Oriental veiling of women as a distinct advantage, allowing not only anonymity “tis impossible for the most jealous husband to know his wife when he meets her, and no man dare either touch or follow a woman in the street” (Hefferman and O’Quinn 2013, p. 114-5), but also opportunity for infidelity incognito – Montagu recognises such moral digressions are difficult if not impossible in London society where women in society are visible to all. Montagu’s viewpoint of Oriental woman is therefore uniquely different to other (male) Orientalists. But (male) critics still think Montagu contributes to the Oriental stereotype of

...pleasure, sexuality and lust. Although critics think that Montagu is a feminist, it seems that she is neither a voice for feminism nor a hero for feminist.

(Khrisat (na))

There are many differences between Montagu’s *Turkish Letters* and the stories collected and presented by Galland in his version of the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment*. In Montagu’s work, the single author has the authority of an eyewitness to the events described and one who is a major character and participant in the letters which form the narrative discourse. Galland on the other hand is an integrator of stories originating well before his lifetime, possibly in differing cultures and countries.

The *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* contains elements of the supernatural and the fantastical (magic spells and potions, jinns, ghouls, ape-people, giants, sorcerers and imaginary creatures and lands) intermingled with real people and geography.

While the stories of the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* provide humour and entertainment, according to Mack “they are primarily lessons in etiquette, aesthetics, decorum, religion, government history, and sex” (2009, p. xxii.). This is not a universal view however, as at least one editor, G.C Baskett, in revising selected stories for children’s consumption, attempted to comfort their parents “with the consolation that, while the tales themselves may offer a fanciful vision of the world to the total excusal exclusion of moral and didactic teachable” (*ibid.*, p. xix).

It is not perhaps surprising that in such a vast and panoramic work as the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* there are many different examples of moral instruction. These include themes of fidelity, charity, compassion, courage, mercy, respect, cooperation, forgiveness, love, trustworthiness, honesty, responsibility and tolerance. But the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainment* does not directly preach to its audience, rather it is left to the reader to extract these lessons from their response to the stories.

In ‘The Story of the Little Hunchback’ (Mack, 2009, p. 222) and the tales embedded in it, moral instruction is underlined by humour. An extensive example is the slapstick nature of the ‘pass-the-parcel’ treatment of the supposedly dead body of the Hunchback. This is set up in the parent frame story where at Tailor’s table “unluckily the crooked gentleman swallowed a large bone of which he died in a few minutes.” (p. 223). The Tailor, fearing he killed the hunchback but shunning his moral responsibility, transports the body to a doctor, deceiving the doctor into treating a supposedly live patient. The hunchback’s body is however kicked down the stairs by the Jewish doctor: “the doctor was transported with joy being paid beforehand ... and that in such haste that, stumbling against the corpse, he gave it such a kick as made it tumble quite down to the stairfoot.” (p. 223). The doctor discards his morals and stuffs the body down a chimney “clapping ropes under his armpits, let him down the chimney into the [Sultan’s] purveyors chamber so softly and dexterously” (p. 224). The Arab purveyor then props the body up in a shop doorway. It is then knocked down by a drunken Christian merchant:

...the corpse being jostled, tumbled on the merchant’s back. ... [The merchant.] ... knocked him down with a swinging box on the air.

(p. 225)

The Jewish doctor, Muslim purveyor and Christian merchant all fail to fulfil their moral duty of care of the dead. However they are all brought to account, as, in reverse order, they are called before the chief justice. As they appear, they confess their immoral deeds and in doing so, save the subsequent perpetrator in the chain from execution. Eventually, the Sultan of Casgar (to whom the hunchback was court jester) hears the whole sorry story, declaring: “Did you ever hear ... such a surprising story as this that has happened upon the account of my little crooked buffoon” (p. 228). The reader is then entertained by a sequence of sub-frame stories. At the end of all of this, the Sultan is so amused he “looked with a contented air and gave the Taylor and his comrades their lives” (p. 304).

The original frame story, *The Story of the Little Hunchback*, is finally resolved as the fishbone is pulled from the hunchback’s throat and the hunchback amazingly springs back to life. The Sultan then rewards the Taylor, Doctor, Purveyor and Christian Merchant by giving “them each a very rich robe which he caused them to be clothed in his presence” (p. 305). Only the poor hunchback sadly remains unrewarded. Thus the reader sees the morality of telling the truth, being responsible for their own actions, tolerance amongst cultures and religions and that good actions result in good outcome, but bad actions are punished. The miraculous resuscitation of the hunchback is a moral metaphor for the rebirth found in numerous places in the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*. Indeed just as the little hunchback lives through the many stories of the parent frame, to be reborn eventually, Scheherazade achieves her own continued existence by linking many stories until her own eventual rebirth from the Sultan’s threat of execution.

Returning to the question of the relationship between romantic excitement and moral instruction, both *The Turkish Letters* and *The Arabian Entertainments* provide a vivid and dramatic picture of the Oriental exotic and contain many examples of how the participants thoughts and actions have either good or bad consequences. In *The Turkish Letters*

this drama is mirrored by Montagu herself, and is described by the young Joseph Spence who met Montagu in Rome and wrote to his mother:

Lady Mary is one of the most extraordinary shining characters in the world; but she shines like a comet; she is all irregular and always wandering. She is the most wise, most imprudent; loveliest, disagreeablest; best natured, cruellest woman in the world.
(Spence, 1820, cited in Desai ,1991, p. xxiv)

Montagu's writing, as in her personality, provides similar extremes for readers. *The Turkish Letters* evoke the romantic atmospheric, glamorous, luxurious, sensuousness and exoticism of the Orient while Montagu's feminine viewpoint offers a characterisation of the Oriental woman which also equally and critically illuminated the situation of women in 18th century Western society.

Taken together, both works contrast the natural and the supernatural, the realistic and the imaginary, the opulence, splendour and grandeur and the squalor, poverty, violence and bigotry of the Orient but do not directly instruct the reader. The reader becomes a participant in the discourse and must use the lessons they observe in the romantic excitement of the text to reach their own moral conclusions.

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Pain and Pleasure in Petrarchan Poetry

This essay will examine, in the context of three Elizabethan poems in the Petrarchan school, how the poet depicts and explores pleasure and agony and whether these are truly separate concepts or are just aspects of the same fundamental idea. These poems are: 'Love that Doth Reign and Live Within my Thought', written by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey around 1543, Philip Sydney's Sonnet 45 in *Astrophil and Stella* which was written sometime in the 1580s and John Donne's 'The Legacy' written some time before its first publication in 1633.

The suffering of the Petrarchan lover is the major topic in most English Petrarchan Poetry (Gibson, 2015, pp. 301-306). The praise of the beloved is subservient to the poet's exploration of the beauty and desirability of Petrarchan lover's mistress. More important to the lover is his inward focus and self-absorption with the pleasure he finds when considering the desirability and loveliness of his mistress, and his despair and pain when she is indifferent, or even hostile to his advances. The poem is also a vehicle for the poet to display his poetic skills including word play, puns, double meanings, use of symbols and emblems, metaphor and simile. These talents are presented, not for the edification of the poet's lover, but for admiration by other male poets, courtiers and in the exercise of obtaining patronage.

The beloved is therefore a means to an end, a goal that should never be achieved, as it would undermine the poet's opportunity to continue to meditate on his unfulfilled desires and, in one way or another, end the pleasures of his suffering. Indeed, perhaps the ultimate example of this is the original Laura, who always remained out of reach: imperviously chaste, and then died before Petrarch could complete the last third of his Rime.

Bates (2011, pp. 105-127) says that 'the positive state of desiring something always begins with a negative state – with the condition, that is, of wanting or of not having it'. She points out that 'Thus Astrophil, for example, complains of the cruelly emptied space – now this Orphane place – in which he had fully expected to find Stella ... comparing his loss to that of a wounded soldier or amputee'. From this she concludes: 'Ultimately, the focus of interest is not the desired object but the desiring subject' and 'throughout the Renaissance sonnet tradition poets came up with a number of tactical manoeuvres to ensure that the beloved object remained absent or at some remove'. The poet's intention is thus to prolong the lover's desire and pain indefinitely for their own personal ends (and hence personal pleasure). The role of the beloved becomes merely functional, to provide the wanted object, and her pleasure or pain is immaterial to the poet.

Bates further argues that it is best 'to think of the desire that runs through the early modern sonnet sequence as being of the intransitive variety: as if to say, 'the speaker desires', period, rather than 'the speaker desires x or y''. This seems to be a rather abstruse, theoretical and largely irrelevant argument. The key argument is that the speaker in the poem, desires, and inevitably in the Petrarchan tradition, fails to achieve his wants however he expresses that desire. Whether this is expressed transitively or intransitively, the net outcome is the same – a stasis in which neither the lover nor beloved progresses their emotional state.

Bates does put her finger on the nub of the Petrarchan problem however in saying 'Between these two voices – each one as ineffective as the other – the sonnet sequence stages a scene of almost total rhetorical redundancy: language is shown to be anything but instrumental and speech as utterly lacking in executive power.' (2011, p.113).

This is exactly what the poet wants (even if it hardly helpful to the lover and beloved in the poem). The poet wishes to write great poetry and the state of stasis between lover and beloved is the perfect environment to do this. As Kerrigan and Braden (1989) put it: 'one thing the Petrarchan poet has, in compensation for his anguish, is poems'.

Consider first, an early Petrarchan poem, 'Love that Doth Reign and Live Within my Thought', written by Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey. This is in fact, a translation of Petrarch's sonnet *Canzoniere* 140 (Gibson 2012[15], p. 397). In the first quatrain, the speaker describes how the personified Love has conquered and consumed his body. Love literally inhabits the speaker's thought and breast and shows plainly on the speaker's face. The female beloved responds in the second quatrain, expressing anger at the speaker and rejecting Love. In the concluding sestet, Love departs from the speaker's face, to hide in his heart. The speaker cannot relieve his suffering because he is compelled by duty to serve his master, Love. Despite his beloved spurning Love, the speaker must stay at his fallen master's side to fulfil his duty and is contented to die.

Comparing Surrey's version (Gibson 2015, p. 404-5) to that of the translation of Petrarch it can be seen that Surrey has changed the rhyme to take the English sonnet form. Surrey also strengthens the image of the common Petrarchan theme of 'love as a battlefield' replacing Petrarch's rather indirect military reference 'sometimes armed comes into my face; and there makes camp and places his banner.' to a more direct description: 'Clad in the arms wherein with me he fought, Oft in my face he doth his banner rest.' Surrey uses words like fought, captive, arms, banner, and coward to make the poem a battlefield where the military confrontation between Love and the beloved woman is played out.

Surrey employs regular iambic pentameter in this poem, although some lines: 'Love that doth reign...'; 'Clad in the arms...'; 'Oft in thy face; Sweet is the death...' begin with a trochee and then the line is completed with iambs. This modified metre adds an impetus to these lines, rather like starting a phrase in music with a triplet leading up to the main beat – this is particularly effective in the case of 'Sweet is the death' as it moves the listener's focus from the initial 'sweet' to the immediately contrasting 'death', giving a sharp change of mood, and emphasising the marriage of happiness and death in the last line.

In the first quatrain of Sonnet 45 in *Astrophil and Stella* (Sidney, 1962, p. 163), Astrophil describes his now familiar tale of woe, his lovesick longing for Stella is visible all over his face, but, although she knows she causes it, she is coldly unresponsive – she 'cannot skill', meaning she lacks the ability or capability to understand and thus pity his need.

In the second quatrain, we see a different view of Stella. Here she finds no impediment to shedding tears in response to the romantic tales of 'lovers never known'. Unlike Astrophil, these are lovers that Stella has never met, and in double meaning, are also fictitious to begin with. This is a double blow to Astrophil – he lives in the real world, in which Astrophil cannot respond, but is barred from the fictitious world where his desires could indeed be satisfied.

In the concluding sextet, Sidney asks: what should a real, flesh and blood lover do against such unassailable competition? From the real lover's point of view, Stella is able to apply her pity freely and generously to fictional lovers, without any taint to her honour ('yet with free scope more grace doth breed') whereas here honour requires aloofness ('new doubts') to the wreck ('wrack') of the physical lover ('servant') in front of her. What can the speaker do? His only recourse is to somehow erase his physical presence. Thus the speaker says: 'I am not I'—a metre-based pun, since 'I am' is in fact not the iamb that it is supposed to be). The

lover must replace himself with a fictional romantic ‘tale’ of himself, then Stella can, without loss of honour, show the ‘pity’ so desired by the lover.

Sidney (in the guise of Astrophil), in the first sonnet of the Astrophil and Stella sequence suggests that the poetic verse will be a key to unlocking the pity of Stella and thus a route to pleasure for Astrophil:

Loving in truth, and faine in verse my love to show,
That the deare She might take some pleasure of my paine:
Pleasure might cause her reade, reading might make her know,
Knowledge might pitie winne, and pitie grace obtaine[...].

(Sidney, 1962, p. 187)

Thus, Sidney’s rhetorical delights are expressed by proxy in Astrophil’s poetry and aim to delight and teach Stella to return his love. But Sidney’s purpose is never to actually allow a successful emotional or physical union between Astrophil and Stella. In the few times that Stella sets aside her disdain, and reads his words, they ‘misfire, failing to delight, teach or move here and instead affecting him’ (Alexander 2017 p55):

...in piercing phrases late,
Th'anatomy of all my woes I wrate,
Stella's sweete breath the same to me did reed.
O voice, o face, maugre my speeche's might,
Which wooed wo, most ravishing delight
Even those sad words even in sad me did breed.

(Sidney, 1962, 58.9-14, p. 193)

In Astrophil and Stella 45, Astrophil tries to think about Stella reading him figuratively, as he so often reads her. As Alexander says:

Astrophil writes, reads, and is written, both literally and figuratively: he is poet, reader, and text; but he is also at times like a poet, like a reader, like a text. Stella, similarly, sings, reads, and is read, and is also like a figure who sings, or reads, or is read.

(Alexander, 2017, p. 55)

Much of the pleasure for the audience of Sidney’s sonnet sequence is therefore in experiencing the complexities of the writing. Astrophil is at times a poet, a writer but he is also depicted as a poet in the poetry and is part of the text. Stella, similarly, sings, reads, and is read, and is also like a figure who sings, or reads, or is read. In Alexander’s words: ‘In sonnet 45, it is her competence as a reader of fictions that appears to Astrophil to render her deaf to the fact of his love; loving and reading are disjoined.’ (Alexander 2017 p. 55).

‘The Legacy’ (Donne, 2010, p207) not only uses Petrarchan conventions—the parting of lovers as death, exchange of hearts (e.g., Sidney, Old Arcadia 3, ‘My true love hath my heart, and I have his’) but also plays with them and subverts them – the lovers’ relationship becomes a legal document – a will’.

The speaker says in the first octet that each time he parts from his lover, he dies. It does not matter how short his parting is, the implication being that any separation is fatal to his heart. This is a metaphorical death, and although one might be tempted to relate this to the Elizabethan ‘little death’ of the sexual orgasm, this does not seem immediately plausible here as this poem seems concerned with physical separation. The speaker says that his parting imposes the duty of giving his beloved his own heart – he is both self-executioner (as he parts from his lover, this killing his heart), and his own executor – the legacy of his will being his love.

In the second stanza, the speaker searches for his heart, so that he can give it to his beloved: ‘I bid me send my heart, when I was gone’. But he is unable to find his heart and this redoubles his suffering since although still loyal to his beloved he feels the pain of defrauding (‘cozen’) of his gift:

When I had ripp'd, and search'd where hearts should lie,
It kill'd me again, that I who still was true
In life, in my last will should cozen you.

(Donne, 2010, p. 207)

The poem takes an unexpected turn though in the third octet. Instead of his own loving heart, he finds a fabricated heart, something that has been constructed (‘As good as could be made by art’). This is the most difficult part of the poem. The phrase ‘It was not good, it was not bad / It seem’d’ suggests that the heart was neither loving nor hateful – but simply indifferent. It appears the speaker has captured his lover’s heart, but only to find it uncaring and unloving, and then in the final lines he says, he could not return his lover’s heart, because in reality, because he (and no other lover) could possess it in the first place (‘no man could hold it, for ‘twas thine’). The final couplet thus speaks of the lover’s total anguish that whatever he does, his beloved will always remain aloof, cold and disengaged.

Pleasure and pain are essential elements in Petrarchan poetry, a genre which may superficially be seen as means of seduction. On closer inspection the poets use a number of tactical ploys to ensure that the beloved object remains aloof, unengaged, absent or at some remove. Only in this way can the poet personally take pleasure in the pain and anguish embodied in his poetry and display his poetic fireworks for the amusement of his peers and patrons.

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Why do authors write?

There are many answers to the question “Why do writers write?” This essay considers what these answers might be, and investigates a number in detail, with particular reference to two apparently contrasting works: Ursula Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Beryl Bainbridge’s *Master Georgie*.

It might initially be thought that the most accurate and authentic source of answers to the question ‘Why do writers write’ would be the writers themselves. Many writers have been asked this question in interviews, or have published their reasons in journal articles, blogs, memoirs and so on. It might also be expected there will be no single common reason, given the variety of circumstances, cultures and backgrounds that writers come from. We might however hope to find one or more common threads in their answers. The reasons put forward, are often surprisingly diverse, as shown in Table 1.

Author	Reason for writing	Reference
George Orwell	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <i>Sheer egoism</i>. To be talked about, to be remembered after death, to get your own back on grown-ups in childhood, etc.2. <i>Aesthetic enthusiasm</i>. To take pleasure in the impact of one sound on another, in the firmness of good prose or the rhythm of a good story,3. <i>Historical impulse</i>. The desire to see things as they are, to find out true facts and store them up for the use of posterity,4. <i>Political purposes</i>. <i>The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.</i>	(Orwell 1946)
Anthony Burgess	<i>Books like John Buchan’s Thirty-nine Steps (1915), Graham Greene’s Travels with My Aunt (1969), Dashiell Hammett’s Maltese Falcon (1930), and Raymond Chandler’s Big Sleep (1939) are distinguished pieces of writing that, while diverting and entralling, keep a hold on the realities of human character. Ultimately, all good fiction is entertainment, and, if it instructs or enlightens, it does so best through enchanting the reader.</i>	(Burgess, 1999)
Isabelle Allende	I just need to tell a story. It’s an obsession. Each story is a seed inside of me that starts to grow and grow, like a tumor, and I have to deal with it sooner or later. Why a particular story? I don’t know when I begin. That I learn much later...	(Hodin, 2013)
David Baldacci	If writing were illegal, I’d be in prison. I can’t not write. It’s a compulsion.	(Hodin, 2013)
Sue Grafton	I write because it’s all I know how to do. Writing is my anchor and my purpose. My life is informed by writing, whether the work is going well, or I’m stuck in the hell of writer’s block	(Hodin, 2013)

William Faulkner	Really, the writer doesn't want success... He knows he has a short span of life, that the day will come when he must pass through the wall of oblivion, and he wants to leave a scratch on that wall — Kilroy was here — that somebody a hundred or a thousand years later will see.	(Hodin, 2013)
Neil Gaiman	The best thing about writing fiction is that moment where the story catches fire and comes to life on the page, and suddenly it all makes sense and you know what it's about and why you're doing it and what these people are saying and doing, and you get to feel like both the creator and the audience. Everything is suddenly both obvious and surprising... and it's magic and wonderful and strange.	(Hodin, 2013)
Steven King	To me, the greatest pleasure of writing is not what it's about, but the inner music that words make.	(Hodin, 2013)
W.H. Auden	I think what Dr. Johnson said about writing is true of all the arts: "The aim of writing is to enable readers a little better to enjoy life or a little better to endure it." The other thing that the arts can do is that they are the chief method of communicating with the dead. After all, Homer is dead, his society completely gone, and yet one can appreciate it. Without communication with the dead, a fully human life is not possible.	(Hodin, 2013)
Stanley Fish	If you've found something you really like to do — say write beautiful sentences — not because of the possible benefits to the world of doing it, but because doing it brings you the satisfaction and sense of completeness nothing else can, then do it at the highest level of performance you are capable of, and leave the world and its problems to others.	(Fish, 2007)
Milan Kundera	The novel is a meditation on existence as seen through the medium of imaginary characters.	(Kundera, 1988)

Table 1: Authors reason for writing

Although Table 1 contains comments from just a very small subset of all writers some common threads do emerge. Writers often write because of some irresistible inner compulsion; they write because they take joy in the craft of assembling words into a satisfying whole; they write as a means of considering the world we live in and they use that writing to comment on our world by describing worlds of their own invention that mirror or contrast with our own world.

These reasons will be considered in more detail, using two examples: *Master Georgie* (Bainbridge, 1998) and *The Left Hand of Darkness* (Le Guin, 1969). Both authors have had long and successful writing careers and have given some insights in numerous interviews and journals into their motivation for writing.

In the early part of her career, Bainbridge says she simply writes about her childhood for her own personal satisfaction:

Interviewer: But you'd want to think of your writing as having some sort of enduring significance, wouldn't you? You'd want to see it as containing some higher truths?"

Bainbridge: Higher truths? Oh no. Not at all. If it has any higher significance, it's only to me and not to anyone else. Had I not written my books I would probably have been in a mental home by now. Writing gets rid of everything. That is the only reason I ever began to write. I wanted to write out things that happened in childhood. There was no other reason at all.

(Taylor, 2007).

Bainbridge also states that she writes out of obligation to her publishers, with whom she had a close personal relationship:

I like writing, I mean I don't think of it as a job, on the occasions where I have not written, I stopped writing for about six years, that's a long while ago, and I felt very uncomfortable, the reason I go on writing is not because I have to, because I feel obliged, my publishers have helped me so much, I feel you can't just say suddenly, I'm not going to write any more.

(Taylor, 2007).

Later in her career, she had exhausted all the material she wanted to use from her childhood, but still felt the compulsion to write, and consequently looked for a new set of source material, arguing it would complete her education:

I want to do more books that I have to research. Writing *Watson* gave me a real taste for libraries and newspaper cuttings and things. Remember, I left school at fourteen and I still have incredible pockets of ignorance. In a way, I'm completing my education.

(Bainbridge 1988).

However, by the end of the career, Bainbridge had returned to her original position, saying that in some way, even the historical novels were influenced by her own life experiences – that she was essentially a biographical writer, documenting the lives of her characters but still drawing on her own personal experiences:

When I write a novel, I'm writing about my own life; I'm writing a biography almost, always. And to make it look like a novel I either have a murder or a death at the end.

(Bainbridge, nodate, cited in Scurr, 2000).

Le Guin on the other hand takes a less personal view, using the alien worlds she creates to highlight aspects of the social, sexual and political human world that she is interested in:

As I see it, writing and the arts (and the sciences, and all learning) don't play a role in ensuring our freedom; they are our freedom — the heart of it.

(LeGuin, 2014).

By making up worlds and peoples, I can recombine and play with what we have and are, can ask what if it were like this instead of like this—What if nobody had a fixed gender, as on the planet Gethen? What if marriages, instead of two people and one couple, consisted of four people and four homo- and heterosexual couples, as they do on the planet O? If nobody in a world had ever waged war, how would people and daily life in that world differ from ours, and in what ways?

(LeGuin, 2016).

I send imaginary people to imaginary planets to learn other ways in which we might inhabit our own. I feel some urgency in obtaining this information, since we're inhabiting our planet in an increasingly destructive and unwise way.

(LeGuin, 2016).

Fortunately, Harvard gave us a superb education, which equipped some of us, at least, to begin to learn how and when to overturn the table and the tea urn. And why.

(LeGuin, 2014).

Nevertheless, at heart, LeGuin is a writer who is deeply attracted to and respectful of the craft and act of writing. To her, the simple act of producing the written words clearly provides its own innate satisfaction:

I love living almost as well as I love writing. (LeGuin, 2020a).

Writing is my craft. I honor it deeply. To have a craft, to be able to work at it, is to be honored by it.

(LeGuin, 2020b).

Similarity and Contrasts

While LeGuin states she loves the craft of writing, it is less clear that that is the case in Bainbridge's public statements. Indeed, Bainbridge's method for novel production involved a period of research and consideration and then a period of several months writing, which from her description does not sound entirely enjoyable:

I work day and night. I don't go out. I sometimes don't go to bed, but just nap on that sofa. I often don't have a bath, because the treat of having a long bath after five days and washing my hair revitalizes me I live like that day and night for about four months, then it is over, the book is finished, and I have a long bath.

(Bainbridge, nodate, cited in Gupta, S 2000):

This suggests that Bainbridge seems to be satisfying some internal need to get the words onto the paper to fulfil her vision of the book rather than for the simple pleasures of assembling sentences and paragraphs into a greater whole.

The next sections examine the two novels to see how compatible they are with the author statements made above.

Themes

In *Master Georgie* Bainbridge concerns herself with themes of ‘truth’ vs ‘perceived reality’, the question of whether one can ever know another person, the randomness of the hand of fate, the nature of sexuality in society. As the novel develops Bainbridge slowly reveals the deceptions, lies and half-truths in the relationships between the characters and in the way the characters present themselves in society. The Crimean War was the first to be extensively documented by photography and throughout the novel the photograph is used to show the unreliability of surface images. There are numerous scenes in the book where the truth, if it can be determined at all, can only be found beneath the surface of the photograph, eg the final scene in which the dead body of Georgie is used to make up the numbers in a photograph.

The story is told from the viewpoints of three characters - Myrtle, Mr. Potter and Pompey Jones. As each take their turn, the reader is shown the thoughts and feelings of each but is limited to the view that the narrating character has of the other characters.

Bainbridge questions how one can ever know something simply by looking at it. At one point a fellow character enquires as to why Myrtle often looks sad. “*It's the way I am on the outside*”, she replied. “*Inside, I assure you I'm quite happy.*” (Bainbridge 1998:91). Crucially the central character of George Hardy is never used as a narrator, and although the other characters eventually reveal much about themselves, George remains something of a mystery, a dark spot on Bainbridge’s photographic plates. For instance, Bainbridge never reveals the real reason that George wants to go to the Crimea and take his entire family with him. Does he want to do something noble, or is he trying to somehow escape himself and what he sees as his own worthlessness? Bainbridge leaves it up to the reader decide.

In *The Left Hand Of Darkness* LeGuin examines the themes of truth, duty, loyalty, friendship, the role of sex and gender in society. Underlying all these issues though is the notion of survival, both political, cultural, physical and psychological. Estraven and Ai both seek Winter’s peaceful survival in ways that will meet their differing and partly overlapping objectives. Estraven strives to unite the cultures of Karhide and Orgoreyn and avoid all-out war, while Ai seeks a more galactic unification with his Federation. Together Ai and Estraven undertake a desperate and difficult journey across the Gobrin ice and in doing so resolve the psychological obstacles to their friendship as Ai finally understands and accepts the nature of sexual relationships on Winter and comes to see Estraven as a trustworthy friend. However, LeGuin chooses a plot that results in Estraven being killed in the final scenes of the novel. Although this death is apparently worthless, Estraven has actually achieved his goals, and LeGuin presents the reader with the realisation that the future is now in the person of Estraven’s son, who asks Ai to tell him about the worlds outside Winter – thus underlining the final success of Ai’s mission.

Form and Structure

In *Master Georgie*, the story takes the form of a linear narrative, George Hardy, surgeon travels to the Crimea with his adoptive sister Myrtle, brother in law and amateur geologist Dr Potter and photographer's assistant and fire-eater Pompey Jones. The narration is split between these characters. It is notable that the central character, Hardy, never acts as narrator and Bainbridge only allows us to see him from the viewpoints of the other characters. The story is told in a linear fashion, except for the very beginning, where the 12-year-old Myrtle tells about her past, using six long chapters, also referred to as "plates" as a reference to the photography theme.

In *The Left Hand Of Darkness* LeGuin's account portrays an alien world, largely through the experiences of an earthly visitor, but also through scientific reports, the journals of Estrevan and native accounts of myths and legends. The structure of the work is therefore more complex than *Master Georgie* as the reader is asked to understand and co-relate these various sources of information.

Summary

Master Georgie is Bainbridge's seventeenth novel. As in her other works, Bainbridge writes uncluttered, unfussy direct prose, with carefully honed precision. The reader is presented with a sequence of vivid vignettes as the story proceeds and will take considerable enjoyment in the depth and imagery of her similes, phrases and prose. There are elements that will unnerve, ruffle and discomfit the reader, who will find that their understanding of the characters and their relationships must constantly be revised as the story unfolds. There are moments of dry humour as well as outright strangeness. All of this underlines Bainbridge's basic premise: we are mysteries to each other, and the world is a mystery to all of us. The net effect though is a book with a cool emotional temperature, that is more likely to be enjoyed for its intellectual challenge rather than any emotional engagement the reader might feel for its characters.

The Left Hand of Darkness is just one of twenty novels by Le Guin, work that has earned her a position as one of the finest speculative fiction writers of her generation. Although her work originally was seen to come out of the genre of Science Fiction from the 'Golden Age' of the 1950s and 60s, she established and held firm to her desire to illuminate the experience of humans on this world using high quality, vibrant descriptive writing of the landscapes, weather, topography, folklore culture and society of alien worlds. In *The Left Side of Darkness* LeGuin does, in Burgess words 'enchant her readers' (Burgess, 1999) as she describes Ai and Estraven's 81 day journey over 840 miles, through a frozen glacier land, to save a King and two worlds, with one of the finest sustained accounts of tension and adventure in the annals of speculative fiction. While the book is a fine tale of adventure, and a tender story of friendship and love, it also is a considered examination of sexual roles and their effect on the politics, morals and behaviours of society – and it is this combination of ingredients that has led it's deserved position as one of the major works of speculative fiction of the twentieth century.

How does this relate to my work?

I find both books instructive when considering the form and content of my work. For me, Bainbridge's work is the more difficult to relate to. It leaves me asking: 'Is Bainbridge simply relating, with close historical accuracy, the paths of the characters through her novel? Or is she trying to say something specific about the nature of love, infatuation, sex. It seems to me that Bainbridge takes the role of an observer (albeit an expert one) that recounts the events in her novel and passes the entire responsibility to the reader of relating these events to the world that the reader lives. This is too extreme a position I feel for my own writing. I prefer the somewhat more explicit style of LeGuin, where a more explicit exposition of the situation each character finds themselves in is given in the novel. For example, LeGuin tells us not only about the mechanisms of kemmer but also allows her characters to tell the reader the advantages to society of this behaviour. By postulating a race of people on Gethen who are not encumbered with having to live up to the expectations of gender identity and whose characteristics develop in response to environment and situation, LeGuin suggests that this would lead to practical advantages (reduced social and political conflict, a wider shared responsibility for child rearing, giving equality to all society members). These points bear directly on the political (cold war, Vietnam war) and social (feminist movement, increased sexual freedom) environment in which *The Left Hand of Darkness* first appeared. I feel this more open style results in a more accessible work of fiction and thus I would aim in my writings to be more like LeGuin than Bainbridge in this respect. Both books have shown me the effectiveness of multiple points of view, something I also plan to use in my current writing.

Returning to the original question – as readers, can we know if Bainbridge and LeGuin satisfy their personal need to write? We can certainly speculate that this is the case and try and support this view with the type of evidence presented here. Ultimately though, we can never know. Perhaps we should satisfy ourselves with exploring the experience of reading these two intriguing, fascinating and accomplished works and simply focus on our personal responses rather than striving too hard to determine their authors' original motives.

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Thoughts on Hotel World by Ali Smith

I have recently been reading a selection of novels that I would not normally have selected based on my usual criteria of pure reading pleasure. My goal is to broaden my knowledge of different styles, forms and techniques. Hotel World is one such selection. The novel centres on the death of Sarah Willoughby, a chambermaid in the Global Hotel, and the effect this has on a number of characters who are also loosely connected to that hotel. I found elements of this work to be at times thrilling, absorbing, frustrating, satisfying, confusing, tiresome, distressing and engaging. Ultimately, I think my overall reaction was one of fascination rather than enjoyment.

The book is divided into six sections, each with a temporal title. The first five sections the novel moves about in time ("Past", "Future Conditional"...) describe the overlapping perceptions and response of each of the five characters to the events in the hotel or the environment around the hotel. The final chapter ("Present") achieves some sort of closure by drawing in other ghosts of London (including Princess Diana somewhat bizarrely) yet ultimately leaves the storyline open, as the shop assistant in the jewellers where Sarah left her watch for repair, places and watch on her wrist. The assistant does not know that Sarah is dead and we are left with the impression at some time in the future the assistant will eventually seek Sarah out to return it.

This is a multi-layered novel. At its heart it deals with the passage of time and how life is fragile, transitory and ephemeral. It also focuses on grief, relationships, love and death. Sarah may be dead but she isn't gone yet. Indeed, she finds: "Because now that I'm nearly gone, I'm more here than I ever was." It demonstrates how life is shaped by brief moments, only partly under our control. The hotel, a solid, imposing building representing permanence, unchanged by the seasons outside, is actually a vehicle for constant change and variation as guests check in and leave. Throughout the book there is the constant sense that time is of the essence, moments happen, experiences occur, memories are made and then later forgotten. "What a life. What a time. What I felt. Then. Gone."

Each section uses a different styles and approach, with varying success. In the opening chapter, Sarah is already dead and slipping away from her earthly existence. This is a convincing depiction of what a ghostly spirit might feel and do as it loses contact with the physical world. It often uses a stream of conscience style which I found involving, thrilling in parts, giving a real visceral sense of the ghost's distress and sense of loss. Other sections use fairly normal prose, though one chapter ("Future in the Past") which describes Clare's memories of her sister Sarah, is written without punctuation, sentence or paragraph formatting. This rapidly becomes tiresome and eventually so tedious it distracts from the emotional content of the chapter.

Overall, this a deeply compelling book, that takes risks by using a variety of prose styles. This has made me feel I need to take similar (though maybe not quite as excessive!) risks in broadening my prose style too.

What is Literary Criticism?

Definitions

Literature is the body of written works, especially those with a high and lasting artistic value, and includes, in its widest sense, prose, poetry and dramatic works. The *canon* of literature is the collection of works which are deemed worthy of study in academic organisations such as schools, colleges and universities.

Literary criticism is the activity of studying, evaluating, and interpreting works of literature.

Literary theory analyses literature in the context of a broader philosophical, social, moral, political, gender or other framework. Literary theory is not concerned with the meaning of a work of literature but with the theories that reveal what literature can mean.

Literary movements are groupings of authors and literary works that share similar aesthetics, styles, philosophies, and/or topics, as opposed to groupings by genre or era.

What is literary criticism?

Literary criticism concerns itself with the activities of studying, evaluating, and interpreting works of literature. Literary criticism does not criticize or applaud a work or its author. It is not concerned whether the author or their work is in some subjective way either good or bad. Rather, it seeks to be an investigative review asking how the text functions, and how it is constructed.

Literary criticism uses the tools provided by literary theory. Different literary theories use different approaches when developing and substantiating an argument. Some theories concentrate on the reader's emotional or intellectual response to the text, some on aggregating the works of other critics, some focus solely on a close reading of the text and some analyse a work from a social, historical, gender or political perspective. Literary criticism then uses one or more of these literary theories to propose a persuasive argument about some aspects of the text. Literary criticism thus expresses the various ways that readers try to understand and respond to an author's work. In producing a piece of literary criticism, the critic's purpose is to broaden or challenge the reader's understanding of the text, and to present the critic's opinion on how the text informs the reader about the world that the reader lives in.

Why is literary criticism worth reading or writing?

Literary criticism sharpens the mind and enables a better understanding of how a writer's work affects a reader emotionally and intellectually. By analysing a wide range of literature texts, we can gain a better insight into the moral, social, religious, political, economic, historical and other aspects of our own behaviour and the way our society works can be

obtained. Literary criticism provides the tools to study, evaluate, and interpret literary works like novels, short stories, and poems. The canon of existing literary criticism provides a rich source of material that can help frame our own point of view about a particular text or set of works. Different literary styles encourage us to consider different viewpoints other than our own.

Forms of Literary Criticism

There are numerous different approaches to literary criticism, according to the various different literary theories that have been proposed. The following is by no means a comprehensive list (Purdue University, 2022):

- Moral Criticism, Dramatic Construction (~360 BC-present)
- Formalism, New Criticism, Neo-Aristotelian Criticism (1930s-present)
- Psychoanalytic Criticism, Jungian Criticism(1930s-present)
- Marxist Criticism (1930s-present)
- Reader-Response Criticism (1960s-present)
- Structuralism/Semiotics (1920s-present)
- Post-Structuralism/Deconstruction (1966-present)
- New Historicism/Cultural Studies (1980s-present)
- Post-Colonial Criticism (1990s-present)
- Feminist Criticism (1960s-present)
- Gender/Queer Studies (1970s-present)
- Critical Race Theory (1970s-present)
- Critical Disability Studies (1990s-present)

Historical-biographical criticism

Historical-biographical criticism focuses on the author's historical context. This approach assumes that the significance of a particular piece of literature is inextricably linked to its historical context. This is not necessarily the historical context of the era that the writer is living in. For example, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, is placed in the first century BC of the Roman Empire. Superficially, then Shakespeare is telling a story of Ancient Rome and the characters in the work respond to one another as Romans not Elizabethan's (or at least the Elizabethan view of what Roman's would have done in the first century BC). But Shakespeare is not writing in a vacuum and his audience is essentially an Elizabethan one, so, when considered in depth, critics evaluate Julius Caesar within the context of English literature, history, and culture of the late sixteenth century.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- When was text written and when was it published?

- What was the critical and public reception? What does this reception say about the standards of taste and the social and moral values at the time it was published or reviewed?
- To what extent does the work reflect differences from the ideas and values of its time?
- What influences in the writer's life does the work reflect? These might include people, ideas, movements or events.

How much of the writer's actual life appears in the work? Have modifications of the actual events been made by the author in incorporating them in the text and for what possible purposes?

What effects do these differences have on the effect of the text on its readership?

Has the author revealed something about their personal thoughts, perceptions, or emotions in the work?

Example: tbd

Aesthetic criticism

Aestheticism is a 19th-century movement that takes the view that art is an end in itself, often stated as 'Art for Art's sake'. The beauty experienced when reading literature, viewing art and or hearing music is seen as the reason for creating that art. The idea that art should be didactic or have a moral purpose is not part of the aesthetic viewpoint. The judgement of a piece of art should therefore not be based on the characteristics of that piece of art and not any associated moral, religious, economic, social, political or commercial context. Precocity, archaisms and obscurity often characterise aestheticism since aesthetes take the view that any subject matter can be made beautiful. Aesthetic craftsmanship was both careful and self-conscious. Consequently, some aesthetic artists concentrated on the morbid, the perverse, the unusual and the abnormal in their work. aestheticism can be seen as a reaction against the conventionalities and ugliness of middle-class Victorian life with its associated admiration for the effects of industrialization and mass production. Aesthetes retreated into the world of art in an attempt to transcend what they regarded as the ugliness of middle-class Victorian life. Instead, aesthetes felt that life should imitate art and that nature was crude and lacking in design when compared to art. Aestheticism focuses on suggestion and sensuality, suggestion rather than statement, reinforces the correspondence between words, colours and music and the use of symbols. Aestheticism sought to express an admiration of beauty and provided a vehicle of escapism through the visual and literary arts. Aestheticism found a home not only in art and literature but also extended beyond literature into the decorative arts, architecture, furniture design and fashion.

The roots of aestheticism go back to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750), Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) and Friedrich Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* (1794). In the first half of the nineteenth century, Thomas Carlyle supported and popularised the aesthetic viewpoint in England in works such as *The Life of Friedrich Schiller* (1825), *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays* and *Sartor Resartus* (1833-34). The essays of Walter Pater in 1867-68 in which he promoted the need to live life at a high intensity in the search for beauty influenced British decadent writers such as Oscar Wilde in the second half of the nineteenth century. This led to the adoption of the idea of 'Art for Art's sake' (*L'art pour l'art*).

l'art), popularised by Théophile Gautier in France, who used the phrase to suggest that art and morality were separate.

Aestheticism first reached prominence in the mid-19th century in the poetry and painting of the British Pre-Raphaelites from the 1850s onward and in the writing of Edgar Allan Poe. Aestheticism reached a peak in the 1870s and 1880s with the works of artists such as James McNeill Whistler and Dante Gabriel Rossetti and writers such as Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde and Algernon Charles Swinburne.

Though aestheticism is most often discussed in relation to painting, poetry, and the decorative arts, its influence is also notable in the short fiction of the late Victorian period. On the one hand, aestheticism characterized a genre of short story with a sumptuous, almost poetic style. Often the plot is slight, the emphasis being on mood and character, the embodiment of intellectual insights in an imaginative form, and the representation of the artist figure or sensitive individual struggling to realize an ideal in an inhospitable environment. Notable examples of such stories appear in Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1887), Oscar Wilde's *The Happy Prince and Other Tales* (1888) and *A House of Pomegranates* (1891), Arthur Symons's *Spiritual Adventures* (1905), and Ernest Dowson's *Dilemmas* (1895). On the other hand, aestheticism and the aesthete figured as important subject matter in much late 19th-century short fiction, often treated negatively. Some of HENRY JAMES's short stories of the 1880s and 1890s, for example, including "The Author of Beltraffio" (1884), "The Lesson of the Master" (1888), and "The Middle Years" (1893), explore the personal costs of the aesthete's extreme devotion to art. (Mambrol, 2022).

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

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Example: tbd

Moral-philosophical criticism

Here the ethical merits of the author's work are the primary focus and the moral statements and judgments made by the characters and author in the text are the main concerns of the moral-philosophical critics.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- Does the theme of the work reveal an enduring truth?
- What rewards does the protagonist receive because of their actions? Are these rewards merited?
- What rewards does the antagonist receive because of their actions? Are these rewards merited?

Example: tbd

Sociological criticism

Sociological criticism evaluates literature based on its relationship to society. A knowledge of sociological theories is thus required when taking this approach. The effect that the author's work has on its audience within the society is the critic's primary concern together with the critic's view of the author's status in their society. An example of this approach would be Marxist criticism, which analyses whether a work supports or rejects oppression within a class system.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- How does the economic status of the characters affect the outcome of the story?
- Do the characters strive against the economic and political status quo, or do they manipulate it to their own ends?
- What social conditions does the writer depict in the text and what importance does this depiction play in the work? These conditions might include poor education, poor health care, poor nutrition or inadequate opportunity)
- Does the work properly and fairly deal with the economic, social and political implications of its material?
- In what other ways is the work affected by economic and social issues? How should a consideration of today's modern economic and social setting influence the reader's interpretation of the story?

Example: [A Marxist/Feminist Analysis of Shirley Jackson's.'The Lottery'.](#)

Psychoanalytic criticism

This approach is based on the idea that an author's unconscious thoughts are expressed through their work. The psychological desires and neuroses of the characters within the text are thus seen as an expression of the author's unconscious thoughts and the purpose of criticism is to analyse and evaluate these thoughts. Knowledge of the psychoanalytic theories of Jung, Freud and others is therefore relevant to this approach.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- Are there connections between the behaviour and motivations of characters in the text and our knowledge of an author's life?
- In what way do the characters, their actions, their relationships, and their motivations illuminate the mental world and imaginative life, or the actions and motivations of the author?
- How are the psychological motivations of its characters revealed by the use of its images, metaphors, and other linguistic elements in the text?
- How is the psychological mindset of its author revealed by the use of its images, metaphors, and other linguistic elements in the text?

- Are the motivations of literary characters explainable in terms of the concepts of Freudian psychoanalysis?

Example: [A Freudian Analysis of 'Erin McGraws 'A Thief'.](#)

Formal criticism

Formalism compels readers to judge the artistic merit of literature by examining its formal elements, like language and technical skill. Formalism favours a literary canon of works that exemplify the highest standards of literature, as determined by formalist critics.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- How is the work organized? What is its structure? What is the nature of the beginning, how does it progress and how does it end? How is its plot related to its structure?
- How are the parts of the work related to the work seen as a whole? How are the individual parts related to one another?
- Who is the narrator? Are their multiple narrators? What are their points of view? How do they relate to each other and how are they revealed to the readers? What is the effect of the choice of narrator on the reader and the work? Is there a reason why the author selected the particular type of narration used?
- Who are the major and minor characters and how do they relate to one another? Has the author used the characters to represent particular themes or ideas?
- Where is the work set (in terms of time and place). How does the author make use of the setting and how does the author relate the setting to what we know of the characters and their actions? Is the setting symbolic? Is the setting also a character in the story?
- What tone is used by the author? How does the author describe, narrate, explain, or otherwise create the world of the literary work? What does this achieve from the reader's point of view? What images, similes, metaphors, symbols appear in the work? Why are they used, what is their function and what meanings do they convey?

Example: [On Literary Criticism: Looking into Noers Moths from the planes of light of New Critics, Russian Formalists and the Structuralists](#)

Herujiyanto Herujiyanto (2016) 'On Literary Criticism: Looking into Noers Moths from the planes of light of New Critics, Russian Formalists and the Structuralists', LLT journal (Online). Universitas Sanata Dharma, 17(1), pp. 42–50. doi: 10.24071/llt.v17i1.277.

New criticism

Led by Clench Brooks, John Crowe Ransom (critics) and T.S. Eliot (poet) this form of criticism emphasised the examination of the formal and structural elements of the text, rather than its moral or emotional components.

New criticism concentrates on an ‘objective’ evaluation of the text to identify its underlying form. Things like a text’s use of imagery, metaphor, or symbolism within the text are of interest but matters outside the text such as biographical information about the author or contextual information about the environment the text is written in are not considered.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism are:

- Character: What is unique or interesting about the characters? Do the characters represent stereotypical tropes of the genre (such as the action hero, the anti-hero, the patriarchal father figure, and the Madonna)? How do the characters interact? How do they evolve?
- Setting: What role does the setting play? Does setting enhance tension within the work? Do any elements of the setting foreshadow the conclusion of the piece?
- Plot: Where is the source of conflict? How is the structural design of the scene used to build, enhance or resolve tension within the plot?
- Point of View. What types of point of view are used. Are narrators omniscient or closed? Are they reliable or unreliable?

Example: [A Formalist Reading of Sandra Cisneros’s “Woman Hollering Creek”, Sound in William Shakespeare’s The Tempest by Skylar Hamilton Burris.](#)

[On Literary Criticism: Looking into Noers Moths from the planes of light of New Critics, Russian Formalists and the Structuralists](#)

Herujiyanto Herujiyanto (2016) ‘On Literary Criticism: Looking into Noers Moths from the planes of light of New Critics, Russian Formalists and the Structuralists’, LLT journal (Online). Universitas Sanata Dharma, 17(1), pp. 42–50. doi: 10.24071/llt.v17i1.277.

New Historicism

Here an understanding of the texts is obtained by viewing it in the context of other texts. The influence of economic, social, and political factors are the considered and the term “text,” is interpreted flexibly. The Catholic Church could, for instance, be defined as a “text.” The perspectives of other interpretive methods –particularly reader-response criticism, feminist criticism, and Marxist approaches may also be incorporated when interpreting a text.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism are:

What social classes are depicted in the text? What are the roles of these classes in the story? How are the aspirations and conditions of these classes depicted?

How is the conflict between the powerful, privileged classes and the subordinate, lower classes depicted - does this drive the tension in the story and the jeopardy of the characters forward?

How does the historical context of the story and the social positions of the characters inform the reader about those characters’ motivations?

How do their social positions benefit or obstruct the characters' actions?

Example: <https://cla.purdue.edu/academic/english/theory/newhistoricism/index.html>.

Structuralism/Semiotics

This critical approach regards literature as a system of signs where meaning is constructed in a context. In this system words acquire meaning by being compared to other words and structures. A major theory associated with Structuralism was binary opposition. The theory of binary opposition plays an important role in Structuralism. This theory proposed that there are certain theoretical and conceptual opposites, which structure a given text, often arranged in a hierarchy. Such binary pairs might include light/dark, old/young, male/female, rational/emotional, black/white etc.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- What patterns are evident in the text? Are these patterns similar to those in other texts?
- What binary oppositions are presented in the text? (e.g., masculine/feminine, old/young, light/dark, good/evil, natural/artificial, etc.)
- Are the binary oppositions used in a hierarchical way (e.g., is an old age more valuable than a young age, is light better than dark, etc.)? How is each part of the binary valued?

Example: [On Literary Criticism: Looking into Noers Moths from the planes of light of New Critics, Russian Formalists and the Structuralists](#)

Herujiyanto Herujiyanto (2016) 'On Literary Criticism: Looking into Noers Moths from the planes of light of New Critics, Russian Formalists and the Structuralists', LLT journal (Online). Universitas Sanata Dharma, 17(1), pp. 42–50. doi: 10.24071/llt.v17i1.277.

Post-structural criticism

A reaction to New Criticism, Post-structuralist literary criticism de-emphasised the ideas of structural and formal analysis and questioned the assumption that universal truths are reliant on the social structure that they occur within. Like structuralism, literature is viewed as a system of signs, but post-structural criticism rejects the Structuralist view that there is an inherent meaning in a text. Instead, Post-structural criticism, takes the view that literature is inherently ambiguous and thus has no centre, nor a single interpretation.

Post-structuralism rejects the assumption in Structuralism that an essential quality of a work is the dominant relation of a hierarchy of binary opposites. Instead, Post-Structuralism aims to expose these relations and the dependency of the dominant term on its apparently subservient counterpart. Post-Structuralism aims to understand these meanings by deconstructing the assumptions and knowledge systems which produce the illusion that the text has a singular meaning. Meaning, therefore, is equally in the hands of the reader and the author.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- How does the reader respond in their understanding of how the work relates to their own personal concept of self?

Example: tbd

Deconstructional criticism:

Jacques Derrida originated this critical method which deconstructs (as the name suggests) the ideas and arguments present in a text and looks for contradictions that indicate that there can be no single interpretation of the text. This seems rather similar (or maybe even was the originating idea behind Post-structuralism).

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- Can different and conflicting interpretations of a text be used to show the instability of the language and its true meaning?
- How is the theme of the work presented in relation to the binaries in the work and how does the favoured binary dismantle the hierarchy of privilege of binaries within the work. Does the hierarchy contradict the binary that is showcased?
- What is the meaning of the text? What belief structure or ideology is it supporting?

Example: tbd

Feminist criticism

The increasing prominence of gender studies in the last hundred years or so lead to the emergence of feminist criticism. Feminist criticism is interested in exploring the ways gender dominance and submission are depicted in the text, how gender roles are reflected or contradicted by the text, and how gender roles evolve in the text.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism are:

- What gender roles are depicted in the text? What roles do men and women assume and perform and with what consequences? How are the relationships between men and women or those between members of the same sex presented in the text?

Do these roles witness or contradict traditional gender roles? For example, are the male characters in powerful positions while the women are dominated? Are the male characters in leadership positions and active, decisive and dominant? Are the women subordinate, passive or controlled?

Is the source of tension and jeopardy based on the gender roles within the text?

- Do the character's gender roles evolve over the course of the story?
- How is the place and time that the text was written in reflected by the way that men and women are represented in the text?

- Does the author take a male or female perspective in the text? Is the work presented in a way that reflects a predominantly male or female sensibility? Why might this have been done, what effect was intended by the author and does the work achieve this effect?
- Did the nature of the author's life and personal circumstances relate to the depiction of men and women in the work and their relative status?

Example: An early example is Virginia Woolf essay *A Room of One's Own*. More recent feminist critics include Elaine Showalter and Hélène Cixous.

Reader Response criticism

The important thing here is the reader's personal reactions to a text. Reader Response criticism assumes meaning is created by a reader's or interpretive community's personal interaction with a text. Since there can be many readers this implies there can be no single, correct, universal interpretation of the text. The meaning of the text exists in the minds of its readers.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism are:

What are you the reader's feelings in response to reading the text?

If you the reader personally took on the role of a character in the text, would you behave differently and why?

What memories or experiences are invoked in you the reader?

What values, morals or ethics do you, as the reader, believe are supported or discussed in the story?

As a reader, are you surprised, inspired, disappointed, dis-illusioned, depressed and so on by the story. What is the spectrum of your emotional response and why?

An example: tbd

Media criticism

Here the methods used to deliver the work such as multimedia, visual, oral and other sensory presentations, digital and analogue channels is the important fact.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism are:

How does the author use media to interact with the text?

What, if any, deviations from the traditions of print and page design have been used within the text?

In what ways has the author deviated from the traditional linear, deductively organised text?

Example: <http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/elab/elab.html>

Archetypal criticism

Archetypal Criticism is concerned with identifying the underlying myths or biblical allusions in stories and archetypes. These reflect and represent the “collective unconsciousness”, a term coined by the psychologist Carl Jung.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- What archetypal patterns or mythic elements are employed in this literary work? These might be apparent in the author's selection of any of the following: themes, settings, symbols, plots, genres, characters or imagery. What archetypal events occur in the story? (e.g., quest, initiation, descent into the underworld, ascents into heaven). What archetypal images occur? (e.g., rising or setting sun, water, earth, natural elements e.g., forest, symbolic colours). What archetypal images occur? ((e.g., water, rising sun, setting sun, symbolic colours). What archetypal characters appear in the story? (e.g., mother earth, femme fatal, hermit, wise old man, wanderer). What archetypal settings appear? (e.g., desert, garden, heath, cave, castle, mountains). How do these elements contribute to the work as a whole?
- Does the protagonist undergo any kind of transformation, such as movement from innocence to experience or the pursuit of a Hero's Quest that seems archetypal?
- Does the work reflect the hopes, fears, and expectations of a society or culture?
- Does the work deal with the depiction of universal experiences? What common human concerns are revealed in the story?
- Does the writer allude to biblical or mythological literature? For what purpose?

Example: [A symbolic approach to Kate Chopin's 'The Awakening'.](#)

Post-colonial criticism

Starting from the viewpoint that Western cultures misrepresent the true nature of third-world countries. Post-colonial criticism analyses how a text's stories, myths, and stereotypical images encourage repression and domination.

Questions that might be considered in this form of criticism include:

- How is colonial oppression represented, either explicitly or allegorically within the text?
- What does the text reveal about resistance to colonialism?
- Does the text view colonial oppression as a social, political, economic or religious issue, or as a combination of some or all of these?
- How does the text deal with the issues of personal and cultural identity?
- Which characters or groups are identified as isolated or outsiders? What does the text say about the treatment of these characters or groups?
- What does the text reveal about the operations of cultural difference
- How are the ways in which race, gender, religion, class, sexual orientation, cultural beliefs, and customs combined to form individual identity depicted in the text? What

does the text say about our perceptions of ourselves, others, and the world in which we live?

- Where does the text place itself in relationship to the existing canon of colonialist work?
- Does the representation of colonialization and/or its inappropriate silence about colonized peoples reinforce or undermine colonialist ideology?
- Example: [Other Voices](#)

Some key contributions to Post-colonial criticism:

- Edward Said - *Orientalism*, 1978; *Culture and Imperialism*, 1994
- Kamau Brathwaite - *The History of the Voice*, 1979
- Gayatri Spivak - *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, 1987
- Dominick LaCapra - *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, 1991
- Homi Bhabha - *The Location of Culture*, 1999

Twelve books on literary criticism

See: (Interesting Literature, 2022).

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Ricks, C., (1984) The Force of Poetry, Clarendon Press; First Edition (1 Oct. 1984)

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Cook E., (1998) Against Coercion: Games Poets Play, Stanford University Press

Three more:

- *The Critical Tradition: Classical Texts and Contemporary Trends*, 1998, edited by David H. Richter
- *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide*, 1999, by Lois Tyson
- *Beginning Theory*, 2002, by Peter Barry

Scholarly Writing

A piece of academic literary criticism is expected to have a recognised structure and to contain several specific elements. (In the case of the OU, it is more than an expectation, it is a requirement). Literary criticism should be written in the form of an essay, written in a scholarly style and should put forward an opinion, line of argument, proposition, thesis or opinion about a literary text. This opinion must be supported by evidence from the text (in the form of close reading and detailed analysis of quotes from the text) and weighed against similar or contrary opinions in the existing body of criticism that exists for that text. At the end of the essay, a concluding statement should be made indicating if the evidence presented in the essay does indeed support the initial opinion and indicate what further implications may be drawn from the arguments presented.

Literary critiques are based on a thesis - a statement or theory that is put forward as a premise to be maintained or proved. Note: the thesis must make an argument, not an observation. Traditionally the critique has a simple structure. A thesis claim is made in the introduction. Each subsequent paragraph examines some aspect of this claim. Evidence is provided within the paragraph in the form of quotes and paraphrased statements from the text to serve as evidence of the claim.

Close Reading

This involves closely examining the text, at a detailed level, often word by word and sentence by sentence. The objective is to arrive at a reading or interpretation of the meaning of the work that is something more than just a completely literal understanding of the words on the page. Close reading includes identifying literary elements contained in the text, such as genre, plot, setting, characterisation, point of view, use of rhetoric, humour, irony, syntax, tone, diction, style, imagery, figurative language, theme(s), cultural/historical/religious references, rhyme, rhythm, patterns, or absence of patterns.

While close reading will look for the author's use of literary devices at the word or sentence level (such as alliteration, sensory description, assonance, metaphor, simile, leitmotiv etc) it must also look for aspects of the work that exist at a higher structural level (e.g., flashback, foreshadowing, choice of narrator and the reliability of the nature and so on as well as the author's apparent underlying moral, religious, political, social or economic message).

The objective of close reading is to gain an understanding or appreciation of how the author has assembled the text, what the apparent intent of the author is, and whether this intent is achieved. Does this detailed study of the text then facilitate a higher-level understanding of the work? The features of the work thus identified are then used as evidence to support the thesis of the essay. Close reading is not concerned with simply summarising the work, it requires a detailed analysis of what the words achieve.

Essay writing

An essay written in a scholarly style must include the following elements:

1. A thesis or premise or proposition - the development of a perspective of a topic, rather than just a summary of facts. An interpretation of those facts to support a particular view of that topic which comes to a clearly stated conclusion
2. An academic voice - the essay must be written using a clear, consistent formal style using formal word choice and tone, objective phrasing, and concise but not repetitive sentence structure. While the writing should not be dry, it should focus on clarity and economy of expression.
3. Formal organisation and presentation of ideas. The essay must use a strong paragraph structure:
 - a. An introductory paragraph containing a thesis statement that introduces the topic of the essay
 - b. Paragraphs that support the argument being proposed. Each paragraph should make an individual point in the overall argument and this point must be supported with evidence and analysis. One way of thinking about body paragraphs in scholarly writing is the MEAL plan:
 - i. Main Idea: Your topic sentence stating the concrete claim the paragraph is advancing.
 - ii. Evidence: Paraphrase or direct quotations from the source material you are using to support your topic sentence's claim
 - iii. Analysis: Your explanation and evaluation of the evidence; explaining the evidence you provided and its relevance in your own words
 - iv. Lead Out: Concluding; preparing your reader to transition to the next paragraph (and the next claim)

The MEAL plan matches the general format of academic writing on many levels: that of assertion, evidence, and explanation. Many students make the mistake of writing toward a topic sentence or claim, rather than from one; keeping the MEAL plan in mind as you write will help you begin your paragraphs strongly and develop your analysis thoroughly.

(Extracted from: Duke University Thompson Writing Program. (n.d.)).

1. A concluding paragraph which briefly recapitulates the essay main points and states if the thesis has been demonstrated or not.
2. Cited evidence and critical and logical analysis. The arguments in the essay must be supported by scholarly sources, which are generally peer-reviewed articles, books, and journals. As an academic writer, you should express your own personal views, but these must be supported either by specific evidence from relevant recognised scholarly resources or by evidence based on close reading of the text under analysis.

Supporting evidence must always contain a citation (and a corresponding reference list entry) indicating the source of that evidence. The citations and references should be expressed in the specified house style (OU Harvard for the Open University). If you refer to well-known historical events or other contexts or facts generally in the public domain (e.g. that India is in Asia or John F Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas) then you don't need to cite sources for this information – it is simply regarded as common knowledge. You must however cite sources for more specific ideas and information, all quotations, and any paraphrase of particular content from a source such as a subject expert (e.g. Simon Schama in History or Einstein in Science) or books, journal articles, academic websites, personal website, blogs, social media and so on. This can often be a matter of phrasing or framing. The claim that 'Shakespeare wanted us to understand that the rose is a metaphor for a woman' needs to offer some evidence, in addition to evidence from a close reading of the poem, since we are making a statement about what Shakespeare was thinking. This is because we are making a claim about the other rather than the interpretation of the poem. A letter in which he describes his thought process would be a suitable reference. On the other hand, the claim that 'The rose in this poem can be interpreted as a metaphor for a woman' can simply be supported by a close reading of the poem to show how the relevant words in the poem point the reader towards that understanding.

A good scholarly essay will

- easily identify your thoughts and ideas on a subject and distinguish these from the thoughts and ideas of others.
- express and analyse the relationship between ideas rather than simply making a sequence of factual statements that the reader has to interpret themselves
- take a balanced view of the topic
- be objective
- be formal in tone and impersonal in style
- may use the passive form of verbs
- tend to employ a cautious way of explaining findings, using expressions such as 'may', 'it is possible that...', 'could'
- may use specialised vocabulary
- write in your own words, using the vocabulary and expressions relevant to your subject
- link your ideas in a logical way
- use sentences in grammatical English with accurate spelling so that your meaning is clear.
- contain a citation for each source of critical evidence or other supporting information and an accompanying reference list expressed in the appropriate house style (OU Harvard for the Open University).

A good scholarly essay will not

- summarise the text. It is assumed that the readers of the critical essay are familiar with the text being analysed so providing a summary in a critical essay adds no value.

- use personal pronouns such as I, me, you. On the other hand, it is arguable that, given that you are encouraged to think for yourself, interpret texts, and develop an argument in your essay, it makes sense to use the first person. If you do use it though, ensure that views or opinions are backed up by evidence and reference to critics.
- use verbs that are composed of multiple words, such as 'give up', 'put up with'
- express personal bias
- use contractions or shortened forms of verbs, such as won't, doesn't or it's

Conventions vary for the presentation format of a literary essay. A commonly used set of guidelines might be:

- Microsoft Word (doc or docx) or Adobe PDF.
- Normal margins. (2.54 cm top/bottom/right/left) on an A4 page
- Times New Roman, 12-point, black font
- Use double line spacing in general.
- Indent the first line of every paragraph (except the first line of each new section)
- Normal header and footer space
- Personal identifiers if required should be placed in the header or footer
- Number the pages in the header or footer
- If quotations exceed 40 words, then use a block quotation rather than an in-line quotation.

The block quote should be a single indented paragraph. It does not require enclosing quotation marks.
- Use single line spacing for block quotes or poetry (or if the poetry has a special layout - then follow this exactly)
- In-line quotations should be placed inside single quotation marks. Line breaks within the quotation should be indicated by a forward slash, e.g., 'There was an Old Man with a beard / Who said, "It is just as I feared! / Two Owls and a Hen, / Four Larks and a Wren, / Have all built their nests in my beard!"'
- Italicise Book, Journal and Play titles, e.g., *Hamlet*, *The Playboy of the Western World*
- Titles of articles in journals or chapters in books are not italicised - they should be placed in single quotation marks, e.g., "Going Native": Geography, Gender, and Identity in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters" in *British Literature in Context in the Long Eighteenth Century*
- If this essay is a response to a course question, then you may be asked to restate the question at the top of the answer. If there are optional sections to the question, make it clear which options you are answering
- Use a consistent referencing style, e.g., the Cite Them Right Harvard referencing style (Pears, R. and Shields, G. 2022)
- Place the list of references, in alphabetic order after the word count
- Indicate the word count for the piece. Do not count titles, restatement of the question etc, but do include in line references and quotes. Do not include the reference list or bibliography at the end of the piece.

Evaluative summary writing

Literary Criticism often consists of an academic essay that evaluates a piece of creative writing such as a novel or poem. An academic essay that evaluates a piece of literary criticism rather than a creative work is called an evaluative summary. Evaluative summaries are not limited to literary criticism but may also be used in more general ways to consider any material that presents an opinion or an argument.

An evaluative summary is made up of two elements:

- An accurate, clear and balanced summary of the text being analysed. This is essentially a factual analysis. (From the tutor's point of view this demonstrates that the student can understand and summarise the facts, arguments and opinions that the author has presented in the text. The summary does not pass any judgement, but merely concisely documents the contents of the text.)
- Your own critical analysis of the quality of the arguments being presented in the text. This is the evaluation part. (Here the tutor is looking for evidence that the student can show critical judgement and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the author's views or arguments. While the critical analysis will contain statements of your opinion about the author's text, these opinions should be backed up by reasoned arguments, and by supporting evidence from expert sources wherever possible.)

In an evaluative summary you are providing both an analysis and a reasoned judgement. You are not just summarising the facts in the text being analysed, but you are also providing an expert opinion on the validity of these facts.

As an example, consider the American Fox Network TV program, *Conspiracy Theory: Did We Land on the Moon?* This claimed NASA faked the moon first landing in 1969 to win the space race.

The evaluative summary of this article might contain the following sections:

Summary: Here the content of the TV programme would be discussed, in a factual way. The summary would cover who created the programme, what the context of the programme was (it was being made some time after the moon landings), and what the audience reaction was. The summary would also concisely list the claims made by the programme and the things that programme presented as facts to support those claims. (These might include the fact that the flag placed by Apollo 11 on the moon seems to be flapping in the wind, hence it cannot be on the moon as there is no atmosphere, the fact that the astronauts would be killed by radiation in the Van Allen belts around the Earth on their journey to the moon, that NASA have 'lost' the high resolution telemetry tapes from the mission suggesting a cover up and so on).

Evaluation: While the summary is 'just the facts', the evaluation considers whether these so-called facts are correct. Correct of course can be a subjective judgement. So, the evaluation

of the moon conspiracy programme might discuss why Fox made the programme - presumably to show government was being dishonest by supporting a conspiracy - and why Fox was interested in doing that. The evaluation would also consider how plausible the conspirators' arguments were and why the conspirators were presenting these arguments - perhaps with the purpose of undermining the establishment, by proving the government lies to the people. While this evaluation might be a subjective judgement, it can be backed up by considering whether the facts or arguments presented by the conspirators are supported by scientific evidence or expert opinion. There is much in the literature to show that the Flag would remain in whatever position it was set, so no wind is needed, that the radiation in the Van Allen belts, though dangerous, is not experienced for long enough to kill the astronauts and that NASA was simply incompetent and lost the tapes through human error. The evaluation would therefore argue that the conspirators' arguments were weak and false and that the Fox documentary, while entertaining had no actual intellectual merit. These counter arguments provide the meat of the evaluation but most importantly they should be backed up with references to the appropriate scientific journals and historical evidence. The evaluation may certainly express the opinions of the person writing the evaluation, but these opinions should always be supported by creditable sources, if possible.

Questions to ask yourself when writing an evaluative summary of an article

- Who wrote the article? What is their expertise / authority to write on the topic? Is he or she likely to be prejudiced? What is their motivation? Who was the intended audience? How did the audience react to the article?
- When was the article written. What was the political, social, economic, moral etc environment at the time - did that have a bearing on the article?
- What arguments does the article present? What evidence is presented to support these arguments? Is the author opinionated and do they expect the reader to accept a fact or idea simply because the author says so? Are there implicit assumptions in the author's arguments?
- What tone does the article adopt? Does the author use objective language or does he/she try to use unfair persuasion by using emotive words (eg terrible, horrible, disgusting, appalling). Are there unsupported generalisations, these statements often beginning with words "all", "every", "most" etc. but lack statistical or logical supporting evidence.
- Is the article clearly expressed? Does the author expect the reader to accept a fact or idea that is important to the argument, but that is not clearly stated.

- **Using the Critics**
- The use of critical resources is a key part of writing an essay of literary criticism.
- Use the critics as testing board for your own thoughts and opinion. It may be better to start a paragraph using your own views, rather than using a quotation from a critic. You can then use the critics within the paragraph to backup or questions the opinion you started the paragraph with.

- Don't necessarily believe the critics. They may be right, or they may be wrong. They certainly can and do contradict each other. The lifeblood of literary criticism is debate and disagreement. Literary criticism is very different from the scientific method. Unless you are writing a purely evaluative essay, the backbone of your essay should be your personal response to the text you are analysing. The critics are there to illuminate your response.
- Do not restrict yourself to a single critical source. It is best to consider the views of multiple critics and see which support your opinion or position and which do not.
- It is probably best not to align yourself completely to a single critical position. There are many nuances in critical thinking, and it is very unlikely that anyone will agree completely with everything a given critic says. So, some element of picking and choosing is required.
- It is important to take each critic seriously and engage with their position rather than dismiss them out of hand. A critic's argument should only be rejected by providing a properly reasoned argument for that rejection.
- The first reference to a particular critic should use both their first name and their surname. Subsequent references use the surname only.
- Avoid redundancy. If you have discussed a critic's views about a particular topic and have credited it to them, there is no need to directly quote the work in which the critic expressed those views. Just include a page number in the reference to the critic.
- Be rigorously consistent in your referencing style. For example: According to John Smith, *Macbeth* is 'a play about motivations, not about actions' (Smith, 2020, p. 123).
- Critical sources are best used to either (a) support or illustrate a part of your own argument (b) disagree with an argument (supporting evidence and reasons should be provided) or (c) extend or develop your arguments.
- A critical source can often profitably be applied outside its original context, e.g., applying to a different text or a different form. For example, something a critic says about Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace* may have relevance to James R Martin's *Game of Thrones*.

Useful resources for scholarly writing:

Literary Criticism 101, A Useful Fiction, [Online] Available at
<https://onehundredpages.wordpress.com/literary-criticism-101/>

Open University, (2022a) 'Developing academic English' in the Open University Help Centre, Core Skills: Study Skills, Available at: <https://help.open.ac.uk/develop-your-writing> (Accessed: 23 Jul 2022).

Open University, (2022b) 'Critical Thinking and writing (Advanced)', The Student Hub, Open University, [Online] Available at: <https://studenthublive.open.ac.uk/content/critical-thinking-and-writing-advanced-12-jul-2022>

Open University, (2022c) 'Types of Assignment', Open University Help Centre, Assignments: Types of assignment, [Online] Available at <https://help.open.ac.uk/essays>

Open University, (2022d) 'Types of Assignment', Open University Help Centre, Assignments: Writing in your own words, [Online] Available at <https://help.open.ac.uk/writing-in-your-own-words>

Useful resources for close reading

There are some very short examples of good quality close reading at:

Open University, (2022e) 'Don't describe—analyse', Undergraduate arts and humanities: Skills: Skills toolkits: English Literature Toolkit. Available at <https://learn2.open.ac.uk/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=1859527§ion=2.2>

and of course, there are a lot of close reading examples in the Open University A334 and A335 module materials and tutorial material.

For poetry,

Muldoon, P. (2009) *The end of the poem: Oxford lectures on poetry*. London: Faber.

This includes much close reading of a number of modern poets.

References

Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2022) *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide*. 12th edition. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Interesting Literature (2022) "12 of the Best Books of Literary Criticism Everyone Should Read", Interesting Literature Web Site [Online] <https://interestingliterature.com/2020/04/books-literary-criticism-theory-all-time/>

Lumen Learning (no date) English Literature I: Literary Criticism, OER Services, Lumen Learning, [Online] Available at: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-brillit1/chapter/literary-criticism/> (Accessed: 18 May 2022).

Masterclass (2021), Literary Criticism Explained: 11 Critical Approaches to Literature, Masterclass, [Online] Available at <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/literary-criticism#3kqMoFiSiznwc856kTEKCn> (Accessed: 18 May 2022).

Purdue University (2022), “Literary Theory and Schools of Criticism”, Purdue Online Writing Lab, [Online] Available at: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/subject_specific_writing/writing_in_literature/literary_theory_and_schools_of_criticism/index.html (Accessed: 8 Aug 2022)

Literary Criticism: Questions for a Variety of Approaches [Online] Available at: http://bcpsherefordhs.ss3.sharpschool.com/UserFiles/Servers/Server_3705599/File/Academics/English/Literary_Criticism_Generic_questions.pdf

Mambrol, N., (2022) Aestheticism, *Literary Theory and Criticism* [Online] Available at: <https://literariness.org/2022/04/29/aestheticism/>

Literary Movements

See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_literary_movements for an extensive list.

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