Interiority in *White Teeth* by Zadie Smith

Dave Sinclair

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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.

(1544 words)

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