Concealment and deception rather than disclosure and revelation are the true *modus operandi* of the postmodern author.

Dave Sinclair
9 Jun 2023

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 opaquer 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 revealled.

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 ione 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 an 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.

[3250 words]

References

Carroll, T. (2019) "Writing This Book Was a Weird Séance': An Interview With Deborah Levy", *Longreads*, Automattic, Available at https://longreads.com/2019/10/15/writing-this-book-was-a-weird-seance-an-interview-with-deborah-levy/ Accessed 22 Apr 2023.

Duignan, B. (2023) "postmodernism". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Available at: https://www.britannica.com/topic/postmodernism-philosophy Accessed 7 May 2023.

Levy, D. (2019) *The Man Who Saw Everything*, London: Bloomsbury

Mullan, J. (2014) "Realism: Discovering Literature: Romantics &Victorians", *British Library*, London. Available at: https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/realism Accessed 22 Apr 2023.

O'Grady, C. (2009) 'Fiction: Pale Tale', *The Guardian*. London (UK): Guardian News & Media Limited, Available at https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jun/20/white-is-for-

witching-oyeyemi Accessed 23 Apr 2023.

Lowdon, C. (2021) 'Strings attached: Helen Oyeyemi's latest puppet show', *TLS. Times Literary Supplement*. NI Syndication Limited, Available at *Gale Academic OneFile*, https://go.gale.com/ps/i.do?p=AONE&u=tou&id=GALE|A682600922&v=2.1&it=r&sid=bookmark-AONE&asid=71cec770 Accessed 25 Apr. 2023.

Oyeyemi, H. (2009) *White Is for Witching*, London: Picador.

Porter, J. (2013) "[Im]Migrating Witchcraft: Transatlantic Gothic Hybridity in *White is for Witching*", *Monsters and the Monstrous*, 3(1) Inter-Disciplinary Press, ISSN: 1756-770X

Shilling, J. (2009) "White is for Witching by Helen Oyeyemi: review", *The Telegraph*. London (UK) Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/5251569/White-is-for-Witching-by-Helen-Oyeyemi-review.html Accessed 23 Apr 2023.

RN2 (2023), Comment in group discussion, *Reading Novels 2 - Webinar (Group 3):* Tutor: Joe Stretch, 437V0046, Creative Writing MA, Manchester Metropolitan University, UK.

Sinclair, D. (2023) "Opening Chapters", *The Drowned Priest (WIP)* Available at: https://www.davesinclair.org/_files/ugd/87d6b9_338228e1640048bea7853ea3f97ef058.pdf Accessed 7 May 2023.