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Dickens and Realism John Mullan

His descriptions of London streets are almost tangible, yet his plots rely on ludicrous and fortuitous coincidences. He confronts his readers with the harsh realities of 19th-century life, yet his characters are more cartoon caricature than psychologically complex. So, asks John Mullan, is Dickens a realist?

Is Dickens a realist writer? In our common references to his fiction, we hardly seem to know. 'Dickensian' is sometimes a word for the seamy side of Victorian life. Here we think of Dickens as a writer who revealed the miserable 'reality' concealed in the slums and workhouses of a great imperial nation. But 'Dickensian' also refers to the novelist's gift for the grotesque, even the monstrous. Writing his stories for publication in weekly or monthly parts, Dickens was driven to make his characters instantly recognisable and utterly memorable. The likes of Miss Havisham in Great Expectations or Uriah Heep in David Copperfield are certainly unforgettable, but they are surely distorted shapes of humanity.

Social realism

The 'realist' Dickens is often thought to be the writer who refuses to flinch from the real effects of poverty. In Oliver Twist, for instance, Dickens takes his genteel reader to a locality that he claims to know. On the Thames near Rotherhithe

> there exists, at the present day, the filthiest, the strangest, the most extraordinary of the many localities that are hidden in London, wholly unknown, even by name, to the great mass of its inhabitants.

This is Jacob's Island.

> Crazy wooden galleries common to the backs of half a dozen houses, with holes from which to look upon the slime beneath; windows, broken and patched: with poles thrust out, on which to dry the linen that is never there; rooms so small, so filthy, so confined, that the air would seem too tainted even for the dirt and squalor which they shelter; wooden chambers thrusting themselves out above the mud, and threatening to fall into it - as some have done; dirt-besmeared walls and decaying foundations; every repulsive lineament of poverty, every loathsome indication of filth, rot and garbage

It was a real place, really visited by the author. But Dickens's prose makes it also a place from a nightmare, where even the force of his hyperbole can hardly do justice to his indignation.

Think of the opening of Bleak House, where we get a November afternoon in London.

> *As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet or so long, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes - gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun.*

'One might imagine': it is a scene that confesses to be fanciful, yet this vision of a city returned by its own gloom and filth to some primal epoch, a city that has managed to extinguish solar warmth and light, is irresistible. To do justice to reality, description has to be fantastic.

Fascinating villains

So too with some of Dickens's grotesque characterisations. He is sometimes criticised for his villains, 'baddies' pure and simple, their very features twisted. Yet these monsters are as 'real' as our childish nightmares. Readers of The Old Curiosity Shop fret at the sentimental depiction of the virtuous Little Nell, but few deny the vividness of the novel's dwarfish, repulsively fascinating villain, Quilp. He looks like a living Mr. Punch and has the energy of pure ill-will. He drinks extraordinary concoctions of boiling alcohol and ferociously chain-smokes cigars. His accessory Sampson Brass supposes that he spends his leisure hours 'making himself more fiery and furious [...] heating his malice and mischievousness till they boil'. Quilp's malignity burns with incandescent vigour. He keeps turning up with some new trick, even if it is only to hang upside down from the top of a coach and make horrible faces at the travellers inside. 'Such an amazing power of taking people by surprise!' He is not, we might say, a 'real' person but he is an aspect of humanity.

Expressive names

Dickens's distortion of human features in order to get at essential human characteristics is represented by the improbable but wonderfully expressive names that he invents. For Dickens, to get the name was to get the character. In his notes for David Copperfield, you can see him trying out different possibilities. David's intimidating step-father goes from Mr. Harden to Murdle to Murden before he becomes, unforgettably, Mr. Murdstone: hard and murderous. Just right, perfectly evoking a child's fears. Dickens's names are sometimes close to telling you what a character is (the frozen Sir Leicester Dedlock in Bleak House, the utilitarian Gradgrind in Hard Times) and sometimes more poetically expressive (the lovably foolish Traddles in David Copperfield, the vampire lawyer Vholes in Bleak House). No wonder that some of Dickens's names have become words for types of character. An article in the Guardian complains that New Labour enthusiasts 'have a Gradgrindian commitment to facts and data'. A columnist in the Daily Mail describes the Chief Executive of the Football Association as an 'Artful Dodger'. And ever since his first appearance in A Christmas Carol in 1843, Scrooge has been a synonym for a life-denying miser.

Unrealistic genres

A Christmas Carol is, of course, a ghost story, composed for that time of year when the family might amuse itself with an amiably chilling story, written to be read aloud. It is characteristic of Dickens that he should breathe new life into this unliterary genre - the supernatural tale. The journals that Dickens edited, Household Words and All The Year Round, made ghost stories their speciality, especially at Christmas. Dickens wrote other examples, like 'The Haunted Man' and 'The Chimes'. Here he looks like an anti-realist. He not only adopts an unrealistic form, but in A Christmas Carol does so in order to make a moral fable. This most famous of his tales for Christmas is apparently doubly anti-realist. It employs the supernatural, and it shows a man being transformed overnight from vice to virtue. If we use the word 'realistic' to mean 'likely', then this is entirely unrealistic.

Yet the brilliance of the story is to contain within its fable-like form fragments of vivid social realism. Scrooge is forced to see the world as it really is and has been, from the scenes from his own childhood to the domestic interiors of his employees and relations. The tipsy party games played by Scrooge's nephew and niece and their friends are like Victorian family video clips, even if they are shown us by a spirit. Dickens redeemed other popular, supposedly 'unrealistic' genres. By the 1830s, middle-class readers were lapping up the so-called 'Newgate Novels' of Harrison Ainsworth and Bulwer Lytton. These narrated the exploits of notorious criminals. Moralists complained that they romanticised crime. Oliver Twist can be seen as Dickens's response to this literary fashion, a response that insisted on the unwholesome quality of what it showed. Dickens added a preface to the novel insisting that 'the very dregs of life' may 'serve the purpose of a moral'. Dickens's moral design always requires a certain quite conscious avoidance of what a sociologist of today might think likely. Oliver, the parish boy, is strangely untainted by his life amongst desperate paupers and calculating criminals. His very habits of speech make him sound like the good middle-class boy that he is destined to become.

Improbable plots

Dickens's sense of design leads him to use, indeed to highlight, some improbable plot turns. The path untainted through corruption of Oliver Twist is revealed to be an elaborate scheme by his half-brother, Monks, to rob him of his birthright. There is a lost will, in which the man who was father to both Oliver and Monks left the bulk of his property to Oliver. The truth is proved by a ring and a locket that Oliver's mother possessed when she died in the workhouse. It is like the providential discoveries at the end of a romance. The parish boy gets his inheritance and the villain gets his just desserts. (Monks emigrates and eventually dies in prison.) Dickens's fiction provides us with poetic justice. Near the end of David Copperfield, David and his friend Traddles are being given a conducted tour of a prison by Mr Creakle, the rascally schoolmaster who has become a magistrate. Creakle, 'in a state of the greatest admiration', presents the institution's two model prisoners, Twenty Seven and Twenty Eight, who inhabit adjacent cells. They are Uriah Heep and Steerforth's malignly creepy butler, Littimer. These two villains have ended up next to each other. David feels 'resigned wonder'. 'Of course!' is the reader's response. Both characters specialised in the sinister pretence of servility, so being famous 'penitents' together was a natural (even if not probable) fate.

Underlying reality

This is fiction that reveals the hidden shape of things. It uses every flamboyant staging device, every possibility of caricature, to do so. Dickens's contemporary George Eliot thought that realism should be like a Dutch painting of a domestic interior: sober, modest, attentive to the ordinary things in life. By her standards, Dickens is no realist. But we would not be so captured by his grotesquerie and exaggeration and gift for the fantastic if these did not so often and so truthfully show a reality underneath the ordinary surface of life.

Excellent Foppery - Comedy in Shakespeare's tragedies

Daniel Stanley investigates the subtle and powerful role humour plays both structurally and dramatically in Shakespeare's tragedies. He looks in particular at Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, King Lear and Othello.

Gravediggers' humour

> *A musician had given orders that when he died, his flute was to be buried with him. The undertaker asked the widow, 'What do you think, madam?''Well,' she replied, 'I thought it a blessing he didn't play the piano.'*

This kind of humour, illustrative of the close relationship between comedy and tragedy, would have been appreciated by Shakespeare. The notion of a poignant moment tinged with relief but then diminished by practical, earthly considerations seems inappropriate but inescapably amusing. Indeed, Hamlet's graveyard clowns seem to understand that despair and laughter are twin responses to tragedy. Charged with the job of burying the poor drowned Ophelia, their scene quickly turns into black comedy as one clown asks another a riddle:

> *Who builds stronger than a mason, a shipwright or a carpenter?*

The solution, like something from a Christmas cracker, soon follows:

> *a gravemaker - the houses he makes last till Doomsday.*

All their discussions and mock-philosophical banter about drowning seem to provide a little light relief, albeit still concerned with the subject of death.

And yet, like other humorous moments in Shakespeare's tragedies, their placement within the play is loaded with structural and dramatic significance. Here, in the final act, Hamlet's beleaguered sweetheart has just drowned herself and it will only be a few lines before Hamlet himself lifts up the skull of the King's former jester and delivers his famous 'Alas, poor Yorick' speech.

'The readiness is all'

Structurally, a scene of dark comedy can also be seen to prepare the tragic hero, and audience, for the acceptance of truth. Hamlet passes through the graveyard scene and reaches greater insight about the idea of mortality when he later says:

> *The readiness is all. Since no man knows of aught he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?*

In this sense, the graveyard scene anticipates events that will lead to Hamlet's end. Hamlet states that man is no more likely than a sparrow to comprehend what comes after death. And the audience, too, senses that the duel with Laertes that follows will bring bleak finality.

Verbal duelling

In Romeo and Juliet it is a duel, too, that brings about a change in mood and a realisation on the part of the hero of his own weaknesses. Romeo's fatal brawl with Tybalt is foreshadowed by comedic verbal duelling with his friend Mercutio in Act 2, Scene 4. Complaining that Romeo abandoned his friends at the Capulet ball, Mercutio says:

> *You gave us the counterfeit last night*

and when Romeo fails to comprehend he is told:

> *The slip, sir, the slip. Can you not conceive?*

This begins an exchange filled by Shakespeare with riddles, puns and wordplay. The idea of a counterfeit coin suggests the double meanings of language that will be explored in order to demonstrate their relationship to truth. Mercutio is complaining about Romeo's lack of honesty towards his friends, but also towards himself. Here, a swift exchange of short lines and word duelling begins:

> *MERCUTIO:...such a case as yours constrains a man to bow in the hams.*
> *ROMEO*
> *Meaning, to curtsy.*
> *MERCUTIO*
> *Thou hast most kindly hit it.*
> *ROMEO*
> *A most courteous exposition.*
> *MERCUTIO:*
> *Nay, I am the very pink of courtesy.*
> *ROMEO*
> *Pink for flower.*
> *MERCUTIO*

> *Right.*
> *ROMEO*
> *Why, then is my pump well flowered.*
> *MERCUTIO*
> *Sure wit, follow me this jest now till thou hast worn out thy pump, that, when the single sole of*
> *it is worn, the jest may remain, after the wearing, sole singular.*
> *ROMEO*
> *O single-soled jest, solely singular for the singleness.*
> *MERCUTIO*
> *Come between us, good Benvolio! My wits faint.*
> *Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 4, 51-69*

Romeo is accused of being 'singularly' one-track minded but Mercutio's jest is that behind the slip of words, 'courtesy' to 'curtsy', 'pink of flower' to 'flowery pumps' (shoes), 'sole' to 'soul', is a singular truth. Once worn out, Romeo will be left with nothing to stand on and the joke will be on him. For his part, Romeo evades this, simply seeing the jest as 'single-soled', like the thin sole of a shoe.'The slip', then, refers to the slippery nature of the meanings behind language that reflect Romeo's own evasiveness. The verbal duel continues, with Romeo seeming to have the upper hand. But with the friendship reaffirmed by witty banter, Mercutio has the last word, saying:

> *Now art thou Romeo. Now art thou what thou art, by art as well as by nature.*

Here, however, the double side of 'art' as in 'are' and as in 'artifice', the opposite of natural, continues to make the question of what Romeo really 'is' a slippery one to pin down. Romeo himself comes closest to answering it in Act 3, Scene 1 when, having been involved with Mercutio's death and losing himself to an impulsive revenge upon Tybalt, he moans, 'I am fortune's fool!'

Clowns, fools and jesters

So far we have seen how comedy prepares the way for truths to be revealed to both audience and hero. Clowns and jesters, then, play an important dramatic and structural role within Shakespeare's tragedies. Indeed, the audience feels the sudden change in mood brought by Mercutio's final lines. He jokes as he lies dying, 'ask for me tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man'. And yet, what stands out is not his wit, but the fear invoked by his repeated curse: 'A plague a'both your houses'. His last words, 'Your houses' toll the death knell of comedy and romance and mark the onset of tragedy. Taken off stage, his words remain, haunting the lovers and their families to the very end.

Licensed fools

Another joker whose disappearance marks a shift towards tragedy is King Lear's Fool. Shakespeare's comedies, such as Twelfth Night, contain instances of clowns and fools who play an important role in the confusion and errors of identity that make up the core humour of the drama. Sometimes simple minded, the conventional fool is the object of much mirth but he often also states truths and has the licence to say things that others can't. Fools in Shakespeare often use wit and clever wordplay for satirical ends, drawing attention to the flaws in their rulers or society, or the darker side of their world. This kind of satirical wit can act as a comic mirroring of the events of the plays. In Lear's tragedy,

however, we meet a fool whose ability to speak wisdom and truths is demonstrated in a play where questions about nature and reality versus illusion or artifice reign. In a dramatic sphere where truth is contested, rendered murky by disguise, intrigue and insincerity, it is the hero's metaphorical blindness that arguably leads to his downfall. The Fool's privileged position and the lowness of his social origins give him license to speak with honesty and truth. In King Lear, however, part of the tragedy lies in the fact that Lear consults his Fool too late; by Act 1, Scene 4 the seeds of tragedy have already been sown.The timing of the arrival of the Fool seems inopportune and his advice to Lear flippant in the light of the king already having given his kingdom away to his two scheming daughters, Goneril and Regan. Furthermore, he has disowned his most loving and faithful daughter Cordelia and banished the loyal Earl of Kent. And yet, Lear's relationship with his Fool is warm and full of trust. Unlike in the case of Kent, Lear listens to the Fool's criticisms, which Shakespeare fills with more riddles and wordplay. But behind the Fool's words lies the truth, and part of his function is to open Lear's eyes to it:

> FOOL: ... Nuncle, give me an egg and I'll give thee two crowns.KING LEAR : What two crowns shall they be?
> FOOL: Why, after I have cut the egg i' the middle, and eat up the meat, the two crowns of the egg. When thou lovest thy crown i' the middle, and gav'st away both parts, thou bor'st thy ass on thy back o'er the dirt thou hadst little wit in thy bald crown when thou gav'st thy golden one away... [Sings.]
> Fools had ne'er less grace in a year,
> For wise men are grown foppish,
> They know not how their wits to wear,
> Their manners are so apish.

To begin with, the Fool puns on crowns as in money as well as the halves of Lear's kingdom he has given up. He takes this further with the metaphor of the egg, out of which he creates two crowns and an image of a golden yoke representing his daughter, whose true value and love Lear had failed to recognise. In a third meaning of 'crown', Lear's head is held up for examination, dramatically significant given the madness that will shortly take hold of him. Lear is further ridiculed by the image of him carrying his own donkey, an inversion of natural order that the Fool compounds with the statement that wise men have become fools, so that the jester's own job seems seriously redundant.

Lear's folly

The essence of the Fool's joke is that Lear must have emptied his head of wits and good sense, strongly suggesting that the real fool here is Lear himself. His 'apish' decisions suddenly seem absurd to the audience, who are put in the position of deciding whether, as a tragic hero, he deserves our sympathy at all. This may be why Shakespeare has Lear continue to be blind to the truth and our pity for him is suspended until he undergoes great suffering and madness. Nonetheless, the Fool scenes are worthy of further study not only in the way their humour defuses the tension of the play, but in the part the character plays in helping Lear realise his mistakes. By that time, however, it is too late; the Fool is gone and Lear can only lament while holding the body of Cordelia in his arms: 'and my poor fool is hanged.'

Iago: a malevolent wit

The Fool's perceptive jests are enjoyable but his removal from action, like that of Mercutio's, signifies a dramatic step towards tragedy. The skull representing a king's dead jester, Yorick, also represents the death of laughter. As Hamlet himself asks:

> *Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar?*

In Othello, laughter also quickly dies. Iago is another trusted companion of the leader, who in a comedy might use his cleverness to quip and joke satirically about his world but in Iago that humour has gone sour and his clever wordplay performs an entirely different function. Iago has the Fool's position of trusted servant and confidant; however, his sharp wit is used for deceit and discord rather than the service of truth.'I am not what I am', we are warned by 'Honest' Iago in the first scene of Othello. His openness is disarming, as are his light-hearted riddles and drinking songs, so that when Othello requires guidance, Iago's words are valued. In fact, Othello requires Iago to be true to himself when seeking to validate his insecurities about his wife, Desdemona: 'Give thy worst of thoughts the worst of words' he requests. Skilfully holding back, Iago eventually counsels Othello, 'it is in my nature's plague to spy into abuses, and oft my jealousy shapes faults that are not'. Iago's genius cunning is in using his honesty veiled by modesty to manipulate his master so that he may be trained to see for himself the proofs of infidelity between Desdemona and Cassio he looks for:

> *if you please to hold him off a whileYou shall by that perceive him [...]*
> *Note if your lady strain his entertainment*
> *... much will be seen in that.*

Having set him up, all Iago needs to do is to plant the proof, Desdemona's handkerchief, in Cassio's chamber and the trap is set. 'Thus credulous fools are caught' boasts Iago, with Othello having suffered a total breakdown:

> *and many worthy and chaste dames even thus/all guiltless, meet reproach.*

A complex conclusion

There is little mirth to be found in Othello. In the other tragedies what comedy there is serves briefly, but only briefly, to make us laugh. It is a dark kind of comedy which uses language to point up harsh realities about characters, the world or the truth of human experience. In the end it reinforces the impact of the tragedy, and the pity we feel, as the protagonists tumble into insanity, indignity or death.

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Defining poetry Michael Rosen

emagazine asked Michael Rosen, poet, broadcaster and newly-appointed children's laureate, to explain what poetry is. Simple? Think again!

People often ask me, what is a poem, perhaps because they suspect that a lot of what I write isn't really poetry even though it quite often says on the cover of my books something like 'Poems by Michael Rosen'. Some people are a bit more combative from the off, and say things like, 'What you write isn't poetry, is it?'

Am I bovvered?

I have several answers to this line of questioning. One is to say that I'm not really bothered by what people want to call it. If it makes life any easier, just call it 'stuff' and then we don't need to waste any more time bothering about names. After all, when you're eating a tomato, you don't really care terribly much if it's a fruit or a vegetable, do you? You care if it's a good or bad tomato. As I'm sure you've spotted, what I'm doing here is resisting the desire we have to label and categorise. At the same time, I'm criticising the way some people use the categorisations in a loaded, non-neutral way in order to determine whether this or that is good or bad. This is what people do when they talk about 'high' and 'low' culture, or when they try to make distinctions between fiction, documentary, 'docufiction' and 'mockumentary'.

Let readers decide?

Another line of answer is for me to say that a poem is quite simply whatever a group of people think is a poem. Usually, we leave this to a specific group - that's to say a publisher, an editor, some critics, fellow poets and experienced readers. For as long as people have wondered if this or that is a poem, it's the agreement between sufficient numbers of such specific people that has been decisive.

Now, once again, as I'm sure you've spotted, I've dodged the original question. Or if you were to be a little more charitable towards me, you could say that I've answered the question from a position standing outside of writing rather than inside it, looking for extrinsic explanations rather than intrinsic ones. So, by saying it's an agreement between groups of people, I've simply observed how people behave in a sociological way towards writing.

Intrinsic features of poetry?

Someone could then ask me quite legitimately, 'If groups of people decide that this or that is a poem, are there any reasons intrinsic to this kind of writing that makes them come to this conclusion?'

Now, I'm up against the wall. I can't get away with any more ducking and diving. The problem is that if we take the whole body of what has been called poetry anywhere in the world, we have a hugely diverse range of writing types. Quite quickly we can see that there can't be a simple one-factor answer. Some people have tried. The most famous is Coleridge's 'the best words in the best order'.

This sounds all fine and dandy, except that, just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, so too is 'best' in the eye of the reader. What I think are the best words in the best order, you might think are mediocre words in a terrible order. My poem isn't a poem for you.

A what-is-poetry checklist

So, enough shilly-shallying. Here's my checklist for what leads people to think that what they're reading is a poem.

1. Patterning

Poems nearly always involve some kind of patterning of language where you could say that underlying the writing, there is a design that has some kind of regularity to it, like tartan or a wallpaper design. The most famous and obvious patterning systems are rhyme and rhythm. However, poets like Ogden Nash and John Hegley sometimes use rhyme without a regular rhythm, while other poets, particularly verse dramatists like Shakespeare or T.S. Eliot, use rhythm without rhyme.

But there are other patterning systems to look out for. English is a language that has stressed and unstressed syllables. You can use a pattern of stresses that's regular, just as you do with a conventional piece of music, the beat of music hitting the stressed syllable. Or you can count syllables. This is called 'syllabics' and Sylvia Plath is someone who experimented with this way of writing. It's one way to create pattern without being tied down by an unchanging rhythm.

Other patterning systems are repetition of sounds (alliteration and assonance), a repetition of a phrase or part of a phrase (an 'echo' or 'framing' technique) but also any kind of repetition of image or concept. These systems are much harder to discern and I call them 'secret strings'. Once again, with a highlighter, you can often find deeper meanings of a poem, by drawing lines between words that have links with each other, using their sound or their meaning.

The particular kinds of patterning that we find in poetry are aspects of the cohesion that we find in all language-use. In poetry these patterns are often that much more visible or audible.

2. Pithiness

Most poets try to achieve ways of expressing ideas that compress as much meaning, thought and feeling as they can into a short space of time or space on a page. Sometimes, as with a Shakespeare sonnet, this makes for a particularly dense kind of writing, where each word, phrase or line seems to throw up complex, ambiguous, paradoxical ideas. But another kind of compression can be achieved in a different way, the emotional intensity being created by sound, a bit like in music. This is the principle behind the element of poetry that resembles chanting. If you repeatedly chant a single phrase, you can create sensations of pleasure or sadness or compassion and quickly reach deep levels of emotion.

3. Proximity

A much overlooked aspect of poetry is the way in which poems yoke together ideas and images. In unexpected - and often unexplained - ways, poems will place one idea next to another. This is the process of association. John Donne begins one poem:

Busy old fool, unruly sun...

If you let your mind run over some of the ideas here, you can quickly see how odd this is. How can the sun be a fool? How can it be unruly ('unruly' means boisterous or disobedient)? Easy to see that it's old, but how can it be busy? What is a busy old fool? Are busy old fools unruly? In five words, there are five images, out of which only 'old' and 'sun' would seem to match up in any ordinary way. This laying of ideas next to each other in an unexpected and often unexplained way is part of the process known as 'defamiliarisation'. So, as some have said, poetry makes the familiar unfamiliar and the unfamiliar familiar. If you juxtapose two images that you would not normally see next to each other, you demand of the reader what might be called the 'work of association': the reader has to work out why such two images associate.

4. Pictures

One of the most commented on aspects of poetry concerns the way in which many poems use language over and over again to make analogies. The opening of one of Wilfred Owen's poems is 'Bent double, like beggars…' As you know, the phrase 'like beggars' is a simile. Other ways to cue up similes are to use phrases like 'as', 'as if', 'as when', 'in the way that', 'in the manner of', 'so does/do', and there's a slightly coded way of doing it, by using the comparator 'more'. Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet says:

> More than Prince of Cats, I can tell you.

In a more compressed form, poems create pictures using metaphor and metonymy and, following from what I said about patterning, they create patterns with the metaphors. Shakespeare's 'Sonnet 24', uses the idea of a painting and explores similarities and differences between paintings and love across the whole poem. This is what's called a 'conceit' (that which has been conceived), a process which underlies a great deal of poetry even when it isn't immediately obvious. A poem about trying to walk through a forest can, on reflection, also be a poem about trying to get through a difficult time in your life and so on. A poem doesn't have to say it's a 'conceit' to embody a conceit!

But why bother with metaphors and similes? Because they are one of the most powerful and useful ways in which we can investigate and explain. Wilfred Owen's poems are mostly jam-packed (a metaphor in itself!) with metaphors and similes and I've often asked myself why. I think that it reflects his desperation that people at home should feel and see the full ghastliness of the First World War. He is, in effect saying, over and over again: 'it's like this, it's like this…'

5. Mode of address

One very special thing about poems becomes apparent if we ask the question of any given poem, 'Who is this poem speaking to?' In some poems, you could say that the answer is obvious: 'He's talking to his lover' or some such. But, then we can say, if he's talking to his lover, why has he bothered to write it down and publish it? Surely, if he wants to talk to his lover, he can go and see her, write her a private letter or get on the phone! The 'writerly' answer is to say that poets take on the voices of people and things in hundreds of different ways. Poems are very often imitations of the way people would write or speak if they were speaking or writing to this or that person or thing. The mode of address, then, is itself a kind of metaphor! Robert Browning wrote poems as if they were people in the act of talking. A Duke taking some people round his great house begins:

> *That's my last Duchess painted on the wall,*
>
> *Looking as if she were alive.*

The mode of address of many poems is borrowed from the sound or style of earlier poems. Wordsworth begins, 'I wandered lonely as a cloud'. The idea of beginning a poem with the image of walking out and about goes back at least to medieval times when there was a tradition of poems and songs being about going out into the countryside on a May morning and has been picked up many times by other poets, as with William Blake and the poem that begins 'I went to the Garden of Love'.

So the importance of mode of address in poetry signals the fact that 'voice' is of fundamental importance, perhaps more so than in much prose writing.

6. Scavengers

It's not only voices that poets borrow - they are incurable scavengers. If you write poems, you give yourself the licence to beg, borrow and steal any kind of language from any source: political speeches, notices, advertisements, fragments of songs, any poem in the world history of poetry. T.S. Eliot's early poetry was developed out of a patchwork of references, allusions and borrowed voices from a wide range of sources.

One of the things that makes a piece of writing into poetry is the unexplained way in which poets draw together these borrowed words, phrases, modes of address and allusions. When Alexander Pope wrote his poems many of the phrases he played with were borrowed from translations of Latin poets. Today, many of us might not recognise these without the help of notes. Bob Dylan's songs are dense with borrowed phrases from the Bible, political speeches, proverbs and other people's songs. Carol Ann Duffy's poems are full of other people's voices, like Miss Havisham from Dickens's Great Expectations or old school teachers, or the imagined twin sister of Elvis. One of the tricks of poetry is to surprise readers by importing one voice into the context of another.

7. The mix

If you mix these six areas of language-use into one pot, you'll be hard pushed to find a genre of writing other than poetry that can freely use any or all of them within the covers of one book.

Article Written By: Michael Rosen is a writer and broadcaster. He was appointed Children's Laureate in 2007.

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Bloodlust, Savagery, Obsession and Excess - Gothic Macbeth

Is it really possible to use the conventions of the Gothic - a literary movement from the late eighteenth century - to analyse a play written in the early seventeenth century? Dr Pamela Bickley's illuminating discussion of Shakespeare's troubling play suggests it is.

When Shakespeare wrote Macbeth in or around 1606 he was certainly not writing a Gothic text; he was producing a vividly dramatic script for his theatre company to perform. Neither Shakespeare nor his audience would have understood 'Gothic' as a literary concept; the term emerged with the genre itself in the mid-eighteenth century. In what respects, then, can Macbeth be identified and read as Gothic? What characteristics does the play share with later Gothic texts?

Gothic Transgression and Excess

> *I am in blood*
> *Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,*
> *Returning were as tedious as go o'er*
> *3.4.135-8*

Gothic writing uncovers a world of taboo, challenging and overstepping norms. One of the key aspects of the genre that can be identified through its long survival is its engagement with the unspeakable, from the rape, incest and diabolism of Matthew Lewis's The Monk (1796) to the late twentieth century and the grotesque world of Patrick McCabe's The Dead School (1995). In Macbeth, as in any play of the period, the ultimate taboo is regicide: to kill the king is a heinous act, violating feudal loyalties and offending against God. Macbeth always knows that Duncan's murder is 'deep damnation'. In his first soliloquy he reveals the early stirrings of 'horrible imaginings', thoughts that terrify him and deprive him of all sense of reality - 'nothing is, but what is not' (1.3.142). And in his later musings, he envisages the entire cosmos recoiling in horror: 'tears shall drown the wind' (1.7.25). Similarly, when Macduff discovers Duncan's body, his imagery is religious, not simply political:

> *Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!*
> *Most sacrilegious Murther hath broke ope*
> *The Lord's anointed Temple ...*
> *2.3.65-7*

But in this play the regicide is not the only taboo. The apparition of the 'bloody child' conjured by the Witches symbolises the most horrifying slaughter of all - the deaths of innocent children. Lady Macbeth's hyperbole of dashing her baby's brains to the ground is part of this Gothic excess; Macbeth himself goes much further in his willingness actually to sacrifice Fleance and then Macduff's children.

Brutality and Lust for Power

The play introduces Macbeth in terms of excessive savagery. He is initially the fearless soldier defending his king from treachery and invasion and, in this respect, all approve Macbeth's military prowess. But Shakespeare's words emphasise the physical brutality of the hand-to-hand fighting:

> *his brandished steel,*
> *... smok'd with bloody execution,*
> *... carv'd out his passage*
> *1.2.17-9*

Macbeth's sword steams with the hot blood of his victims as he fights his way towards the disloyal Macdonwald who is 'unseam'd [...] from the nave to the chops' and beheaded. When the Captain goes on to describe Macbeth as seeming to 'bathe in reeking wounds' he speaks literally - the warrior would be covered in blood and gore. The Captain's words partly prefigure how Macbeth will end - fatally wounded and subsequently beheaded. But this opening battle scene also typifies the world of the play: the world that Macbeth inhabits but then perpetuates beyond the battlefield, violating the domestic space of his own and, later, Macduff's castle. Macbeth finds in himself an affinity with blood and darkness. He does not scruple to seek the deaths of Banquo and his young son Fleance; Macduff's wife, children and babes will all be sacrificed to Macbeth's overwhelming desire for supremacy. When he says,

> *For mine own good,*
> *All causes shall give way*
> *3.4.134-5*

he typifies the overwhelming hubris of the Gothic hero. Frankenstein's ambition, for example, possesses him 'like a hurricane':

> *Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world.*

Frankenstein - Obsessions, Isolation and the Torture of the Mind

Macbeth and Frankenstein pursue different ends but they are both consumed by an obsession which sweeps aside all moral restraint or societal norms. In Frankenstein's world, Gothic transgression is revealed in his graveyard activities: violating the dead is an absolute taboo. In Macbeth's world, regicide is the taboo which makes 'my seated heart knock at my ribs'. In this respect the play

resembles the nightmare of the Gothic: a world where the brakes are off and the unthinkable is enacted.

The world of Macbeth is not limited to physical violence, however: 'the torture of the mind' (3.2.21) is vividly realised in this play. Macbeth's own intense mental, emotional and spiritual suffering is evident from his anguish before (and, of course, after) Duncan's murder up to his final soliloquy where he finds only 'Nothing' at the heart of life. The isolation of his suffering is part of the horror of the play - and again connects him with the apartness of the Gothic protagonist. Angela Carter's Bluebeard (in The Bloody Chamber) is briefly an object of pity when his terrified victim perceives 'the atrocious loneliness of that monster'. Macbeth's solitude is inherent to his tragedy; equally, Lady Macbeth is tormented by nightmare, horror and isolation. These two have embraced a world of blood and it haunts them.

'Secret, black, and midnight hags' - the Occult in Macbeth

The dark and mysterious world of the supernatural dominates Macbeth from the opening moments of the play. Who are the witches and what is their purpose? Of course, Shakespeare is exploiting contemporary fears of witchcraft and the new king's obsession with it. James believed he had suffered from demonic attempts to destroy him, and published his own views in his Demonologie (1597). The witches themselves clearly exist on the margins of the 'real' world: they haunt battlefields for totemic body parts and pursue their own private revenges.

Dismembered body parts are often part of the horror of the Gothic, from Frankenstein (1818) to McCabe's The Butcher Boy (1992). The witches later played their own part in Gothic tradition, inspiring a number of paintings in the second half of the eighteenth century. The painter Henry Fuseli found Macbeth a particularly rich source for dark and troubling depictions of the supernatural; 'The Weird Sisters' (1793) is still an uncompromising and challenging painting. A particularly striking modern interpretation of the witches can be seen in Roman Polanski's film of Macbeth (1971), where they both begin and end the drama. Polanski supplies a final scene where the witches, clearly part of the bleak and inhospitable landscape, are discovered by Donalbain, returning to Scotland. Polanski's implication is that their malevolence is ever-present and so is the susceptibility of individuals to their tempting ambiguities. The witches are perhaps the most obviously threatening and Gothic aspect of the play: their evil remains undefeated and their existence challenges conventional views of the supremacy of spiritual good over evil. In the same way, Dracula's world of the undead undermines the religious certainties of the Victorian reader.

The world of the numinous is not limited to the Satanic arts of the witches, however. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth call upon dark forces as though the night can unleash evils that are concealed or repressed during daylight hours. When he is plotting the murder of Banquo and Fleance, for example, Macbeth conjures 'seeling Night' not simply for obscurity but because the night harbours wickedness:

> *Good things of Day begin to droop and drowse,*
> *Whiles Night's black agents to their preys do rouse.*
> *3.2.52-3*

His wife, similarly, invokes 'you Spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts'; 'you murth'ring ministers' (1.5.40-1, 48) when she first reads, in her husband's letter, of the witches' prophecy and Macbeth's subsequent advancement to Thane of Cawdor. She clearly believes that she is summoning a waiting

world of spiritual beings bent on destruction. This world of the unknown is unpredictable and tormenting, however; Macbeth is courageous in battle but the appearance of Banquo's ghost at the feast unmans him completely. The effect here is similar to the appearance of the Bleeding Nun in The Monk: the lovers Raymond and Agnes attempt to use the myth of the spectral Nun as a means of effecting Agnes's escape, but their plan turns against them in a horrifying way and Raymond finds himself embracing the skeletal Nun rather than his bride. The otherworldly has a power beyond rational human explanation. And Banquo's ghost appears uniquely to Macbeth, further isolating him in his tormented imagination.

Apocalypse -'let the frame of things disjoint'

Closely connected with the supernatural and with the rhetoric of Gothic excess, is the apocalyptic. This presupposes the end of the universe, possibly as a dark and climactic Last Judgement. When Macbeth seeks out the witches, he addresses them as though they might hold all the powers of destruction; he invites anarchy:

> *Though you untie the winds, and let them fight*
> *Against the churches; though the yesty waves*
> *Confound and swallow navigation up […]*
> *Although the treasure*
> *Of Nature's germens tumble all together,*
> *Even till destruction sicken …*
> *4.1.52-60*

To see Macbeth simply as a warlike Scottish thane with an ambitious wife would be wholly inadequate here. Shakespeare depicts a man to whom darkness and chaos is welcome and whose mind inclines always towards total destruction. When Birnam Wood approaches and he knows the witches' prophecies to be 'the equivocation of the fiend' he confronts his own death - but he desires apocalypse:

> *I 'gin to be aweary of the sun,*
> *And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone*
> *5.5.49-50*

The effective Gothic text functions best when preying upon the imagination, hinting at dark possibilities. In Macbeth Shakespeare draws together a cult of bloodlust with a brooding and dark supernatural world. The Porter's words, usually delivered as blackly comic, are also prophetic. Macbeth's castle has become Hell.

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Navigating Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde's London

Lydia Lutton suggests that a close analysis of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde in relation to its social and historical contexts can be revealing both of the text and of the period in which it was written.

In this tale of the dangers of alienating body from soul and deed from conscience, Jekyll's sense of self-division has been viewed as analogous to, or fostered by, divisions existing within British society. 1880s London was a city of stark contrasts: geographic segregation, economic divisions and political tensions.

By the 1880s London was an immense world-city, culturally and economically important, yet socially and geographically divided and politically incoherent. London was the largest city in the world, numbering 4 million inhabitants. In many ways the bustling, growing and multi-layered city of London gives Hyde an anonymous freedom as he is able to hide his despicable behaviour and go unnoticed by the many strangers who roam the streets. In addition, the West End of Mayfair had undergone significant renovation in the second half of the century; from a wealthy residential area it had been transformed into the bureaucratic centre of empire, the focus of transport, communication and entertainment. However, this world city seemed fragile and vulnerable with distressing effects felt through the Long Depression (1873-1896), a decline in London's traditional industries, and the absence of a unified and systematic water and health system causing frequent outbreaks of disease. Accompanying this malaise was significant social division.

In the mid 1880s London was also gripped by the threat of Irish Fenian terrorist activities, a threat that was exacerbated by a lack of political organisation. The 'heavy cane' with which Hyde 'clubs' Sir Danvers Carew is reminiscent of a shillelagh, a wooden cudgel associated with the violence.

The symbol of Jekyll's house raises the theme of the double, not only within the character but in terms of divisions within Victorian society. Dr. Jekyll lives in a well-appointed home, characterised by Stevenson as having 'a great air of wealth and comfort.' His laboratory is described as 'a certain sinister block of building ... [which] bore in every feature the marks of profound and sordid negligence.' With its decaying facade the laboratory quite neatly symbolises the corrupt Hyde. Correspondingly, the respectable, prosperous-looking main house symbolises the respectable front Jekyll wants to present to the public. Moreover, the connection between the buildings similarly corresponds to the connection between the personas they represent. The buildings are linked but look out on two different streets: the casual observer cannot detect that the structures are parts of a whole, just as Utterson cannot, or will not, acknowledge the relationship between the two.

Darkness and Fog

Stevenson's 'nocturnal', foggy, lamp-lit city setting is fitting for a society where secrecy and hypocrisy dominate. Most of the characters seem to be coming and going either late at night or in the early hours of the morning. Their activities remain unspecified or unquestioned by the vague, unreliable narrator Utterson, as Enfield admits: 'I was coming home from some place...about three o'clock of a

black winter morning.'

Throughout the novel, Stevenson establishes a link between the urban landscape of Victorian London and the dark events surrounding Hyde. He achieves his desired effect through the use of horror imagery, in which dark streets twist and coil, forming a sinister landscape befitting the crimes that take place there. Terrifying visions of the city also appear in Utterson's nightmares:

> 'He would be aware of the great field of lamps of a nocturnal city. . . . The figure [of Hyde] . . . haunted the lawyer all night; and if at any time he dozed over, it was but to see it glide more stealthily through sleeping houses, or move the more swiftly . . . through wider labyrinths of lamp-lighted city, and at every street corner crush a child and leave her screaming.'

Hyde appears as an unidentifiable supernatural 'figure' as he 'glide[s]' rather than walks along the city streets. He is a growing presence in Utterson's mind seen in the repetition of 'more', evidence that Utterson's imagination is 'enslaved', and prefiguring his increased influence over Jekyll.

Later, as Utterson rides to Hyde's apartments in Soho, he gets overwhelmed by the dark smog of the newly industrialised city. By the late 19th Century smoke pollution in industrialised London had become so thick that when mixed with fog it produced sky-darkening choking hazes that could last for weeks. The 'chocolate-coloured pall' is once again symbolic, not only its unique colouring reflecting the strange events surrounding the enigmatic Hyde, but also his own usual response to the events in the story.

> 'A great chocolate-coloured pall lowered over heaven... there would be a glow of a rich, lurid brown, like the light of some strange conflagration.'

Here the fog represents the lawyer's confusion as he struggles to comprehend Jekyll's attachment to Hyde. Furthermore it reflects his prevailing gloomy mood, and the oppressive atmosphere following the death of Carew. In addition, the funereal connotations present in the metaphor 'pall', a cloth covering a coffin, reminds the reader of Carew's shocking murder, but also foreshadows Jekyll's end.

Locked Doors, Secrecy, Evasion and Hypocrisy

Victorians could be said to suppress their true convictions and their natural tastes, sacrificing sincerity to propriety. They presented themselves as being incredibly pious and moral; they talked noble sentiments and many lived quite otherwise. They shut their eyes to what was ugly or unpleasant, pretending it did not exist. They conveniently looked the other way, often believing that candour did more harm than good. This need for secrecy, and wish to 'shut out' harsh reality, is symbolised effectively in the numerous locked doors present in the text: the strange door that Enfield encounters is always locked, Jekyll's laboratory is described as a 'windowless structure' and the three windows in the doctor's cabinet are barred with iron. After the incident with Dr Lanyon the reader is presented once again with the metaphor of the locked door, 'On the 12th, and again on 14th the door was shut to the lawyer', an unwell Jekyll urges Utterson of the need for closed doors, secrecy and silence, 'I mean from henceforth to live a life of extreme seclusion'. He has withdrawn himself to such an extent that the servants in his own household have seen little of him. What was condemned was not sin but *open* sin and in this way, the evasion, or self-deception is hypocritical.

For the characters in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, preserving one's reputation emerges as all-important. The prevalence of this value system is evident in the way that upright men such as Utterson and Enfield avoid gossip at all costs; preferring to remain silent, they see gossip as a great destroyer of reputation. In one of the most significant scenes, Utterson and Enfield are on one of their Sunday walks and speak to an ill Jekyll at his window, 'they saw it but for a glimpse, for the window was instantly thrust down...they turned and left the court without a word.'The men continue in 'silence', afraid and shocked at what they recognise in Jekyll's face. Similarly, when Utterson suspects Jekyll first of being blackmailed and then of sheltering Hyde from the police, he does not make his suspicions known; part of being Jekyll's good friend is a willingness to keep his secrets. Throughout the novel, the characters demonstrate an inability to fully express themselves, or choose to withhold highly important information. For example, in the very first chapter, Enfield claims he does not want to share the name of the man who trampled the young girl in order to avoid gossip. However, after finally naming Hyde, he and Utterson end the conversation abruptly, as they feel discussing the topic any further would be inappropriate for all parties involved. Similarly, Utterson withholds relevant information from the police following Sir Danvers Carew's murder by choosing to keep Hyde and Jekyll's relationship secret. These silences reflect the confines of Victorian morality: while avoiding gossip is an admirable quality, evasion and self-deception are hypocritical to a modern reader.

Violence

Stevenson not only satisfies society's taste for 'shockers' or 'penny dreadfuls' in the horrific tale of Hyde's attack on Sir Danvers Carew MP, he is clearly commenting on the motiveless violence on London's streets, foreshadowing Jack the Ripper's attacks in London's East End in 1888. The attack is gruesome, the 'innocent' old man's bones are 'audibly shattered', the body is 'mangled'. Even the most 'aged and beautiful gentlemen', a respected figure in society, cannot escape. The murder weapon, a cane, is indeed broken in two after being used to beat the victim.

The oppositions between the evil, violent Hyde and others repeatedly blur. In the account of his trampling the child, as in the later account of his attack on Carew, his evil is presented as gratuitous, violent aggression, which Jekyll amplifies by describing Hyde's monstrous depravity as 'drinking pleasure with bestial avidity from any degree of torture to another'. But he is not just an isolated embodiment of rage and cruelty; from the beginning his actions appear to contaminate others. Enfield tells how, after he has captured Hyde, he, the child's family, and even the doctor become possessed 'with desire to kill him...I never saw a circle of such hateful faces', 'we were keeping the women off him...wild as harpies'. Those who confront Hyde seem to turn into his doubles.

Isolation

Jekyll isolates himself to avoid accountability for the actions he considers shameful. Henry Jekyll has apparently had at best limited tolerance for the bonds of friendship. It is unthinkable that a wife or family member should be allowed to share this secret life. Only the bonds of male friendship remain to Jekyll and they will be sacrificed through his creation of Hyde. A decade before the present action, a quarrel with Lanyon over the theories that will produce Hyde breaks 'a bond of common interest.'

Jekyll and Hyde's London is presented as a male space with few women, with little comfort, closed to love's lessons in self-revelation and compromise. While there are two or three servant girls, these are no more than character types: the conventional hag, a faceless little girl running for help - the 'gentle sex' has no part in the action. The lack of women, taken together with the story's lack of specific detail about Jekyll's night-time activities, could be said to imply that Jekyll is indulging in homosexual practices behind the Victorian veil. Moreover, in his will Jekyll calls Hyde his 'friend and benefactor', an

ambiguity that leaves their 'relationship' open to interpretation. Arguably Jekyll replaces the traditional wife with Hyde as he locks himself away in his laboratory in an inversion of the domestic intimacy shared with a partner, describing their relationship using an image of matrimony as 'closer than a wife, closer than an eye'. Stevenson felt that society was not functioning successfully in this comment on the individualising effects of an emerging modern democracy. The Victorian woman was viewed as benevolent, sensitive, caring, and her absence in the text, suggests that these virtues are missing in the city. This is further suggested by the unstable image of Hyde also as a 'child of Hell', a Social Darwinist nightmare of regression to the level of a rebellious child with a lack of moral accountability. Stevenson comments on the damage that can be done by sexual Puritanism present in Victorian society: Jekyll can see no way out of his cycle of pleasure and remorse but to give license to his desires, 'I knew myself...to be more wicked, tenfold more wicked, sold a slave to my original evil.'

Conclusions

In travelling the streets of 1880s London, Stevenson engages with an eternal human conflict: the battle between the desires of the flesh and those of the spirit. The text also incorporates society's fears about the unknown dangers present on the city streets. It can also be read as a prophecy about the advancing powers of Science. It is, however, clearly a trenchant criticism of Victorian society's repressive standards of virtue and respectability.

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The Voice Within the Visual – Adapting Literature for Film

Just as readers interpret books differently, so do filmmakers, foregrounding different ideas, angles or ways of thinking about character. Using three different examples, The Handmaid's Tale, We Need to Talk about Kevin and The Great Gatsby, Tionee Joseph discusses how and why some texts are more richly open to adaptation than others.

The Handmaid's Tale

> *Novel: Margaret Atwood, 1985*
> *Film: directed by Volker Schlöndorff, 1990*
> *Young woman Kate/Offred (Natasha Richardson) attempts to escape the oppressive, patriarchal Republic of Gilead where fertile women are used as breeders for the survival of the human race.*

Atwood's use of a first-person narrative enables the reader to connect to the protagonist Offred's inner thoughts as she recounts her former life with her captured husband and daughter. Independent thought is banned in Gilead, and so lack of expression would be accurate representation of this dystopian world. However, there is so little speech and insight into the protagonist's mind in the film that we are too distanced to emotionally invest. In the novel, Offred narrates in the present tense and describes how the past blends into her present. Language is a significant feature of Atwood's novel: she describes Offred's repressed feelings that become cravings for intimacy and love. Schlöndorff decides not to employ a voiceover which is not essential, but perhaps what could have been used to convey these powerful, sensory memories is an integration of very short flashbacks; familiar sounds, touches, and sights that disappear in seconds to give the audience the same transient feeling.

Due to the style of writing, the structure of the narrative is non-linear; the order of events can be joined together as the narrator comes to them in her thought process. The film instead follows a chronological order, but because The Handmaid's Tale is not plot-driven, the pacing may seem to be slow to the audience. Offred offers sufficient explanations for the new radical ideologies and politics of the future era so that it can be fully understood by the reader. However, incorporating this into the film would mean an overly long running time and too much explanation, another hindrance to the audience's viewing experience. Richardson's Kate has been criticised for being dense, but her character in the book is very opinionated about those around her. She analyses their behaviour, categorising them into believers and non-believers, trustworthy and treacherous. This includes her employer's driver Nick – a possible spy – with whom she has a forbidden romance; this is not a main plot of the book, although the film maximises it for commerciality.

The novel's ending is undoubtedly open-ended:

> *Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers because it can't be helped. And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.*

As we are as unsure whom to trust as Offred is, we also have to decide on our own beliefs about what happens to her based on our interpretations of the novel so far. In spite of this, the film eliminates all uncertainty about Nick's loyalty and Offred's future. Nick helps her into hiding and in the final shot we see a pregnant Kate living in solitude in the mountains, with some hope that the current regime will be overthrown. Some would be grateful for this added closure which is absent from the book, yet others may consider this as unfaithful as it removes ambiguity – a central theme to the entire story.

We Need to Talk about Kevin

> *Novel: Lionel Shriver, 2001*
> *Film: Lynne Ramsay, 2011*
> *Right from his birth, a reluctant mother (Tilda Swinton) struggles to love her son Kevin (Ezra Miller), who later becomes a mass killer.*

Symbolism is used frequently in Ramsay's film through various film techniques that connect it to Shriver's novel. This implies that it is essential to have prior knowledge of the novel in order to have a deeper understanding of the film. The film's soundtrack is composed of distinctly American country music which juxtaposes with the scenes of horror, but is used ironically as readers will be familiar with Eva's disdain of American culture. 'Mother's Last Words to Her Son' by Washington Phillips with the lyrics, 'you are leaving, my darling boy, you always have been your mother's joy,' is a notable recurring example. This choice of song also seems ironic given the protagonist's strained relationship with her son, although this foreshadows the end of the narrative when Eva shows a willingness to accept Kevin back into her life.

Furthermore, a mirroring technique Ramsay uses is also significant as Shriver insinuates how similar Kevin and Eva are, despite their ambivalent feelings towards each other:

> *He was watching me and I was watching me, and under this dual scrutiny I felt doubly self-conscious and false. If I found our son's visage too shrewd and contained, the same shifty mask of opacity stared back at me when I brushed my teeth.*

Ramsay establishes this likeness at the start of the film by using a close-up shot of Eva washing her face in the sink which transitions into Kevin's reflection in the water. Moreover, in the prison visit scenes, Swinton and Miller mimic each other's body language at opposite ends of the frame, giving an impression of there being a mirror in between them. As we find out in the novel along with Eva, Kevin not only resembles her physically but she has also influenced his personality, opinions and ways of thinking.

Another advantage of the film medium is the ability to depict changes in time, which is appropriate for We Need to Talk about Kevin as Eva constantly shifts her narration of events from the present to the past throughout the novel. It is arguably easier to keep track of whether the older or younger Eva or Kevin is part of the action through signifiers such as costume, the actor's age (in Kevin's case) and haircut (in the case of Eva). These visual markers of time help us to align the characters' feelings and behaviour at various points in the narrative.

As the epistolary narrative is formed by Eva's perspective of events, we only know the external Kevin: what he chooses to show and how Eva interprets it. It is up to us to decide whether she is deductive and right to be cynical about her child, or simply paranoid and guilty. Likewise, in the film we only see what Kevin is like on the outside, when he is presenting himself in front of his mother and his father differently. Ramsay decides not to tell his side of the story or to really get inside his mind. This is not necessarily a negative point; unlike in The Handmaid's Tale we do not need to know his thoughts: to know them would eliminate the mystery of his character.

The Great Gatsby

Novel: F. Scott Fitzgerald, 1925
Film: Baz Luhrmann, 2013
Nick Carraway's (Tobey Maguire) self-made millionaire neighbour Jay Gatsby (Leonardo DiCaprio) resumes a doomed love affair with former girlfriend Daisy Buchanan (Carey Mulligan).

Luhrmann decides to give the film a heavily stylised look by focusing on the visual aspects of the story using lavish sets, costumes and locations to connote the excess of the wealthy living in the 1920s. The effect created is almost dream-like, linking it to one of the novel's main themes: aspiration towards the American Dream.

The Great Gatsby appeals because the reader enjoys voyeuristically peering in to view the lives of those who are ridiculed as being exotic, foolish and beguiled, and is grateful not to be a part of it. Introduction to The Great Gatsby, Collins Classics edition.

At the beginning of the film Nick establishes the context of the story by narrating over clips of Wall Street brokers, stacks of money, parties, high-rise buildings and alcohol production. The montage editing captures the accelerated pace and the frenzied lifestyle, and in this way the experience of the Jazz Age can be conveyed in a short space of time. Although footage and newspaper clippings are constructed, editing effects make them look old and grainy, giving an impression of authenticity.

As well as keeping some elements true to the period, some are also given a modern update such as the jazz-inspired soundtrack including contemporary artists such as Beyoncé, Lana Del Rey, and Florence and the Machine. This soundtrack is probably not too unlike what a modern audience would hear during their usual film experience and by choosing these instead of purely 1920s music, Luhrmann prevents the audience from becoming too distanced from a story set almost a century ago.

Through the medium of film, the audience can literally see through Nick's eyes; the next step up from reading his account of what he sees. There are many sweeping overhead camera shots from the sky

over the city and car chases that connote the whirlwind adventure that Nick is taken on. As he is drawn into Gatsby's world, so are we.

> *I was within, and without. Enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life.*

However, an issue with the novel's narration is its reliability. Whilst Nick oversees most of the action, he is not with Gatsby all of the time and so we do not have a complete view of his life as we would with an omniscient third-person narrator. At these points, the film can have more freedom and is less restricted. During the scenes in which Gatsby and Daisy are alone, Luhrmann increases the passion and the intimacy of the affair, making it a conventional film of the romantic genre that an audience expects to see.

On the other hand, Nick is not just a by-stander to all the action, he is part of it and has his own opinions that we find out in the novel and the film respectively. The film suitably uses a framing device; when we first meet Nick he is a recovering alcoholic, re-telling specific events to his doctor which implies the tragedy of Gatsby's story and his involvement in it has left him psychologically damaged.

Like Fitzgerald, Nick is a writer and the film acknowledges this by bringing the story back to the written form as he writes the account on a typewriter whilst he tells it. Sections of the dialogue are also shown on screen, and so it retains the visual style.

What Does this Reveal?

So why is all of this useful for an English student? The points raised in this article are examples of close-text analysis; a skill that demonstrates an ability to pick out smaller details of a text to show a more complete, overall understanding. When applied, it suggests active reading and an awareness of authorial intentions and context. Being able to argue for or against changes made through the process of adaptation shows critical engagement with the texts. When this leads to further exploration of other critical opinions, a more rounded argument can be created which is especially beneficial for writing essays, as it shows to markers that you can widen your interpretations of the primary text. So whatever you decide to read next or are assigned to read, if the film is also available to you, why not consider them both? You may find that one form of narrative works better than the other: that is now for you to explore.

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Crossover fiction

40-year-olds are reading Harry Potter and 10-year-olds are reading The Lord of the Rings. Readers and publishers and the media have gone 'crossover' crazy. What is it all about? Carol Atherton investigates.

When the comedian Linda Smith appeared on BBC2's Room 101 in November 2003, her first nomination was adults who read children's books. All those people absorbed in Harry Potter and His Dark Materials were beneath contempt: according to Smith, they should act their age and read some 'proper books' instead. After all, why waste your time with children's books when you could be improving your mind with Madame Bovary?

Whatever Smith might think, the phenomenon of 'crossover' fiction - books written for an audience that includes both children and adults - seems to be here to stay. For one thing, it's been extremely lucrative. According to the Sunday Times Rich List, J.K. Rowling's personal fortune now outstrips that of the Queen, while Mark Haddon's The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time sold nearly 1.5 million copies in its first year of publication. It's also a genre that has drawn critical acclaim. In 2001, Philip Pullman's The Amber Spyglass became the first children's book to win the Whitbread Book of the Year Award; two year's later its triumph was repeated by The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time (which was also long-listed for the Booker Prize). Unlike the Harry Potter novels or the His Dark Materials trilogy, The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time was originally written for the adult market. Jennifer Donnelly's A Gathering Light, the winner of the 2004 Carnegie Medal - the publishing industry's top award for children's books - is stocked in the adult section of many bookshops.

The rise of the 'kidult'?

Why is crossover fiction such a success? Cynics have attributed it to the rise of the 'kidult' - the name given to infantilised adults who are so unable to cope with the stresses of modern life that they regress to their youth. The growth of the crossover novel, so this school of thought goes, is just another part of a marketing ploy to sell beleaguered thirty-and forty-somethings a taste of their lost innocence, in a package that also includes school discos, retro sweets (Spangles, anyone?) and Bagpuss DVDs. Other critics have been more charitable. One particularly persuasive case has been made by Jasper Rees, who claims that children's books show a willingness to confront important themes and issues in a manner that's both serious and humane. Crossover novels tackle matters that help to shape our sense of who we are and how we relate to the world: matters of identity and history, the nature of love and the loss of innocence. Such themes are a far cry from the identikit commercialism of much current adult publishing, brilliantly summed up by Robert Edric of The Spectator in terms of

> all those lad-lit, baby-lit, metro-lit, dot-com, tex-lit, day-glo genres endlessly three-for-twoing on the bookshop tables.

Of course, while it often seems to have sprung from the same miraculous birth as Harry Potter in the late 1990s, crossover fiction is not just a recent phenomenon. One only has to think of 'children's' fiction like Alice in Wonderland, Winnie the Pooh and The Jungle Book or 'adult' novels like Lord of the Rings to realise that novels have been crossing over for many years: Mark Haddon himself has pointed out that many of Dickens' novels would have been read aloud to the whole family.

However, one name that's often surprisingly absent from debates about crossover fiction is that of Sue Townsend's teenage intellectual, Adrian Mole. This absence is ironic, as in many ways Adrian Mole is where modern crossover publishing first started. When The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4 first hit the bookshops in 1982, it became an instant success: it was reprinted thirty-one times over the next three years, and was adapted for both stage and television. Its ubiquity earned it a mention in David Lodge's 1988 novel Nice Work, in which a character resigns from his job as an English lecturer because he is tired of teaching 'young people who have read almost nothing except their GCE set texts and Adrian Mole'. And online bookseller Amazon creates an explicit link between Townsend's creation and the crossover fiction of today, by describing Christopher Boone, the narrator of The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time, as 'an autistic version of Adrian Mole'.

Adrian and Christopher - the parallels

Amazon's description is not strictly accurate: fifteen-year-old Christopher, lover of mathematics and hater of all things brown and yellow, has Asperger Syndrome, a version of autism. However, there are certain parallels between Adrian and Christopher. Both are isolated from the people around them, Adrian by his social ineptitude and Christopher by his dislocation from the emotions and viewpoints of others. Both tell their stories in a deadpan voice that allows us to see the gap between their perception of the world and the events that unfold around them. And both have families on the verge of turmoil. However, while the problems facing Adrian's family reflect the wider social and political context of the early 1980s, Christopher's stem from his medical condition, and the difficulties experienced by his parents in coping with his complex and highly frustrating needs. This means that the two books differ significantly in tone. When Adrian's parents argue over who isn't going to get custody of Adrian, we see this as a humorous reflection on their son's angst-ridden pomposity: Adrian dresses unfashionably, takes life far too seriously and aspires to have his own poetry programme on Radio 4. However, when Christopher's parents argue, it's 'because of the stress of looking after someone who has Behavioural Problems, like I have'. When we find out what these behavioural problems are - groaning, hitting people, screaming, and 'stupid things', such as 'burning things on the gas stove to see what happened to them, like my shoes or silver foil or sugar' - we understand that this frustration is of a completely different order to that experienced by Adrian's parents.

Confused by the adult world

What both books share is a strong, highly individual narrator who is used by the author to highlight the strangeness of the adult world. Adrian finds his parents' behaviour perplexing, as both seem determined to shirk their adult responsibilities (his mother spends the Family Allowance on gin and cigarettes, while his unemployed father watches children's television and is caught one day pretending to be an acorn growing into an oak). Christopher is also confused, but for entirely different reasons. In the book's second chapter, Christopher's teacher, Siobhan, draws a series of different facial expressions as a way of getting him to understand emotions, 'but I was unable to say what these meant'. His inability to see events through other people's eyes means that his world is a far more threatening place than Adrian's: to Christopher, the people who rescue him from the path of an oncoming Tube train are not lifesavers, but potential assailants to be warded off with a Swiss Army

knife. While the characters in Adrian Mole are largely grotesques intent on satisfying their own needs, those in Curious Incident are ordinary people trying to cope with circumstances that are incredibly difficult. The description of Christopher's father trying to bring about a reconciliation with his estranged son is almost unbearably moving, all the more so for being recorded in Christopher's flat, unemotional voice. Townsend's comedy keeps us at a distance from Adrian and his traumas: Haddon makes us care by showing us every awkward pause.

Crossover - a vaild label?

It's easy to see why these books can be placed in the crossover category. Their teenage narrators have the potential to appeal to a wide range of young readers, and their style is (at least superficially) straightforward and accessible: indeed, Haddon's frequent use of conjunctions such as 'and', 'but' and 'so', many of which are placed at the beginning of sentences, provides the perfect means of expressing Christopher's logical, methodical way of seeing the world. Nevertheless, their classification as either crossover or children's fiction is a little contentious. Just because the style is readable and straightforward does not mean the subject matter is not subtle or challenging. Adrian Mole is full of examples of subtle, situational humour that can be lost on younger readers, such as Adrian's constant misinterpretation of other people's motives and actions, and the ludicrousness of his attempts to be an 'intellectual':

> *Friday March 6th. Used my father's library tickets to get War and Peace out. Saturday March 7th. Finished War and Peace. It was quite good.*

Mark Haddon, meanwhile, has stated that he never intended The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time to be a crossover novel at all, saying that he wrote it simply as an adult novel with a teenage protagonist. In one interview, Haddon commented:

> *It was my agent and my publishers who realised it had crossover potential ... The sudden excitement about 'crossover' is not a sign that books have changed but that publishers have suddenly realised that they can market books to everyone from the ages of 12 to 90.*

This, of course, does not mean that all readers will read crossover books in the same way. Some people have argued that it's difficult to appreciate Curious Incident fully unless you've had some experience of Asperger Syndrome: I remember that when I read the book, I kept hearing in my mind the voice of a boy with Asperger's who I taught four years ago.

Whatever Linda Smith might argue, neither book is trivial. Readers of all ages have commented that what Curious Incident does is to carry out a kind of 'estrangement' from everyday life that makes us examine our assumptions about what we consider 'normal'. As one of my students observed:

> *It shows you what it would be like if some bits of your brain were closed off to you, and you could only use the bits that other people couldn't.*

Adrian Mole, meanwhile, offers a vivid satire of the sheer awfulness of teenage life: the agonies, aspirations and embarrassments of feeling trapped in a world that's just too small for you. Beyond the cartoon covers, both deserve a place in any list of 'proper books': read Madame Bovary by all means, but leave some time for crossover fiction too.

Article Written By: Carol Atherton

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Print

Openings in Contemporary Fiction – Questions, Challenges and Surprises

Stephen Dilley takes a look at the openings of four books on the 2016 Man Booker Prize shortlist to see how they work, and reflects on how these examples tie in with new trends in contemporary narrative writing.

The best openings of novels do more than just introduce plot, character and setting: they allow the writer to tell us something about the kind of novel we are about to read, and the role which they expect us to play as readers. Small details matter in these first sentences. By interrogating the openings of four of the novels from this year's Man Booker Prize shortlist, we can see how writers today set out to challenge and surprise their readers, and how the role of the reader is changing in fiction today.

Paul Beatty – The Sellout

> *This may be hard to believe, coming from a black man, but I've never stolen anything. Never cheated on my taxes or at cards. Never snuck into the movies or failed to give back the extra change to a drugstore cashier indifferent to the ways of mercantilism and minimum wage expectations. I've never burgled a house. Held up a liquor store. Never boarded a crowded bus or subway car, sat in a seat reserved for the elderly, pulled out my gigantic penis and masturbated to satisfaction with a perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look on my face. But here I am, in the cavernous chambers of the Supreme Court of the United States of America, my car illegally and somewhat ironically parked on Constitution Avenue, my hands cuffed and crossed behind my back, my right to remain silent long since waived and said goodbye to as I sit in a thickly padded chair that, much like this country, isn't quite as comfortable as it looks.*

Beatty's satire on American race relations is immediately provocative; as enlightened liberal readers, we may feel a sense of affront at the first-person narrator's initial assumptions about our prejudices ('This may be hard to believe') but the following list of perceived misdemeanours reveals a lighter touch, the use of minor sentences and repeated 'Never' giving it the flavour and force of a spoken voice. This paragraph is full of unexpected juxtapositions as the speaker moves seamlessly between trivial and serious offences. As with all satire, we may laugh at the exaggeration, whilst recognising the angry truth behind it in the context of continuing police shootings, inequality and discrimination.

This list reaches its climax as he describes 'board[ing] a crowded bus or subway car': given the racial context, we are likely to recall Rosa Parks' anti-segregation protest and may feel that we know what is coming next. His subsequent volte-face as he introduces his 'gigantic penis' is therefore doubly surprising: it should make us laugh at its outrageous irreverence (and the implication that even this

might be seen as normal behaviour for a black man), but also warns us that this novel will have no respect for any taboos surrounding racism and is therefore not for the easily shocked. The 'perverted, yet somehow crestfallen, look' seems to encapsulate the mixture of absurdity, pathos and anger that will run throughout the novel.

In the final sentence, the comparison between the 'thickly padded chair' and 'this country' is particularly telling: here, Beatty is giving us a sense of the novel's scope and ambition – this is a novel not just one man but about a whole nation – but also that he will not be afraid of exposing uncomfortable truths behind 'comfortable' façades.

Deborah Levy – Hot Milk

> *2015. Almería. Southern Spain. August.*
>
> *Today I dropped my laptop on the concrete floor of a bar built on the beach. It was tucked under my arm and slid out of its black rubber sheath (designed like an envelope), landing screen side down. The digital page is now shattered but at least it still works. My laptop has all my life in it and knows more about me than anyone else.*
>
> *So what I am saying is that if it's broken, so am I.*

The words '2015' and 'Today' immediately anchor this novel in the present: this is a novel of now, for now, about now and it's another first-person narrative. Some readers may feel that the speaker's reaction to her broken screen lacks perspective, but most of us will recognise her feeling that 'my laptop has all my life on it, and knows more about me than anyone else'.

But there is more going on here than just a comment on today's digital world. A sense of fracturing is central to Levy's opening: the full stops in the chapter title immediately create a jolting, fragmented effect which lacks the fluency we might expect of a diary entry. This is compounded by the violence of the first sentence, emphasised through the hard 'concrete floor'. We don't need to draw the parallel between the laptop's shattered screen and the speaker's feelings of brokenness because Levy does this for us. The observation we might make instead is that symbols of this kind will be important to how the novel communicates with us. Note, for instance, the sexual connotations of the 'rubber sheath' which is then compared to an 'envelope', associating the laptop with both sexuality and communication and suggesting that both might be slippery and difficult to grasp. As readers, we are being told to be alert to resonances like this throughout the novel, and to be ready to make these connections ourselves. We are also being told explicitly that what we're hearing is an account – 'So what I am saying is' – which draws attention to the telling in a way that many contemporary fictions like to do.

Ottessa Moshfegh – Eileen

> *I looked like a girl you'd expect to see on a city bus, reading some clothbound book from the library about plants or geography, perhaps wearing a net over my light brown hair. You might take me for a nursing student or a typist, note the nervous hands, a foot tapping, bitten lip. I looked like nothing special. It's easy for me to imagine this girl, a strange, young and mousy*

> *version of me, carrying an anonymous leather purse or eating from a small package of peanuts, rolling each one between her gloved fingers, sucking in her cheeks, staring anxiously out the window.*

Here again, we have a first-person narrator, and, like Beatty, Moshfegh immediately explores the assumptions we might form about her speaker ('a girl you'd expect to see on a city bus', 'you might take me for'). The message is clear: appearances will be significant in this novel but might be deceptive too. The reader is explicitly instructed to 'note the nervous hands, a foot tapping, bitten lip' – all familiar signifiers of anxiety – but because we can only see the speaker from the outside at this stage, we are left guessing at its causes.

But then, unlike Beatty and Levy, Moshfegh pivots quite unexpectedly to give a different view: 'it's easy for me to imagine this girl.' Here, Moshfegh establishes a gulf between the speaker then and now, and we realise that the first sentence's past tense ('I looked like') refers back much further than we had initially realised. As she continues to describe this 'strange, young and mousy version of me', we realise that the speaker has now changed into a completely different person. She subsequently tells us that 'I was not myself back then. I was someone else. I was Eileen.' The questions that will fuel our interest concern the idea of identity: how and why has she changed, and what did it mean for her to be 'not myself'?

Graeme Macrae Burnet – His Bloody Project

> *Preface*
>
> *I am writing this at the behest of my advocate, Mr Andrew Sinclair, who since my incarceration here in Inverness has treated me with a degree of civility I in no way deserve. My life has been short and of little consequence, and I have no wish to absolve myself of responsibility for the deeds which I have lately committed. It is thus for no other reason than to repay my advocate's kindness towards me that I commit these words to paper.*
>
> *So begins the memoir of Roderick Macrae, a 17-year-old crofter, indicted on the charge of three brutal murders carried out in his native village of Culduie in Ross-shire on the morning of the 10th of August 1869.*

This prologue gives us two voices – the beginning of a first-person historical testimony and a commentary on this. Roderick Macrae's memoir immediately raises plenty of questions – the speaker's situation, the 'deeds' he has committed, the reasons for his current emotional state – and therefore, its interruption partly serves to pique our interest by withholding answers. But it also changes how we respond to what we have just read. The fact that these words have become the subject of scrutiny within the text invites us to read them critically too: we should not just accept Roderick's words at face value.

Macrae Burnet also uses this device to establish an illusion of historical veracity: the novel comprises a series of 'found' 19th-century documents, and the inclusion of a modern-day commentary adds authenticity, inviting us to suspend disbelief and imagine that the fictional events we are about to

encounter might actually be true. To add further weight, the author has playfully given his protagonist the same surname as himself, claiming this as a work of family history and thereby further blurring those boundaries between fact and fiction.

What's Revealed About Contemporary Fiction

So what, if anything, can these openings tell us about contemporary fiction? To a greater or lesser extent, they are all postmodern novels which reject the idea that they might contain any inherent objective truth or meaning. They are also concerned as much with how their stories are told as with the stories themselves, and all share a degree of self-consciousness in their openings, whether this is through explicit reference to the act of writing in His Bloody Project ('I am writing this at the behest of my advocate […] that I commit these words to paper') or of speaking in Hot Milk ('So what I am saying is'), or through the willingness to address us as readers directly and subvert what we might 'expect' in Eileen and The Sellout. In all of these novels, the process of telling is fraught with great unreliability and fragility, and we should therefore anticipate as much drama to stem from the relation of events as we will find within the events themselves.

Linked to this is the role which we can expect to play as readers – we are not being treated simply as vessels expected to receive each novel's contents passively and uncritically, but are instead invited to become active participants, bringing our own experiences, beliefs and prejudices with us into each text and allowing these to be exposed and challenged by what we read. The direct involvement of the reader is a device as old as the novel itself; but what distinguishes these novels as particularly contemporary is that we are not simply being asked to decode meanings, but to create them. As this year's winner, Paul Beatty, said,

> *I definitely don't have a message.*

Any messages that we wish to take from these novels we will have to construct ourselves, and we are invited to begin that process of constructing meanings from the novels' very first pages.

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Print

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd – A Question of Trust

Agatha Christie establishes trust in her narrator in ways that we might associate more with a writer like Jane Austen. But is that trust wise? Judy Simons suggests that far from leaving us in the safe, comfortable terrain of classic fiction, Christie draws us into the more murky world of the modern novel, where part of the pleasure for the reader is in having that trust betrayed.

> *Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence.*

As you read this, please don't think that you have wandered into the wrong essay by mistake. I am just using the opening words of Jane Austen's Emma as an example of the sort of fiction that underpins Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd and to which the later work is deeply indebted. Despite its irony, Austen's sentence invites readers to relax in the safe world of the book, and to trust the all-seeing narrator, who joins in sharing the jokes at the heroine's expense, and who navigates us through the complex, multi-layered text.

As with many 19th-century novels, Emma's authorial persona directs the reader how to view and also how to judge the fictional characters, and it conveys a sense of moral certainty that may leave scope for nuanced debate but not for any doubt on issues of moral responsibility. Like a kindly and occasionally angry parent, the voice of classic fiction soothes its audience with its combination of authority and familiarity. It establishes a contract between storyteller and reader, and even in a first person bildungsroman, such as Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre or Charles Dickens' Great Expectations, where we might question the protagonist's motives, that voice continues to evoke a recognisable social order and a stable set of values, which frame the human drama. Experience has taught us to accept and adopt the narrator's version of events.

Trusting the Narrative Voice

Many 20th-century novels on the other hand exploit this tradition to subvert readers' expectations, and The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, an early example of this approach, is now considered a milestone in the crime fiction genre. Its fundamental premise takes for granted readers' complicity in a predetermined narrative contract. Detective novels enjoy a special relationship with their readers, who assume the role of investigator and consequently become embroiled in the fictional action. As with all whodunnits, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd assembles an intricate puzzle for the reader to solve, but its key trick can only work if we trust the narrative voice. It is Dr Sheppard's perspective that in turn shapes ours.

So, whilst Sheppard's account is scrupulously accurate, his narrative is teasingly incomplete. As Hercule Poirot explains towards the end of the book, when he refers to the 'reticence of the manuscript',

> *'It was strictly truthful as far as it went – but it did not go very far.'*

It is what Sheppard omits that is so telling, and the phraseology is intentionally ambiguous, so that any re-reading immediately suggests alternative interpretations. Initially, however, as gullible readers, we are more than ready to be seduced by Sheppard's measured and objective tone and by his insistence on fidelity and the inclusion of tiny details – aficionados of crime are after all always on the lookout for clues. In the absence of any other guide, Sheppard appropriates the role of author to introduce all the essential information – characters, names, locations and timings – that is required to enable the reader to solve the mystery. Inevitably this has the added effect of deflecting attention away from him to the rest of the dramatis personae.

A Betrayal of Narrative Trust

The opening sentences of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd offer a perfect illustration of the betrayal of narrative trust. Do not ignore, incidentally, the significance of the chapter titles in contributing to the obfuscation. 'Dr Sheppard at the Breakfast Table', for instance, not only gives the reader the necessary facts about who and where but is sufficiently mundane to suggest that (if 'murder' did not appear on the book's cover) the sentence which follows –

> *Mrs Ferrars died on the night of 16th – 17th September – a Thursday*

– could be a routine observation on the part of a doctor who deals with the dying regularly in the course of his professional duties. The domestic setting, another typical feature of Christie's work, helps to create the deliberately limited stage for the action, in which every character is a suspect. How though does it continue?

> *I was sent for at eight o'clock on the morning of Friday 17th. There was nothing to be done. She had been dead some hours.*

It was just a few minutes after nine when I reached home once more. I opened the front door with my latchkey, and purposely delayed a few moments in the hall, hanging up my hat and the light overcoat that I had deemed a wise precaution against the chill of an early autumn morning. To tell the truth, I was considerably upset and worried. I am not going to pretend that at that moment I foresaw the events of the next few weeks. I emphatically did not do so. But my instinct told me there were stirring times ahead.

On the face of it, there is nothing to arouse suspicion in this report. It opens with statements of fact that are incontrovertible. Yet how many of those statements are equivocal? 'There was nothing to be done', says Sheppard. Does he mean that on medical grounds he cannot save the patient, or that as a

blackmailer and murderer, he realises he is now in the hands of fate? And why does he delay 'purposely? Why is he 'upset and worried'? The surface rationale is that, as a doctor, he may have misgivings about the circumstances of Mrs Ferrars' death. The other explanation is that his behaviour and feelings are those of a guilty man, who knows that this episode puts him in danger. Similarly, the economy of style and the simple sentence constructions could be thought a reflection of Sheppard's lack of literary sophistication. Yet with hindsight they emerge as a deliberate ploy. As Hercule Poirot drily points out,

> *Dr Sheppard has been a model of discretion.*

The impression of candour is further strengthened by a series of direct admissions. 'To tell the truth' and 'I am not going to pretend', says the villain winningly, phrases which instil confidence, and, which, while genuine, are central to his technique of evasion.

A Façade of Veracity for the 'Common Reader'

In playing with the conventions of classic fiction, Christie was also responding to the literary trends of her age. The detective novel was enjoying a golden moment in the years between the two world wars. And whilst the avant-garde writing of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf might attract a highbrow audience, the 'common reader' to use Woolf's term, was lapping up realist fiction that depicted a recognisable social order with which middlebrow readers could identify. The determinedly traditional, bourgeois landscape of Christie's novels establishes a comfortable and familiar literary scene, which contributes to the façade of veracity. This is compounded by Sheppard's professional status. The label of doctor (only his sister calls him James), coupled with his narrative authority, signals his personal integrity, and the book's other characters trust him implicitly with the result that their confidence consequently boosts the reader's. In particular, Christie draws on the prototype of Dr Watson, the side-kick of the then most famous medical man in crime fiction, Sherlock Holmes John Watson, honest, straightforward, logical and faithful, is both the narrator of and participant in Conan Doyle's mystery tales, and a perfect foil for the dazzlingly intuitive Holmes. Secure in the fore-knowledge that The Murder of Roger Ackroyd will be a showcase for the talents of its star detective, Hercule Poirot, the reader is predisposed to slot Sheppard into the Watson mould of reliable but dim witness.

An Ingenious Metafictional Surprise

It is only at the very end of the novel that the reader is made aware that The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is a metafictional narrative, whereby Sheppard's account of events is itself a fictive artefact to be scrutinised. Suddenly the text changes direction and turns from a boast into a confession. In the final Apologia, Agatha Christie points out the ingenuity of her own authorial technique. 'I am rather pleased with myself as a writer', says Sheppard.

'What could be neater, for instance, than the following:

> *The letters were brought in at twenty minutes to nine. It was just on ten minutes to nine when I left him, the letter still unread. I hesitated with my hand on the door handle, looking back and wondering if there was anything I had left undone.*

All true, you see. But suppose I had put a row of stars after the first sentence! Would somebody then have wondered what exactly happened in that blank ten minutes?'

This is an open invitation to readers, naively thinking that there is no more to unravel, to retrace their footsteps, and I defy anyone who has been immersed in the story, trying to outwit Poirot, not to go back and look again at earlier sections to see what clues have been missed. Christie, never one to be overly modest about her work, switches the focus from plot and action to the craft of writing itself. In this way the narrative technique becomes not just a vehicle for relating events but the very heart of the book's achievement

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Structures of Innocence – Alice Sebold's The Lovely Bones

Dr Kate Jones explores the way in which Sebold structures the novel, arguing that her use of symbolism, time, point of view and other narrative techniques risk being 'distasteful' and sentimental about a subject that demands a different kind of treatment.

Symbolic Structure

When a child is killed, so the cliché goes, time is frozen. This is often represented on screen by the image of the child's bedroom, still exactly as it was on the day she disappeared, or by a discarded toy or bicycle, symbols of innocence taken and lost. The Lovely Bones is loaded with such symbols: Susie's charm bracelet, her photograph of her mother, her father's ships in bottles, the pompom of her hat. Each of these objects is both a reminder of the past (what Susie was) and an emblem of the future (what Susie might have been). Thus, the symbolic structure of The Lovely Bones signals the way in which the death of a child disrupts time; the child is gone but also still present in these objects; each day is haunted by the past and by the future, by the memory and by the potential of the child that has gone. As Mark Turner puts it:

> a child who died in the past is still mentally with us. The child never leaves, is always there to cast her shadow on the day, even though our days have changed radically since her death.
> Mark Turner, 'The Cognitive Study of Art, Language, and Literature', in Poetics Today

We may feel this when adults die, too, but because the child is physically undeveloped her body and possessions (small, cute, and 'childish') are more likely to be symbolic of lost 'innocence'.

Structuring of Time

The temporal disruption caused by the death of a child is also registered in the narrative structure of The Lovely Bones. The novel begins on 6 December 1973, the day Susie is murdered, then, using narrative techniques including prolepsis (flash forward) and analepsis (flash back), it moves between the future, the past and the day of Susie's murder (which acts as a kind of present). On the one hand, then, the symbolic and narrative structures of the novel represent the way in which a trauma such the death of a child disrupts the linear progression of time. On the other hand, The Lovely Bones takes pains to reject the idea of stasis and assert the notion of resolution, putting emphasis on the development of Susie's family members and the changes in Susie herself.

Susie as the Focaliser

The representation of Susie's 'growth' can only be achieved because of the unusual way that the novel is focalised (the perspective through which the narrative is presented). Susie's first-person omniscient narration is homodiegetic (because Susie is a character in the story) but this is complicated because she is dead so she rarely participates in the narrative action. As with a conventional first-person narrator, we see things from her perspective and know what she is feeling (to an extent; we may feel that our insight into her emotional state is limited, as I discuss later). As with a conventional omniscient narrator, she can see things in places that she isn't, and access the past experiences and internal thoughts of other characters in the novel. The way in which The Lovely Bones is focalised, argue Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Neilson, and Brian Richardson,

> *invites us to develop a new cognitive category ('the dead narrator') to picture a situation in which Susie continues to interact with the world she had to leave.*
> *Jan Alber, Henrik Skov Neilson, and Brian Richardson, 'Unnatural Voices, Minds, and Narration',*
> *in The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*

Although the focalisation of The Lovely Bones registers the tension between suspension and movement that accompanies the death of a child – in the sense that Susie is both present and absent for the characters left behind in the 'real world' – some critics (including novelist, Ali Smith in 'A Perfect Afterlife', the Guardian, 17 August 2002) have argued that its main purpose is to console its readers. The consolation The Lovely Bones offers is that Susie can still 'grow up' despite the fact that she is a child when she is killed. The beginning of the novel appears to acknowledge the impossibility of Susie ever 'growing up':

> *What I found strange was how much I desired to know what I had not known on Earth. I wanted to be allowed to grow up.*
>
> *'People grow up by living,' I said to Franny. 'I want to live.'*
>
> *'That's out,' she said.*
>
> *'Can we at least watch the living?' asked Holly.*
>
> *[...]*
>
> *'You won't experience it [living],' Franny clarified.*

By the end of the novel, however, Susie has 'grown' as a person, even if she will never be an adult. Her murder does not deprive her of the ability to grow.

> *This little girl's grown up by now,*
>
> *says the wife of the man who finds Susie's bracelet, to which Susie responds:*

Almost.

Not quite.

I wish you all a long and happy life.

A Sentimental Arc and Ending?

Daniel Mendelsohn the New York Review of Books notes the sentimentality of the novel's ending and argues that The Lovely Bones smacks of a TV movie in its insistence on healing, growth, resolution, and 'closure'. More damning is Rebecca Mead's charge that the novel not only adheres to the 'formulaic' narrative used again and again in real-life stories about the kidnap, rape and murder of young girls (see the documentary section of Netflix for examples of these kinds of narratives) but also gives this story a happy ending:

Cuteness, it turns out, is immortal. This is not only untrue; it's distasteful. [Sebold's] novel plays into US culture's saccharine sensibility about girls and violence, a sensibility that attends the appetite for horror and is inseparable from it.
Rebecca Mead, 'Immortally Cute', in the London Review of Books, 2002

The novel is 'distasteful' because it includes just enough violence to hook us at the start but never sufficiently addresses the impact on Susie of her rape and murder, preferring a sentimental, 'uplifting' and 'inspiring' ending. But Susie's so-called growth is only possible because, except for the violence represented in its forceful early pages, the novel largely excludes the horror and trauma of her experience. Instead of sitting in Heaven replaying (perhaps even revisiting) her final moments with anger, sadness or grief, Susie is represented as an eternal teenager, swinging on the swing set, reading fashion magazines, eating ice cream, and blushing when her sister kisses a boy. The detachment of Susie's narrative voice and the novel's insistence on growing up, moving on and 'closure' minimise the violence and trauma of Susie's ordeal.

Minimising the Impact of Sexual Violence?

This is especially noticeable when she talks about sex. Even though Susie's only experience of sex was destructive and deadly, in The Lovely Bones sex is associated with growing up, moving on and feeling alive. It is the way to become an adult:

Lindsey just wanted to get it over with. Have it behind her so she could achieve adulthood.

When Lindsey does have sex, she travels to a place of experience to which her at once innocent but experienced sister cannot follow her:

At fourteen, my sister sailed away from me into a place I'd never been.

For Susie's mother, Abigail, sex with Len 'drive[s] the dead daughter out' and contains the possibility of 'a new life'. When Lindsey kisses Samuel Heckler, Susie states:

> it was glorious. I was almost alive again.

And, of course, Susie does get to 'live' again when she inhabits Ruth's body in order to have sex with Ray, after which she can transition from her Heaven into 'wide wide Heaven'. The idea that Susie's attitude to sex remains the same even after her rape and murder ignores the actuality of the crimes perpetrated on her body and mind; the damage that her rape and murder would have caused is not visible. How is it she is unaffected by her ordeal but so affected by other events? The only way that Susie can 'grow up', it seems, is to stay the same as she was before she was killed.

This brings us back to the question of the novel's focalisation. By having Susie narrate from Heaven – detached and omniscient – The Lovely Bones holds her in suspension even as it insists on her growth and the development of those around her. In this way, the novel figuratively 'disembodies' Susie in a way that mimics George Harvey's dismembering of her body after the murder. It is significant that Harvey seals Susie's corpse inside a safe and throws it down a sinkhole. Trapped in a place where precious things are stored, flung into a void, a place of nothingness, Susie is an eternal child – 'immortally cute', as Rebecca Mead puts it, and immortally innocent. If, as I argued above, Western culture, like Harvey, sexualises innocence and the violation of innocence – dreaming:

> not still dreams [...] of women and children

– then the problem with representing Harvey as a classic 'oddball' serial killer (with the troubled childhood to match) is that it puts the blame onto an individual rather than addressing the extent to which our culture is saturated by fantasies of the rape, abduction and murder of young women and children. Taken as a whole, The Lovely Bones retells the fantasy rather than holding it to account in any serious or sustained way.

Article Written By: Dr Kate Jones holds a PhD in English Literature and teaches Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of East Anglia.

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Print

The Tyger discussed

An analysis of Blake's poem.

Let's begin by noticing that this fairly short poem squeezes in no fewer than 13 question marks: it's a poem of perplexity, wonderment and speculation rather than assertion. It twice conjures up the notion (a slightly perplexing one) of 'fearful symmetry', and is itself roughly symmetrical - six stanzas, composed in the auditory symmetry of couplet form, and beginning and ending with the same question, or very nearly so: by the end of the poem, the phrase 'Could frame' has quietly mutated into 'Dare frame'.

Is this reference to symmetry perhaps a hint that one of the things the poem addresses is itself, or more generally the art of poetry? Maybe: if you look elsewhere in Blake's poetry, industrial words like furnace, anvil and hammer are usually associated with his mythical character Los, who is the personified Spirit of Poetry. At the very least, it's fair to say that the poem is in some way about the energies and pains of creation.

Many readers feel that the key question in the poem is:

> *'Did he who make the Lamb make thee?'*

This most obviously means something like: does the God who creates gentle beings also make savagely destructive beings? Or, to give it a more exact theological spin: is the vengeful Old Testament God, Jahweh, identical with the merciful God-man of the New Testament, Christ? But consider, too, the poem's historical context: it was written in the wake of the September Massacres of 1792, when the French Revolutionaries - habitually referred to as Tygers by the horrified English press - slaughtered hundreds of aristocrats and priests. So perhaps the line also implicitly asks: how can a revolution supposedly inspired by humanitarian impulses so rapidly turn murderous?

The more closely you look at the poem, the more jumbled and promiscuous its background mythology seems to be. When Blake asks: 'What the hand, dare seize the fire?', he's pretty clearly thinking of the Greek story of Prometheus, who stole fire from Heaven and in the great mythical emblem of rebellion against gods and fathers (more revolutionaries); but in the strange, beautiful lines:

> *When the stars threw down their spears*
> *And water'd heaven with their tears.*

Blake seems to be rewriting the revolt of Lucifer and Beelzebub from a work he greatly admired, Milton's epic Paradise Lost (yes, more revolutionaries). It's also possible that the mention of 'stars' here

somehow embraces the astronomical classification - recent in Blake's day - of a 19-star constellation christened The Tiger.

The Tyger by William Blake

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies,
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand dare seize the fire?

And what shoulder, & what art,
Could twist the sinews of thy heart?
And when thy heart began to beat,
What dread hand? & what dread feet?

What the hammer? and what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp!

When the stars threw down their spears
And water'd heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee?

Tyger Tyger burning bright,
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye,
Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

Article Written By: Kevin Jackson is a freelance writer and author of Invisible Forms: A Guide to Literary Curiosities published by Thomas Dunne Books.

This article first appeared in emagazine issue 11, February 2001

Print

Wordsworth, William: a poet of the ordinary

Beggars, mad women, shepherds and school teachers – Neil King shows how Wordsworth not only made them the subject of his poetry, but also used their language.

I suppose that nowadays William Wordsworth might be locked up were he to hide behind walls watching people, then creep out and follow them down the road, and then accost them. But for Wordsworth this kind of activity was one way in which he observed and recorded the most ordinary and humble of people going about their business. For instance, he closely observes anOld Man Travelling (1796):

> *He travels on, and in his face, his step,*
> *His gait is one expression; every limb,*
> *His looking and his bending figure, all bespeak*
> *A man who does not move with pain, but moves*
> *With thought –*

And later in the poem:

> *I asked him wither he was bound, and what the object of his journey.*

What does Wordsworth find out about this old man?

> *'Sir! I am going many miles to take*
> *A last leave of my son, a mariner,*
> *Who from a sea-fight has been brought to Falmouth,*
> *And there is dying in an hospital.'*

And that's it. End of poem, which is only 20 lines long. Wordsworth has observed and recorded a moment in a humble man's life as he makes his way through, probably, Somerset near Wordsworth's home of Alfoxton. An irony is that Wordsworth thinks that the old man

> *is by nature led*
> *To peace so perfect, that the young behold*

> *With envy …*

Yet he finds upon enquiry that the old man is by proxy a victim of the Napoleonic War, then in its early stages.

Noticing the unnoticed

It was in his twenties, while living in the West Country, that Wordsworth discovered his theme of focusing upon those who were unconsidered and apparently beneath notice. He found that almost any trivial event could be inspirational. An early result was Lyrical Ballads (1798), a collaboration with Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), published anonymously and poorly reviewed by the critics who found the subject matter homely and unimportant. This was echoed by most of his contemporaries, and even his friends and family; they thought him eccentric in choosing the commonplace for much of his subject matter. What did he think he was doing? Poetry had customarily dealt with high subject matter or lofty thoughts in an elevated style. What did William want to busy himself with the doings of such as beggars, vagrants, the poor, parish children, mad women, leech peddlers, old huntsmen, shepherds and schoolmasters, disputing neighbours, village idiots, convicts and suchlike? What poet before him would have written a poem entitled Lines written at a small distance from my House, and sent by my little Boy to the Person to whom they are addressed?

He was not only interested in such people as subject matter for his poems: he felt that he could learn from them, and in return do something to highlight the plight of the rural poor. He considered that a benevolent regard for ordinary, less fortunate souls is good for us. Of The Old Cumberland Beggar (1800) he writes that as such a man 'creeps … from door to door'; he 'binds' the community and 'keeps alive the kindly mood in hearts':

> *He travels on, a solitary Man*
> *So helpless in appearance, that from him*
> *The sauntering Horseman throws not with a slack*
> *And careless hand his alms upon the ground*
> *But stops, – that he may safely lodge the coin*
> *Within the old Man's hat …*

Many of the subjects who wander through his pages have been damaged or dispossessed. His sister Dorothy records in her diaries how the Wordsworths gave alms to beggars who had their regular rounds. In response to a tragedy when both parents of a family of young children were lost and died on the fells above Grasmere, the Wordsworths took in one of the orphaned children and William used his influence amongst his wealthier friends in London to provide for the family. From his own experience he knew what it was like to be orphaned.

A frugal life

He organised his household on the basis of an ordinary, frugal existence – 'plain living and high thinking' was his way. When their friend Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) came to stay he found the fare sparse. Fortunately for him the guest room at Dove Cottage was at the back of the house where the fell-side rose sharply, so that it was possible to jump out of the first floor window a few feet to the

ground. Early in the morning Scott would slip down, briskly walk a mile up the road to the Swan Inn, eat a hearty breakfast, and return unnoticed. I like to think that upon emerging from his room later and being offered a bowl of porridge Scott would have said something like 'No, no, William. This rich living! I must eat today like an ordinary man.'

Radical in style and subject matter

Wordsworth wished not only to write about the everyday, but he aimed to do so in refreshingly everyday language. He recognised that this was something of an experiment, as he states in his Preface or 'Advertisement' at the beginning of Lyrical Ballads. He makes clear his wish to be innovative in both subject-matter and style, and begins by asserting that:

> *It is the honourable characteristic of poetry that its materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind.*

He continues that this particular collection of poetry was:

> *written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower orders of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure.*

He goes on to urge his readers not to be prejudiced in their perceptions of what constitutes good poetry, but that while reading his book:

> *they should ask themselves if it contains a natural delineation of human passions, human characters and human incidents.*

In other words, they should judge according to what they see around them in their everyday lives, and not consider 'Poetry' (a word, says Wordsworth, 'of very disputed meaning') to be on a different plane.

Rejecting 'poetic diction'

One of the habits against which he was reacting was the notion that poetry had to be written in a special 'poetic diction' which elevated it above ordinary written language, let alone the speech of common people. This belief reached its apogee during the century before Wordsworth, the neo-classical poets of the eighteenth century believing that poetry should indeed be written in an artificial language not debased by the use of everyday words. In general, Latin-based words were used in preference to direct Anglo-Saxon ones. The poet Thomas Gray (1716-71) considered that 'the language of the age is never the language of poetry'. Examples of the poetic diction of this period are 'feathered breed' for 'bird', 'finny tribe' for 'fish', 'milky race' for 'cow', 'purple groves pomaceous' for 'orchards', 'rich saponeateous loam' for 'good soil'. Some even considered it crude ever to use 'ever' (always 'e'er') or 'over' ('o'er'). In the hands of the best poets of the period such as Gray or Alexander Pope (1688-1744) such poetic diction can be effective and very witty; but it was not for Wordsworth.

At the end of his Advertisement to the Lyrical Ballads he claims that:

> *with a few exceptions … the language adopted … has been … intelligible for these three last centuries.*

Wordsworth does not, of course, wholly succeed in his aim of using 'the ordinary language of ordinary men', for any art is just that – it artificially uses its medium and artfully shapes life, and can never be truly natural; yet Wordsworth's opinions have shaped the subject matter and style of poets ever since.

Article Written By: Neil King

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Print

3. Books on TV

Dev Patel as the eponymous David Copperfield

A Modern Classic

The Personal History of David Copperfield

Jenny Grahame gets to grips with another adaptation of the Dickens classic she loved as a child and finds that Armando Iannucci's fearless adaptation of *David Copperfield* ticks all the boxes.

Armando Iannucci on the set of *The Personal History of David Copperfield*

So. Armando Iannucci, arguably Britain's greatest contemporary satirist, creator of *Brass Eye*, *The Day Today*, *Alan Partridge*, *The Thick of It*, *The Death of Stalin*, and more. Plus, Charles' Dickens' *David Copperfield*, one of the best-loved coming-of-age stories in English literary heritage, exposing abusive parenting, child labour, urban poverty, the huge contrasts between country and city, wealth and poverty, ambition and humility, and England in the process of becoming a capitalist Empire. An unlikely match. So what could it offer Film and Media Studies students in an era crowded with cinematic universes, prescribed close study products and tempting box sets?

There have been at least 14 screen adaptations of *Copperfield*, dating back to 1911 – and they make wonderful viewing, revealing fascinating insights into the social and technical contexts of their production. My own first experience of David Copperfield was as a five-year-old, many years ago, when my mum told me the story. Not read, mind you, but *told*, in extraordinary narrative detail and in nearly as many words as Dickens himself actually wrote. The telling lasted many weeks of bedtimes and a lifetime of memories, and no other version ever came close. I was shocked to discover that many of my favourite characters and turns

It actually feels simply irrelevant that David's friend, the arrogant cad Steerforth, is white and Welsh while his aristocratic mother (Nikki Amuka-Bird) is black, or that Wickfield is portrayed by an actor of East Asian descent (Benedict Wong) with a British-Ghanaian daughter.

Rosalind Eleazar and Dev Patel join a cast of actors from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds to depict Dickens' characters

Images courtesy of Lionsgate

of phrase were actually often side lined, or even deleted, in the umpteen screen and audio versions I consumed in later life. This made me wary of the choices and editorial decisions made by screenwriters and directors hoping to adapt this sprawling adventure story for 21st century audiences.

Iannucci's 2019 film *A Personal History of David Copperfield* is a visual translation so Dickensian in spirit, so contemporary in style, and so accessible to modern audiences that it made me rethink the purpose and process of adapting a classic 'literary heritage' text. This adaptation joyfully breaks all the rules, and then reinvents them for the 2020s Britain of Johnson and Brexit. Here – just for starters – are four reasons why students of film and literature should watch this film.

The Narrative

This is a great story. *David Copperfield* is essentially a writer's 'coming of age' first person narrative, loosely based on Dickens' own life. David's idyllic and loving early childhood is disrupted by his mother's abusive remarriage to a bullying stepfather, resulting in a series of life-changing adventures: banishment to factory labour in London, a rundown boarding school, a thankless clerical job, an unsuitable love affair, financial ruin, disillusionment, self-understanding. Meanwhile, David is nurtured by a cast of eccentric and caring surrogate parents including his nanny Peggotty and her seafaring Yarmouth family, the impoverished but eternally optimistic Micawbers, his unconventional aunt Betsey and her companion the childlike and mentally fragile Mr Dick. It is by carefully transcribing their foibles, sayings and catchphrases on scraps of paper that David becomes a writer – possibly the first documented example of the creative uses of the Post-it note in the literary process.

The original is a rambling and episodic narrative of 600 pages, and Iannucci is fearless in abridging it. Within seconds of the opening our expectations of Dickensian melodrama are exploded as the adult David smashes through the fourth wall of a Victorian theatre into a bright world

of rural sunshine in a race to recapture the experience of his own birth. This will not be an authentically realist version. Many sub-plots and eccentric minor characters (Mr Traddles!) bite the dust. Iannucci foregrounds, in a very modern way, many of the issues Dickens addressed, and which are so current today: mental health (Mr Dick), corruption, security fraud and scamming (in the oily form of Uriah Heep), the under-resourcing of education. Migration – country to city, England to Australia, child to adulthood – the quest for status (and more importantly identity) are themes which resonate today; while Dickens himself tended to leaven them with complex plot twists and internal monologues, Iannucci's light touch editing and inspired casting enable us to observe, recognise and reflect.

Casting, Colour-blindness and Challenging Expectations

Of course the key factor in this contemporaneity is the film's colour-blind casting, most notably of Dev Patel as the goodhearted David, but also the random diversity of its world and gallery of characters. Although our very first glimpse of the adult David is onstage, lit from the footlights just as Dickens himself appeared on stage in Victorian London, we're seated in a multicultural audience which foreshadows the mixed ethnicity of the then emergent British Empire. Within minutes it has become entirely natural to see a cast

of characters where race and class are uncoupled, where aristocracy and wealth can be as inclusive as poverty and abuse. Iannucci has commented that his casting of the film

> wasn't a conscious reaction to Brexit, but the conversation has gone very insular in terms of what Britain is and what it doesn't want to be. I wanted to celebrate what Britain actually is, and it's much more of a carefree, enjoyable, humorous kind of zesty, energetic place.

So it actually feels simply irrelevant that David's friend, the arrogant cad Steerforth, is white and Welsh while his aristocratic mother (Nikki Amuka-Bird) is black, or that Wickfield is portrayed by an actor of East Asian descent (Benedict Wong) with a British-Ghanaian daughter. This casting is neither motivated by historical accuracy – although Victorian London was in no way as monocultural as most literary adaptations suggest – or faithfulness to the original novel: it is about 'people playing people, like actors are meant to do', as Dev Patel has commented. That's quite a sea change for contemporary audiences used to thinking of Dickens as a dead white male, representing issues of class and status in an elitist tradition. As Patel remarks:

> In past iterations, I haven't seen myself represented on that screen. I definitely didn't think it would appeal to me or speak to me, but Dickens is a truly universal story. I see Dickens

on the streets every time I go to India, and it's relevant to America too […] I'm from North West London, and the idea that we've spun a version of this film that allows kids from there to find a face they can relate to is really exciting.

Intertextuality

This inclusivity is emphasised by our intertextual knowledge of the past roles of its cast. There's lots of fun to be had spotting the famous faces – Paul Whitehouse, the glorious Tilda Swinton, Daisy Mae Cooper. And although it's not actually essential to know that Dev Patel started his career in youth drama *Skins* and in *Slumdog Millionaire*, that Mr Dick is the Hugh Laurie of *Blackadder*, *House* and *The Night Manager*, or that the affable Mr Micawber (Peter Capaldi) has played both *Doctor Who* and the furiously scheming Malcolm Tucker in the political TV series *The Thick of It*, the inventiveness of such casting adds a layer of wit and playfulness to the experience.

This intertextuality extends to a range of other references. Opening with the device of the theatrical readings for which Dickens was famous, we're never far away from the biographical facts of Dickens' own life. There are moments of sped up silent cinema farce when David entertains his drunken schoolfriends – which also suggest the rowdy arrogance of Boris Johnson's Bullingdon Club; street scenes which visually reference Hogarth's engravings of 18th Century London. A 'high school graduation sequence' feels weirdly similar to many US teen movies, albeit in Victorian dress.

The Visual Style – Postmodern Point/s of View

Traditionally Dickens adaptations have tended to reflect a particular visual cinematic sensibility, immersed in the dark world of the poorhouse, the factory and the prison. The best-known – David Lean's *Oliver Twist* or *Great Expectations*, for example, or Andrew Davies' *Bleak House* – share a high-contrast expressionist aesthetic

of looming shadows, heightened performances, and exaggerated naturalism. Iannucci's vision and cinematography is lighter, sunnier, and more surreal. There's lots of sky, green grass, flat countryside, and pastel shades on the Yarmouth docks; a bright world seen through David's curious eyes, and edited at an exuberant pace full of visual surprises.

Visually and structurally, the film – like David himself – is highly self-conscious of its own construction. Throughout, the narrative is filtered through David's point of view: he stands beside his mother as she gives birth to him; our first glimpses of his surroundings and carers are shot through his eyes as faces and objects swim in and out of focus, blurred by the caul with which he was born. His early struggles with reading and concentration are represented by words dancing on the page; the giant hand of his abusive stepfather literally plucks him into the air to punish him for his supposed lack of aptitude. His love of Peggotty's upturned boat home on Yarmouth beach darkens from the fairy-lit fantasy of his childhood to a more gritty downbeat realism when seen in the presence of the aristocratic Steerforth.

So. Dickens + Ianucci. Does it work, and why should film and media students watch it? Speaking for myself, the film has finally surpassed my personal experience of my mum's storytelling skills. It has proved to me that it's possible to recreate the spirit

Hugh Laurie as Mr Dick but perhaps better known for *Blackadder, Jeeves and Wooster, The Night Manager* or *House*

Images courtesy of Lionsgate

Images courtesy of Lionsgate
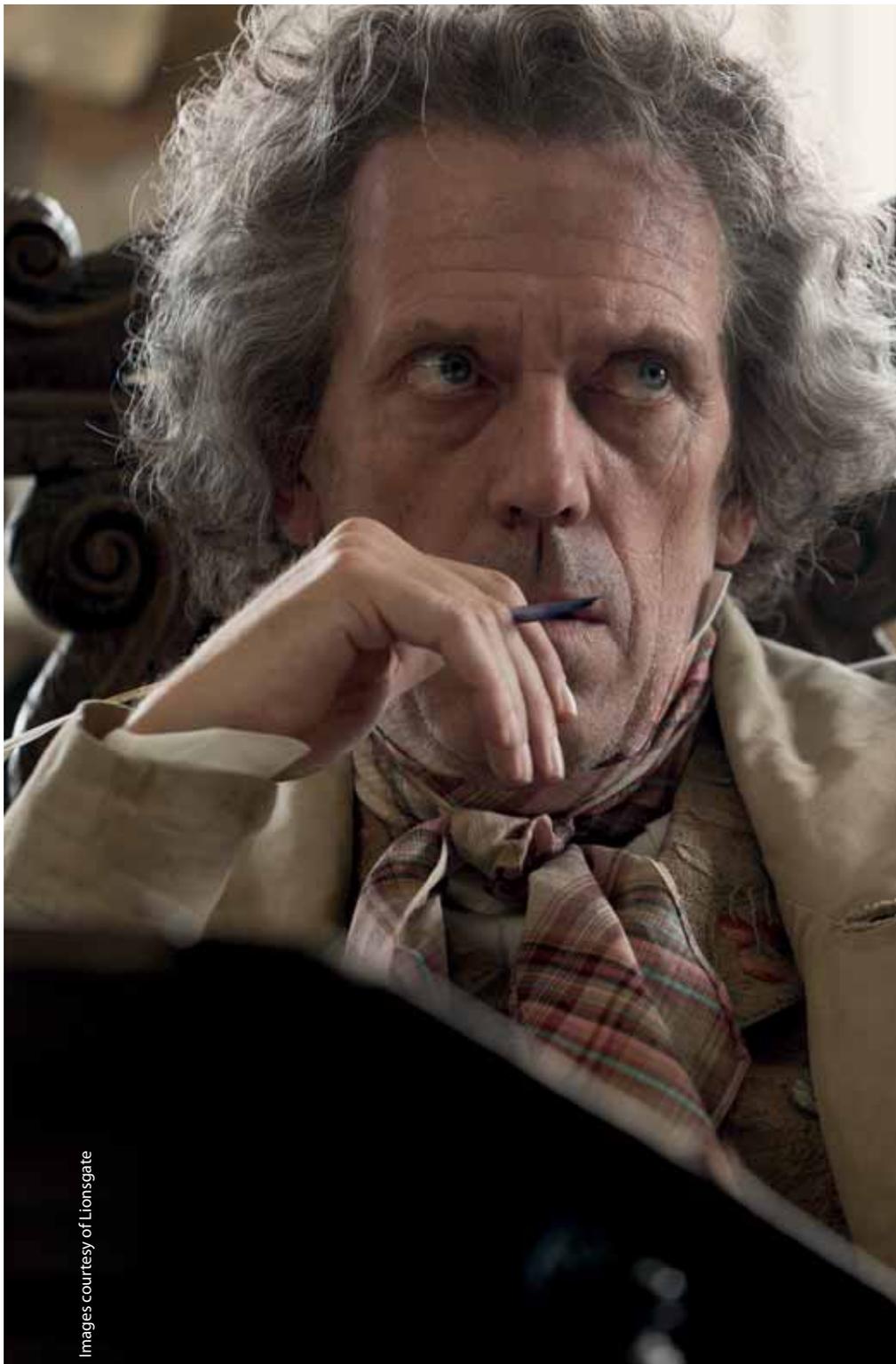
It has proved to me that it's possible to recreate the spirit and themes of a Great Big Literary Classic for a new generation by upending the conventions of traditional adaptations through inclusive casting, postmodern structure and contemporary visual style.

and themes of a Great Big Literary Classic for a new generation by upending the conventions of traditional adaptations through inclusive casting, postmodern structure and contemporary visual style. I now know I'll go back to the original text to enjoy the complexity of the original prose; but I'll also rewatch some of the earlier TV adaptations to compare, contrast and reconsider what I can learn from past interpretations and production approaches. Most importantly, it has reminded me that there is no definitive 'right' version, and that a truly great narrative, in the hands of an inspirational and inclusive filmmaker, can speak across generations to those who may have previously felt excluded by class, status or ethnicity.

Jenny Grahame is a freelance media educator and was editor *MediaMagazine* for 16 years.

from the MM vaults

Soap Opera Classics: *Bleak House* on TV – Jeremy Points, MM22

9. Write a poem in Response to a Poem

Forward/emagazine

CREATIVE CRITICS

2019 WINNER

Lucy Thynne (winner), Katie Kirkpatrick and Anna Holland (runners-up). Photo: Adrian Pope, with thanks to the Forward Arts Foundation

Winner:
- Lucy Thynne, Lady Margaret School, Fulham

Runners-up:
- Katie Kirkpatrick, Hills Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge
- Anna Holland, St Nicholas Catholic High School Sixth Form, Northwich, Cheshire

Highly Commended:
- Lyra Christie, Gosforth Academy, Newcastle upon Tyne
- Em Power, Esher College, Thames Ditton
- Chantelle Arangalla, Gumley House Convent School, Isleworth, Hounslow
- Isabella Bonnell, Rugby High School, Rugby
- Lily Rachel, East Barnet School, Chestnut Grove, London
- Naomi Thomas, High Storrs School, Sheffield
- Adelaide Whitelaw, Bedford Modern School, Bedford

Comments by *emagazine* Editors

This year's Forward/*emagazine* poetry competition for A Level students was a joy for those of us doing the judging! We decided for the first time this year to only offer a 'creative critical' response, given its success in previous years, provoking both really strong poems and excellent critical writing about the chosen source poem. We had over 100 entries, from schools and colleges up and down the country, from all kinds of schools. Our one regret was that so few boys entered. We know that more girls do English than boys, but next year we hope for a bigger entry from those who do.

The general standard of the poems written by the students, and the associated critical writing, was superb. Students chose poems that really spoke to them and in their commentaries were able to articulate the significant qualities of the poem that had most attracted and interested them. The students' own poems were often powerful, moving, witty and personal. Not only that, they also showed an impressive command over language and form. We have decided to highly commend all the shortlisted entries in recognition of their quality. We would also like to congratulate the many, many students who wrote extremely well but didn't quite make it to the shortlist.

Comments by Judge Daljit Nagra on the Winning Entry

A stunning, wise, structurally complex yet immediate and heart-stopping whopper of a poem, which is beautifully explained in the commentary. I love the way Ravinthiran's compact sonnets have served as source of influence to create a series of quatrains that look ahead to the absence of the mother, then return to the speaker's own birth, and then back, further back to the grandmother and the mothers before in a lineage of creation, 'like Russian dolls'. There are many striking achievements in the poem, including the precise diction, the assured tone and the lovely syntax as it loops around the lines and runs over verses. This poem is elegy, is dithyramb and ultimately it's a love letter to birth and life and death. The poem ends with a domestic rapture that in a darker reading moves both forward in time to convey the love of joy and communion, and of despair at the final breath, 'I love you, I love you'.

The Winner – Lucy Thynne

Responding to 'Dubrovnik' by Vidyan Ravinthiran

My mother, swimming

Sometime far from now I will think of this: you, a pale line
sketched into the blue, the waves holding you
as any daughter would want to be held.
The day slips past like water trailing through a child's hands,

and I want to be small again, swimming with you, not here,
but in the bathtub at home, sliding around like an egg-yolk
loosened from its shell. You'd put me between your thighs, opened
into curving brackets of skin, and I would not be thinking

of myself in the third person, but laughing in the way
I've now forgotten. There's something about arriving
in the rain and it all quieting now to this: the sea,
wine-dark, you, its drawing in reverse.

I don't want to think of when I won't be sitting here,
watching you swimming, so I think about your own mother instead –
how as she got older, her memory reached further back
into itself. How she told us that she remembered

being curled in the womb, the liquid, amniotic glow,
and later, the face of her mother after birth.
None of us believed her, but I think this is the same
kind of swimming: a kick and a breath, holding on,

her daughters and their daughters encased
like Russian dolls inside of her. We run home and in the dark
of the garden I dream of you calling to me from the sea,
your voice shouting as it throbs above us:

my daughter – I love you, I love you.

Commentary

Ravinthiran writes about watching both the present and the past through observing a loved one: an ambiguous 'you.' The poem is titled 'Dubrovnik', but is as much about the echoes of Sri Lanka later in the poem, described in beautifully evocative images and subtle rhymes ('bitten', 'smitten') that tie the poem together. I loved the idea of the observer that begins 'Dubrovnik', and so have tried to respond to this by creating my own, who watches her mother swimming and, much like that of Ravinthiran's, thinks of a past and future.

In Ravinthiran's poem, there is a strong sense of two separate places, with the act of swimming as a bridge between them. I decided to write about multiple places that intertwine as a result, some more domestic and maternal – our bath at home, and ultimately the womb, all told through the inherited family memories Ravinthiran also writes of. I really liked the significantly implied female presence in Ravinthiran's poem – he refers to two mothers – which I wanted to draw on myself, applying this to my own personal history of my mother and grandmother. I chose the same setting as Ravinthiran's poem – the sea – which seemed apt, as a kind of mother to so many other living things.

'Dubrovnik' above all touched me for its beautiful and deceptively simple presentation of time passing. The poem jumps from the present to a 'later' to the earlier memory of Sri Lanka, and even the possibility of being 'pulled in and under and lost forever.' Both mothers at the end of 'Dubrovnik' act differently as the antitheses of each other – but neither seems less loving. Like my own mother and grandmother in this poem, two very different kinds of mothers, this poem aims to recreate Ravinthiran's sense of tenderness in portraying loved ones and motherhood.

Runner-up – Katie Kirkpatrick

Responding to: 'Scenes for a Bright Town' by Helen Tookey

mosaic

in this shard
is the curve of his iris
dirty sea water grey
polluted with questions,
glinting, like sunlight on the crests of waves,
when answers are evaded

      in this shard
      is the inside of his lip
      so vulnerable, so soft,
      pink like the blush of your cheeks
      every monday afternoon

   in this shard
   is the palm of his hand
   with carvings that tell fortunes,
   a life line to a time
   just beyond the coastline

        grey pink flesh
        the shards are set in grout –
        and still he looks up expectantly

Commentary

Tookey's poem made a lot more sense to me when I focussed on the final image: reconstructing a city using 'fragments'. For my poem, I wanted to take the theme of fragmentation but apply it to a person rather than a city.

I admired the way Tookey's poem is split into sections, each of which captures its own distinct image, and so decided I wanted to mirror this; rather than subtitles, I chose to use spacing to create the visual image of a mosaic.

The imagery in my poem is inspired by that of Tookey's: she focuses on nature and the seaside, and I decided to echo this by comparing features of the boy to sea water, waves, and the coastline, thus giving my poem a sense of setting. I tried to mimic Tookey's skill at conveying character and plot without explicitly mentioning it through details such as 'every monday afternoon' and 'when answers are evaded': she expresses so much so subtly in lines like 'not midnight exactly – three minutes past/by the kitchen clock'. These kinds of phrases also allowed me to mirror the uneasy, quiet tone of Tookey's poem.

The ending of my poem is intended to suggest that the shards of the mosaic are fragments of memory, and that the character referred to in 'your cheeks' is expecting too much from their memories. This was inspired by the way the final line of Tookey's poem pulls together the idea of the different images making up the city, and also makes readers question the language of the title: surely a 'bright' city doesn't need to be reconstructed? I tried to mirror this through the idea that the last line makes readers consider whether this is really a mosaic, a memory, or a living person.

Runner up – Anna Holland

Responding to 'Flowers' by Jay Bernard

Her

The streets will run red
Tonight
The stars will shine from a blood-soaked mirror
Tonight
The flowers will die
Tonight
The meadows will thrive on my beating heart
Tonight

You beg to know my
Crime
You assume I must be punished for my
Crime
You hunt me for my
Crime
You do not get the right to decide my
Crime

Why won't you help me
Escape?
We're crying and screaming, desperate for
Escape
But they won't let us
Escape
Because in Russia, hunting us is their
Escape

Do I have your attention now?
Will you come and save
Us, the innocent?

All I did was love her.

Commentary

Jay Bernard is an LGBTQ+ black poet who, through their poetry, fought to raise awareness of the suffering of black people in our society. As a member of the LQBTQ+ community, I feel that it is my duty to follow in their footsteps and fight to make the suffering of our community known. In Russia there is a website dedicated to identifying gay people, only so that they can be hunted and brutally murdered. Their only crime is loving who they want to. On July 21st, 2019, gay activist Yelena Grigoryeva was stabbed to death for trying to defend members of the LGBTQ+ community who had been detained by Russian police. This website turns the murder of LGBTQ+ people into a game based on the *Saw* movies, and Yelena found her name listed before she died. Despite numerous death threats, Yelena continued to fight for her community, and this poem is dedicated to her memory, and to the memories of all the LGBTQ+ Russians who have been slaughtered because of who they loved. Bernard's poem expresses so much anger at the murder of innocent people, who died because of something they couldn't change. 'Flowers' is an inspirational step towards breaking the silence surrounding the treatment of oppressed minorities, and I would like to follow in the footsteps of Bernard and Grigoryeva and tear down the extreme censorship we are held under. 'Flowers' actively accuses the general public of their ignorance, and I themed my poem, 'Her', around more directly accusing the reader of not doing enough to fight for us. Poems such as these are a call to arms to the people, and it is now their responsibility to respond.

emagazine/Forward

Young Critics
Competition 2018

16-19 Critical
- 1st place: Freya Buxton, Queen's School
- Highly Commended: Erika Yip, Milton Academy and Cameren Birch-Ghose, Caroline Chisholm School
- Commended: Molly Thompson, King Edward VI High School for Girls

16-19 Creative
- 1st place: Natalie Perman, Withington Girls' School
- Highly Commended: Aidan Tulloch, Thirsk School and Sixth Form College and Mahira Mannan, Haggerston School
- Commended: Cia Mangat, St Paul's Girls' School and Dominic James, Wren Academy

Teacher Critical
- 1st place: Charlotte Richer, Cherwell School

Teacher Creative
- 1st place: Matt Oliver, Bede's School
- Commended: Olga Dermott-Bond, Rugby High School, Celia Shephard, Dulwich College International Shanghai Pudong, and Neil Bowen, Wells Cathedral School

Barbara Bleiman, one of the editors of *emagazine*, said of the whole collection of entries:

As always, we were hugely impressed by the best entries to the competition. In almost every category, we have read writing that has been eloquent, engaged, thoughtful and sharply focused.

It is interesting to note that in both age categories – 14-16, 16-19 – the creative response to a poem, accompanied by a commentary on the chosen poem, was of an exceptionally high standard by comparison with the purely critical writing. Shortlisting the creative writing was really tough – there were so many brilliant poems to choose between, and such fantastic commentaries too. Much of the writing in the commentaries, interestingly, surpassed that of the purely critical that we saw (winners and shortlisted entries aside, of course). In the 14-16 age category, we decided to award two first prizes for the Creative Writing and, sadly, none for the critical, to reflect this disparity.

We've been asking ourselves why it is that the students who wrote their own poems also wrote so well about the poems on which they were based. Is it because the engagement with the original poem is of a different kind to the analytical thinking they are being expected to do in preparation for exams? Have they had to 'get under the skin' of the poem, in order to draw from it something that inspires their own writing? Is it because the act of writing a poem pushes them to read the original with more attention, and closer scrutiny? Or perhaps, rather, it's the reverse – that it pushes them to identify some big, significant aspects of the poem that they can then speak about with authority and conviction? This is a question for teachers as well as students. We have no definite answers. It seems strange that students are writing better in a form they've not been taught to write in – a commentary – than in a form they have been taught to write in – a critical analysis. Whatever the answers, it's worth all of us, students and teachers alike, noting that the very best critical

writing that we saw, across the whole competition, spoke with an authentic voice, didn't try to impress with lots of literary terminology, genuinely noticed significant and interesting things, had something to say that was expressed clearly, simply and convincingly. It went down big roads, ending up at a major destination, rather than following small dirt tracks that led nowhere. It took an angle that it pursued and developed, rather than dotting around analysing detail for the sake of it. It spoke to the reader.

When you read the winning writing in the 16-19 age category on the next two pages, I hope you'll see what we mean by this.

Winner Critical Category – 16-19

Freya Buxton, Queen's School, London: 'Day, with Hawk'

Vahni Capildeo's poem, 'Day, with Hawk', is an exploration of an encounter with a 'peregrine', in which a 'stunned' speaker grapples with language in a seemingly desperate attempt to express the moment.

The poem's metalinguistic concerns are made apparent as the speaker draws attention to the inadequacy of language for expressing the profundity of the moment. Capildeo states she is left 'hanging on to language by its clichés', which establishes a sense of an uncontrollable struggle with language, that continues throughout the poem. Capildeo's use of mimetic enjambment as she 'hang[s] on to language' is interesting, as it suggests that the speaker is required to employ a visual representation of language, as language alone cannot express the sense of spiralling out of control the speaker feels. Added to this, Capildeo suggests a difficulty in communicating the event to the reader through her need to revert to 'clichés'. Yet this statement produces something of a paradox, as the multiple neologisms and compound words throughout the poem, such as 'singer-songwrite' and 'chestnut-stippled', suggests the speaker is attempting to form a whole new vocabulary in order to describe the bird appropriately.

Through her exploration of language, Capildeo creates an interesting juxtaposition between herself and the bird. While she is described through a semantic field of loss of control, through verbs such as 'tumbling' and 'hanging', the hawk appears 'princely' with a 'non-urgent flexing of chest muscles'. Capildeo conveys a sense of deep awe of the bird's ease of movement which is further highlighted through his initial description as 'Like the fire from bare twigs that twists a floral kiss on winter's neck'. The soft sibilance used can be seen as reflective of both the bird's elegance in the air, as well as the speaker's infatuation. Moreover, the internal rhyme between the lines suggests a momentary drawing together of the two beings, who met 'just once', which alludes to the profundity of the moment. The rich imagery of this description, which compares the hawk's energy to the new life heralded by spring, furthers the contrast between the speaker and the bird. The juxtaposition of expressive description with the fragmentary ending lines draws attention to the rift between the 'princely' bird and the struggling poet. Capildeo states that 'Love, this is; no poem.' This somewhat ambiguous line, punctuated by a caesura and end stopped, suggests that the speaker is struggling to maintain the flow of thought and speech as she is awestruck by the hawk's majesty. This idea is furthered as Capildeo struggles to find the collective noun for a single peregrine, which could be 'an embarrassment of poets. An adoration. An abyss'. The poet exhibits her 'embarrassment' at her own confusion and the poem's final word, 'abyss' marks the poet's ultimate loss of control of her language.

Thus, Capildeo's poem is so intriguing as a result of her exploration of communication, which leaves the reader grappling for understanding, just as the poet herself does.

Winner Creative Category – 16-19

Natalie Perman, Withington Girls' School in response to 'Do You Speak Persian?'

do you remember

my great grandmother spent years
peeling cabbages
boiling broth that steamed the house
white with grief.

when she arrived in america
the streets breathed smoke and
people cut words like steak
which dripped raw blood into
cavernous mouths:
swallowing words like food.

she couldn't speak their language
but she began to copy sounds
of foreign laughter like the clink of wine glasses
and and *that* and *what* and *how* in cracks
of pavement in new york.

she forgot how to pronounce the
sounds of her childhood
so she spoke only yiddish:
she had idioms about onions
bought *tchotchke* for
the neighbour's children
and then her own.

my grandmother says
she was a little *meshuggeneh*
(although she was *mishpucha*, family, of course)

she never recovered from travelling
alone to the united states at age 13
knowing her family were dead.

when she shaved horseradish for pesach
and the walls would sweat with
the sharp smell
but her eyes were always dry

she said to my mother
that it was her tongue-
her tongue which crawled out of her mouth
and made strange sounds
verbs and vowels that tasted
sour

since she lost her tongue
she couldn't remember
who she was
anymore

words like
peeled *kroyt*

down the drain.

Natalie's Reflective Commentary

Kaveh Akbar's poem 'Do You Speak Persian' begins and ends with night; I decided to begin and end with cabbages, one of the few words I know in Yiddish (kroyt). Akbar's poem intertwines language with his heritage as Persian, I intertwined mine as an Ashkenazi Jew with equally faltering knowledge of the language of my family, which oscillated between Russian, Ukrainian, Yiddish, Hebrew and English.

In Akbar's poem we are invited to lose ourselves in the Persian language, without knowledge of the phrases he uses. As such, I decided to tell the story of my great-grandmother, who lost part of her identity when she forgot how to speak her native tongue, Russian, and took on another, English. Akbar's image of swallowing words moved me to focus on my great-grandmother's life through the imagery of food, cabbages and the kitchen.

I left my Yiddish unexplained as Akbar left his Persian, although the words are quite well-known, as are Akbar's Persian phrases: 'Delam barat tang shodeh', I miss you, and 'Shab bekheir', good night.

In Akbar's poem I sensed the urgency of the need to hold onto words before we lose them, to treasure words, to take care of them. Akbar's exploration of the struggle of language, being an immigrant or 'other' in a new place and learning a new language yet forgetting your own, represented in the beautiful futility of a star travelling light years only to 'die in the back of an eye', seemed to me to express grief, longing, loss, hopelessness, but also the need to reconnect and find new meanings. This poem serves as an ode to my great-grandmother and her search for language but also an ode to grief, and the people whose words get lost in their lives.

10. Play With a Text

What is Re-creative Writing?

Andrew McCallum explains the possibilities opened up by the re-creative process and encourages you to get your creative juices flowing.

Experimental French writer Raymond Queneau one morning observed a man on a bus accusing another of jostling him. He described the incident in just over 100 words, under the heading 'Notation'. He then re-wrote the same event from different narrative perspectives in 98 different ways, using titles such as 'Blurb', 'Onomatopoeia', 'Rainbow', 'Exclamations' and 'Botanical', gathered together in a book called Exercises in Style. Each is an example of re-creative writing. An original work is made afresh; the new version brings additional meaning to its source, which, in turn, throws light on narrative choices made in the re-creation.

Re-creative writing in schools generally asks that you turn a published piece of work into something else (hence it is often called 'transformative' writing). For example, you might re-write a passage from a novel in a different genre, turn it from prose into poetry, set it in a different historical period, or re-imagine it from the perspective of a minor character. Such strategies can be a lot of fun, but they have also gained sufficient credibility to be an assessed part of some A Level Literature specifications. The examiners are effectively stating that you can demonstrate critical reading through re-creative writing.

How is Re-creative Writing Different to Writing Essays?

Re-creativity combines elements of the critical and the creative, offering a refreshing alternative to essay writing, the traditional mode of responding to literature. For where essays analyse texts in abstract ways that place a clear separation between the roles of writers (creators) and readers (critics), re-creativity allows readers to demonstrate understanding using the same resources as writers. They act as both creator and critic. This is not to suggest that English courses do away with essays. They demand rigour, enabling you to represent ideas in intellectually convincing ways. However, re-creative writing has challenges all of its own. In acting as an author, you must show understanding of a text by writing one yourself. Suddenly you are not required so much to analyse literature, as do it.

Isn't it Cheating?

If you are sceptical about re-creative writing as a critical technique, you might consider how famous authors use it and whether or not, in fact, all imaginative work is re-creative. For all writing comes from somewhere, be it drawn from a writer's own life or from his or her reading. Indeed, re-creativity might stand as the writing technique supreme in a post-modern world, where supposedly nothing is original and everything a reworking of what has gone before. Not that it is a wholly contemporary phenomenon. Shakespeare uses re-creativity as much as anyone. A large number of his plays rework identifiable sources. For example, Macbeth draws on Holinshed's Chronicles, which give an historical account of an actual Scottish king.

Shakespeare's form of re-creativity differs in one significant way to that used by authors today. While you can gain understanding of his work by comparing it to his sources, it is unlikely he was self-

consciously offering his own versions as a point of comparison to the originals, which would not necessarily be known to most of his audience. In contrast, modern writers who use re-creativity are aware that many readers will be familiar with their source material. They want to create something new, but they also want their work to stand as a point of comparison with the original. This brings new meaning to both versions. It can be particularly effective when dealing with issues that have been thought about in very different ways in different historical periods. For example, the two novels below both challenge constructions of race and ethnicity in texts.

Wide Sargasso Sea

First published in 1966, Jean Rhys's Wide Sargasso Sea is a prequel to Charlotte Brontë's much older Jane Eyre, telling the story of how the first Mrs Rochester came to be locked up in the attic of her husband's mansion. The 'madwoman in the attic' is transformed in Rhys's novel into a lively woman with real hopes, fears and desires. Her descent into madness is then linked to rejection by her husband, which comes in turn from his rejection of her Creole heritage. Rhys forces you to question how Brontë's original can fail to explore the character of the woman in the attic. Does her background make her of little value to the culture of her time? And how does this affect the way we read Jane Eyre today?

On Beauty

Zadie Smith's 2005 novel, On Beauty, is based loosely on E.M. Forster's 1910 novel Howards End. However, Smith's work does not so much critique the original as draw on it for inspiration. It offers a modern take on Forster's exploration of what happens when two families with different values become interlinked. Smith sets her book in the United States rather than England; her characters, like Forster's, are middle-class, but black while his are white. There is nothing unusual about a black family in the States being middle class. However, it is relatively unusual for one to be portrayed in an award-winning novel. The book challenges readers to view the characters in a similar way to Forster's; in other words, according to their behaviour rather than ethnicity. Her critique, then, is of the way we read rather than of Howards End.

Achieving a Re-creative Frame of Mind

Books expose readers to new worlds. Re-creativity offers the opportunity to transform those worlds. You explore an original text, identify a gap or a point of interest, and create it afresh. In doing so you enter into the original world on terms of your own making. What you re-create acts in a way as a critical comment. But it can also do much more. It has the potential to bring you closer to what you read, turning it into something similar to actual lived experience. Think about the examples from Rhys and Smith. Both take something they have read and transform it to fit in with their own understanding of life. Re-creative writing thus offers a connection to original texts unavailable in essay writing. One way to experience this explicitly is to embed your own persona within a re-creative text. For example, you might write a dialogue in which you talk to a novel's central character about his or her behaviour and ideas. You will find yourself making critical comments that would never occur in a formal essay, no matter how much your teacher encourages a 'personal response'.

Experimental Re-creativity

Re-creative writing does not have to be personal. Raymond Queneau's Exercises in Style, with which this article starts, might usefully be termed 'experimental re-creativity' for the way it explores multiple narrative possibilities. Queneau co-founded a school of literature called Oulipo, which stands for Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle, roughly translated as 'workshop of potential literature'. Its members

seek to demonstrate that language can be endlessly creative even within constraints. For example, Queneau used a mathematical formula to write one hundred billion poems - I'll let you search the internet to find out how. Another co-founder, Georges Perec, wrote a novel called La Disparation without using the letter 'e'. If this sounds fantastical enough, consider the process by which Gilbert Adair translated it into English, also without using an 'e'. His version, A Void, is 50 pages longer than the original!

The seemingly straightforward task of writing a passage without the letter 'e' is a good introduction to re-creative writing. It de-familiarises the writing process, forcing you to grapple with vocabulary and syntax. It highlights how all writing involves choice and that meaning flows from the specific ones made. Here is my own e-free re-write of the opening to Great Expectations, alongside the original. I recommend you try this with one of your own favourite books to get your re-creative juices flowing.

> *My father's family name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Pip. So I called myself Pip, and came to be called Pip.*
>
> *My dad's last was Pirrip, and my first was Philip, but my infant talk could only say Pip. So I was Pip, and am Pip to this day.*

I don't think I'm a contender to be the modern-day Dickens. But my experiment drew my attention to how the rhythm of the original is interrupted by the harshness of 'Pirrip', 'Philip' and (three times) 'Pip'. Dickens leaves you in no doubt about who is the lead character in this book. I guess my version does a similar thing, but with shorter sentences there is no rhythm to break up and so any effect is lost. I am, though, on my way to experiencing how Dickens himself wrote. The next step is to move on to re-creativity proper by, for example, attempting an opening to a novel in the style of Great Expectations using a character of my own.

Article Written By: Andrew McCallum is course leader for the PGCE in Secondary English with Media and Drama at London Metropolitan University and author of Creativity and Learning in Secondary English (2012).

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Print

12. The Art of the Essay

A Loose Sally of the Mind – Putting Forward Bright Ideas in English Literature Essays

Writer, academic and critic Blake Morrison discusses the nature of the English literature essay, going back to the original meaning of the word to discover just how exploratory, tentative and personal it's meant to be.

For most students, an essay is something imposed on them rather than something they choose to do. You might hear someone say 'I've been writing a poem' or 'I've been writing a story', as if these were pleasurable and freely chosen activities, but if someone tells you they've been writing an essay it'll usually be with a groan – the essay will have been set as homework, to be done as duty, rather than as a means of self-expression. But essays – even literary essays – can be as personal to write, as pleasurable to read and as creative as poems or novels. And they're no less a matter of expressing yourself and offering your personal take on the world.

Trying Something Out

'To essay' something – the verb, that is – means to try something out, to have a go. And the noun 'essay' suggests an attempt or endeavour. In his famous Dictionary, Samuel Johnson defines the essay as

> a loose sally of the mind, an irregular indigested piece, not a regular and orderly composition.

Of course, when teachers come to mark essays, they do look for order of some kind, the sense of an argument being put forward in a clear and logical fashion. Still, I think Dr Johnson is right – the best essays put forward a bright idea or series of bright ideas, not fully formed perhaps, but stimulating and provocative. An essay isn't the last word. It's tentative, personal and subjective: 'Here's what I think – how about you?'

The most famous exponent of the essay is perhaps the French 16th-century writer Michel de Montaigne, who described his essays as attempts to show 'some traits of my character'. They also expressed his thoughts on politics, religion, morality, love, sex, parenthood, death and much besides. But they were unashamedly personal and this was what made them radical. We tend to think of essays as impersonal. When I was doing A Levels, and then again at university, the use of the first person pronoun was discouraged. You were meant to be objective, which meant adopting a style that was neutral, beige or passive. But essays can't help but be subjective. And the original model for them, Montaigne's, was candid, open, not afraid to say 'I'.

After all, it's your engagement with the text that matters. You do need to be aware of what others think of that text – critics, reviewers, your teacher, your fellow students, the way in which that text was received when it came out and has been received since. But it's what you bring to that text that

matters – your own ideas and responses. Talking about its structure, or its themes, or use of metaphor, or characterisation, all this is also a way of saying how it affects you. And if it hasn't affected you, if it's left you cold, that too is something to explore.

Orwell and Early 20th-century Essays

The literary essay had its heyday in the early 20th century, with writers like D. H. Lawrence, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster. Topping all of them was George Orwell. In the current era of post-truth, newspeak and double-think Orwell is essential reading – a man who can help us see through the lies and sham, a man to guide us through the labyrinth of war, post-colonialism, Brexit and Donald Trump. My favourite essay of his is called 'A Hanging'. It recounts an experience he had as a young man while serving in the police force in Burma, at a time when he was already beginning to question the ethics of colonialism. The essay brilliantly describes the scene of the hanging: the guards, the condemned man (whose offence we are never told), a dog that bounds into the yard where the hanging is due to take place and disrupts the proceedings. For most of the essay, Orwell doesn't comment on the morality of capital punishment. But when he notices the prisoner step aside to avoid getting his feet wet in a puddle, even though he has only minutes left to live, Orwell suddenly realises how immoral it is to take another person's life for any reason, even by way of punishment. Of course, the thought may have occurred to him before. The essay is as carefully shaped, and as artful, as any short story. But there's a sense of discovery in it – as though it's through the act of recalling the event, and writing about it, that Orwell is working out what he really thinks. In creative writing showing always works better than telling. And it's by showing what happened, rather than preaching and pontificating, that Orwell gets his point across.

Of course, Orwell's essay tells a story and it's based in life. Critical essays can't do that. They engage with texts. But when Orwell writes about Gulliver's Travels, or boys' comics, or the poetry of the 1930s, or the idiocy of Tolstoy's criticism of Shakespeare's King Lear, you still hear that same voice – of somebody not afraid to have his own thoughts, even if they're out of step with current opinion. Above all, there's a sense that he's connecting the books he writes about with his own life, his own experiences, his own ideas about the world. And you don't have to be in your twenties, thirties and forties to do that. If a sentence in a novel resonates with you, or the line of a poem rings true for some reason, or you come across a simile or metaphor that sends shivers down your spine, then that's worth writing about: it's what the poet or novelist hoped when he or she set down those words – not that their text would be studied for exams, but that someone would be emotionally moved or intellectually provoked by it.

The Extinction of the Essay?

In a recent article for the Guardian, the American novelist Jonathan Franzen suggests that what defines the essay – the expression of opinions or the narrating of personal experiences (or some combination of the two) – is now a staple of social media: of blogs, of posts, of tweets. He asks:

> *Should we be mourning the essay's extinction? Or should we be celebrating its conquest of the larger culture?*

It's a good question, but I don't think that essays and tweets are comparable. That's not just because the most famous tweeter in the world – the man who's given Twitter a bad name – is Donald Trump or because 140 or even 280 characters are too minimal to be called essayistic. It's because tweets

allow little room for nuance. They're assertions not explorations – and exploring is what the essay does best. Blogs are a better comparison: as first-hand testimonies of thoughts, opinions and experiences set down by one person for other people to read, they're the equivalent of essays. And however opinionated, blogs are often vulnerable, tentative and deeply personal – again just like essays.

Criticism, Judgement and Celebration

At one point in Samuel Beckett's play Waiting for Godot, the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, exchange insults – 'vermin', 'moron', 'sewer rat' and 'cretin'. The ultimate, unanswerable insult they come up with is 'crritic'. The word 'criticism' (like the word 'essay') has negative associations. But literary criticism doesn't preclude positivity: passion, enthusiasm and celebration. It's about championing books by showing what makes them tick far more than it's about attacking them or doing them down. Honest judgment is what we look for in criticism – reasoned, nuanced but personal judgement. Critical essays may be parasitic – they exist in relation to the literature they're feeding off – but they can also be an art-form in themselves. What we value in them is wit, passion, intelligence, provocation, enjoyment – the same qualities we look for in a novel or poem.

Of course, hatchet jobs can be fun too, when someone takes on an established name and calls his or her bluff. But it's a different kind of fun I'm thinking of – the fun of finding new things in a classic text or of finding new ways to talk about that text, through the insights of feminism, or environmentalism, or politics, or simply from personal experience. Books might exist physically as objects without even being opened, but they don't truly exist till someone reads them. The author Alberto Manguel has said that

> *All writing depends on the generosity of the reader*

– the text gives to us and we bring something to it in return. Your task when writing a literary essay is to interpret, explain, elucidate, make sense – but also to connect the book you're reading to your own life. Mutato nomine, de te fabula narratur the Roman poet Horace wrote:

> *Change the name and the story is about you.*

Classic texts tell stories that seem to be our stories, as though written just for us. And that's why we, in turn, write about them.

In short, there's nothing weird or elitist or negative about the act of criticism. It's as natural as breathing. It's what we all do when we've seen a film, or heard a new album: 'What did you think of it? I thought this.' And we back up our thoughts by reference to a particular scene or song, and argue our corner against those who disagree with us. That's the basis of the critical essay. And it can be inventive, it can be creative, it can be passionate. Most importantly, whether you use the I-word or not, it has to bear your stamp – it has to have your personality at its heart.

Article Written By: Blake Morrison is a writer of fiction, poetry, non-fiction, journalism and literary criticism. He is Professor of Creative Writing at Goldsmiths, University of London.

The Art of the Essay (emagplus)

In this extract from EMC's The Literature Reader, Judy Simons explores the essay in the digital age – and provides some practical tips.

The critical essay does not conform to a single format which has to be rigidly adhered to. Like other literary genres, it is a flexible medium, a creative space in which academics, students, authors and general readers can share opinions. Literary experience is not constant but changes over time, and modern essays are generous in acknowledging the diversity of readers and their backgrounds. [...]

'The great enemy of clear language is insincerity,' wrote George Orwell. 'When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting ink'. Orwell's Inside the Whale (1940) is both a classic example and a clear-sighted assessment of the art of writing critical essays. Wide-ranging in scope, beautifully structured, eschewing jargon or complicated terminology, it addresses its central subject head on. Its insistence on clarity and honesty is sound advice. Believe in what you are saying and do not try to dress up your ideas in highbrow language or rely on clichés.

There are many student guides on the market which provide a template for essay-writing. Websites such as essaydragon.com advise on the different stages of planning, structure and style while a number of university English departments publish online handbooks, which contain excellent practical pointers. There are also helpful YouTube videos, which take you through the composition process step by step. Yet because an essay should always be personal, there can be no absolute prototype. It is helpful to remember that the verb 'to essay' also means 'to try'. Your essay is a means of testing out ideas and polishing the techniques used to structure them.

My own top five tips are:

1. Know your subject. This relies on reading the text for yourself. At A Level you may feel that you have done this exhaustively. Yet, understanding is also about engaging with that text, the story it tells, and whether or not it has the power to speak directly to you as a reader, not just via your teacher. Literature that is set for A Level has usually been selected for its complexity and its potential to enlighten or affect your thinking. So, read and read again!

2. Conduct research. This does not necessarily involve seeking out obscure primary sources, although reading Keats's letters or Mary Shelley's 1831 introduction to Frankenstein will offer considerable insights into their works. Rather it means reading around the text, understanding the contexts, including its literary history, and knowing what other commentators have said. Writing an essay is not an isolated activity. When you embark on it, you are entering an ongoing debate about literature, including with other students and with academic critics, whose ideas will help inspire your own. Remember that there is no 'correct' interpretation of a text and that it is perfectly acceptable to disagree with others' opinions. This is an important step in articulating your own position.

3. Answer the question. Most essay topics offer a deceptively simple proposition that demands a more subtle answer; for example, 'How far do you agree with the view that in King Lear, Goneril and Regan are victims rather than villains?'. Your essay should of course sustain a focus on these two characters and the scenes in which they appear. But the phrasing also invites a review of the primary value system embedded in the action, such as the human and social values of family, respect for order, filial obedience, love, charity and kingship. How do Shakespeare's dramatic methods, the juxtaposition with Gloucester's family or the positioning of Lear's speeches excoriating his daughters fit into the play's exploration of power? Is there really scope for ambiguity here? Don't forget that the best essays show evidence of an enquiring mind so you should not be shy about using question marks.

4. Structure your argument. Where an author can be equivocal or abstruse, the critic should be aiming to be clear and to untangle. Planning what you are going to say is essential. You may find that as you make notes on your reading, your proposition evolves in unexpected ways. The key is to organise your points into a logical format that supports your main case. This avoids your ideas spilling out onto the page in a random sequence that results in a disjointed or rambling piece of work. In a comparison piece, for example, you should aim to keep your paragraphs balanced alternately between the texts. Remember too to keep to the prescribed word count. Do not make the mistake of thinking that the more you write the more compelling your thesis will be.

5. Provide the evidence. Every claim you make must be underpinned by reference to the text or to relevant contexts. This is what makes your line of reasoning convincing. You need to be selective about the material you use, but if you have followed points 1-4 above, this should come naturally. Quotations from the text underpin and strengthen your interpretation. They can be used alongside any background information you have, for example about the cultural climate in which a writer's work was produced and the literary conventions of the day. Do not make the mistake of expecting characters in a Victorian novel to behave according to twenty-first century codes. It is the judicious use of reference to characters, scenes, authorial voice and imagery that will ensure your essay comes alive.

The Essay in the Age of Digital Technology

Digital technology has opened up a massive literary resource. It provides access for researchers to a range of materials which were once available only in a specialist library, such as copies of original manuscripts, out of print books and articles and biographical or historical information. It allows for new scholarship and literary discoveries that contribute to the essay's intervention in an evolving live debate.

Wikipedia, Google and other search engines can, however, tempt a reader towards simplistic analysis. A work of literature amounts to more than its surface narrative or plot synopsis. The internet is seductive because it appears to be comprehensive but its information is only as reliable as the person who posted it, and not all online views are equally valid. A critical perspective located via Google can range from incisive analysis by a learned scholar to a barely literate high school essay on Jane Eyre, such as some of those on the Bartleby website. Surfing the internet requires scrupulous discrimination on the part of the consumer, and it should never, ever be used as a sales outlet from which to purchase ready-made, supposedly bespoke coursework essays.

On the plus side, digital media have created a new approach to essay writing, with online magazines such as Electric Lit offering alternative publishing outlets. A whole blogosphere has emerged, populated by enthusiastic litbloggers, who exchange views, reviews and mini-essays. Blogging, where

typical posts are between 800 and 1500 words, affords a spirited, democratic space for literary discussion. As one commentator has noted, 'it does more than an essay because of its playfulness'. Yet its explosive growth has sparked controversy, with some, such as one chair of the Man Booker judges, claiming that blogging will only result in the 'detriment of literature'. Check out the regularly updated Literature Blogs UK Top 10 and make up your own mind.

Rarely do blogs follow the accepted conventions of critical essay writing. They are more casual, allowing for impromptu, open-ended observations that reaffirm a collective passion for literature. They can be quirky, playful or angry. They challenge the specialised rhetoric of the literati and what some see as an ivory tower complacency. Yet many academics, authors and teachers are themselves active bloggers, who find in the blog release from academic conventions and who know they can reach new audiences with a speed and directness that gives their views both currency and significance.

Readers live in the contemporary moment, and the power of present-day media shapes both textual meaning and production. Technology has opened up a world in which literary experience is not confined to the traditional print format. This is why the essay remains such a dynamic form, constantly renewing itself with each external stimulus. Do not give up on its rewards.

This extract is taken from EMC's The Literature Reader, a collection of articles by leading academics and writers on a wide range of topics from modernism and experimental literature to Shakespeare and the contemporary novel.

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