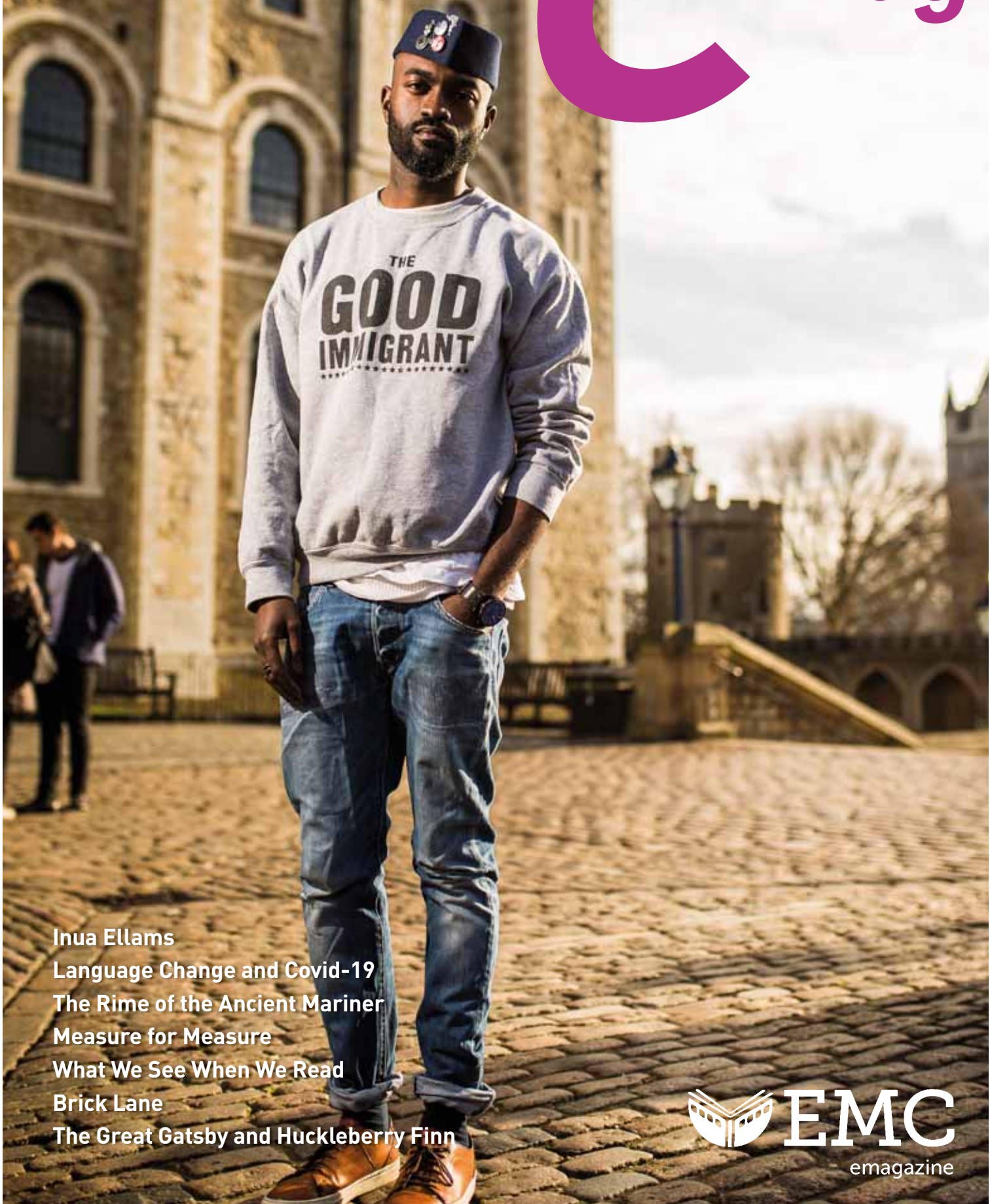


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Inua Ellams
Language Change and Covid-19
The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Measure for Measure
What We See When We Read
Brick Lane
The Great Gatsby and Huckleberry Finn

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- Transcript and video to accompany the article *Conversations with Corinne* (page 25) is available on the open pages of the *emagazine* site.

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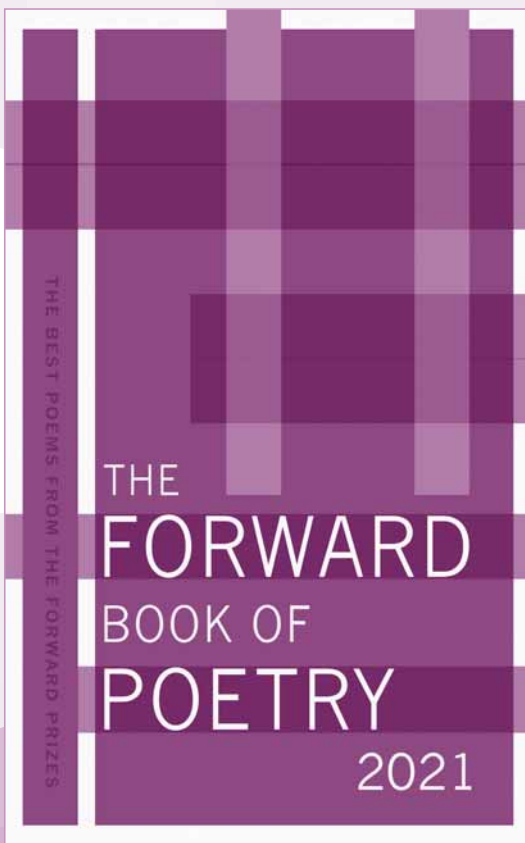
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Forward/*emagazine* CREATIVE CRITICS 2020



We had a bumper crop of entries this year, of an exceptionally high standard. Students were inspired by a wide range of poems and wrote with commitment, energy and a high degree of skill. For many, this seemed like part of their longer journey in discovering a poetic voice rather than a one-off and we were extremely impressed by the crafting, confidence and power of their writing. It seemed as if they genuinely had something important to say. The commentaries, once again, showed how writing a poem of your own can take you further into the original text. It is a strong argument for this kind of work in English A Level classrooms

We shortlisted 12 entries, which we sent to poet Julia Copus to make a final decision on the winner and runners-up.

Barbara Bleiman and Lucy Webster,
emagazine editors

Julia Copus' comments on the shortlist

There was something to discover in each one of these brilliant shortlisted entries. I was deeply impressed not only by the ingenuity and range of the poems but by the erudition of the accompanying commentaries. In the best entries, the commentaries shed light on both the model poems and the newly minted responses. But in the end, a poem must also stand on its own feet. Each of the top three poems does just that, and each has its own distinct note. These are poems in which thought process, imagery and rhythm are sustained right the way to the end; poems which – importantly – end as strongly as they began. I'd like to pass on my congratulations to the authors of the shortlisted and commended poems, but also to everyone who entered. The overall standard was extremely high and the maturity and sophistication of this shortlist suggests that our poetic future is in safe hands.

The Winner

Joyce Chen (Westminster School) for 'Cuttlefishing off the coast of Hong Kong' in response to 'Holy Man' by Will Harris

Julia Copus comments:

In this magical poem (inspired by a single stanza in Will Harris's 'Holy Man'), the speaker remembers herself back to a childhood memory of night fishing and depicts, with great clarity and poise, the disconnect she feels from the adult world even as she blends – 'small and forgotten' – with her surroundings. The experience is recreated with a cinematic sensibility: 'The boat washed dimply yellow, the shade/of my bedroom in those years of nightlights and spinning dreams'; elsewhere, a teapot lid on a tablecloth floats 'belly-up like an apology/or a dead thing'. But the poem's metaphorical significance is only revealed as it moves towards its close and the colour black provides a link to a present-day Hong Kong suffused with political unrest and – as the illuminating commentary puts it – 'a sense of the confusion and guilt that often accompanies dual identity'.

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- Forward/*emagazine* Creative Critics 2019 – Winning and Shortlisted Entries, *emagazine* 87, February 2020
- Forward/*emagazine* Creative Critics 2018, *emagazine* 82, December 2018
- Forward/*emagazine* Young Critics 2017, *emagazine* 78, December 2017
- Barbara Bleiman: Writing About Poetry, *emagazine* 71, February 2016
- Malcolm Hebron: What Are Poems and What Do They Do For Us?, *emagazine* 85, September 2018

The Runners-up

Ariba Saeed (London Academy of Excellence) for 'Hide and Seek' in response to 'Rookie' by Caroline Bird

Julia Copus comments:

There is an enormous energy and a powerful imagination at work in Ariba Saeed's poem 'Hide and Seek', written in response to Caroline Bird's 'Rookie'. Using a skilful interweaving of well-known nursery rhymes and fairy tales, the poem maintains a strict rhyme scheme throughout its 28 lines while it builds a moving and compelling narrative of victimisation and escape, making clever use of the LGBT+ 'in the closet' metaphor.

Katie Kirkpatrick (Hills Road Sixth Form College, Cambridge) for 'things i am freezing to come back to later' in response to 'The Larder' by Vicki Feaver

Julia Copus comments:

I love the gentle and sustained note of nostalgia in this poem (based on Vicki Feaver's 'The Larder') about experiences so deeply treasured that the writer is storing them up to return to at a later date. The final line contains the surprising revelation that one of the items they will be 'freezing' for later is the poem itself – a decision that appears to be reached just as the final full stop is inked into place.

Highly Commended

- 'Kid' by Luke Tinworth (Little Heath School, Tilehurst)
- 'A Second Evening' by Iqra Naseem (Lordswood Girls' School and Sixth Form Centre, Birmingham)
- 'pass time' by Thariny Suresh (Royal Latin School, Buckingham)
- 'Vilnius' by Yael Katz (Haberdashers' Aske School for Girls, Elstree)

Commended

- 'Child' by Erin Violet-Camp (Newton Abbot College)
- 'You Are Mistaken' by Nia Mercurius-Johnson (Royal Masonic School for Girls)
- 'Pakistani Praises' by Ibrahim Usmani (Repton School, Dubai)
- 'Hawker Centre' by Maria Ma (Queen Ethelburga's Collegiate)
- 'Close (several short poems)' by Hala Almodares (Lycée Internationale Jeanne d'Arc)

Cuttlefishing off the coast of Hong Kong

The night was painting the sea and my hands a vanishing colour
but I could still feel the sticky warmth of the plastic reel
like a comb flat in my palm. I must have only been five or six,
peering out from between the boat's edge and safety rail,
looking for cuttlefish in the dense water
like looking for stars in a smoggy sky.

I felt small and forgotten watching the darkness congeal
in a swarm of lazy mosquitoes and adult chatter -
if I heard two dialects on deck, I would have thought
they were lovers, then. The boat washed dimly yellow, the shade
of my bedroom in those years of nightlights and spinning dreams.

a hitch on the line -

Pull up quick but careful, careful / Pick it up for a picture, while it's still alive
[now I like to think that I gave the sad creature to my brother
because I could not carry the weight of its dying pulses]
but when they all came up like a magic trick, fried and salted in a huge pan, still I ate
and ate.

Your tongue's gone black!
and I think black as oily ink, black as an ocean for running away;

I would not think of how, in twelve years,
protestors clad in black flow
into rivers of fear running through
Hong Kong like a lifeblood; of how
the waiter's face closes like a reflex
when we order in Mandarin,
the teapot left empty on white tablecloth,
its lid floating belly-up like an apology
or a dead thing: to him,

we were the predators with open jaws
and he saw our tongues were black.

Reflective Commentary

The penultimate stanza of 'Holy Man' inspired the beginnings of my poem, as Harris associates the colour green with everything from the universal ('a cartoon frog... a septic wound... the glen') to the deeply personal ('the lane in Devon where my dad/grew up, and the river in Riau where my mum played'). I therefore chose black, a colour that has featured across daily news in Hong Kong for the past year, but also has strong associations with one of my earliest memories.

Harris's fixation with religion, from 'Christmas' to 'Tibetan prayer flags... meaningless severed/from the body of ritual, of belief' and 'a jade statue/of the Buddha', is reflected by my political focus in Cuttlefishing. While 'Holy Man' centres around an unlikely encounter with a stranger who awakens spiritual introspection in the speaker, the central act of catching cuttlefish comes to signify the conflict between nations which bleeds into my speaker's life.

The stylistic feature that visually stood out to me from 'Holy Man' was Harris's paragraph-like chunks of prosaic narrative, which I mirrored in my first two stanzas. In my poem however, the stanza and line lengths are not constant but evolve as the subject shifts across time from personal memory to the wider political backdrop. The two couplets especially break from the structure of the poem to highlight the stark contrast between how we perceive ourselves and what others see or assume.

Finally, the last line of 'Holy Man' particularly stuck with me ('- and I flinched, waiting for the blade to fall'). I wanted to create the same sense of apprehension and undefined fear, or almost pre-regret, at the end of Cuttlefishing, hopefully leaving the reader with a sense of the confusion and guilt that often accompanies dual identity.

Inua Ellams

Identity, Displacement, Destiny

Inua Ellams, poet and playwright talked to Barbara Bleiman, co-editor of *emagazine*. The email conversation focused particularly on his writing for theatre and his recent productions in London theatres which have received high praise from audiences and critics alike.

1. What writers have most influenced you?

I've been influenced by Dipo Agboluaje, Lemn Sissay, James Baldwin, William Shakespeare, Lorraine Hansberry, Sabrina Mafouz and Lucy Prebble, to name a few.

2. Is there a real divide for you between writing poetry and writing plays? What's the difference in the writing process?

All my plays begin as poems, as short poems. And they become plays when, in trying to write the poem or tell the complete truth of the poem, they become bigger, more complex, more nuanced, more multi-voiced worlds. Those voices become characters and as they begin to interact, debate and argue with each other, the poem becomes a play. When I finish writing a poem it sits on the desk for a couple of weeks before I go back and edit it and then it's finished. When I finish writing a play, it is only the beginning of the work.

3. You've had great success with your plays recently. What's the theatre world like in 2020 for a black dramatist, trying to get plays put on?

Drama and theatre has been suspended indefinitely because of the coronavirus. There are indications that when the world returns to some semblance of normality, there will be a conservative philosophy underpinning the choice of plays theatres decide to put on. Artistic directors of theatre may not want to take on plays that centre on the lives of those that belong to minority ethnic groups. Some think their stories may not appeal to the majority of theatre-goers, so they will be running a financial risk. This includes plays by black people, which means that the work of black dramatists is and will be in a precarious situation.

4. What themes or ideas motivate you in terms of writing drama? Personal? Political? Both?

Three words keep occurring in all of my work: identity, displacement and destiny, and they are manifested in both the personal and the political.



The Barber Shop Chronicles by Inua Ellams © Marc Brenner

5. Nigerian and English life, culture and complex, multiple identities figure strongly in your work. Can you say something about this in your writing?

I am a product of several lives of several cultures and complexes. I am Nigerian but I grew up in British and American television. I am African but I live amongst Europeans. I'm a child of the hip-hop generation and its complex narrative and literary allusions, but I am also a child of ancient oral storytelling traditions where stories and morals were clearly defined but the style in which the stories were told and the room for personal interpretation were open. I'll bring all of these to the stories that I tell, or try to tell.

6. Do you see yourself as working within traditions of drama or creating new traditions? Old wine in new bottles, as Angela Carter once said, or new wine in new bottles?

None of the above. I think I'm just mixing wines and putting them in bottles that resemble me.

7. What do you like in a theatrical experience yourself? What makes a good play?

A good story, suspense, conflict, and someone to root for.

8. What kind of experience of literature did you have as a 16-19 year old? Did it prepare you in any way for the literary life you now lead? If so, how?

From an early age, I was a voracious reader. I read everything I could get my hands on and would chase my own thoughts down a rabbit hole. I wasn't in university or college. I couldn't afford to go to either, and my immigration status meant that it was illegal for me to attend any higher-level educational institution as a home student. I would be charged as an international student, which we could not afford. I was left to my own devices, which meant I was able to create and destroy as I saw fit. I was able to create worlds, build bridges between those worlds, and figure out how the politics of those worlds sat with me. I think this prepared me for the literary life I lead now.

9. Your three recent plays are quite different. Which are you most proud of writing and why?

I'm most proud of *The Half-God of Rainfall*. I had to reinvent a classic poetic form in order to write the story. I mixed Nigerian with Mology with Greek Mythology, urban pop culture with social activism, and gender politics with sports.

The Half God of Rainfall is about a lone parent, a working-class mother, who goes to incredible lengths to protect her child from his abusive father. The mother is a Nigerian woman. The father is Zeus. Their son is an athlete. The story starts in a tiny grassy





The BarberShop Chronicles by Inua Ellams © Marc Brenner

sports field in southwest Nigeria and ends with the complete destruction of Mount Olympus. It is a story about love, power, sexual violence, female solidarity and ultimate, ultimate vengeance. It is written in both the Homeric and Dantesque poetic tradition, crosses Greek Mythology with Yoruba Mythology, and is set in the world of contemporary basketball.

10. What advice would you give to a young person wanting to have poetry published or plays performed?

This is from Polonius in *Hamlet*, it has always rang true with me:

this above else, to thine own self be true.

Inua Ellams was interviewed by Barbara Bleiman, co-editor of *emagazine*.

Inua Ellams reads his poems on EMC's The Poetry Station. <http://poetrystation.org.uk/search/poets/inua-ellams>

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- Barbara Bleiman: An Interview with Dannie Abse – Welsh Retrospective, *emagazine* 62, December 2013
- Barbara Bleiman: Avoiding the Subject the Poetry of Billy Collins, *emagazine* 24, April 2004
- Lawrence Scott: Linton Kwesi Johnson – An Interview, *emagazine* 19, February 2003
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- Andrew Green: Homage and Rupture – Poetry Singing from the Margins, *emagazine* 84, April 2019
- *emagazine*: Speech and Silence – An Interview with Jacob Sam-La Rose, *emagazine* 75, February 2017
- Priscilla McClay: An Interview with David Hare, *emagazine* 50, December 2010
- Barbara Bleiman: An Interview with Nicholas Hytner, *emagazine* 35, February 2007
- Barbara Bleiman: An Interview with Jude Kelly – 'Theatre's Not Like a Flat-pack', *emagazine* 15, February 2002

SYSTEMS WRITING



What Are They and How Do They Influence Reading?

Professor Kathy Rastle reveals how writing is much more than just visual symbols for spoken language. Spelling is also strongly associated with meaning, in ways that affect how we learn to read, as well as how we should view the supposed ‘irregularity’ of our spelling system.

By the time that most children leave school, the act of reading seems effortless. Text is all around us and we cannot help but understand what it means. Yet, our experience of reading masks the fact that unlike walking or talking, humans are not born to be able to read. Instead, reading is a skill that needs to be taught explicitly, and whose mastery requires years of dedication and practice.

The most basic challenge of reading is learning to associate the visual symbols of writing to meaningful language. To a literate individual, this seems trivial, but it is profound. Spoken language is conveyed as a continuous stream of acoustic energy, and yet writing represents this in a wholly non-obvious manner: as discrete visual symbols.

Writing Systems in the Past and Present

The earliest writing systems emerged around 5000 years ago, probably from systems designed for accounting in the ancient world. Yet, while some writing systems have been around for a long time (Chinese), others were developed much more recently (Korean Hangul). In fact, a new writing system was introduced just last year (Inuktitut Qaliujaaqpait) in an attempt to unify the Inuit dialects.

Writing systems always represent spoken language but they do so in different ways. In logographic writing systems like Chinese, a symbol may represent a whole word. In syllabic writing systems like Cherokee, a symbol represents a syllable; and in alphabetic writing systems like

English, Italian, or Finnish, the symbols of writing represent sounds.

Alphabetic writing systems are further broken down based on the consistency with which spellings map onto sounds. The relationship between spellings and sounds is highly consistent in Italian. Once you know the rules, you can read aloud almost any word accurately. In contrast, English is full of words that break the rules, such as **have** (cf. *gave, wave, save*), **pint** (cf. *mint, hint, splint*), and **chef** (cf. *church, charm, chest*).

Does English Spelling Deserve Such a Bad Reputation?

Much has been made of the irregularity of English spelling. Research shows that



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tense sound sequence are typically spelled another way (e.g. *strict* instead of *stricked*).

It turns out that this relationship between English spelling and meaning is ubiquitous. The many spellings available for English sound sequences yield a situation where particular spellings (usually associated with suffixes) can become reserved for particular meanings. Crucially, this meaningful information is not available in the spoken forms of these words (the spoken forms of *strict* and *kicked* both sound like they could be in the past).

This discussion suggests that the very property that makes English spelling hard (a relatively opaque relationship between spelling and sound) allows it to convey aspects of meaning with far greater precision than spoken language. This analysis shows why initiatives to reform English spelling are misguided. Trying to simplify the relationship between spelling and sound might well remove the hidden meaning that English spelling conveys.

How Do Writing Systems Shape Reading?

Because we are not born with neural hardware for reading, the challenge for the brain is to relate the visual symbols of writing to spoken language using neurons built for other functions. The brain is a statistical learning device, and it is thought that it capitalises on systematic relationships wherever they can be found, during the course of learning to read. This means that the way that the brain solves the problem of learning to read may well vary across different writing systems.

If the brain is a statistical learning device, then we might ask what individuals discover about English spelling through their text experience. There is ample evidence that English readers know the relationship between spelling and sound; this is the knowledge that they use to read non-words like *slint* and *vib*, a trivial task for most skilled readers. But what do they know about the hidden aspects of meaning described above?

Recent research on university students suggests that their knowledge is considerable. Let's consider the example spelling [-ous], which is strongly associated with adjectives. Research suggests that adults are more likely to classify a non-word like *domous* as an adjective than a noun. Likewise, they are more likely to spell the



spoken word /dəʊməs/ using the spelling [-ous] if it occurs in an adjective context than in a noun context. Similar preferences are observed when we monitor participants' eye-movements in text reading.

It seems unlikely that adults could describe these relationships between spelling and meaning explicitly; and to my knowledge, these relationships are not frequently taught in initial reading instruction. Thus, our research suggests that adults have picked up on these regular patterns through their text experience, and that they use this information to support comprehension.

Has Writing Evolved to Support Reading?

There is considerable evidence to suggest that properties of writing systems affect reading and reading acquisition. But why do differences between writing systems exist in the first place; and what causes writing systems to change over time? These are interesting questions for which we don't have good answers.

Most writing systems face some degree of human intervention. Writing systems such as Korean Hangeul and Pinyin were invented specifically to promote literacy, and most modern writing systems undergo sporadic or ongoing regulation through national bodies such as the French Académie Française.

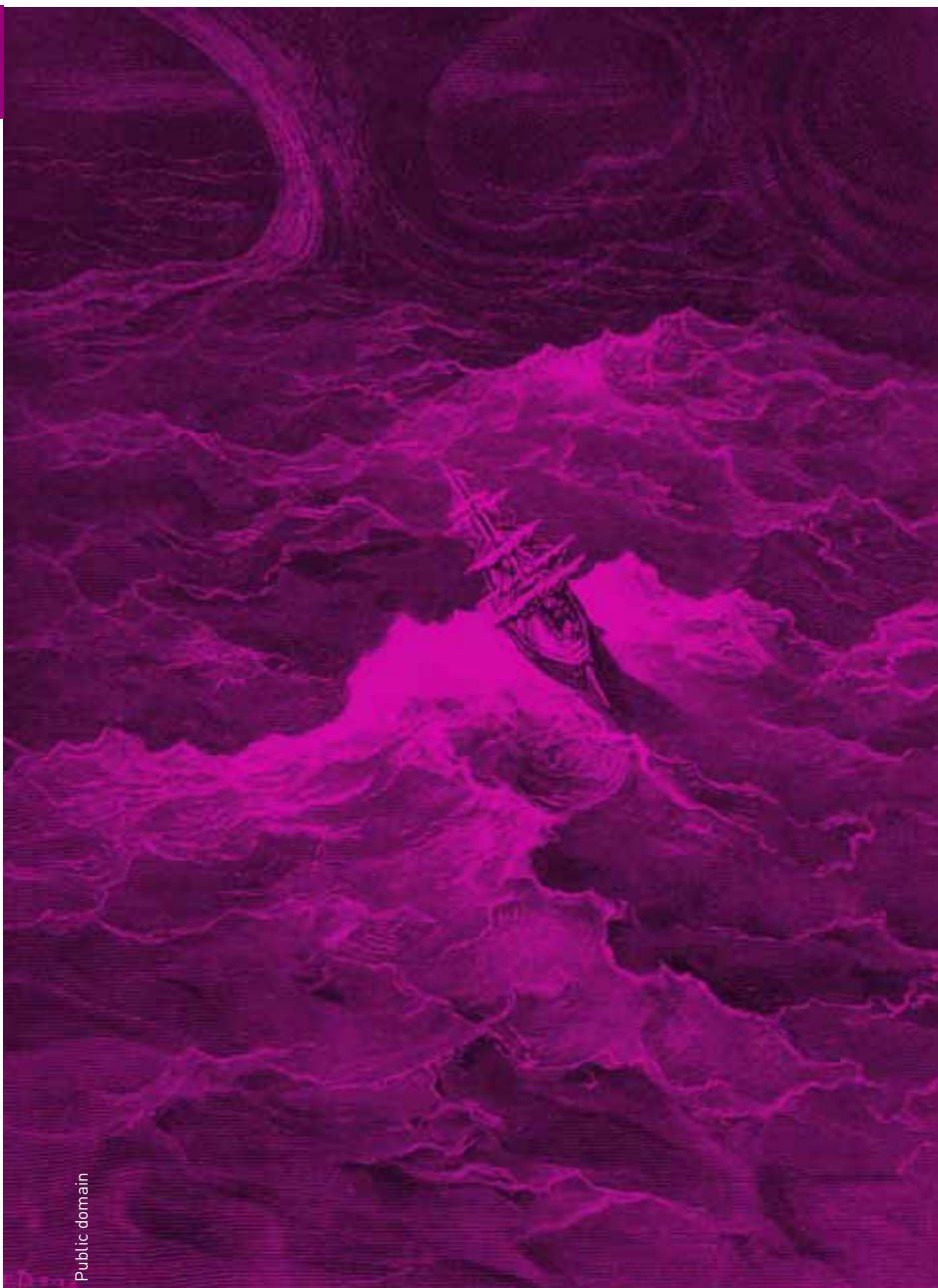
English is an outlier in this respect. There have been attempts to reform its spelling (Noah Webster being the most prominent

it takes longer to learn to read aloud in English than it does in more consistent writing systems such as Italian, Spanish, French or Welsh. Likewise, teachers and parents will be familiar with the enormous challenge of learning to spell in English, with so many possible spellings for each sound (for example, consider the plausible alternative spellings for **brake**: *break*, *braik*, *brayk*, *braick*, *braicke*, *braiQUE*).

The random nature of English spelling is usually attributed to its long and complicated history. It is seen as a serious problem that must be overcome during reading acquisition, and calls for simplifying the spelling system go back 500 years. Yet, in focusing in on the relationship between English spellings and sounds, have we seen all there is to see?

New research suggests that the disorder between spelling and sound might actually be a consequence of order between spelling and meaning. Let's consider the words **herded**, **kicked**, and **snored**. If English had a more transparent relationship between spelling and sound, we might spell these words *herdid*, *kict*, and *snord*. But if we did, we would lose a very important clue to the meanings of these words: the ending [-ed].

In fact, if we consider all English words ending in [-ed] that have a plausible stem (so, excluding words like *bed*), we find that virtually all indicate the past. The spelling [-ed] has ended up being reserved to communicate past tense; spoken words that do not convey past tense but that use a past



A Tale For Our Times

The Ecological Message of 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner'

Claire Kelly's eco-critical reading of Coleridge's poem uncovers the contemporary power of a text which is all about human beings disregarding the natural world and living with the consequences. For her, it is a highly moral tale.

Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* may seem an unlikely poem to praise for its contemporary resonance. The deliberate use of archaisms, the influence from the German school of Gothic and the references to angelology perhaps at first make *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* appear far removed from our twenty-first century world. However, when explored from an eco-critical perspective, one which considers the text in terms of its commentary on our relationship with the natural world, Coleridge's tale is almost prescient in its fundamental message: we must respect and revere nature and recognise our connection with it, or suffer the consequences. Coleridge's poem darkly illustrates humans' utter dependence on nature, captures the interconnection between all things in the Universe, and suggests the awful repercussions of transgressing natural laws.

The Power and The Terror

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner depicts the Mariner and crew as utterly at the mercy of natural phenomena. The favourable weather conditions in which the ship leaves the harbour dissipate when it reaches the Line, and it is in this liminal space that nature becomes a powerful foe, pursuing the ship and changing its course:

He struck with his o'ertaking wings,
And chased us all along.

The storm's agency and purpose cast the crew as victims here as they flee in fear. This terror continues as the ship is propelled to the land of ice, where

ice, mast-high, came floating by,
As green as emerald.

This visual simile evokes a sense of the sublime, creating a grand, wondrous spectacle while leaving us in no doubt of

the potential danger posed by the natural world. The ice is further brought alive through auditory imagery, as

It cracked and growled, and roared and howled

with the onomatopoeic verbs suggesting something animalistic and savage. Through his depiction of this frozen landscape, Coleridge paints nature as a powerful source of potential threat, terror and destruction.

The mariners' fundamental dependence on the natural world is also exemplified after the murder of the albatross, as the ship is rendered motionless when the wind and waves cease:

*As idle as a painted ship
Upon a painted ocean*

The absolute stasis in this simile is a stark, visual illustration of our reliance on meteorological conditions. This is exacerbated by the torture experienced by the crew as the blistering sun beats down:

*All in a hot and copper sky
The bloody Sun, at noon,
Right up above the mast did stand.*

The mariners are further tormented by the elements as they endure drought and dehydration despite being entirely surrounded by water:

*Water, water, every where
Nor any drop to drink.*

The natural world, then, is essential to human survival, and the Mariner's tale outlines the human suffering which can ensue if natural elements and resources work against us.

The Consequences of Transgression

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner's illustration of nature's potency is counterbalanced, however, by the fragility and vulnerability of the natural world. The Mariner commits an act of transgression in shooting 'the harmless albatross', a symbol of nature's benevolence and hope. No motive for the Mariner's destructive crime is suggested, and it is perhaps committed out of ignorance and mindlessness as the Mariner fails to consider the spiritual and moral implications of his actions. The suffering experienced by the stranded, dehydrated Mariner and crew are presented as consequences of the crime, and this sense of the natural world punishing the Mariner reflects the initial inspiration for the poem. Coleridge's fellow Romantic poet Wordsworth told Coleridge of reading *Captain Shelvocke's Voyages*, a real-life account

of a voyage around Cape Horn where the sailors frequently sighted albatrosses:

'Suppose,' said I, 'you represent him as having killed one of these birds on entering the South Sea, and that the tutelary spirits of these regions take upon them to avenge the crime.'

'Tutelary' refers to 'having the position of a guardian or protector of a person, place or thing', and in Wordsworth's vision, nature's guardians quite literally rise up in retaliation for the Mariner's transgression. This can be seen in the poem through the 'Polar Spirit', who desires to be avenged for the Mariner's shooting of the albatross as

*He loved the bird that loved the man
Who shot him with his bow.*

The Mariner is therefore persecuted not only by natural phenomena but also by a guardian of the natural world. His punishments serve as a potent reminder that we must act in harmony with nature and the concluding lines of the Mariner's story leave us in no doubt that he certainly has extracted this moral lesson from his experiences:

*He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small.*

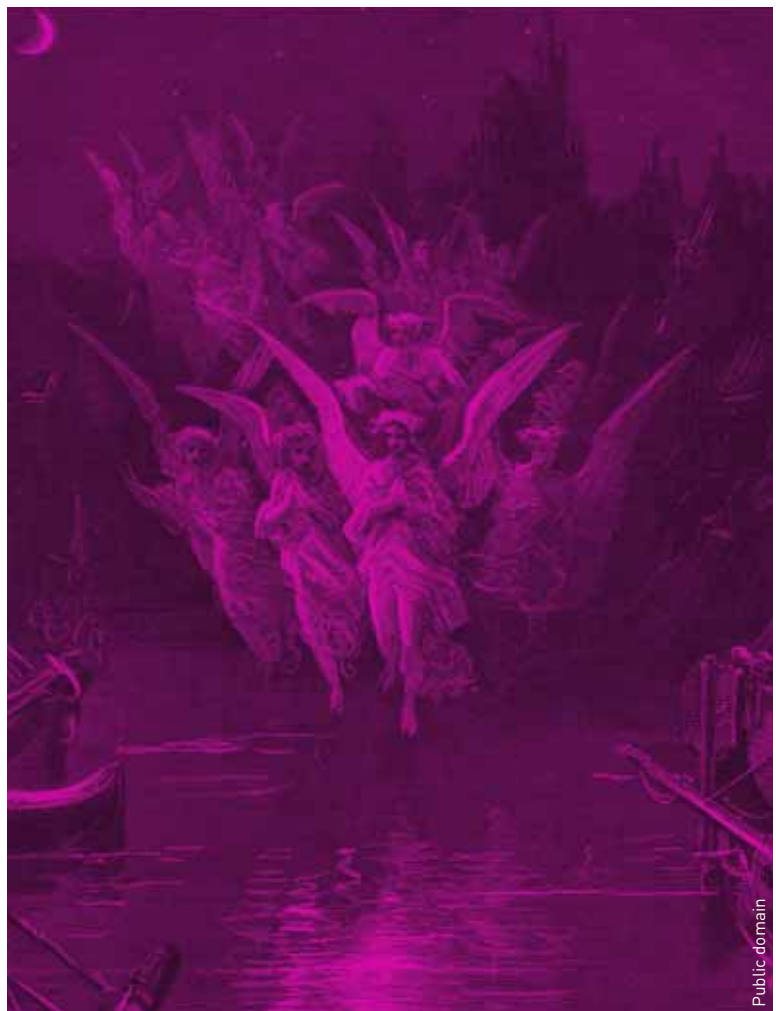
The moral, then, seems perfectly clear: we should love, respect and revere all of creation.

A Spiritual Teaching?

It is perhaps surprising, then, that when recounting a conversation with his contemporary Anna Laetitia Barbauld in *Table Talk*, Coleridge comments:

Mrs. Barbauld once told me that she admired the Ancient Mariner very much, but that there were two faults in it, – it was improbable, and had no moral.

This seems curious, particularly given Coleridge's own rather different self-critical response:



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as to the want of a moral, I told her that in my own judgement the poem had too much; and that the only, or chief fault [...] was the obtrusion of the moral sentiment so openly on the reader as a principle or cause of action in a work of such pure imagination.

Barbauld herself propounded the idea of finding spirituality through nature in her own writings, so why would she complain of seeing 'no moral' in Coleridge's tale? Perhaps her comment reflects the disparity between the tale itself and the moral which the Mariner draws from it. The idea that the extraordinary, phantasmagorical experiences that the Mariner recounts serve neatly to illustrate a moral teaching seems an oversimplification. However, while the Mariner's assertion of his spiritual growth as a result of his punishments can be seen as a simple, almost child-like way of him attempting to rationalise his extraordinary experiences, his tale nonetheless retains a clear didactic message.

This moral of love for all creation may relate to Coleridge's spiritual leanings at the time of the first edition in 1798. In his early life, Coleridge was broadly aligned with Pantheism, the belief that God is in everything, and that everything in the Universe is connected. This interconnection links, on one level, to eco-critical thinking, as according to Barry Commoner's first law of ecology:

Everything is connected to everything else.

This appreciation of our unity with the natural world is particularly resonant for a twenty-first century audience; we are witnessing the potentially devastating consequences of human actions on our environment, making the vitality of this connection impossible to ignore.

Wonder and Redemption

It is the Mariner's transgression of natural laws that leads to his punishment and guilt, and it is thus fitting that it is through the natural world that he begins his journey to redemption. In part two, despite witnessing the power and grandeur of nature, the Mariner still sees the grotesque element of the sublime:

Yea, slimy things did crawl with legs
Upon the slimy sea.

It is only later, when he is able to appreciate the wonder and beauty of the water snakes, with the deep, jewel-like colours of

their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green and velvet black,

that 'The spell begins to break.' The easing of the Mariner's suffering is further aided by the action of the natural world in part six of the poem, as the benevolent, hospitable breeze enables the Mariner's ship to return to the harbour:

It mingled strangely with my fears,
Yet it felt like a welcoming.

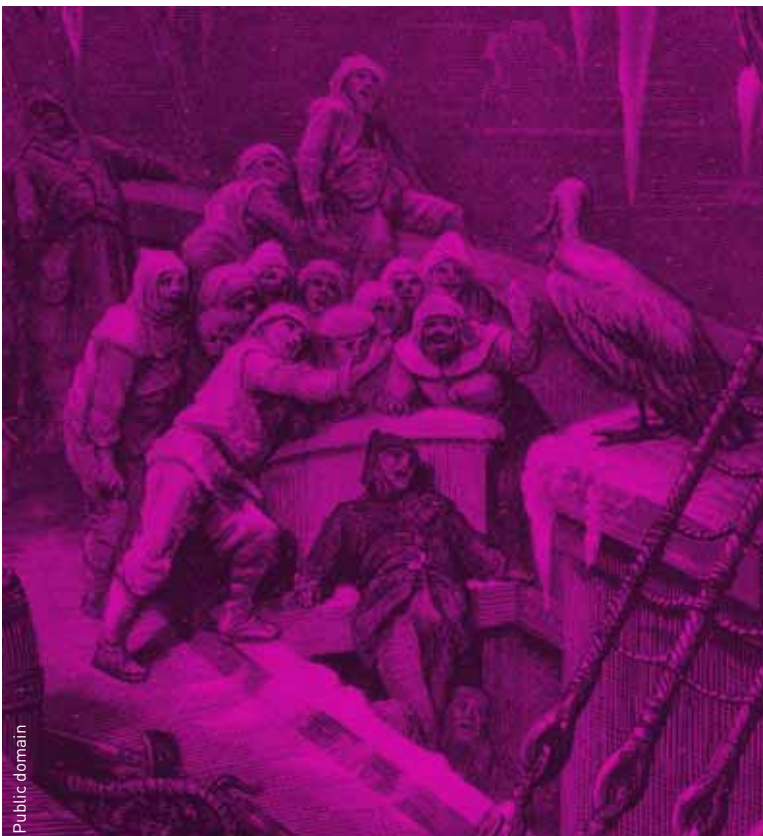
His sense of awe of nature precedes the introduction of the Hermit, a human living in harmony with nature and in whom the Mariner hopes to find absolution for his crime. As a Romantic poet, Coleridge reacted against the processes of industrialisation and urbanisation, and the Hermit perhaps represents a pre-industrial world; he lives simply, beyond man-made constraints and with nature as his guide:

This Hermit good lives in that wood
Which slopes down to the sea.

Significantly, it is through a figure who lives in accord with the natural world that the Mariner seeks to be shriven and can take further steps towards enlightenment and forgiveness.

In an eco-critical reading of Coleridge's *Rime*, it is arguably nature, rather than the Mariner, that takes centre stage. Nature is at times an adversary, at times a victim and at times a force for justice. Ultimately, though, the natural world is an ally and a spiritual teacher, showing us that we must respect its power and recognise our dependence on it while appreciating its vulnerability to human action. The transcendent, healing power of nature is therefore central to Coleridge's Romantic vision of the relationship between human beings and the natural world, and we too 'must hear' the Mariner's message of connection and unity.

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Never Let Me Go

The Blandness of Sex

A Level student Anita Lu examines the treatment of sexual intimacy in Ishiguro's novel and suggests that there is a deliberate dullness in everything about the narrative style, emphasising the lack of genuine sexuality in the characters' lives.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* is a haunting exploration of what it means to be human, and why the clones – no matter how hard they try to grasp for whatever it is that may render them 'more human' – are always condemned to miss the mark. One of the most disturbing ways in which the reader learns this is through his treatment of sex – Kathy's bland narrative voice is unwavering even in moments of intimacy, where it is the absence (rather than the presence) of graphic eroticism that is disconcerting. Through consistent and subtle distortion of the mundane, Ishiguro carefully reveals the clones' lack of total humanity. The effect he achieves is reminiscent of 'the uncanny valley effect' (the eerie feeling we get when encountering something that is almost, but not fully, human). Sympathy for the clones gradually degrades into pity as it becomes clear that these 'poor creatures' are not quite like us.

Tommy and Kathy share a heart-rending bond, but their love scenes lack the spark of sensuality – they are family in a world that oppresses their ability to be lovers.

Dampening Descriptions

Ishiguro intentionally crafts a dull and uninspired narrative style in *Never Let Me Go* to '[tone down or dampen] its potentially lurid material' (Wai Chew Sim: *Kazuo Ishiguro*) – but the effect of this is also the dampening of the senses, and subsequently the dampening of sensuality. Descriptions throughout the book are limited and ambiguous – generic at best – so that even the image of Hailsham is hazy for both Kathy and the reader. Ishiguro uses euphemisms repeatedly to the same end ('completion' to signify the death of a donor, or 'possible' to mean 'genetic parent'), extending this language to scenes

that are supposed to be intimate. In one scene, for example, Kathy

[goes] down around [Tommy's] stuff [as] he just [lies] there not making any attempt to feel [her] up in return.

Indeed, he is in recovery and has limited mobility, but the words here are awkward, and do little to suggest stimulation of the senses, with the lack of reciprocation further negating any semblance of pleasurable sensory experience. In a way, Ishiguro is implying the sexual act by writing so – but it is an implication that comes without tension or the aesthetic element of eroticism; 'stuff' is clumsy, and provides little fuel for the reader's imagination. Ishiguro's other word choices – 'noises', 'full blown way', 'done it really well' – carry the same effect of being inelegant and without specific sexual connotations. Moreover, Tommy is 'not even making any noises, but just looking



Andrew Garfield, Carey Mulligan, *Never Let Me Go*, 2010 in AF archive / Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

peaceful', stirring a kind of disturbed sadness and disorientation in the reader.

'A bit functional'

Perhaps the blandness of Kathy's tone can in part be attributed to the fact that sexual fantasy, or indeed imagination itself, is not afforded to the clones, who consider the most ordinary aspects of human life – such as working in an office – to be the pinnacle of their dreams. They may read literature, but they read passively, shown by the fact that Kathy is utterly oblivious (or wilfully ignorant) of the connection that exists between herself and Josef K. in *The Trial* – both lack complete surnames, and are cornered into inescapable situations by nameless and faceless authorities. Her inability to register these subtleties points to a general absent-mindedness that may explain her confinement in her role as a

clone, but then again, they are all 'told and not told' from childhood so that the idea of rebellion does not ever begin to be conceived.

Essentially, sex in the entirety of *Never Let Me Go* is as Kathy describes sex at the cottages – 'a bit functional'. It engenders a mixture of curiosity and disappointment for both the reader and the characters, rather than lust or intensity. At one point, Kathy quite crudely wonders if Tommy might have been 'after some sex', quantifying the act so that it becomes rather like an object that can be given or taken away – which forms part of a broader motif that runs throughout the novel – the commodification of the body, be it for its organs or for its sex. Her tone here suggests a sense of expectation as she reads into Tommy's 'deliberate' and 'coy' manner, with the word 'after' implying a kind of sexual chase – but this too goes

unfulfilled, as she is mistaken about his intentions. It is to be noted that sex in the novel is only 'functional' in tone. The reality is rather ironic – the clones are sterile, hence the aspect of reproduction, or a sense of life being continued, is lost from their intimacy. Georges Bataille once claimed that 'eroticism is assenting to life, even in death' (*Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, 1986), contending that the difference between animal sexuality and human sexuality is that the latter is capable of being erotic. His ideas are pertinent when considering the lack of eroticism (in spite of the prevalence of sex) to be found in *Never Let Me Go*. The clones are like livestock, as supported (perhaps subconsciously) by Madame, who fears them as if they are spiders, and calls them 'poor creatures' – like animals, who, according to Bataille, cannot exhibit eroticism in the same way that humans may. Perhaps their position is even worse than that of animals, for they are denied the ability to procreate – and without it, there can be no 'assenting to life'.

Immature Love and Imminent Death

Through his exploration of Tommy and Kathy's relationship, Ishiguro provokes the reader to differentiate between immature love, and love that engenders feelings of sexual desire. They seem to encompass the former, for in spite of their age, they never grow up – Ishiguro makes this abundantly clear in his characterisation of Tommy, who is innocent and vulnerable to the point that he resembles a child. The tantrums of his childhood fade as he matures, but we see an echo of his younger self as he '[rages, shouts, flings his fists and kicks out]' after discovering the futility of deferrals. It is pathos that Ishiguro evokes in all of these moments – pathos as Tommy screams, pathos as Kathy attempts to reach him, and pathos again as they hold each other

because that [is] the only way to stop [them] being swept away into the night.

Even in their orphaned state, the clones form tight familial bonds – they come from the same collective, and the only collective that they will ever belong to. When Kathy visits Norfolk at the end, she hopes – if only for a moment – that their childhood myth of lost things will come true and bring Tommy back to her. That is where her fantasy stops – it is the first and last thing that she hopes for. Reading their interactions, it becomes impossible to deny the care that they have for one another, even if they do not exhibit a sense of sensuality.

Kathy is a retrospective narrator, but this in fact highlights her immaturity and lack of development – for she will never outgrow her childhood, nor experience the trials and tribulations of adult life, even at 31 years old: her preordained destiny is to give away parts of herself so that others may live, and consequently, she must die. Judith Butler's reflections in *Undoing Gender* (2004) are applicable to the experience of the clones. She proposes that

to find that you are fundamentally unintelligible is to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were human...

a concept that Kathy endorses, for she implies that 'being human' must be acted or done actively on their part – sex cannot be 'left too long', or else it will

just get harder and harder to make it a natural part of [them].

If anything, the clones begin their intimacy out of a wish to feel more human, but because they are sterile and condemned to die, the feeling that they seek is lost.

Sex then becomes a mockery of their sorry state, for it reveals precisely that which they attempt to hide.

Human lives are ideally about gradual progression into the individual, but Ishiguro's story does not follow this trajectory of self-improvement and growth, for the characters' lives are centred around their deaths. Each time sex is brought up in the novel, Ishiguro exhausts the meaning of the word, until it is reduced to just another reminder for the clones that they are not and never will be truly human. It is not that they lack the faculties to do so, but rather that they have no agency – and the cruel fate that awaits them infringes on their ability to enjoy even the most fleeting moments of happiness in their lives.

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Carey Mulligan, Andrew Garfield, Keira Knightley, *Never Let Me Go*, 2010
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Living in a **Linguistic Landscape**

How the language that surrounds us shapes society

In this article, Philip Sargeant draws on recent examples of written language all around us, on the streets and even in our windows. He shows how studying it gives us insight into our world and the ways in which language both creates and reflects society's concerns and manner of organising itself.

In the City of London, just east of St Paul's Cathedral, there are a couple of short, one-way streets called Russia Row and Trump Street. Not only do these exist side by side, but Russia Row flows directly into Trump Street. From our twenty-first century perspective this juxtaposition seems to be loaded with significance. Anyone of a conspiracy-minded disposition would be forgiven for thinking that perhaps the future was preordained by the seventeenth-century city planners. In reality, of course, the street names have nothing to do with the 45th President of the United States or the controversies over his ties with Russia. Trump Street, which used to be known as Trumpadere Street, is named after the trumpet makers who worked there, while Russia Row used to be the site of the offices of the Muscovy Trading Company.

While the significance of these two names might be little more than a red herring, the language that's displayed all around us in public spaces – the street signs, posters, adverts and graffiti – is, for the most part, laden with meaning, and can give a very clear picture about the society and culture we're living in. Indeed, in some cases, as we've seen recently, this language becomes a battleground for the values we wish to present as a community.

Covid – Signs in Windows

Walking along the streets of towns and cities up and down the UK in the summer of 2020, for example, you could see signs taped up in the windows of houses everywhere. There were pictures of rainbows made by children, hand-written

notes thanking local service workers, posters declaring that Black Lives Matter. In some windows you saw football jerseys: Marcus Rashford's Manchester United shirt or Colin Kaepernick's San Francisco 49ers shirt. In others, people had propped up teddy bears on the windowsill. For a few months, the exteriors of residential streets everywhere became an outdoor art gallery.

You don't usually see people displaying signs in their windows to this extent outside election season. And even then, there's a very different look and feel to the signs, which are usually mass-produced, professionally designed and advertising a particular candidate or party. But in the midst of the Covid lockdown, with the whole population stuck close to home, people needed to find alternative ways of

expressing their feelings – especially when lockdown then coincided with a wave of political protest. Converting the fronts of their homes into impromptu public billboards became one such alternative for expression.

Linguistic Landscape Research

Even without a pandemic reshaping society the public landscape is always full of written language. Most of this is so much a normal part of the environment that we rarely think a great deal about it, or even notice it. The study of this is known as **linguistic landscape research** and is an excellent way of understanding the nature and concerns of society. For instance, examining the linguistic landscape of a city neighbourhood can tell us a great deal about the multilingual make-up of the community that lives there. The different languages that signs and adverts are written in will indicate who they're addressed to, and thus who lives and works in that neighbourhood. In Chinatown, for example, not only are the names of restaurants written in both Chinese characters and the Roman alphabet, but street notices about parking restrictions are as well. You're also likely to see handwritten adverts in shop windows written solely in Chinese script, which are probably addressed to recent immigrants looking for work. In other words, Chinese isn't just an ornamental feature of the environment, but is considered by both other residents and by the council as a working language for the community.



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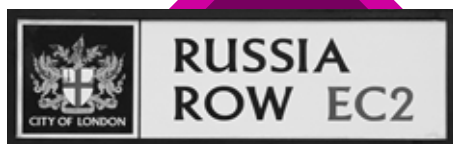


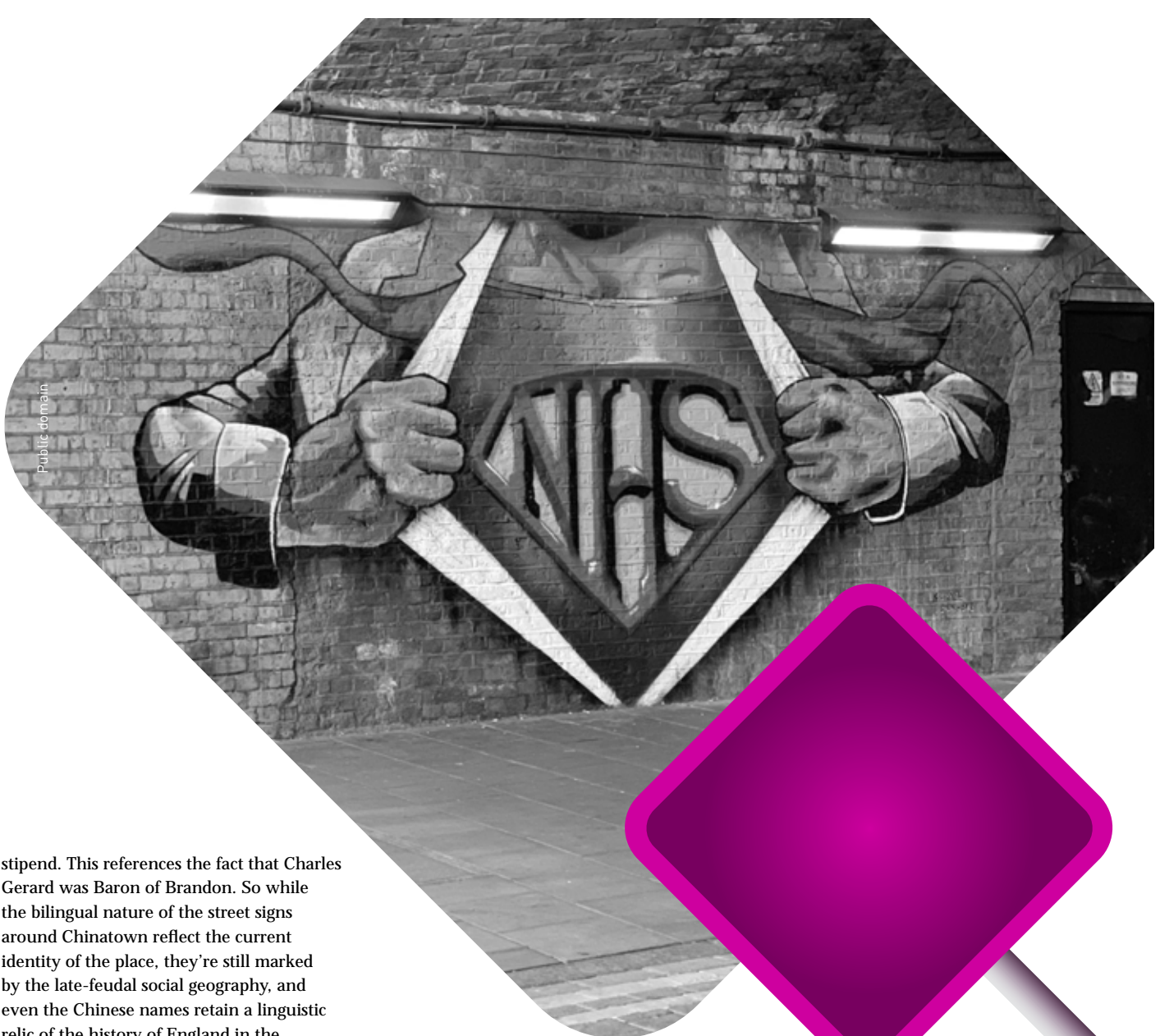
Telling us How to Behave

The linguistic landscape is also an essential part of the way society itself is organised. Many of the signs set up around a place tell us how we're supposed to behave in the public sphere. During the Covid pandemic markings sprang up on the pavement telling people where to stand when queuing, or to make sure they always kept two metres apart. Again though, this isn't just a feature of life in a pandemic: in every public space at any time there will be innumerable signs telling us which way to drive, where to walk or not to walk, where to throw away our rubbish and so on. In this respect, the linguistic landscape acts as a book of regulations for our actions.

What's Revealed about the History

Then there's what the landscape reveals about the history of a place. In London's Chinatown, for instance, the streets have dual English and Chinese names. The English names tend to refer to the aristocratic history of the land which the streets were originally built on (as do many street names in the UK). Leicester Square, for example, is named because the 2nd Earl of Leicester, Robert Sidney, had a house on that site in the seventeenth century. Gerrard Street, the main thoroughfare in Chinatown, is named after the military leader Charles Gerard, who used the area as a training ground for troops. Perhaps surprisingly, the Chinese names of the streets also pick up on this history. The Chinese name for Gerrard Street is 爵禄街 (*jeuk luk gaaí*), a shortened form of 官爵和俸禄, which refers to a rank of nobility and its salary, i.e. a baron's





stipend. This references the fact that Charles Gerard was Baron of Brandon. So while the bilingual nature of the street signs around Chinatown reflect the current identity of the place, they're still marked by the late-feudal social geography, and even the Chinese names retain a linguistic relic of the history of England in the seventeenth century.

Contesting Names and Artefacts

Over the last few years we've seen how the history referenced in street names can, in some instances, be very controversial. In Glasgow in the summer of 2020, for example, activists put up alternative signs for a number of streets which had originally been named after slave trade owners. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, there was a great deal of public reflection about Britain's colonial past, and how this was memorialised around the country. So Glasgow's Cochrane Street, for instance, named after the eighteenth-century merchant and slave trader Andrew Cochrane, was renamed Sheku Bayoh Street after the man who was killed in police custody in 2015.

The significance and impact of the linguistic landscape extends to artefacts which aren't

strictly 'linguistic', but which also have symbolic meaning in communicating ideas. So just as there have been controversies about the names of certain streets, there have been even greater disputes about public statues commemorating historical figures whose legacies clash with the values of modern society. In responding to one such controversy in the spring of 2020, the prime minister Boris Johnson said that

Frankly I think what people need to do is focus less on the symbols of discrimination... what I want to focus on is the substance of the issue.

But the point the prime minister misses here is that often the symbols and the substance are one and the same, and that the linguistic landscape plays a fundamental role not just in reflecting the environment we live in, but actually creating it.

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Remembering Hecuba

Expectations of Vengeance in *Hamlet*

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Sophie Raudnitz reveals how very important Euripedes' character Hecuba is to the whole idea of Shakespeare's play, giving us a model of vengeance that Shakespeare sabotages, ironically adopting a very Euripidean move in doing so.

When the ghost of Hamlet's father charges Hamlet to 'Remember me!' and in so doing, avenge his murder, he not only brings a sense of obligation to his son but also brings a set of expectations to the theatre. Hamlet's story was well known in Elizabethan England: Belleforest's translation of Saxo's *Danorum Regum heroumque Historiae* had already given rise to a play called *Hamlet* – its authorship unknown – and had inspired the most celebrated play of the age, Thomas Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy*. In these plays, as in the wealth of other revenge plays in performance at the time, the figure of the grieving protagonist, inspired by a supernatural agent to avenge an unnatural act, was a given. So, the ghost's injunction

to Hamlet would immediately have triggered the memory of such plays and elicited a set of suppositions about the form the play would take.

Haunted by Traumatic Memories

Memory itself could be described as a kind of haunting: just as a ghost brings the past, physically, into the present, so memory brings the past into the present moment, often with a destabilising effect on the rememberer. This is particularly the case with a traumatic memory such as is found in grief, which can be all-consuming. Hamlet's response to the ghost's injunction at first, appears to bear this out. In the soliloquy which follows it, Hamlet says that he will

from the table of my memory
... wipe away all trivial fond records
so that

thy commandment all alone shall live
Within the book and volume of my brain.

Hamlet, 1.5.98-103

In this way, he uses the metaphor of a tablet or slate to represent his memory, saying that he will 'wipe' everything from it except the memory of his father and his purpose of revenge. (For the origins of this image, see Plato's *Theatetus*, 191c-d.)

A Theatrical Archetype of Vengeance

The theatrical archetype for this figure of vengeful grief was, at the time, Hecuba, the dispossessed queen of Troy, whose husband and many children were slaughtered by the Greeks. She would have been well known to audiences, not only through Virgil, Ovid and Seneca, but through early Greek sources and their adaptations. The play *Hecuba* by Euripides, in which she exacts righteous revenge on the man who killed her son by blinding him and killing his children, was the most printed, translated and performed ancient Greek play of the period and was adapted many times too. In Norton and Sackville's *Gorboduc* – another Elizabethan revenge tragedy, thought to be one of Shakespeare's sources for *Hamlet*, she is described as

the wofullest wretch
That euer liued

3.1.14-15¹

In Euripides' play, Hecuba mobilises her grief, using it as a potent political force: her laments elicit sympathy from those who hear them and through this, she is able to convince them, that her vengeance is not personal and vindictive, but a form of retributive justice. Her 'combination of passionate grief and triumphant revenge' made her the definitive tragic figure of

Ed Stoppard as Hamlet, Amita Dobson as Gertrude in *Hamlet*, directed by Stephen Unwin. The English Touring Company. Production 2005. Credit: Geraint Lewis / Alamy Stock Photo

the era.² The audience would, therefore, have recognised, that when Hamlet wipes his memory of all but his grief and his vengeance, he is allying himself with iconic tragic revengers like Hecuba.

Hamlet – Straying from Expectations

It is when Hamlet feels that he is straying from his vengeful purpose that his contrast to ancient Greek tragic heroism, and Hecuba in particular, is made explicit. In 2.2, the speech the player performs at Hamlet's request focuses first on Pyrrhus, son of Achilles, who wreaks decisive vengeance on the Trojans for the death of his father. It then turns (at Hamlet's call) to Hecuba and this section elicits such strong emotion, even in the player himself, that Polonius pleads with him to stop. In the speech, the player says that those who had seen her

with tongue in venom steeped
'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounced

and that her 'clamour' of grief

Would have made milch the burning eyes of heaven

– would have caused the stars to weep milky tears – and would have induced 'passion', or violent sorrow, even in the gods (*Hamlet*, 2.2.468-475).

Hamlet's soliloquy which follows is one of the most moving of the play, but his lament is not, like Hecuba's, for his murdered loved one, but rather for his own inability to express and mobilise his grief as Hecuba does and to translate it into vengeful action. He compares himself both to Hecuba and to the player, saying that had the player his own 'cue for passion', his words would be so potent that he would not only flood the stage with his own grief but would madden, 'appal', 'confound' and 'amaze' those who heard him, surpassing even the affective power of Hecuba. Therefore, although he sees his motivation as even stronger than Hecuba's, he 'can say nothing' and in the fact that he is 'unpregnant', he also cannot

act on his grief. (*Hamlet*, 2.2.511-40. See also note on 'unpregnant' where pregnant' means quick or ready to act.) In this way, Hamlet measures himself against Hecuba and finds himself wanting.

Hamlet in A World 'Out of Joint'

This is borne out in the dénouement of the play, as the chief difference between Hamlet and its sources is the 'accidental' nature of Hamlet's eventual revenge. The revengers before him, however much they may, like Kyd's Hieronimo, have agonised over the morality of their vengeance, all committed themselves to their actions and at the last, acted decisively. Hamlet, meanwhile,

spends almost the entire play spectacularly failing to keep his oath' and when he does, finally, kill Claudio, it is 'suddenly, without forethought
Kiernan Ryan, 'Hamlet and Revenge', from *Discovering Literature: Shakespeare and the Renaissance*, British Library *Discovering Literature*

Much of the body of criticism on *Hamlet* has sought to account for this, but for me, Kiernan Ryan does so most convincingly. According to his reading, psychological and religious explanations for Hamlet's delaying tactics do not account for those moments when he does act decisively, such as when he kills Polonius. Rather,

Hamlet's tormented resistance to performing the role of revenger expresses a justified rejection of a whole way of life, whose corruption, injustice and inhumanity he ... rightly finds intolerable.

For Ryan, it is 'the time' that is 'out of joint', not Hamlet and for this reason, Shakespeare creates

a tragic protagonist who refuses ... to play the stock role in which he's been miscast by the world he happens to inhabit.

Kiernan Ryan, 'Hamlet and Revenge'

There is no satisfaction for the audience in Hamlet's revenge because Claudius is merely a product of his time and his death cannot set this right. Meanwhile, in Hamlet's death, we see the potential for an ideal vision or version of the world extinguished by the corruption that dominates.

A Critique of the Whole Genre?

What is most interesting for me, though, is Ryan's comment that in creating Hamlet,

Shakespeare deliberately sabotages the whole genre of revenge tragedy

in order to cast light on the corruption of the age. This is, in itself, a typically Euripidean move. What Shakespeare does in *Hamlet* is



Ed Stoppard as Hamlet, Alice Patten as Ophelia in *Hamlet*, directed by Stephen Unwin, The English Touring Company Production 2005 Credit: Geraint Lewis / Alamy Stock Photo

what Euripides is known for in Greek tragedy: although neither can change the outcome of their plot – it is, after all, laid down in numerous sources – they stretch it almost to breaking point. In Euripides' *Electra*, for example (another revenge tragedy), the hero, Orestes, kills his adulterous mother and her lover, who had previously killed his father. In other versions of this story, Orestes was vindicated in his revenge because he acted according to the god, Apollo's, wishes. In the Euripidean story, however, we are told that Apollo's oracles gave bad advice! (Euripides, *Electra*, l. 1245) In the *Hecuba*, though we do not know how far Euripides strayed from earlier sources, what is remarkable is that the gods are notably absent at the end of the play, abandoning the mortals to their barbarism and forcing the audience to judge for themselves. While *Hecuba* may have seemed like the gold standard of tragic revengers, Euripides' play was horrifying for the audience precisely because their sympathy for her grief leads them to be complicit in her atrocity against her enemy and his innocent children. So too with *Hamlet*, Shakespeare 'sabotages' the revenge tragedy genre to draw attention to the outrage of what the ghost asks of Hamlet and to the horror of an age which, as Ryan argues, holds such barbaric values dear.

If one also considers, as Emma Smith has, the role of the players and 'The Murder of Gonzago' as representing a past theatrical age with its revenge plot and its stilted language, displaying a nostalgia for a bygone age, we might begin to see a light emerging in the darkness. (Emma Smith, 'Hamlet' from *Approaching Shakespeare*. <https://www.podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/approaching-shakespeare>) Hamlet's unwillingness to play a stock character, to live up to the expectations of the ghost and the audience, reflects Shakespeare's own unwillingness to rehash a play which had already found its apogee for the age in *The Spanish Tragedy*. Paradoxically then, in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses the memory of Euripidean tragedy to usher in a new form of tragedy, freed from the constraints imposed by the ghost of *Hecuba*.

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1. This quotation and a discussion of why *Hecuba* was so popular at the time in Tanya Pollard, 'What's *Hecuba* to Shakespeare?' in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol 65, No. 4 (Cambridge University press, Winter 2012), pp. 1065-66. Accessed on 26/07/2020 at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/669345>

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Conversations with Corinne

Here is another in the series of 'Leonie and Corinne' articles, in which Gillian Thompson draws on linguistic research to reflect on aspects of her granddaughters' language development. The video clips and transcripts referred to are available on the *emagazine* website's home page.

I have been recording my two granddaughters, Leonie and Corinne, since the eldest, Leonie, was two years old. Several articles analysing their speech features have appeared in *emag* (issues 74, 79, 83 and 86), with transcripts and videos of their conversation available on the *emag* website.

An Apparent Time Study

When linguists are researching child language, they have two options. They can track a child's speech longitudinally, known as a **real time study**. The advantage is they can see how that particular child develops speech over time, so the study is accurate and authentic. However, it is very time-consuming, and to wait for anything up to five years before you have a full set of data can be frustrating. It certainly isn't feasible for A Level students! Another option is what is called an **apparent time study**. That is when you monitor the speech of children of different ages, giving the impression of how language develops. Leonie and Corinne are perfect for this as they are sisters, thus minimising the extra linguistic variables of gender, ethnicity, socio-economic background and geographical area (all aspects which could have produced unreliable comparisons). My first recording of Leonie was taken when she was two years and nine months old. At three years two months, Corinne is five months older. By comparing the two transcripts we can gain a sense of

how a child's language can change over a five-month period.

Corinne has just turned three. During the last year, her speech has really taken off. Twelve months ago, most of her utterances were two or three words long; now they are regularly six-eight words long (known as the **mean length of utterance**). Corinne currently attends pre-school three mornings a week so her social circle has widened: now her speech is influenced by her peers and teachers as well as by her family.

Normally, a cameraman films the girls at the college where I work. Due to lockdown, the two videos of Corinne were filmed by her parents, which might explain why she is relaxed in front of the camera. As a result, there is less of an issue with **Observer's Paradox** a feature noted by William Labov, the American sociolinguist. Labov pointed out that we need to gather authentic data in order for our research to be fully representative but can only do so through observation. Being observed makes us self-conscious and less inclined to speak naturally, hence the paradox. Fortunately, this did not affect Corinne and so my data is reliable.

Like most children, Corinne has progressed across different areas of language acquisition: grammar, phonology, semantics and lexis.

Grammar

Now that Corinne's sentences are longer, she has had to acquire grammatical structures. Social Psychologist Roger Brown found that children acquire these structures in stages. At 38 months old, we would expect Corinne to be at stage four of Brown's developmental chart (often known as **Brown's List**). We would expect her to know the articles and indeed Corinne says, 'a blue thing' (video two transcript, line 91) and 'the lid' (video two transcript, line 46). We would also expect her to know the regular present tense and there is plenty of evidence of this too ('I can', 'I've got'). She is already proficient in plurals (stage two), labelling 'pink ones' (video two transcript line 79). An interesting sign that Corinne understands plural formation can be found when I conducted the **Wug Test**.

Psychologist Jean Berko devised this test back in 1958, to test children's capacity to apply grammar rules. She drew a fictitious character called a wug and showed it to a child. Then she drew another one and asked the child to describe the pair. Children, who had never heard adults say wug (as they don't exist!) were able to apply the plural rule: wugs, thus suggesting they have an implicit knowledge of the way words are formed. Corinne correctly applied the 's' ending to a picture of two wugs (video one transcript line 60) and also created a plural for another fictitious creature the gutch (video one transcript line 67). However, when asked to form the past tense of a

made-up verb 'spow' she was unable to do so (video one transcript line 82) suggesting she hasn't yet mastered the capacity to form simple past tenses, another feature of level four of Brown's List.

Semantics

Like most of us, Corinne has a larger passive vocabulary (words she understands but doesn't yet use) than an active one. This means she understands more than she can say. For example, in video one (line 25) I ask her: 'And what flavour cake is that?' and she replies 'It dus...dust.. milla' (It's just vanilla). She doesn't use the noun 'flavour' herself but her answer clearly demonstrates she understands its meaning.

An interesting feature occurs on lines 42 to 50 of video two. In our role-play, Corinne is pretending to make ice-creams for me, and hands me a plastic lolly. Before I can 'eat' it however, she says 'I can just open the lid.' But ice-creams don't have lids (unless they're in tubs, which this one isn't) so what does she mean? It is clear from her actions that she is miming taking the wrapper off the ice-cream. She doesn't know the noun 'wrapper' so improvises – hence her use of 'lid.' This is known as **overextension**. Corinne is still developing and refining her mental lexicon so her understanding of word meanings isn't yet precise. However, she knows that a lid is a kind of covering – as is a wrapper – and she knows that her use of the word, together with the mime, will communicate the meaning clearly enough. And indeed it does, as I reply, 'You have to take the paper off... the wrapping off, do you?' modelling the standard form back to her so she might be able to use it appropriately in future.

Phonology

At only just three, Corinne's pronunciation of sounds is still developing. There are some sounds she struggles to make – but she has an easy solution for that. If she can't pronounce one sound, she just substitutes another. So she says 'glue' for 'blue' (video two transcript line 66), 'dat' for 'that' (video one transcript line 32) and 'dust' for 'just.' (video one transcript line 26). She also reduces words of more than one syllable, often focussing on the stressed syllables – e.g. the two syllabled 'milla' for the three syllabled 'vanilla' (video one transcript line 26) which is also an example of **consonant substitution** where she swaps an 'm' for a 'v.' At the moment, the most important thing for Corinne is to communicate, and it

is clear from my reactions that I understand what she is saying.

The Functions of Speech

Corinne is beginning to have an understanding of the function of language.

Linguist Michael Halliday identified seven functions of speech: **instrumental** (fulfilling a need); **regulatory** (influencing the behaviour of others); **interactional** (developing social relationships); **personal** (conveying opinions); **representational** (conveying facts); **imaginative** (creating imaginary worlds) and **heuristic** (learning about the environment). Corinne's speech suggests she can fulfil the instrumental category (she finds me a blue object in reply to my request in line 85 of the video two transcript). She also attempts to influence my behaviour (regulatory) when she says, 'Taste it like mine' (video two transcript line 93). She demonstrates a clear understanding of the representational function of language by answering my questions on colours and flavours (video one transcript lines 25 to 47 and video two transcript lines 50-61). Perhaps the most interesting aspects of the transcripts, however, is when Corinne shows she can fulfil the imaginative function of language. There is a lovely sequence in transcript two (lines 29-39) where she is making me a 'meal', clearly lost in her own world of make-believe which has her singing and 'cooking.' As time goes on, Corinne will no doubt master all the functions of language through exploration of its enormous capacity and range.

Child Directed Speech

A major way in which Corinne will extend her linguistic capacity is through **Child Directed Speech**. In 1983 Jerome Bruner suggested there is a **Language Acquisition Support System** (LASS) which provides a framework of 'scaffolding' by which adults enable children to learn. Often we do this instinctively. At various points in the recording, I call myself 'Grandma' (e.g. video two transcript line 9). This avoids confusion, as personal pronouns such as 'I' are less easy for children to relate to. I also use a lot of tag questions, such as isn't it? (video two transcript line 74) and aren't you? (video one transcript line 7), inviting Corinne to give a response. My language is simple, with plenty of pauses. I use concrete nouns and basic adjectives, focussing on things Corinne can see, such as the pretend food items and their colours.





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When Corinne makes 'mistakes', I don't tell her she's wrong, which might undermine her confidence and inhibit her from experimenting in future. For example, in the video one transcript, Corinne says, 'It dus... dust milla' (line 26) I reply, 'It's just vanilla, is it?' Here I just model the standard form back to her. Corinne understands what I am saying (replying 'yeah' in line 27) although she cannot yet replicate my sounds.

Abstract Concepts

In the 1960's and 70's, a psychologist called Walter Mischel conducted what he called the **delayed gratification** experiment where children were offered a choice between one small reward provided straight away or two small rewards if they waited for a short period. When I tried this with Corinne (lines 83 to 109 of the video one transcript) she immediately goes for the instant reward ('I'm getting it.') She clearly wasn't prepared to risk waiting! This tells us something about her understanding of

time: she has no set idea of what 'later' feels like. It could be forever! Her concept of time is still hazy, also evidenced when she is unable to form the past tense earlier (line 81). At six years old, Corinne's elder sister Leonie is much more aware of time and can write and refer to events in the past. This suggests that Corinne will acquire a better understanding of this abstract concept over the next three years.

A lot has happened since I last recorded Corinne chatting – she has a larger vocabulary, can form longer utterances and is acquiring a knowledge of grammar. Hopefully I'll be back next year to report on the changes over her fourth year.

Gillian Thompson teaches English part-time at Godalming College. Her first novel *The Oceans Between Us* was published by Headline in 2019 and her second *The Child on Platform One* in March 2020. She blogs about writing on her website wordkindling.co.uk.

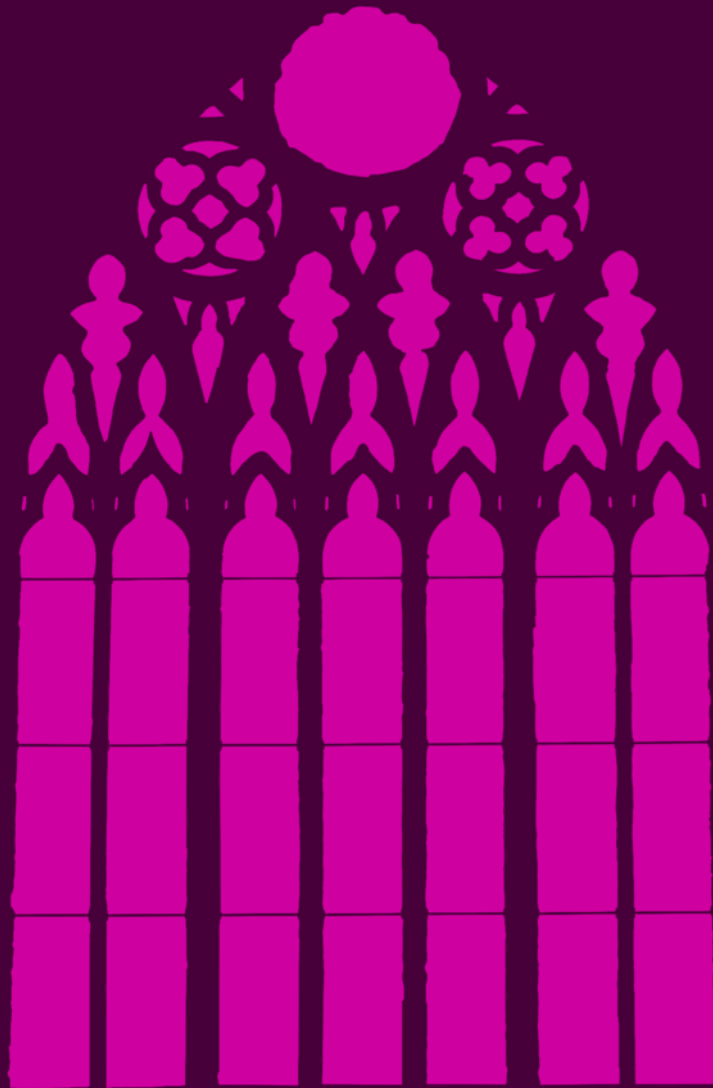
+ On the open site

- Transcript and video to accompany this article is available on the open pages of the *emagazine* site.



ROMANTIC MUTABILITY

Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey'



Fiona Macdonald's article examines the complexities of Wordsworth's meditations in this much-loved poem, arguing that it shows both the Romantics' enthusiasm for change and a deep sense of loss in recognising the transience of experience.

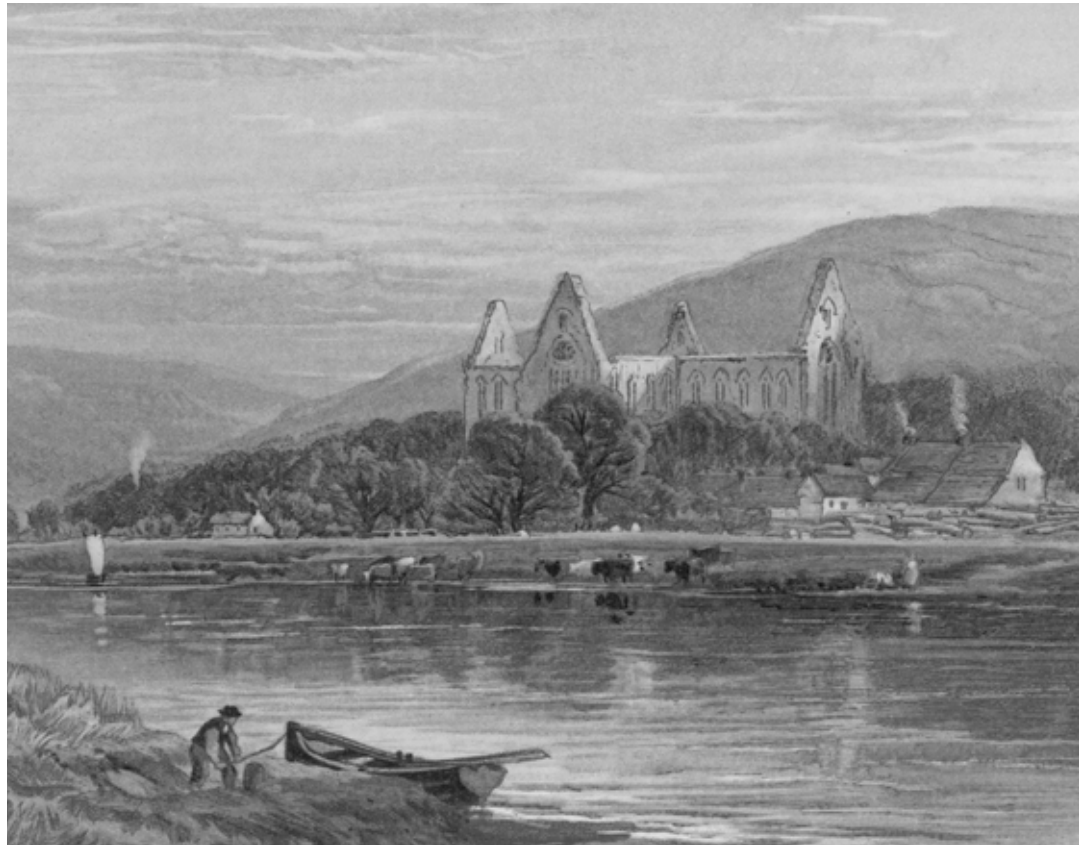


When Monty Don read Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed Above Tintern Abbey' at the Hay Literary Festival 2020, during a global pandemic and nationwide lockdown, this most well-known of Romantic poets seemed to offer comfort and stability in an anxiously shifting world. Yet perhaps not all readers would agree that Wordsworth's meditations in this poem achieve consolation. In fact careful attention to 'Tintern Abbey' reveals that Wordsworth was troubled by change and shared with other Romantic writers a melancholic sense of what they, and we, might call 'mutability'.

Mixed Feelings about Change

The world of the 1790s in which Wordsworth was writing was a world in frightening flux. The French Revolution of 1789 led to a period of unpredictable, extreme events: the Revolution's bloody aftermath, the declaration of war with France, and in England ongoing radical agitation, often aggressively repressed, throughout the 1790s. Wordsworth was an active participant in this spirit of re-evaluation. He mingled with revolutionaries in France and warmed to the Jacobin cause. His poem 'Salisbury

Plain' and his 'Letter to the Bishop Llandaff' affirmed his republican ideals. Echoing this political turbulence, he positioned the 1798 volume *Lyrical Ballads* in which 'Tintern Abbey' first appeared as an 'experiment' which would challenge poetic tradition: a literary revolution. Yet if, like those 'rebels' acknowledged by Marilyn Butler in her ground-breaking study *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries* (1981), Wordsworth courted some kinds of specific historical change, 'Tintern Abbey' also suggests a more general sadness at the alterations wrought by time and the experience of loss.



Tintern Abbey in Wales, 1888, Alamy

A Place of Renewal

At first sight, of course, this is a poem of restoration. Wordsworth revisits the banks of the River Wye in 1798, having made his first visit five years previously, and he begins with the delight of returning to this place 'once again', offering a joyful catalogue of the many 'beauteous forms' of the Wye valley, its cliffs, sycamores, groves, copses and hedgerows. It becomes apparent that Wordsworth owes to this place many kinds of personal invigoration: physical vitality ('sensations sweet/Felt in the blood'), emotional awakening ('...and felt along the heart'), mental revival ('passing even into my purer mind/With tranquil restoration') and moral strengthening ('influence/On that best portion of a good man's life'). He further claims that this natural scene has been the source of a far more extraordinary 'gift', a 'blessed mood' in which the 'mystery' of the world is lightened and he becomes a 'living soul', able to 'see into the life of things'. With excitement and gratitude, and in a gesture often taken to define the 'Romantic', Wordsworth goes beyond mere admiration of the 'picturesque' qualities of place to identify this natural landscape as the very source of his poetic power: the poem combines fond reunion in a familiar locality

with a stirring statement of inspiration. As Fiona Stafford puts it,

physical revisiting is a kind of rebirth, enabling divine connection and poetic renewal.

Fleeting Replenishment for the Soul?

Yet Wordsworth also makes it clear that he has had to live away from this place and without such a strong sense of blessing. His Romantically 'sublime' moment of insight is framed on one side by the 'lonely rooms' of the noisy city, and on the other by the 'darkness' and 'the many shapes/Of joyless daylight' in that 'fretful stir [...] and fever of the world'. In other words, the power of the inspiration is momentary and fleeting, thus sharing in that quality of 'mutability' so important to Romantic writers. Moreover, very close and subtle reading of the poem suggests an even greater complexity to Wordsworth's enthusiastic claim for nature's inspiration. Is he expressing replenishment in the real presence of the Wye, now in 1798, or sharing the memory of recalling that place in its 'absence', during those lonely years in the city? So, is his 'gift' of vision an unquestionable and convincing certainty, or, as he himself hints, a 'belief' that may yet be 'vain', an imagined comfort sought in times of lack? In this sense too Wordsworth's ecstasy is 'mutable'.

In Memory Only

Thus Wordsworth's return to the Wye, if it is to some extent a 'renewal' of nature's power to awaken his humanity and imagination, is also a spur to reflect on change, and, more subtly, on the elliptical phantasms of memory and the mind. In fact, the poem moves towards a very sobering sense of time's passing as Wordsworth goes on to reflect that he has 'changed' from 'what he was'. He is no longer the wild and energised young boy who ran among the mountains satisfying his 'appetite' with the immensity of the natural world, its 'cataract', 'tall rock', and 'deep and gloomy wood'. He has lost the 'aching joys' and 'dizzy raptures' of youth. He has had to learn the 'sad music of humanity'. No longer fulfilled merely by what the 'eye' can offer, he has sought for some 'remoter charm/By thought supplied'. So the passage to adulthood has involved a taming of his appetite, an awareness of suffering and what we might call a greater 'inwardness' – he has lived more in his mind and imagination. In all, 'chastened' and 'subdued', he has been tempered, in the sense that time has altered him.

Continuity Tempered by Loss

Consciously, determinedly hopeful, in these changes Wordsworth endeavours to affirm

spiritual growth. He senses something 'far more deeply interfused' than the pleasures of his youth, and is captivated by a 'presence' that, because it 'rolls through all things', both the natural world and the 'mind of man', keeps him connected to physical reality despite his greater inwardness. He also claims his identity is continuous: he is 'still/A lover of the meadows and the woods'.

And he glorifies all this second 'sense sublime' as 'abundant recompense'. But this unity and continuity are proclaimed in the face of what he nonetheless names as 'loss'. 'Recompense' is after all not restitution, and sadness, the possibility of 'decay[ed]' spirits, remains folded within this poem's celebration in spite of Wordsworth's refusal to 'mourn'.

Dorothy – A Stable Constant

In the final section of the poem Wordsworth addresses Dorothy, longing that he may 'yet a little while/[...] behold in [her] what [he] once was'. His close relationship with his sister has aroused prurient speculation and his tendency to see her as a mirror of himself has provoked irritation. But Dorothy actually plays a crucial role in the poem's exploration of change, in that she embodies familiarity: this is a clinging utterance, desperate for constancy. Similarly, using rather spectral language that reminds us that reflection, and especially memory, is a flickering drama, Wordsworth sees in her eyes the 'gleams/Of past existence': she connects him to his history. Yet even as he fixes on Dorothy's stabilising presence, he acknowledges the irreversible current of a human life. He knows that even she will be changed by the 'years of this our life'. His thoughts spin dizzily from retrospect to prospect, as he anticipates how, like him, she will find her 'wild ecstasies [...] matured/into a sober pleasure' and will encounter 'solitude', 'fear', 'pain', and 'grief'. Here he juxtaposes the affirmation of Dorothy as a constant figure with the melancholy ripple of time's onward movement, reiterating the changes noted in his own life course. As Paul de Man has written, Wordsworth's poetry takes place 'within the knowledge of [...] transience'.

Preoccupied by Time and Change

Romantic writing has often been derided as self-centred. In 1819 Keats rather sneeringly coined the phrase 'the wordsworthian or egotistical sublime', fuelling Jerome McGann's much later accusation that Romantic writers assert 'the independence of the creative imagination' without

concern for the 'vicissitudes of history'. Is 'Tintern Abbey' 'egotistical'? Is Wordsworth unaware of 'history'? Some would argue that the poem is blind to the precise socio-economic context of the Wye Valley, but if it lacks this highly specific historical consciousness 'Tintern Abbey' is certainly deeply concerned with time and, particularly, as we have seen, with that very Romantic concept of 'mutability'. The 'blessed mood' is precarious; memory can be flimsy and mental processes hauntingly opaque; the self is always changing. This sensitivity to the flux at the heart of things reaches back to the early eighteenth-century elegies of writers like Gray and Cowper. And it was taken up again by P. B. Shelley, whose 1816 poem 'Mutability' found its way into Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) as a comment on Victor's growing sense of evanescence following his fall from the 'summit of [his] desires'. Perhaps it is consoling, in a global pandemic, to assert with Shelley that 'nought may endure but mutability'. On the other hand, perhaps it isn't!

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BRICK LANE

Clothes as Context and Metaphor

In Monica Ali's novel, set in the East End of London, clothes are not only a key part of the context of a community immersed in the textile industry but also a major signifier of changing attitudes and identities for the characters. So argues A Level teacher, Anna Hughes. (In the article that follows Sadia Habib explores the representation of Muslims in novels and other texts. If you're studying *Brick Lane*, you may want to reflect on your views on Ali's novel in the light of her piece.)

BRICK LANE E.I.

ব্রিক লেন



Tannishtha Chatterjee in *Brick Lane*, directed by Sarah Gavron (2007) / Credit: © Film 4 – Ruby Films

Brick Lane, just east of the City of London, is so-called because, according to Daniel Defoe in his 1724 *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* it was

a deep dirty road, frequented by carts fetching bricks that way into White-Chapel from Brick-Kilns in those fields, and had its name on that account.

Spitalfields, around *Brick Lane*, was already associated with immigrants in Defoe's time: his novel *Roxana* (also 1724) tells the story of the daughter of French refugees

who fled for their Religion about the year 1683, when the Protestants were Banish'd from France.

According to *Roxana*, the eponymous protagonist, the French protestants

fell readily into Business, being by the charitable Assistance of the People in London, encourag'd to Work in their Manufactures, in Spittle-Fields.

The principal 'Manufacture' was silk-weaving and the area is still associated with immigration and textile production.

The Stories of East End Immigrants

East London is much mythologised, both in sympathetic explorations of immigrant experience and by writers using it as a place of encounter with a threatening, foreign other (see Conan Doyle's short story 'The Man with the Twisted Lip'). There is also a substantial body of popular non-fiction writing about East London – books about its history sell – as well as television and films with East End settings: Georgia

Brown's 1968 BBC documentary *One Pair of Eyes* is very watchable and captures the moment when Spitalfields started to change from a predominantly Jewish area (populated by immigrants who came from Eastern Europe in the 1900s and their descendants) to being the heart of London's Bangladeshi community. Brown interviews Mr Mitzinmahan who describes arriving in London alone, finding work as a tailor in East London and then going on to work in Saville Row. Emanuel Litvinoff's *Journey Through a Small Planet*, an autobiography set around Brick Lane and Bethnal Green Road in the first half of the twentieth century, captures the texture of everyday Jewish life, with the clothing production always in the background. Litvinoff remarks that he once recognised an actor

from the elegant way he smoked his cigarette [...] but] otherwise he looked no different from a tailor – as though being ordinary meant being a tailor.

The title of Ali's 2003 novel *Brick Lane* therefore draws attention to its place in a developed tradition and Ali makes brilliantly playful use of cockney tropes. Mrs Islam's sons (whom she uses to enforce her extortion) echo the Kray twins but fail to make the grade: when they finally carry out their violent threats the scene descends into slapstick. Ali's exploration of the textile industry and the power of clothes combines a well-documented aspect of East

London immigrant experience with subtle layers of meaning.

Nanzeen's Early Experience of London

Nanzeen arrives from Bangladesh unable to speak English, so she interprets Londoners through their clothing and bodily ornaments. She is fascinated by the tattoos on a woman living on the estate. When she daringly walks into the City of London, Nanzeen notices how combatively presented the city women are:

The women had strange hair. It puffed up around their heads, pumped like a snake's hood.

Nanzeen has a moment of connection with a woman

in a long red coat [...] with gold buttons that matched the chain on her bag [...] Her clothes were rich. Solid. They were armour, and her ringed fingers weapons.

Nanzeen feels exposed and 'pulled at her cardigan'. The comparison invites us to consider whether character is formed by as well as expressed by clothing – could Nanzeen, dressed differently, become someone else? Nanzeen later reflects that if

she wore trousers and underwear [...] then she would roam the streets fearless and proud.

It is a moot question because *Brick Lane's* story centres on Nanzeen's relationship with destiny. Her Mother, Rupban, claims that by refusing to take her ailing baby Nanzeen to hospital, she left her child to its fate – which



Tannishtha Chatterjee in Brick Lane, directed by Sarah Gavron (2007) / Credit: © Film 4 – Ruby Films

was to live. Rupban's defining characteristic is resignation and initially this also shapes Nanveen. Nanveen, however, becomes less fatalistic and in the book's final chapter she grabs a man praying in the midst of riot, to urge him

'Allah [...] does not want your prayer now. He wants you to save yourself.'

A key moment is when Nanveen considers that 'clothes, not fate, made her life'. At first Nanveen makes clothes to order for Karim, putting in zips and linings but, after taking control of her destiny by refusing both to marry Karim and accompany Chanu back to Bangladesh, she begins to design clothes:

She began to sketch out a design.

Significantly, she is working for 'Fusion Fashion'.

Changing Clothes, Changing Identity

It is interesting, therefore, that though Nanveen

was gripped by the idea that if she changed her clothes her entire life would change as well

and although she does experiment with western clothing in the privacy of her home, she always wears a sari in public. After going for a walk in a city Nanveen dresses in a pair of Chanu's trousers and later she is able to try on the clothes she

makes. The final image of the novel is of Nanveen wearing her sari with ice-skates, remarking that 'you can't skate in a Sari' to which Razia replies (in the final line of the book)

'This is England [...] You can do whatever you like.'

A few pages earlier, Nanveen adjusts her sari so that she can dance to the radio:

She swooped down and tucked her sari up into the band of her underskirt [...] she turned and kicked, turned and kicked.

When she first arrives in England, she is mesmerised by the movement of the ice-skaters on television – which she associates with their strange and sparkling outfits. In the final chapter she finds freedom of movement herself, in dance and in skating but without changing her clothing.

Other characters do change their clothes. Shahanna wears jeans instead of salwar kameez and rejects her parents' culture, while her sister is compliant sartorially and in other ways. Karim's change of clothes is significant:

Karim put on Panjabi-pyjama and a skullcap

(a change echoed in the girls at the meeting who change from wearing hijabs to burkas). The outfit also reveals his exacting personality:

The boots had to be unlaced in just the right way, neither too high nor too low.

The reader and Nanveen are shocked when Karim praises Nanveen for being the 'real thing' because she does not wear either 'short skirts' or 'the scarf or even a burkha' – he sleeps with her because she satisfies his precise tastes. The description of Chanu's tourist outfit, purchased for a day out in London, is very funny but there is also a feeling of affection towards Chanu in his shorts which, with pockets loaded with 'a compass, guidebook, binoculars, bottled water, maps and two types of disposable camera', 'hung at mid-calf'.

Mood Shifts and Subtle Meanings

Clothing reflects the novel's delicately shifting moods: as well as being comical it can evoke pathos and it is associated with guilt and pain. Nanveen's red sari comes to reflect her belief that she is damned as she feels herself 'flaming inside her red sari'. She collapses from nervous exhaustion just after washing clothes in a state of guilt (which she cannot wash away) – and vomits over the clothes she has just washed. And one of the most pitiful images of the book is of Nanveen's mother putting on her best sari to kill herself, watched by Hasina who is wearing a treasured pair of shoes.

Hasina's story parallels Nanveen's and the switches between the sisters' narratives, one working in the textile industry in

London and another working in the textile industry in Bangladesh, reflects Ali's source for the novel:

I am deeply grateful to Naila Kabeer, from whose study of Bangladeshi women garment workers in London and Dhaka (*The Power to Choose*) I drew inspiration.

Both women are exploited – Hasina's letters to Nanzeen shock the reader but so does the derisory pay Nanzeen receives for her work:

If she worked fast, if she didn't make mistakes, she could earn as much as three pounds and fifty pence in one hour.

Clothing is part of the texture of everyday experience and at the same time is loaded with meaning – as with the Union Jack sweatshirt that Razia wears even on a swelteringly hot day. Ali dresses her characters symbolically and links their clothes with the economics of garment production; East London's history and colonialism. Although Chanu's learning is gently mocked, Ali uses his voice to make those links. Chanu tells Nanzeen that

'In the eighteenth century the French Protestants fled here [...] They were silk weavers. They made good.'

He also tells Nanzeen (and the reader) that 'the British cut the fingers off Bengali weavers [...] The Dhaka looms were sacrificed [...] so that the mills of Manchester could be born.'

Food – A Different Metaphor

If you are interested in Ali's treatment of clothing you might consider how novels about immigration use food in a similar way. Like clothing, food is part of everyday life and yet is loaded with meaning – and (like clothes) it gives writers an opportunity to show off their descriptive, sensory and evocative skills. The quest for exotic or cheap food drove British colonial expansion and consolidated colonial identity (look up recipes for Empire Christmas Cake). You might consider how food is described in *Brick Lane*, or *Small Island* by Andrea Levy or *Sour Sweet* by Timothy Mo – or any other novels you have read which seek to capture the everyday experience of immigrants.

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- Stephen Morton: Imaginary Homelands – *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Other Contemporary Novels, *emagazine* 69, September 2015
- George Norton: The Immigrant Experience – Key Concepts and Terms, *emagazine* 74, December 2016
- Jenny Bavidge: Literary Tourism – Place in Literature, *emagazine* 20, April 2003



Tannishtha Chatterjee in *Brick Lane*, directed by Sarah Gavron (2007) / Credit: © Film 4 – Ruby Films

BRICK LANE E.I.

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Recognising

ISLAMOPHOBIA

in Novels and Other Texts

This article by Sadia Habib shows how to begin critically analysing the discourses about Muslims that prevail in the literary, cultural and media texts you might come across. By becoming more critical about language, we can begin to challenge racist and Islamophobic attitudes.

The print media has long been acknowledged as being influential in shaping our thinking and influencing the ways that we view different social groups. Even when we know the power of the media, and despite being critical of what we read in the newspapers and online, it's very easy to succumb to accepting racial and class stereotypes found in news stories. The language used to describe Muslims is often related to the political priorities of the writers, journalists, politicians. A big concern for Muslims who are demonised in the language of the media is the widespread dissemination of fake news about Muslims. As newspapers can now be accessed online and due to the global status of the English

language, the negative representation of Muslims in the British press is circulated throughout the world. Similarly Islamophobic films and television shows are also widely available to a global audience through platforms such as Netflix.

Have you ever stopped to think about the ways in which Muslims and their communities are represented in the media? The ways their cultures and identities are sometimes depicted Islamophobically in the books you read or the films and television shows you watch? As an English teacher who is Muslim, this is a topic I've thought about for a long time. In recent years, I co-founded **The Riz Test** after becoming

frustrated with the tired tropes about Muslims being circulated in cultural texts. The Riz Test seeks to encourage film and television producers, writers and directors, as well as audiences, to think more critically about the representation of Muslims in popular films and television programmes.

Why do people have prejudices and stereotypes about Muslims? Why has it become the norm to ridicule the beliefs and cultures of Muslims? Often ideas about Muslims and their religious and cultural practices are pre-conceived, as many holding these prejudices may have never visited Muslim countries or even interacted with Muslims. So what is Islamophobia?



Zekenia Ebrahimi in *The Kite Runner*, directed by Marc Forster (2007) / Credit: Allstar Picture Library Ltd./Alamy Stock Photo



Is Islamophobia a New Term?

Islamophobia isn't just pulling off a woman's headscarf or attacking an elderly man who is on his way to the mosque: it is not just fear, hatred or ignorance of Muslims and Islam. It's important to recognise that Islamophobia is a structured, deliberate and socially reproduced set of actions that amplify and normalise discrimination towards Muslims. We must keep on examining how Islamophobia pervades our social institutions, and is often visible in the literary, cultural and media texts we take for granted and consume regularly.

Importantly Islamophobia isn't a recent post 9/11 phenomenon. Kumar (2012) highlights that since the time of the Crusades, Muslims were perceived as a threat, and long after that, throughout history, prejudice and discrimination against Muslims has been maintained by those with power. In other words, if we look closely at the language of political and media spokespeople, we can witness how they transmit the language of Islamophobia to scapegoat racialised and classed communities. As Sayyid (2003) explains Islamophobia is rife as

Islam is the 'other' that we cannot embrace, even when we are at our most tolerant, because this other fails to accept the rules of the game – because it sees the game as a western game.

And thus, Muslims continue to be Othered in all walks of life.

Islamophobia was also rife during colonial times. European colonisers who occupied Asian and African lands treated the inhabitants as inferior civilisations. Kumar (2012) explains that the colonisers who used language to describe Muslims as backwards and primitive. Often the pejorative language used was a way of justifying colonial desires to subjugate Muslims. Today, the legacy of colonialism lives on. Muslims continue to be caricatured and demonised as culturally backwards. Therefore, Islamophobia is as present today as it always has been.

Said's Orientalism

If you're interested in anti-racist and anti-colonial thinking, though it's quite a challenging text, I'd recommend that you read Edward Said's seminal text *Orientalism*. Said's book was published in 1978, yet the themes and issues he raises are just as pertinent today. Whether you

like to read classics like Charles Dickens' novels, or more contemporary texts like Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, or if you watch recent television shows like *Bodyguard* or *Informers*, understanding how people of colour are perceived and represented is imperative. To better understand many cultural texts, including literature, films, television programmes, gaming and more, young people who inhabit postcolonial, multicultural and globalised spaces need a foundational knowledge of the historical and political representations of classed and racialised people.

Said's writings help us to understand how and why Muslims are Othered and demonised in popular culture. Said argues this Orientalist lens directed towards Muslims – to make them seem dangerous and a threat to the West – are reflective of agendas and interests of the powerful and the elite. He highlights how the spread of empire meant not just military conquest, but also sought to subjugate the natives through ideological conquest.

Ideological conquest can occur through controlling the arts. Said describes cultural texts such as literature, paintings and music as not depicting mythical people and



The Kite Runner, directed by Marc Forster (2007) / Credit: Moviestore Collection Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo

places, with the East being represented 'as a kind of mysterious place full of secrets and monsters'. Those inhabiting Eastern lands are represented in cultural texts as a homogenous group with a fixed identity, whilst the West is frequently narrated as being progressive and diverse.

Reading *Orientalism* will help you better understand the interplay between literature, history and politics both in the past and the present. It will encourage you to become more critical of the language you encounter in novels and newspapers, in the cinema and on the television. And very importantly, it will help you to fight back against rising racism and Islamophobia.

Islamophobia and Literature

In *Islamophobia and the Novel*, Peter Morey (also influenced by the works of Edward Said) explains that Muslims are not only framed in political and media discourses, but also in literature. Morey argues there are three levels of literary framing – the textual, contextual and the production/reception.

- Writing is framing: it is an act of bringing together and accentuating themes, issues, and characters as well as of dramatising the consequences of the collision of different ideas
- Writing as framing is part of the agenda-led frame governing political, media, and journalistic discourses
- Texts as then placed in the frame governing their production,

reception, and recognition as 'literary'.

When thinking about representation of Muslims in novels then, you might consider the storylines and characters, how the themes reflect wider social discourses and ideologies. When reading Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, or Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, I was very conscious of how writers from Muslim lands themselves fall prey to perpetuating representations of Muslim lives and identities that pander to the 'White Gaze'. What satisfies white readers in the West when reading about Muslims? What themes do they expect to hear about in these often beautifully written books: terrorism and patriarchy. It's a shame that the cultural texts that seem to sell are the ones that give the audiences the stereotypes they seek. I remember reading Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, and while very engaging in terms of characterisation, the experience made me uncomfortable about how the representation of the Iranian men and women would be received by uncritical passive consumers of world literature.

Last year, when I went to see the stage production of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, I was not surprised that the mainly white audience was thoroughly immersed in the stories of female suffering in foreign lands. I overheard an elderly white audience member say

'This is how it is over there. This is the culture of how women are treated.'

When reading *The Kite Runner* (which was gifted to me by a white colleague), though I liked the novel overall and the author's narrative style, I felt uncomfortable about the New Orientalist tropes and themes. The New Orientalist narrative in certain novels makes me worry about what Western audiences are absorbing when they read texts about the East. Even if a brilliantly written book, I cannot get away from that prevailing discourse of West is best. The problems of Islam and Islamic countries are emphasised, while the West is shown as a sanctuary. That age old Orientalist narrative of conflict between the East and the West prevails, with the West as triumphant. No wonder such books and plays are very popular with White readers and audiences.

Donadey and Ahmed-Ghosh's aptly named article, *Why Americans Love Azar Nafisi's Reading Lolita in Tehran*, describes the book's popularity – a best seller in the USA, translated into numerous languages, and one of the most borrowed books in the years after publication. Hamid Dabashi calls out authors who he believes move away from legitimate critique of their nation states by becoming ideological mouthpieces for Western governments – he refers to these authors as 'native intellectuals' and 'informants'.

Geoffrey Nash explains that novelists like Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi and Monica Ali and their works often promote western secularism:

Khalid Abdalla in *The Kite Runner*, 2007 / Credit: AA Film Archive/Alamy Stock Photo



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- Stephen Morton: Imaginary Homelands – *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* and Other Contemporary Novels, *emagazine* 69, September 2015
- George Norton: The Immigrant Experience – Key Concepts and Terms, *emagazine* 74, December 2016
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- Kate Ashdown: Places of Safety or Threat: Afghanistan and America in *The Kite Runner*, *emagazine* 68, April 2015
- Nicolas Tredell: Composed in Clichés? Style in *The Kite Runner*, *emagazine* 87, February 2020
- Pamela Bickley: Post-colonial Novels, Post-colonial Readings, *emagazine* 41, September 2008
- Claire Squires: *White Teeth* – Happy Multicultural Land? *emagazine* 18, December 2002

Islam as a religion is the unwelcome guest at the feast of western secularism.

Next time you read/watch a cultural text about Muslims, do so with a critical eye: what are the ideologies being represented and advocated in the book, show or film?

Morey gives the example of how literary texts about Muslims focus on stereotypes and myths about integration, gender and radicalisation. It's also important to think about the third level of literary framing – investigate the way language is used to market and publicise the novel, as well as the language used in the reception by audiences and reviewers. And again, how this appeals to the White Gaze. How were, for instance, novels written and published in a post 9/11 world and in response to the 9/11 attacks framed: how were they written, in what context and how were they received/produced/publicised? Who were they written for?

These are key critical questions to ask of novels about Muslims and their

communities. When reading novels or watching films containing Muslim characters, even if these texts have been created by Muslims or those from Muslim places/cultures/communities, it is always better to ask the aforementioned critical questions about audience, context, language and reception. It is also worth reading books from diverse Muslim countries to seek out a range of representations of Muslims – such as Elif Shafak's *The Forty Rules of Love* or *The Architect's Apprentice*, Hala Alyan's *Salt Houses*, or Kamila Shamsie's *Salt and Saffron*.

Sadia Habib was an English teacher and completed her PhD in Educational Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London. She co-founded 'The Riz Test' to measure the representation of Muslim characters in films and TV shows. She works on heritage, identity and belonging projects at Manchester Museum and University of Manchester.

Responding to **'Dulce et Decorum Est'**

A Cognitive Grammar Approach

In this article, Marcello Giovanelli introduces Cognitive Grammar, using it as a framework to analyse Wilfred Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. He outlines the key features of Cognitive Grammar before highlighting how the model can be used both to explore the language of the poem and explain some common reader responses to it.

Dulce et Decorum Est

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs,
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Men marched asleep. Many had lost their boots,
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame; all blind;
Drunk with fatigue; deaf even to the hoots
Of gas-shells dropping softly behind.

Gas! GAS! Quick, boys!—An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets just in time,
But someone still was yelling out and stumbling
And flound'ring like a man in fire or lime.—
Dim through the misty panes and thick green light,
As under a green sea, I saw him drowning.

In all my dreams before my helpless sight,
He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning.

If in some smothering dreams, you too could pace
Behind the wagon that we flung him in,
And watch the white eyes writhing in his face,
His hanging face, like a devil's sick of sin;
If you could hear, at every jolt, the blood
Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,
Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud
Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues,—
My friend, you would not tell with such high zest
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est
Pro patria mori.

Wilfred Owen



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What is Cognitive Grammar?

Cognitive Grammar, developed by Ronald Langacker, is one of a more general series of approaches to language that form part of cognitive linguistics. Cognitive Grammar differs from formal grammars which view language as a system with its own set of rules independent of context (e.g. Chomsky's **transformational grammar**). Cognitive Grammar, although interested in structure is more of a functional grammar, viewing language as a set of resources that we draw on according to the contexts in which we talk and write. In functional linguistics (e.g. Halliday's **systemic functional grammar**), language is a tool people use in order to get things done. Cognitive Grammar also has a strong social dimension, emphasising that when we communicate, we are effectively trying to divert our reader's or hearer's attention in some way so that they are able to construct a mental representation of what we are writing or saying. An additional emphasis is on the relationship between cognition

more broadly and our physical basis in the world, known as **embodied cognition**. It's fairly easy to see how the principle of embodiment works in the language we use. For example, we use metaphors by drawing on the physical world to explain abstract ideas in terms of more concrete ones such as in the way that many cultures conceptualise life in terms of a journey: birth is a beginning point; death is an end point; problems are obstacles in the way, and so on.

Construal

In Cognitive Grammar, grammatical forms offer specific ways of packaging ideas and presenting them to a reader or listener. This is known as **construal**. Crucially, different construals are meaningful since they divert attention to a particular way of viewing the world. Let's look at the following sentences which use either the active or passive voice to demonstrate this point.

1. The soldier killed the enemy
2. The enemy was killed by the soldier

3. The enemy was killed

In Sentence 1, the active voice draws attention to the agent (the soldier) who is foregrounded as the subject of the clause. An alternative construal, Sentence 2, downplays this agency by using the passive voice which moves the agent to the end of the clause, and diverts attention away from the soldier to the patient (the enemy) who is killed. The construal in Sentence 3 removes the agent altogether; agentless passive constructions like this single out only part of the overall event and fix attention on the patient, leaving the agent defocused and unknown. Other construals are possible: in Sentence 4, attention moves to the instrument of the killing (a bullet) rather than an agent responsible for firing it (although we infer someone must have been responsible); while in Sentence 5, the use of an intransitive verb 'died' automatically excludes any agency whatsoever.

4. The bullet killed the enemy
5. The enemy died



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Different construals thus offer particular ways of presenting the same scene; each of the five examples discussed above provide templates for highlighting some aspect of meaning: emphasising, downplaying or obscuring agency for an action.

Cognitive Grammar often uses the analogy of the theatre stage to describe construal; attention can be diverted to particular aspects of a scene by placing some elements **on-stage** and leaving others **off-stage** (as seen across sentences 1-5). In the remainder of this article, I'll draw on this analogy as I explore different types of construal. In particular, I'll be looking at:

- **Specificity:** how we focus on a scene either by 'zooming in' on minute detail, or by 'zooming out' to obtain a more general view;
- **Scanning:** how we are invited to mentally track events as they unfold in a narrative;
- **Subjectivity:** the degree to which we position ourselves or others on-stage as part of the scene.

Reading 'Dulce et Decorum Est'

Wilfred Owen is probably the most famous of the First World War soldier-poets and is seen as the archetypal 'trench poet' who highlighted the realities and horrors of war (Owen was killed in France a week before the war ended). The poem is much anthologised, studied at school and often quoted.

I'm going to start my analysis by considering particular reader responses to the poem and then moving on to the text itself to think about how the poem's

language might influence these responses. Students I have taught generally say that they feel a sense of shock in the vivid descriptions of the soldiers at the beginning of the poem, feel drawn into the speaker's recount of the gas attack and dream vision in the middle section, and understand the ways in which the poem positions us as readers to react to the horror in the final section. No-one I have ever discussed this poem with sees it as anything other than an anti-war poem. Students also tend to comment on how close they feel to the action of the poem and how this influences their response. This seems to be a common reading of Owen, both specifically of this poem, and more generally of his work. For example, the academic Eva Zettelmann (2018: 1) argues that

Owen's poetry emulates real-life experience in a convincing three-dimensional fashion. Reading Owen, we feel we know what being a soldier in the First World War was like.

Searching reader comments on the book review website *goodreads* reveals that readers generally find the experience of reading Owen's verse moving due to its realism and sense of closeness; readers feel that they are transported to the action. Here are three examples (my added emphasis):

- Reader 1: 'written in *a very real manner*'
- Reader 2: 'written in such a descriptive manner you feel as if you were the one dying in the trenches'
- Reader 3: 'Owen's description of a gas attack *was so vivid and you can feel the panic*'

https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/6273.The_Collected_Poems_of_Wilfred_Owen?from_search=true&from_srp=true&qid=UXPr4YTNaK&rank=1

In my following discussion, I analyse how the various construals in the poem may give rise to the kinds of interpretative effects that readers describe, focusing on specificity in the first verse paragraph, scanning in the second and third verse paragraphs, and subjectivity in the final verse paragraph.

Construals in the Poem

Owen's speaker starts with a focus on the physical condition of the soldiers, their bodies unnaturally inverted (a common motif in First World War poetry) as they move through and then away from the trench. The poem offers an initially very specific construal as we are invited to 'zoom in' to view the soldiers in detail; the reader's attention is drawn to both visual and aural aspects, 'Bent double', 'old beggars under sacks', 'Knock-kneed', and 'coughing like hags' and 'cursed'. Interestingly, the soldiers' movement away from their starting point coincides with a more schematic construal of the scene and the sharp focus of the opening gives way to more general description: the 'old beggars' become construed as a collective whole 'Men', 'many' and 'all'. Like a camera zooming out, the construal thus offers a more holistic view of the scene, emphasising the sheer number of men suffering.

The poem relies on start-stop moments for effect. In the second and third verse paragraphs the dramatic direct speech of the soldiers contrasts with the more long drawn-out 'An ecstasy of fumbling'. Across the remaining lines and into the third verse paragraph, the events that take place are largely presented by nominalised actions ('an ecstasy of fumbling' instead of 'they fumbled ecstatically') or through

present participles that form progressives, 'was yelling out and stumbling' or clausal adverbs 'floundering', 'drowning'. In fact, it is a striking feature of these eight lines that of the eleven verbs only two occur in finite forms with each followed by present participles. Participles do not specify the start and end point of an action (compare 'stumbling' with 'he stumbles') and thus offer an internal view of the scene being described. The reader scans these events as though up-close and in a way that is a bit like viewing a video clip on a repeat loop! And, this is the kind of 3D effect identified by Zetzelmann and to which Reader 3 alludes in their reading of the poem.

A scene can also be described with varying degrees of subjectivity so that a speaker or writer can position their own opinion more clearly on-stage and divert their reader/listener's attention towards a particular stance on a scene. For example, a phrase with particularly strong evaluative adjectives, 'vile, incurable' and head noun 'sores' is highly subjective since it projects a strong stance. Another subjective construal occurs through the use of personal pronouns.

I believe those are vile, incurable sores

places the speaker more explicitly on-stage as an integral part of the construal (indeed this is a key feature of the dream vision in the second verse paragraph).

In 'Dulce et Decorum Est', the highly evaluative language construes the content of the poem subjectively and there is a strong sense of Owen's speaker (and Owen as an author) as on-stage. Another prominent feature at this point in the poem is the explicit use of the second person pronoun 'you'. The hypothetical 'if... could... would' clauses position the poem's addressee on-stage so that we are invited to view a version of ourselves as part of the action, watching and sharing the horror with the speaker. Much of the poem's power comes from this construal; the poem invites us to imagine that we can simultaneously be part of the world of the poem and watch it as a spectator, reacting to its horror and sharing the speaker's subjective evaluation.

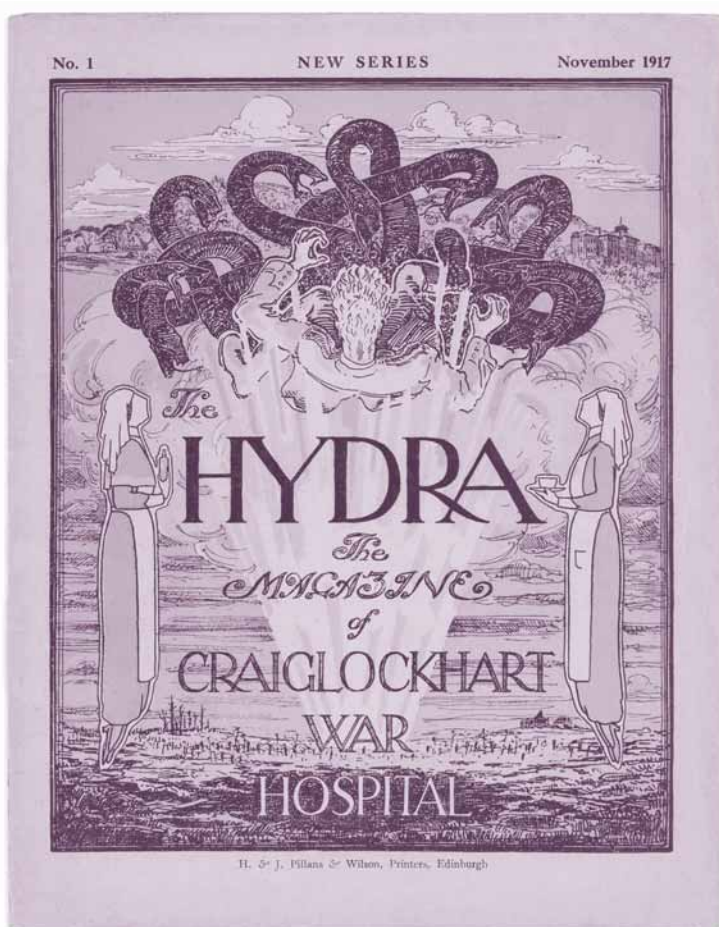
Of course, there's much more that I could say about this poem and the ideas I've presented here could be explored and developed in more detail. I have demonstrated, however, that Cognitive

Grammar can highlight how specific construals may account for readers' responses and how its visual and embodied bases provide an enabling framework for examining the ways in which literary texts position us as readers.

Further Reading

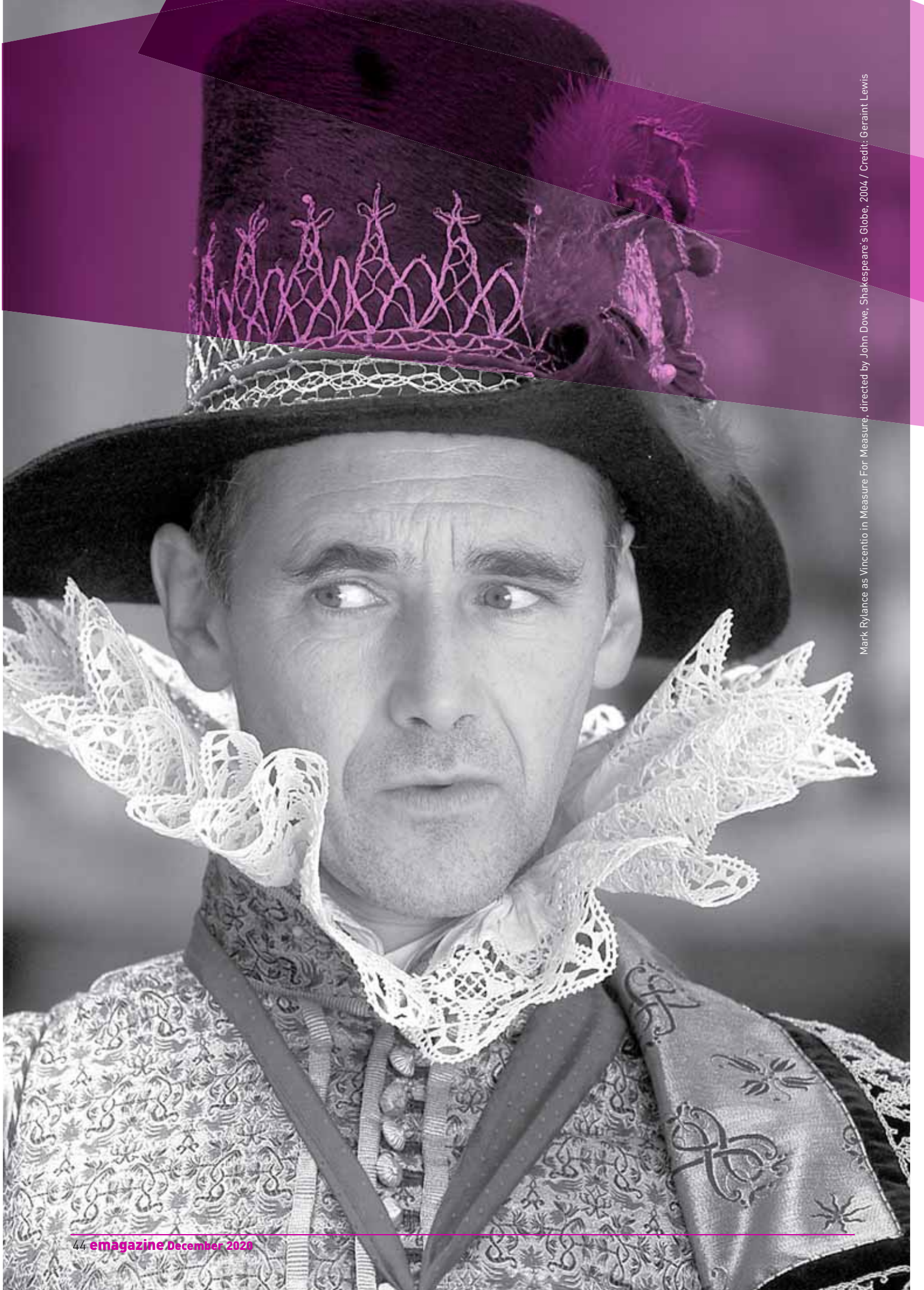
Most of the literature on Cognitive Grammar is advanced but *Cognitive Grammar in Stylistics: A Practical Guide* by Marcello Giovanelli and Chloe Harrison (Bloomsbury, 2018) offers an entry-level introduction for undergraduates that would also be accessible for A Level students. If you're interested in war poetry, my open access article on the writing of another First World War poet, Siegfried Sassoon, using Cognitive Grammar is available here <https://www.degruyter.com/view/journals/jlse/48/1/article-p85.xml>.

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Mark Rylance as Vincentio in Measure For Measure, directed by John Dove, Shakespeare's Globe, 2004. / Credit: Geraint Lewis

Taking the Measure of Isabella

Three Different Readings

John Hathaway examines this most problematic of characters and shows how viewing her through different critical lenses can sharpen up our thinking about ways of reading her and how these have developed over time.

As far as Shakespeare's heroines go, Isabella is a perplexing conundrum. Looking at the ways in which various male and female critics have interpreted her character, it is clear that she has triggered wildly contrasting responses, with some deploring her cold piety and others attacking her ferocity and fiery nature. Thus Coleridge declared Isabella to be 'unamiable' and Hazlitt argued that her 'rigid chastity' was alienating. In 1753, Charlotte Lennox deplored Isabella as being 'outrageous in her seeming virtue' whilst Quiller-Couch accuses her of selfishness and of becoming 'a bare procuress' because of her apparent eagerness to pimp out Mariana to Angelo so that she herself does not need to lose her virginity. Such a range of perspectives reveals Isabella to be a deeply problematic character who has divided critics since the play's first performance. Viewing the text as a morality play, or through a psychoanalytical lens, or from a feminist viewpoint, helps us to capture some of these

conflicting interpretations of Shakespeare's most baffling heroine.

Morality Play – The Good Receive the Reward They Deserve

One of the more simplistic ways of viewing *Measure for Measure* is to see it as some sort of morality play or religious allegory. Isabella, from this perspective, stands for virtue and chastity, something which is signalled in the very first scene in which she appears where even the disreputable Lucio regards her as 'enskied and sainted.' The adjective 'enskied' is particularly powerful here, suggesting that Isabella is so virtuous (particularly compared to the seamy underbelly of Vienna that the audience have been exposed to in Act I Scene 2) that she already belongs in heaven. Angelo himself, after their first interview, calls Isabella a 'virtuous maid' and she is a character who is repeatedly defined by those around her by her chastity.

During the course of the play, Isabella stands strong against temptation and thus earns herself the fairy tale ending she thoroughly deserves because of her refusal to yield her chastity at the behest of Angelo and others. G. Wilson Knight, writing in 1930, saw the play as an allegory of the Gospels in the New Testament. He argued that Isabella represented 'sainted purity', at the end of the play achieving her desire of union with the Christ-like figure of the Duke, who has reinstated the proper balance between justice and mercy that had fallen so awry in Vienna. Isabella, after the unmasking of the Duke in the final scene, defines herself as his 'vassal' and recognises the Duke's 'sovereignty' which acknowledges the power and authority that she feels the Duke rightfully holds. From this perspective, her silence at the end of the play is not at all problematic. What more can she hope for than marriage to the Duke, her just reward for the faith and chastity she has constantly demonstrated



Meredith MacNeill as Mariana in *Measure For Measure* directed by Simon McBurney, Theatre de Complicite and The National Theatre, 2004 / Credit: Geraint Lewis

in spite of the various trials she has faced during the course of the play

Psychoanalytical Reading – Troubling Undercurrents of Repressed Emotions

Of course, such a reading is itself intensely problematic, and risks reducing Isabella to nothing more than a two-dimensional Disney princess. The real Isabella of *Measure for Measure*, whilst she may seem to be virtuous, has deeper and darker elements to her character that reflect a far more troubled personality. In a previous article published in *emagazine*, James Middleditch compellingly argued how an understanding of Freudian psychology can transform our reading of Angelo as a character who is ruled by his super-ego, or morality, to such an unhealthy extreme that when he faces temptation, in the form of Isabella, his id, or instinctive, base desire, runs amok and overwhelms him. By the end of the play his ego, which acts to balance these two extremes, has reasserted itself and thus these two opposing forces are reconciled as Angelo learns to recognise his own humanity. What is fascinating is that so many readings of the play focus on the differences between Angelo and Isabella rather than their similarities. Just as Angelo is initially referred to as a 'man whose blood/Is very snow-broth' and who 'scarce confesses/That his blood flows', Isabella is accused of being 'Too cold' by Lucio as she entreats Angelo to spare her

brother's life. In addition, her very first words in the play present her as 'wishing a more strict restraint' than the already austere order of Saint Clare enforced upon their members. This suggests that Isabella, at the start of the play, is a character who, like Angelo, is defined by her super-ego and feels a desperate need to exert strict control over her life.

Just as Angelo is shown to be a 'seemer', or to have the appearance of outward virtue whilst revealing inner base desires, Isabella too is a character who is shown to be propelled by repressed emotions. For a woman who places the utmost value on her virginity, there is an erotic charge that runs through her speech, and lines such as

*Th'impression of keen whips I'd wear as rubies,
And strip myself to death as to a bed*

have clear sexual overtones. However naive Isabella is, there is a comic double entendre when she enters Angelo's ante-room for the second time and asks to know 'his pleasure' (to which Angelo, as his aside attests, is certainly not blind), no matter how suppressed Isabella's sexuality is. What clearly stands out, however, is her anger and violence in response to Claudio's plea to save his life. Isabella, in the space of a few lines of verse, moves from freely offering her life to save her brother to calling him a 'warped slip of wilderness' and using imperatives to express her desire that he would 'Die, perish!' She declares she will gladly

pray a thousand prayers for [his] death

and the very final words she utters to her brother in the play are

'Tis best that thou diest quickly'

Here Isabella is completely dominated by her anger. This emotion perhaps reveals Isabella's deep repressed fear of sexuality, but the speed with which she changes her feelings towards her beloved brother indicate that, like Angelo, she is dominated by her emotions. Arguably, it is only at the end of the play that Isabella, effectively stage-managed by the Duke, has been forced to face her own inconsistencies and, through pleading for Angelo's life and being reconciled to her brother, is able to arrive at a greater sense of self-understanding as she accepts her own humanity and embraces her sexuality through marrying the Duke.

Feminist Reading – Patriarchal Double Standards

With the advent of Second Wave Feminism in the 1960s, more and more interpretations of Isabella have focused on the way in which she (and other female characters) are oppressed by the harsh patriarchal world around them which judges women as being either saints or whores. This man-made virgin/whore dichotomy, it is argued, is a stranglehold on female characters that allows them little room to define themselves and to exert any form of agency. Yet the artificiality of this dichotomy is exposed by the men in the play who encourage

Isabella to use her sexuality for their own benefit. In the play's very first mention of Isabella, for example, Claudio states he has 'great hope' in Isabella's ability to persuade Angelo to save his life, because of her 'prone and speechless dialect' which is able to 'move men'. This, notably, is listed before her rhetorical ability. Claudio's words here contain an intimation of sexual provocation: he is perfectly happy to use his sister as sexual bait. Likewise, Lucio's asides to Isabella during her first meeting with Angelo contain various sexual innuendos, such as 'touch him: there's the vein' and 'He's coming', to indicate the impact that Isabella's advances are having on Angelo.

It is no wonder, therefore, that when Isabella brings Claudio the unfortunate news that he will only live if she is willing to sacrifice her virginity for him, that his response should leave her full of rage and anger. Isabella, who has been brought up to place the highest value on chastity, is forced by the men around her into a position where she feels obligated to trade in her virginity for her brother's life. Not only that, but the Duke persuades her in the final scene to publicly announce that she 'did yield' to the 'concupiscible intemperate lust' of Angelo, and therefore jeopardise her reputation, as part of his Machiavellian plan to expose Angelo. She is a female character who finds herself suddenly forced to enter a bewildering patriarchal world after dwelling within the feminine haven of the convent

and who is subsequently exploited and betrayed by a succession of men.

Conclusion – Shakespeare in the 21st Century

The many different ways in which Isabella can be interpreted means that she remains a fascinating character to discuss and debate. For me, however, my lasting impression of Isabella is based on the final moments of Greg Doran's RSC 2019 version of the play, which emerged in the wake of #metoo and the Harvey Weinstein scandal. Isabella, recognising how powerless she is to refuse the Duke's proposal of marriage, wears exactly the same look of horror and disgust as she wore earlier in the play when she was sexually groped by Angelo. The sudden blackout left the audience very clear that the Duke's desire to marry Isabella was yet another powerful male's attempt to dominate and possess her and that it made Isabella feeling just as violated and helpless as she had felt when facing Angelo's advances.

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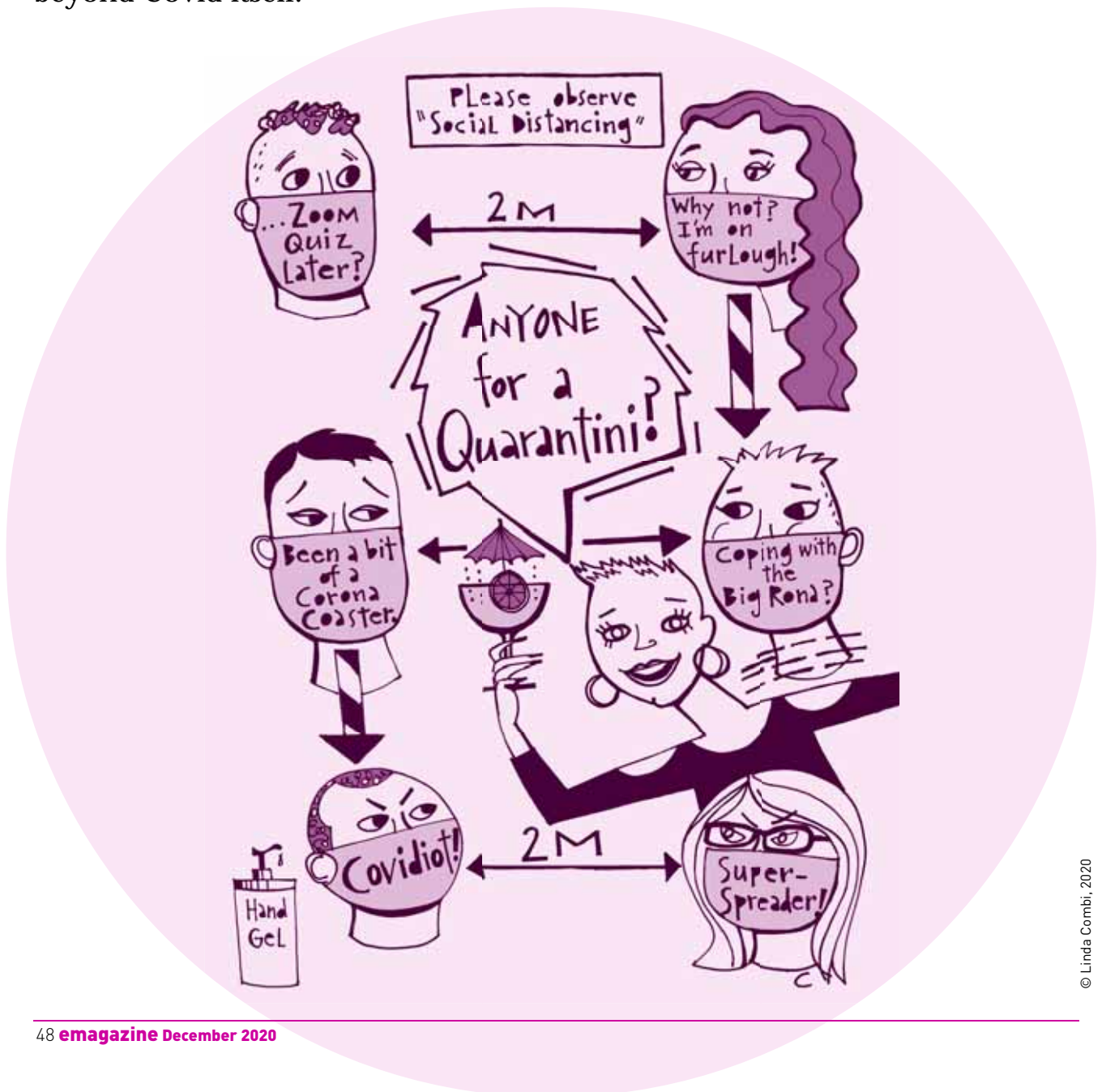


Mark Rylance as Vincentio, Sophie Thompson as Isabella, Liam Brennan as Angelo in *Measure for Measure*, directed by John Dove, Shakespeare's Globe, 2004 / Credit: Geraint Lewis

'Read the Zoom'

Language Change and Covid-19

Teacher Loren Cafferty examines the heaps of new words and ways of using language that have emerged over the past few months, looking for patterns not only in the words themselves but also in the reasons for their appearance, the ways they're being used and the likelihood of them lasting beyond Covid itself.



Coronavirus has changed the world; the way we work, the way we socialise and the way in which we use language. As a teacher of English Language I get animated each year when I get my teeth into Language Change. 'It's literally happening to us, in front of our very eyes,' I chirrup excitedly to each new set of students. Ordinarily they roll their eyes patiently in my direction and submit to my wild enthusiasm for word of the year. Yet, for linguists, this year has really hit different.

It's hard to remember a time where so many lexical and semantic shifts flooded our linguistic consciousness. The serious stuff began not long after Christmas when our mainstream media began picking up reports that the World Health Organisation was concerned about a disease with pandemic potential in the Wuhan region of China. Whilst the **WHO** was an established player on the international political stage its simple initialism became common parlance very quickly and it's interesting that it has remained an **initialism** despite the obvious temptation to use it as an **acronym** and therefore give rise to potential misunderstandings or levity.

What Do We Call 'the virus'?

The WHO was instrumental in controlling the way the virus itself was discussed. '**Chinese disease**', '**Wuhan Flu**' and even more jokey terms like '**Kung-flu**' were beginning to gain popularity when the WHO announced that this disease was to be known as '**Covid-19**', while the virus that caused it was to be known as '**SARS-CoV-2**'. Linguistically – and pragmatically – there is a surprising amount going on here. The disease is **lexical blend** of 'Coronavirus', 'disease' and 2019 (the year of discovery) -while employing elements of initialism too – and it is the disease name that has become the one most people know.



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This is partly for reasons of articulation – blends are often easy to say – and partly perhaps because one or the other tends to be the more popular. Consider AIDS and HIV; many people knew the name of the disease, far fewer the virus that caused it.

The WHO were keen that terms like Chinese virus did not take a linguistic hold, fearing an unjustified xenophobic backlash. There are interesting historical precedents for this – not least the terrifying pandemic of 1918 which was widely known as '**Spanish Flu**'. Scientists largely agree that Spain was not the source of this outbreak of influenza, which killed up to 50 million people, but that a combination of a high-profile case (King Alfonso was very ill) and discomfort over Spain's neutrality in World War One led to a semantic misunderstanding that pervades the language even today. The WHO expressed concern too at the labelling of the 2015 '**MERS**' outbreak. This acronym for Middle Eastern Respiratory Syndrome led to a backlash against people in communities that were perceived to be at fault for spreading the virus and the WHO were keen that the same did not happen with Covid-19.

Lexical and Semantic Ingenuity on Display

Not all of the language change that has arisen from the pandemic has been as concerned with such serious matters. As always language change can prove itself fun and inventive. My students, who became impressively adept at dealing with 'virtual teaching' told me that they refer to the virus as '**the big Rona**' and those who flout the new rules as '**covidiots**' whilst '**self-isolate**', '**shielding**', '**furlough**', '**super-spreaders**' and '**local lockdown**' have all entered their lexicon in the last few months.

What's interesting from a linguistic point of view is not only the speed with which these terms have become popular but the sheer variety of lexical and semantic ingenuity on display. Rona makes a playful use of **abbreviation** while covidiots works as a really interesting blend – both of the blended words exist in their entirety within the morpheme but are not articulated separately. Self-isolate, super-spreaders and local lockdown are all **compounds terms** but their frequency of use during the pandemic has strengthened their lexical status beyond separate adjective + noun. '**Furlough**' is perhaps the most interesting. It began to be used widely



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in late February and this was cemented by Rishi Sunak's announcement of the job retention scheme on 20th March. Until this point the term was essentially obsolete in the UK and archaic in America where it was sometimes used to describe a spell of paid leave, especially for the military. Its etymology is a little hazy; it is not clear if this is a borrowing from Dutch – verlof – and the spelling is an anglicisation of the pronunciation or if there was a greater degree of German influence incorporating the Middle German verb for granting permission. It is remarkable how much traction the term has gained and it has quickly been adopted as both a noun and verb.

Technology and Humour Driving Change

Technology has played a key role in many of the language shifts that have been a part of the pandemic linguistic journey. Hands up – how many of you had heard of Zoom before lockdown? A little-known conferencing platform has given rise to a variety of new terms, including the verbs '**zooming**' and '**zoom-bombing**' and noun compounds like '**Zoom Quiz**' and it seems possible that these terms will work like **eponyms** from previous decades (like hoovering and sellotaping) where the specific brand may lose their dominant share in the market but the semantics remain. It is telling that politicians, teachers, parents and pupils across the country have largely named live lessons as Zoom lessons regardless of the platform used.

Many terms have been very playful – '**coronacoaster**' to describe the emotional turbulence of living with the threat of the



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virus, '**coronials**' to reference the children born nine months after the lockdown period, '**coronut**' to reference the belly fat sitting around the middle of those who snacked during furlough and the preponderance of terms from *Tiger King* and *Hamilton* as those two productions were heavily promoted as ways to enjoy popular culture from the comfort of the sofa.

Global Spread of Virus and Language

There seem to be several factors at play in why this period has been so fruitful for linguistic changes and **neologisms**. Although there have been several significant virus outbreaks through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries there has been nothing of pandemic scope since the Spanish flu – Covid-19 has, as all the newspapers and MSM outlets told us, been unprecedented. As an event that affected the whole world it provided an, albeit grim, unifying experience and – as always – language is the way in which we express and communicate feelings.

It is interesting that the spread of shared terms appears to be faster than in previous comparable events. For example '**covidiot**' and '**quarantini**' (a lockdown cocktail



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or '**locktail**') are now in common usage throughout the US, Australia and part of Europe whereas the use of '**le grippe**' which was used across mainland Europe during an outbreak (known as Russian flu) in the late nineteenth century was not popular in the UK and Ireland until it was borrowed for the 1918 epidemic. It seems likely that the global nature of media – both mainstream and social – has had an impact. Information can be shared more easily than ever before thanks to the instantaneous nature of web-based information distribution – as David Crystal has stated

language changes slowly but the internet has speeded up the process of those changes so you notice them more quickly.

Black Humour

Crystal has also said that playing with language is natural and there is no doubt that people use word play as a means of coping with tragedy through black humour or inventiveness. It is no coincidence that one recent neologism is '**doomscrolling**', this great **compound** meaning the obsessive compulsion to check through a social media feed for coronavirus updates whilst recognising the futility of the act. It might also be true that with time on furlough, spent out of school and literally stuck at home people have had more time to become inventive and engaged even more with platforms that allow their linguistic creativity to be shared and admired.

What Will Last?

There are criteria for a word to be considered 'official' – it must be frequently used, have widespread use and be meaningful so that people actually have a reason to know and use it. The great lexicographer Samuel Johnson said that language changes and 'you might as well lash the wind' as try to stop it. Words have a kind of mortality. How much society needs a way of expressing an idea, a thought or a feeling influences which live and which die.

So history has its eyes on us – it is true that the language of previous pandemics has often not stayed with us as the virus itself dies or vaccines are developed. It remains to be seen how many of the terms that have arisen during the Covid-19 crisis will play a lasting part in the lexicon – and how much of it is the fault of Carole Baskin.

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FRANKENSTEIN

Revolutionary Times and Feminist Readings

Richard Jacobs explains the most significant contexts for Mary Shelley's novel – the biographical/psychological, the social/political and the philosophical/religious contexts – and explores how significant they have been to the most important strands of contemporary criticism about her work.



Frankenstein is one of those texts where the contexts that informed its production and composition as well as its after-effects, what we might call the Frankenstein-mythology or Frankenstein-industry (the many films, the *Daily Mail* headlines about Frankenstein-food and so on), are almost as culturally significant as the text itself. The text is itself richly and complicatedly entangled with its means of production and its subsequent history, including the history of the later nineteenth-century novel. It's not too much to say that this text about a monstrous birth and hideous progeny was itself the monstrous birth of a text and its progeny of textual after-births.

A related way of starting to think about this is to say that, like many culturally rich texts – like, for instance, *Paradise Lost*, with which *Frankenstein* itself is very closely entangled – Mary Shelley's novel is a conflicted text, and therefore a contested text. It is conflicted in its ambivalent sympathies and contradictory energies (are both the Creature and Frankenstein both villain and hero?) and it is therefore contested in the way it has been subjected to ambivalent and contradictory readings and critical responses – and re-workings in the post-text *Frankenstein*-mythology and industry. I'll be saying more about these matters later. But let me now turn to those three contextual issues. And the first is the inescapable set of circumstances around Mary herself.

The Context of Writing and Writer

This will all be familiar to you so I'll give just the outlines of the very remarkable personal underpinnings of the novel's composition: Mary's mother (the early feminist radical Mary Wollstonecraft) dying shortly after giving birth to her; Mary and Percy reading by her mother's

grave and then eloping to Europe when Mary was 16 and when Percy's first wife was pregnant; her father (the radical writer William Godwin) disowning her at the elopement; the death of her premature first child; her second child born less than a year later, five months old when Mary, aged 18, began the novel; that child dying just after the novel was published; the suicides of Mary's half-sister and of Percy's first wife during the novel's composition; her dedication of the (anonymous) first edition to her father. No less striking is the novel's origin in a ghost-story telling competition with Percy and other older men, including the mega-star Byron: the very young woman outperforming the men whose stories are now forgotten. The psychological implications are also inescapable, centred as they clearly were on feelings of guilt, including for her mother's death in giving birth to her, and for her father's rejection. That rejection – the parent of a child – is crucial to the drama of the novel, repeated rejections of the Creature marking the spine of its plot just as the psychic entanglements of births and deaths – the Creature's birth literally being from dead matter – mark the inner rhythm of its workings.

A Conflicted and Contested World

Let's turn to the social context and the novel's place – conflicted and contested – in the most urgent and anxious of the political discourses of the time. This is the war of ideas following the French Revolution. (Here I draw on an excellent book by Chris Baldick, *In Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity and Nineteenth Century Writing*.) With both her parents radically involved on the 'left' of this 'war', supporters of the oppressed French working-class led in Britain by Thomas Paine – with the conservative Edmund Burke leading the onslaught on revolutionary French values and supporting the aristocratic cause – Mary would have grown up very much alive to this division in the political landscape. But what is most interesting for her later novel is that both sides in the debate used what Baldick calls the 'politics of monstrosity': rhetorically – but in opposing ways – deploying the image of a monster turning on its maker. In Baldick's words

Burke announces the birth of the monster child Democracy, while Paine records the death of the monster parent Aristocracy.

This opposition is reproduced in ways of reading *Frankenstein*. From the conservative angle the novel warns against the radical dangers of trying to forcefully impose a new and artificial 'body politic'; from the left the novel suggests (in Baldick's words again)

that the violence of the oppressed springs from frustration with the neglect and injustice of their social 'parent'.

All readers will need to ask themselves how they assess their own responses to Shelley's Creature. Baldick suggests Shelley's own response is

an uneasy combination of fearful revulsion and cautious sympathy.

My own students over the years have leaned towards noticing her sympathy more than her revulsion. That's my view as well, as for me the novel is clear that the repeated rejection of the Creature, the refusal to acknowledge his place in the social community, is the root cause of his violent revenges. What do you think and did your attitude change as you read on?

Born Sinful, or Born Good?

Closely connected with the political debate is the wider religious or philosophical debate that lies behind it. This can be summarised as the opposition between the older and conservative Christian belief that we are born sinful, and society can only try to soften our inbuilt tendency to selfishness and violence, and the new and liberal beliefs, represented by pre-revolutionary French thinkers like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, that we are born good and inclined to community with others and that it is society that makes us bad through misguided education and deliberate policies of inequality. The Creature's first action is to stretch out his arms to his 'father' and to smile, a clear expression of love and expectancy of love in return. The father's immediate and shockingly inhuman rejection is later repeated by the rejection of the Lacey family (and another potentially loving father), and then again by Frankenstein's rejection of the Creature's plea for a female partner, an Eve to his Adam (Frankenstein tearing 'her' to bits in another characteristically inhuman way). The Creature, you'll recall, explicitly pleads to become

linked to the chain of existence and events from which I am now excluded... in forced solitude.

It's surprisingly easy to see the Creature as more fully human (as well as more



eloquent) than *Frankenstein*. I'll add that his eloquence – those passionate pleas for human recognition and community – was forcibly removed in nineteenth-century stage melodramas in which the Creature was literally silenced, in effect politically neutered.

Doubles, Others and Feminist Readings

That leads me to speak briefly about the common mistake that names *Frankenstein* as the Creature. The mistake reflects the more subtle suggestion that the two are each other's double or Other (which would connect this text to novels like *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*) – and this was recognised in the role-swapping by Benedict Cumberbatch and Jonny Lee Miller in the National Theatre production of 2011. As *Frankenstein*'s double the Creature could be read as embodying his maker's repressed murderous violence or the opposite, his repressed need to love. It's certainly the case that *Frankenstein* has a 'woman problem', as is clear in his embarrassingly Freudian dream of embracing his wife-to-be (whom, awake, he mostly ignores) in the form of his mother's mouldering corpse.

Which is why it's important to note that when we look at the novel's critical reception, the most striking feature over the last decades is the preponderance as well as the quality of feminist readings. (The current Norton Critical Edition of

the novel prints excerpts from thirteen modern critics, nine of whom are women.) Three broad areas of feminist interest could be simply summarised. One approach builds on what we started with, the notion of a 'weak' and 'silent' young woman outplaying, outlasting and overpowering notionally more powerful, older and more ostensibly public men. Having said that, it is the case that Percy was very male in his attempt to control Mary's style in the novel, replacing her direct and simply charged vocabulary with more ornate and 'literary' language (so if you found the style rather clunky you can blame Percy). Her novel did take a long time to be included as a key document in Romanticism but is now seen as more important, more influential, more intensely imagined and certainly (as I suggest) more of a telling intervention in cultural responses to the key event of her time than anything by the famous male poets including her husband. (A partial exception would be Blake, but he too took a very long time to be accepted into the Romantic canon.)

A second approach sees the principal fact of the novel as *Frankenstein* usurping the female role of giving birth – and the consequences of that usurpation. And a third, which I think is particularly important, sees the Creature as a representation of woman herself, specifically early nineteenth century woman, denied equality and rights (in law, education and so on), even

perceived as only partially human. This would be an appropriate response to what we can see as the novel's implicit demand for mutuality, equality and love between all human beings, the desperate message of the French revolutionaries, fervently argued for by her parents, and perhaps most movingly expressed in this dazzling novel.

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The Jumblies

Critical Theory Turning Nonsense into Meaning

How confident are you about using critical theory in a literature essay? Do you consider theory as you are researching and planning what to write? Or is it a bit that you add onto the end of a paragraph, not quite sure of how to join it up to the question? Katherine Savage offers a fun way of developing your approach to it.

Many of us approach critical theory like we would putting on a pair of non-prescription glasses: not really expecting our understanding of the text to improve but hoping we will look or sound smarter as a result! However, this article will encourage you to see critical theory as a powerful set of prescription lenses, loaded with potential to transform the way you see and understand a text. Just like the way the right lenses magically bring what was fuzzy and blurred into sharp focus, critical theory can enable you to see and interact with the text in a deeper and more exciting way.

Let's look at how you could apply different theoretical 'lenses' to an unseen poem. I

will share with you some ideas my English Literature class had as they considered the text and then we'll consider some lessons that this exercise teaches us about using critical theory.

Analysing Nonsense

Because critical theory is focused on meaning, we can apply it to any text: even ones which at first glance seem very far removed from A Level Literature.

Have a read of the first verse of 'The Jumblies', a 'nonsense' poem, written by Edward Lear in 1872 primarily for light entertainment. Then, ask yourself

questions of the text using the boxed questions on page 55.

They went to sea in a Sieve, they did,
In a Sieve they went to sea:
In spite of all their friends could say,
On a winter's morn, on a stormy day,
In a Sieve they went to sea!
And when the Sieve turned round and round,
And every one cried, 'You'll all be drowned!'
They called aloud, 'Our Sieve ain't big,
But we don't care a button! we don't care a fig!
In a Sieve we'll go to sea!'
Far and few, far and few,
Are the lands where the Jumblies live;
Their heads are green, and their hands are blue,
And they went to sea in a Sieve.



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Questions to ask

- How are the different characters described and presented?
- Are there any gaps in the narrative: information withheld from us?
- Is the natural world visible at all? What relationship do the characters in the text have to it?
- Who has power in the text? How is that power displayed?

My A Level Class Discussion

After reading the poem and considering these initial questions, our class divided into groups and began to focus on reading the text through a specific critical lens. All of us wanted to know why the Jumblies were off to sea in the first place, but using the different theories gave us several different answers to that question. Those using a Marxist lens considered the Jumblies in terms of power and social class, wondering if they were making a bid for freedom, and refusing to be constrained by the dominant voices of their society. Were those 'friends' genuinely concerned for their welfare, or just trying to keep them in their place?

The post-colonial critics in the class noted that the Jumblies were determined to leave despite their lands being 'far and few'. Why was this? Perhaps they were in danger, or suffering. Were we being encouraged to support the Jumblies – the eponymous social group of the text – or was their 'don't care' attitude troubling, a sign of arrogance and superiority? One student realised we had assumed the Jumblies were the protagonists of the poem, making a bid for freedom: but what if they were the oppressors, rather than the oppressed, leaving to colonise other places and gain personal power?

Many groups focused on the description of Jumblies – their green heads and blue hands mark them out as 'other'. They began to question the author's choice of describing this group of people in ethnic terms. Did 'Jumbly' have positive or negative connotations? Additionally, those reading through an eco-critical lens saw the green heads of the Jumblies as a symbol of ecological significance. The natural world is portrayed in the text as powerful and awe-inspiring, and the Jumblies' desire to experience the 'stormy day' in their 'sieve' suggests a close relationship with the environment around them.

Using a feminist lens took a little more effort: in this first stanza, we aren't sure if the Jumblies are gendered or not. We discussed the implications of this, and different interpretations that could emerge. For example, some feminist critics could read it as very positive, arguing that the Jumblies are not defined by their gender, and are therefore free from the negative consequences of gender expectations imposed by society. Other feminist critics may argue that this is not positive at all: female experience has been completely ignored by the text, and female voices are silenced as a result.

By asking questions of the text through one critical viewpoint and then discussing these together, we were able to see this small extract of a poem in a wide range of different ways. You'll notice our use of one critical lens led quite naturally to considering another, which in turn helped us to glean a greater degree of meaning from the text.

How to Use Critical Theory in Your Own Reading

Many of you will be expected to use critical theory in your A Level coursework. Here are some tips to help you get the very most out of it:

Consider the text as a whole

Many of the questions we had as a class would have been answered if we had read on in the poem: there would have been more evidence to support some of the points we were making, and some interpretations we had initially could be refined or ruled out. If you are reading a prose text through a critical lens, it is important to ensure that lens brings consistent clarity and meaning. If the theory seems to illuminate only one small section of a novel or scene in a play, it probably isn't the best one to apply.

Look for gaps

What *isn't* in the text can sometimes unlock a critical interpretation for us. When looking at your text through a critical lens, consider what gaps, questions and uncertainties it has, and what answers the theory could provide. There is usually more than one valid interpretation!

Talk to others

Just like prescription glasses, you will be able to read meaning through certain critical lenses with far more ease than others. Talking to others and hearing their

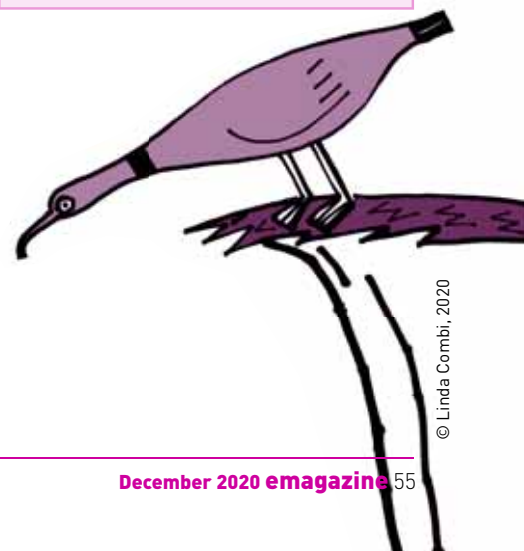
views is especially helpful when applying critical theory as a range of opinions and interpretations will usually help you see the text more clearly. Make sure you spend some time researching and listening to what other readers have made of your text. Film adaptations are very helpful here too: in a film version of a novel or play, the director is showing you how they see the text.

Use the different lenses of critical theory to venture deeper into your A Level Literature texts: and enjoy the feeling of seeing meaning which was previously hidden from view.

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Leonardo DiCaprio in The Great Gatsby directed by Baz Luhrmann (2013) / Credit: Bazmark Films/Photo 12/Alamy Stock Photo

BACK TO THE FUTURE

The Great Gatsby and Huckleberry Finn



Patrick Day and Eugene Oakes Adrift in Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn (1985) / Credit: Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Strange as it may seem, for both Twain and Fitzgerald, writing two iconic American novels, a better future seems bound up with a backward-looking search for the past. So argues Nick Johnston-Jones.

Donald Trump's election slogan 'Make America Great Again' helped win him the US Presidency in 2016 though it failed to do so again recently, when he campaigned for a second term. Implicit in it is the belief that at some unspecified time in the past America reached its zenith as a nation and has since declined. Trump's promise is that this former glory can be regained by a government that puts 'America First'.

This idea of the past acting as a key to a better future is a major feature of much American literature, explored in sharply contrasting ways in *Huckleberry Finn* (1885) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In both a strong element of nostalgia pervades the texts, with Nick Carraway closing his story fondly recalling, 'the thrilling returning trains of my youth' that once carried him

home to 'my Middle West', concluding that 'this has been a story of the West, after all', despite the story's East Coast locus. Twain sets his novel in the ante-Bellum south of his youth in the 1840s, where the natural beauty of the Mississippi provides spiritual comfort to the fugitive Huck who, like Nick, heads West at the story's end.

'Can't repeat the past?' he cried incredulously. 'Why of course you can!'

Probably the best-known of Jay Gatsby's words come in conversation with Nick Carraway. Gatsby ardently believes it possible to roll back the years to reclaim the Daisy he fell in love with in 1917. Nick's subsequent comment puts a subtly different slant on Gatsby's motivation however when he states:

He talked a lot about the past, and I gathered that he wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps, that had gone into loving Daisy.

Put this way Gatsby's longing for the past is more about reclaiming some aspect of his identity than simply winning back Daisy. But this vague notion evaporates as Nick struggles to articulate

a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago

that remain 'uncommunicable for ever' at the close of the passage. In fact the pasts which call so powerfully to both Nick and Gatsby prove as elusive as they are intangible. Fitzgerald appears to be suggesting here that the romantic prism of nostalgia as well as the fallibility of memory means the past will always deceive or escape us.



Leonardo DiCaprio and Carey Mulligan in *The Great Gatsby* directed by Baz Luhrmann (2013) / PictureLux/The Hollywood Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

The Great Gatsby ends with the paradoxical and much-quoted metaphor:

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.

Fitzgerald links this claim to the wider story of America by preceding the observation with the imagined emotions of the original Dutch settlers first setting eyes on the 'fresh, green breast of the new world' – words that recall Gatsby's 'extraordinary gift for hope' from the novel's opening which Nick so admired. America, Fitzgerald seems to say, can never escape its past but also has an irresistible impulse to strive for better:

tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms further ...

This is the essence of not just the American dream but the American national character, epitomised by Jay Gatsby.

Nick consciously turns back the clock at the start of the novel, almost against his better judgement given the trauma it recalls, to relive the events of the story and reclaim Gatsby for greatness. In doing so he symbolically rejects modern America and its helter-skelter pursuit of money and pleasure, yearning instead for the moral discipline of his wartime experience when his world was 'in uniform and at a sort of moral attention'. Gatsby failed in his attempts to turn back time, but perhaps Nick will have better luck if he, and America, steer clear of the 'foul dust' that engulfed his friend.

'The first journey back'

Commenting on Twain's novel in 1935, Fitzgerald said:

Huckleberry Finn took the first journey back. He was the first to look back at the republic from the perspective of the west. His eyes were the first eyes that ever looked at us objectively that were not eyes from overseas.

F. Scott Fitzgerald in conversation with Ernest Hemingway and Dan Simmonds (1935)

Again, the idea of the past is embedded in this observation, only this time relating to America's geography as well as its history. The mythic Wild West with all its opportunities for personal renewal and frontier heroics is Huck's destination when he opts to 'light out for the Territories' at the novel's close. Yet Twain's readers when the novel was first published would have been keenly aware of what awaited Huck and everyone else in the years ahead, with America gearing up to tear itself asunder in the Civil War. The novel's nostalgia for the pastoralism of its ante-bellum setting is continually offset by the greed, violence and racism Jim and Huck encounter on their journey which are inexorably leading America to this crisis.

In Huck's case, his own past offers nothing to inspire him or guide his future. His abusive father is dead and he dreads the smothering conformity of life with Aunt Sally. The final chapters of the story make clear that Huck has also outgrown the mischievous and by now tedious antics of his former role-model Tom Sawyer. His relationship with Jim which has sustained him through hardship and danger on the

river also has to come to an end as Jim heads north seeking to free his wife and children. Significantly, the \$6,000 that Huck entrusted to Judge Thatcher to keep it safe from Pap is also consigned to history. Money, like other 'sivilized' trappings holds no appeal for Huck. His only desire is to abandon his past and strike out anew in his restless quest for freedom.

Unlike Huck, Gatsby does have things to inspire and guide his future, in particular his memories of something ideal and beautiful that he thought he once had with Daisy. While Huck recognises the hardships and limitations of his earlier life though, Gatsby suppresses the realities of his own youth, preferring to invent a past for himself that is more glamorous and paints him in a more romantic and noble light. Whether he actually believes any of this self-invention or whether he is more cynical in reconstructing his past identity, is one of the central questions of the book. One can also ask whether his memories of Daisy represent an authentic view of what happened, or whether they too are born out of an intense desire for beauty and heroism in his life.

Circular Narratives

Commenting on the much-criticised ending of *Huckleberry Finn*, T.S. Eliot argued that

it is right that the mood of the end of the book should bring us back to that of the beginning [...] Huck must come from nowhere and be bound for nowhere.

Introduction to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, T.S. Eliot (1950)

Like *The Great Gatsby*, which begins after the events it describes, Twain's novel is in many ways a circular narrative that leaves its protagonist no further ahead at the end than at the beginning.

In sharp contrast to Huck, almost all the other characters in the novel are enslaved by their pasts: Jim, literally so, but also the Grangerfords, locked into a violent Montague-and-Capulet-style feud with neighbours that is systematically destroying both families in blind obedience to an archaic Southern code of honour. The boy Buck who briefly befriends Huck knows only that the trouble began 'long ago' but now even the 'old folks' cannot remember its origins. Soon afterwards he is shot and mutilated, leaving Huck profoundly traumatised. The King and the Duke likewise cling to outdated concepts of European aristocracy in their exploitation of Huck and Jim on the raft. Tom Sawyer ends the story more firmly in the grip of his boyish fantasies than at the beginning, only now with a bullet wound to thank for them.

Evidently Twain is not holding up the past as a model for the future in *Huckleberry Finn*. Indeed he contemptuously dismissed 'worship of the past' as 'simply mental and moral masturbation' in a letter to Will Bowen of 1876. (Mark Twain's *Letters to Will Bowen*, ed Theodore Hornberger, 1941) Rather his story takes aim at the moral attitudes and institutions of the ante-bellum South to sound warnings for the rapidly evolving America of the 1880's in the

wake of the failure of Reconstruction to deliver the fairer society it promised. This was particularly the case for the millions of newly-emancipated slaves denied their political rights, subject to Jim Crow segregation laws and violent intimidation by white supremacist organisations like the Ku Klux Klan.

Fitzgerald on the other hand, from the perspective of the 1920's, sees clearer possibilities of hope in the past, albeit in ambiguous ways. *Gatsby's* 'greatness', for example, is ascribed to him by Nick in recognition of his 'romantic readiness', asserting that he 'turned out all right in the end' – a baffling claim given the circumstances of *Gatsby's* end: betrayal by Tom and Daisy, abandonment by all but Nick, and murder by Wilson. The reader is left to infer that it is 'the colossal vitality of his illusion' that lifts *Gatsby* above this tawdry fate – the illusion being the absolute conviction that he cannot only repeat but refashion the past. There is a nobility in his dream and his faith in the possibilities of renewal that elevates him far above the other characters, making him in Nick's eyes 'worth the whole damn bunch put together.' As readers we are invited to overlook *Gatsby's* flaws and share this paradoxical conclusion.

Reinvention and Renewal

On the face of it Huck and *Gatsby* have little in common, but both share a gift for re-invention. Huck is adept at improvising stories that create provisional identities to

protect him in moments of peril. *Gatsby* extemporises fictional details about his past to impress Nick on their first drive into Manhattan. But these identities prove fragile things for both characters, continually impelling them to look over their shoulders in fear of the truth catching up with them. There can be no security in the present when the past is a lie.

Twain wrote that in Huck

a sound heart and a deformed conscience come into collision and conscience suffers defeat.

Huck owes his deformed conscience to his social environment and his upbringing – in other words, his past. His sound heart is a product of his innate humanity, in particular his keen intuition of loyalty and justice, honed to the point of outright rebellion by his relationship with Jim. *Gatsby* puts his faith into his dreams rather than his conscience, and they destroy him. Huck, in contrast, lives to fight another day. Whether his future will prove any better than his past is an open question. Conceivably, like Jimmy Gatz of North Dakota, he will fashion himself a wholly new identity for adulthood. What is however beyond doubt is that he explicitly rejects his past and the failed values it represents at the novel's close:

'I reckon I got to light out for the Territory ahead of the rest, because Aunt Sally she's going to adopt me and sivilize me and I can't stand it. I been there before.'

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Archie Moore and Eddie Hodges, *The Adventures Of Huckleberry Finn*, 1960 / Credit: AF Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

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Tim Clist asks some fundamental questions about how writers of fiction (and drama) create visual pictures of people and events and how readers imagine them.

A received wisdom about good writing holds that it conjures crystal-clear images for readers to enjoy, that reading a good novel is like visiting another world, and that readers come to know beloved characters like they do their own family. In 'What we see when we read', book designer Peter Mendelsund examines the role of the visual imagination in reading and finds none of these ideas to be accurate. It's an interesting book on a rarely-discussed aspect of reading and it frequently makes thoughtful, contentious points, as when, after examining a description of Anna from *Anna Karenina*, he states:

Literary characters are physically vague – they have only a few features, and these features hardly seem to matter – or, rather, these features matter only in that they help refine a character's meaning.
...A character's features help delineate their boundaries – but these features don't help us truly picture a person.

While this might sound heretical, we can see that it's true by looking at some of the novels currently taught at A Level.

Tess of the D'Urbervilles

This is Hardy's first description of Tess Durbeyfield:

A young member of the band turned her head at the exclamation. She was a fine and handsome girl – not handsomer than some others, possibly – but her mobile peony mouth and large innocent eyes added eloquence to colour and shape. She wore a red ribbon in her hair, and was the only one of the white company who could boast of such a pronounced adornment.

As Mendelsund suggests, we get two features (her mouth and eyes) and nothing else, and the features seem designed to reveal Tess's sensuality and innocence rather than help us picture her precisely (what does 'peony' even mean as an adjective applied to a mouth?). The ribbon, too, seems to be establishing a mild vanity rather than adding visual detail.

What We See When We Read



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The Picture of Dorian Gray

Other novels offer even more lightly-sketched descriptions. Oscar Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* introduces one of his significant characters like this:

From the corner of the divan of Persian saddle-bags on which he was lying, smoking, as was his custom, innumerable cigarettes, Lord Henry Wotton could just catch the gleam of the honey-sweet and honey-coloured blossoms of a laburnum, whose tremulous branches seemed hardly able to bear the burden of a beauty so flamelike as theirs; and now and then the fantastic shadows of birds in flight flitted across the long tussore-silk curtains that were stretched in front of the huge window, producing a kind of momentary Japanese effect, and making him think of those pallid, jade-faced painters of Tokyo who, through the medium of an art that is necessarily immobile, seek to convey the sense of swiftness and motion.

This is the whole of the first description of Lord Henry and it's remarkable for a complete absence of physical information, describing instead his posture ('lying'), activity ('smoking') and the room he's in. He's established as louche and indulgent, and the aesthetically-informed description suggests a trained eye that sees the world in terms of the art it resembles – but we learn nothing of his physical characteristics. You might expect that Dorian, at least, a man whose physical beauty is central to the novel, would be described in a much more concrete and specific way, but that's not really the case:

Lord Henry looked at him. Yes, he was certainly wonderfully handsome, with his finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair. There was something in his face that made one trust him at once. All the candour of youth was there, as well as all youth's passionate purity. One felt that he had kept himself unspotted from the world. No wonder Basil Hallward worshipped him.

These physical details don't actually make imagining a face much easier – nobody

(without lipstick) actually has 'scarlet' lips, 'frank' describes personality more than physical shape, and while 'gold' is a concrete detail, 'crisp' doesn't help much with picturing the length or style of his hair. The trustworthiness, 'candour' and 'purity' are more impressions of a personality than delineations of facial features. It would certainly be surprising if two readers came away from this description imagining the same face.

Visual Absences in Playscripts

While novels turn out to be fairly imprecise in their descriptions, plays offer even less visual stimulus. The assumption that an actor will supply a character's physical form in performance means that it's common for a reader of playscripts to receive no physical information at all. Many – *The Duchess of Malfi*, *Dr Faustus*, *A Doll's House*, editions of Shakespeare... – simply list the characters' names in the paratext before the play begins. Stage roles on the page are often purely defined by what they do and say, with information on their looks entirely absent. In terms of setting, too, playscripts often don't specify beyond the bare minimum, because the scenes will take physical form in rooms of different shapes and sizes, created by set-designers of various preferences and budgets. Despite all of this undefined ambiguity we can read and enjoy (and imagine) playscripts without difficulty.

The Individual Reader's Visual Memories

If we accept that readers are often working with limited or ambiguous visual descriptions, how do they imagine anything at all? Mendelsund discusses his own experience:

I am reading Dickens again (*Our Mutual Friend*), and I'm imagining something from the book – an industrial harbor: a river, boats, wharves,

Mrs Beeton and Mrs Hinch

Two Domestic Goddesses and How They Represent Themselves

A Level Language teacher Kerry Kurczij compares two heavyweights of household management – one from the 1860s, the other from the here and now – to uncover all kinds of differences in key aspects of their address to their followers.

Smartphone screen shows:

SOZ CANT MAKE IT TONIGHT. HAVE TO HINCH BEFORE MUM AND DAD COME ROUND TOMOZI!

Coinages

Sophie Hinchcliffe, or 'Mrs Hinch' to her 'Hinchers', recently topped three million followers on her Instagram account (note the use of the agentive suffix: here begins our morphological journey, readers. Strap yourselves in if you love language levels!). She is a warm, glamorous, Essex girl-next-door. Her 'Freshen Up Fridays' and 'Hinch Hauls' (playful alliteration in premodified noun phrases – check), her 'Narnia' store cupboards (intertextual references – check) and her 'Minkeh' (regionalisms – check) are legendary. Add to this her domestic paraphernalia pet names: Sharon the Shark Vacuum Cleaner, Kermit the Green Window Cloth, and Dave the Duster, to name but a few, and you could be forgiven for thinking these faithful followers have been amassed through her linguistic creativity, rather than her cleaning and household management prowess (oh, and her coveted trademark spotless grey home). As a representation of modern-day domestic aspiration, there is much to fascinate and occupy us as students of English language use in context.

Nineteenth-century Representation of Domestic Management

Another domestic figure with a similarly huge contemporary following was one Mrs Isabella Beeton. The original 'domestic goddess', Mrs Beeton (interesting that Mrs Hinch was so-branded on social media even before her marriage to husband Jamie) began working on her *Book of Household Management* in serialised form as a set of 24 monthly articles for her husband's publication: *The English Woman's Domestic Magazine* in 1861, and had sold 2 million copies by 1868. Only 23 pages of Mrs Beeton's original edition of the book were actually devoted to 'household management' (guidance for the 'mistress' of the house on delegation of duties to staff reflecting the historical and social context in which the text was written). Her didactic approach is military in its tenor and distant with an avoidance of first-person singular pronouns:

I. AS WITH THE COMMANDER OF AN ARMY, or the leader of any enterprise, so is it with the mistress of a house.



Public domain

Discourse Structure

Whilst there is no such rich lexical seam to plough as per Mrs Hinch with her 'fur baby' (Henry Hinch, the family dog) and 'Cliff the Cif' (stainless steel cleaner), Mrs Beeton could be credited with contributing to the now familiar generic structure potential (Hasan, 1994) for recipes (which over 900 pages of her *Book of Household Management* feature):

user-friendly formulas listing ingredients, methods, timings and even the estimated cost of each recipe.

This was a welcome contrast to the previous recipe style of

daunting paragraph[s] of text with ingredients and method jumbled up together.

Not to be outdone, Mrs Hinch in her *Activity Journal* has generated her own genre: 'Hinch Lists' complete with colour-coded graphological signifiers (pastel highlighters, if you're interested).



In addition, her (genius) 'ta-da' (as opposed to 'to-do') lists demonstrate how she hopes a slight shift in semantics can represent a positive, healthy mindset. This leads us perfectly onto the relationship enacted

between the two text producers and their ideal readers.

Audience Positioning

Mode and contexts of production are crucial weapons in your quest to unlock your understanding of the ways meanings and representations are created in texts. In this case, the twenty-first-century online mode of an Instagram post versus the nineteenth-century print mode of a book are worlds apart. The relative affordances and constraints of the era are always a valuable point of comparison. Much of the audience positioning is highly influenced by the contexts of production and the expectations an audience might have about how they will be addressed and what their own engagement might be.

Both our subjects (at least as brands) 'create content' for their audiences prolifically: Mrs Hinch posts daily, sometimes several times a day, and, to date, has published two best-selling books, compendiums of her most popular posts. Having been open publicly about her own anxiety and mental health struggles functioning as a catalyst for her orderliness and cleaning routines, when she shared concerns about not being able to keep pace with demand from her 'Hinch Army' on announcing her pregnancy, they responded typically with love and support: <https://fiveminutemum.com/2019/01/23/an-open-letter-to-mrs-hinch/>

Adopting largely second-person address and inclusive first person plural throughout her posts, be they written or spoken in mode, Mrs Hinch positions herself alongside her ideal readers (her 'Hinchers; her loyal followers):

I knew exactly what it was... Mrs Hinch The Activity Journal!
I opened it and just sat quiet looking at it thinking I can't believe the image I had in mind has actually come to life 🙏 Obviously it would be grey 😊 but I wanted the design of a gift! This book is all about giving yourself the gift of time out: time to plan, time to dream, time to relax, time for us to have a bit of a giggle and a de-stress.

I remember when I first saw pictures of how you had all styled Hinch Yourself Happy in your homes and it was so so surreal! So I can't wait to see how you style your activity journal, but more importantly I can't wait to see how you complete your pages! It's packed with over 100 fun activities to

The semantic field (which includes the stative verbs 'relax' and 'dream' and the abstract nouns 'gift', 'giggle' and 'de-stress') is a clear acknowledgement of the strains and demands of modern life, and the need to actively seek solace when it all becomes too much.

In complete contrast, 'Hysterics' and how utterly unbecoming they are for any self-respecting Victorian 'mistress' of a household warrant an entire sub-section in Beeton's book!

Another aspect in which our women differ is their attitude to their readers:

Beeton pragmatically implies criticism here. The readers are positioned to question themselves: am I said-housewife whose home is untidy and whose family's dinners are badly cooked? Is Beeton perhaps hinting at her own saint-like virtue in slogging away at producing this book for such slovenly readers? Her pattern (NB: always look out for these in exams if you can) of negative abstract nouns ('labour... discomfort... suffering... discontent' – two negative prefixes there, bound morpheme-lovers!) and adjectives ('badly-cooked' and 'untidy') used in parallel, combine to juxtapose what can be without the Beeton method, and will be with it.

Mrs Hinch, on the other hand, is careful never to press her methods on others or imply criticism of her followers. On the contrary, much of her direct address to them (via her lexeme of choice: 'guys' or the possessive noun phrase 'my Hinchers') involves rapport talk: thanking them for their loyalty and expressing incredulity that she is a source of interest/inspiration at all. She commonly opens with phatic tokens and positive politeness strategies:

It would be unfair to imply Beeton is above all shows of gratitude; her comparatively reserved expression here in the preface of the original work is, perhaps (ALWAYS be duly tentative, readers), more a product of historical and social context:

I must frankly own that, if I had known beforehand the labour which this book has entailed, I should never have been courageous enough to commence it. What moved me, in the first instance, to attempt a work like this, was the discomfort and suffering which I had seen brought about by household mis-management. I have always thought that there is no more fruitful source of family discontent than badly-cooked dinners and untidy ways.

 mrshinchhome Good evening my Hinchers!
I hope you all had a lovely weekend

I wish here to acknowledge the kind letters and congratulations I have received during the progress of this work,

Hardly gushing, however.

'Sticks and Stones'?

As with the majority of the 'Insta-rati', Mrs Hinch is no stranger, however, to trolling where face threatening acts abound:



Posthumously (and it is imperative to note that much of what we now consider to be *The Book of Household Management* was written after her death, either by her husband or subsequent owners of the Beeton brand who saw its mass consumer appeal), Mrs Beeton also came under fire for having plagiarised her cookery content almost in its entirety. A quick, corpus-style exercise (typing the search terms 'Mrs Beeton' and 'plagiarism' into your search engine of choice should prompt some interesting results in terms of the most common collocations produced in your top 25 hits).



Representation of Text-Producer

Love them or loathe them, one of the affordances of computer-mediated communication is the photographic filter: a graphological device which allows users to augment selfies/videos with various, often weird and wacky, additions to their usual look. What started presumably as an in-joke with her friends and family, has become Mrs Hinch's instantly recognisable alter-ego: Gretel; the grey-haired, rouge-lipped, panda-eyed, squeaky-voiced sensation, has become synonymous with the text producer's account. And though she didn't realise it, Mrs Beeton also had a version of herself which lived on as one of the most recognisable 'brand icons' in publishing to date:



Finally, the noun phrases 'Rags for daily use' (Beeton) versus 'cloth babies' (Hinch) – as if you needed those brackets! – provide the perfect juxtaposed representations of our subjects. The first, spartan and almost jaggedly harsh in its phonology (listen to those snarling

Viking phonemes in the plural concrete noun 'rags'); the second, euphemised and diminished both in its sounds and lexical choices: both clean up dirt (possibly even human excretions after a fit of 'Hysterics'! Where's the vomit emoji, guys?). Their

semantic differences communicate the very different social worlds in which our text producers were viewed as queens of household management.

Conclusion

So, where does this leave us? Exhausted by the mere thought of picking up a steam mop? What even *is* a steam mop?

Maybe it would do us all good to clean up our acts: in fact, let's all stop 'Beeton' ourselves up and 'Hinch' ourselves happy.

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Hinch Glossary

Hinch: To clean – verbing

Hinching: The act of cleaning/ present continuous

Hincher: One who cleans – agentive suffix

Hinch Haul: Shopping trip cleaning 'goodies' – premodifier

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PITIFUL DESIRE

Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* explores sexual desire from multiple perspectives, presenting it as exhilarating and vital, but also as compulsive and debasing, suggests A Level teacher, Alice Reeve-Tucker.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Being associated with desire, the symbol of the mechanical streetcar 'grinding along the tracks' (Scene 6) sets the tone for how this theme is represented in relation to Blanche DuBois, the play's tragic protagonist; her sexual desire is all-consuming, powerful, and relentless. However, despite her shocking promiscuity, which includes seducing underage boys and working as a prostitute, I would argue that there is also something pitiful about her behaviour. Indeed, Williams' genius lies in his ability to elicit a compassionate, rather than censorious, response from his audience towards Blanche and her transgressive desires. Williams achieves this influence over his audience by crafting a space for Blanche to articulate the tragic reasons behind her self-destructive actions, and by gradually revealing Blanche's self-loathing and fragility, which are exposed in relation to her deteriorating mental state. Moreover, he presents brutally condemnatory responses from male characters, which serve to suggest to an audience that Blanche's behaviour needs to be met with sympathy rather than punishment. Arguably, a significant reason why Williams encourages his audience to pity Blanche is because of his affinity with her: Williams suffered from a compulsive desire for casual homosexual encounters, which, like Blanche, he admitted to pursuing in order to fulfil a

deep longing for connection and validation. Such an autobiographical affinity perhaps helps to infuse his depiction of Blanche's plight with complexity and compassion.

A Façade of Purity and Refinement

From the outset of the play, Blanche deliberately presents herself as a morally pure and refined Southern Belle: she wears delicate white clothing, and is initially characterised by her genteel manners and expressions. However, this façade starts to crack when we see her discussing the nature of lust with her sister, Stella, early on. Blanche, who has unexpectedly arrived early to stay with Stella, refers to Stella's passionate feelings for her husband with disgust, claiming that she suffers from:

brutal desire – just Desire! – the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another...

Blanche reveals that she is really talking about her own relationship with desire when she admits:

It brought me here – Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be.

Blanche's reference to the streetcar is key: she is presenting herself as having no agency over her desire ('it brought me here'), and she refers to the contraption as a dominating and damaging force ('brutal') that victimises and ensnares her in a never-ending series of encounters she feels helpless to escape ('up one old narrow street and down another').

Compulsive Sexuality

Her inability to control her compulsive sexual behaviour is soon made manifest when we observe her seduction of a 'Young man' who is trying to collect money for a paper. It is an uncomfortable scene to watch: Blanche displays predatory characteristics and acts spontaneously, seemingly without any awareness that her behaviour is inappropriate. Alone with him on stage, she tells him bluntly:

You make my mouth water

Scene 4

before reframing her seductive advances in a romantic light

I want to kiss you – just once – softly and sweetly on your mouth

yet,

Without waiting for him to accept, she crosses quickly to him and presses her lips to his

Scene 6

Scene 5



Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski and Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois in the film adaptation of Tennessee Williams' play, directed by Elia Kazan, 1951 / Credit: Granger Historical Picture Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Her impulsive response is made all the worse because her suitor, Mitch, is about to arrive for a date and she has worked hard to establish herself in his eyes as morally upright. During her date with Mitch, she reveals her own awareness of her hypocritical behaviour when she announces:

I guess it is just that I have – old fashioned ideals!

before she

rolls her eyes, knowing he cannot see her face
Scene 6

Her hypocrisy is further exposed when the shocking extent of her promiscuous behaviour is uncovered by her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. Stanley discovers that just before Blanche arrived at their house, the management at her local hotel

requested her to turn in her room-key – for permanently!

because she worked as a prostitute there. Worse still, she had acquired a reputation for being

not just different but downright loco-nuts
Scene 8

and is no longer welcome back in the town. Part of this reputation included having her house branded 'Out-of-Bounds' by a local army camp, and being fired from her school

teacher job for getting 'mixed up' with a 17-year-old boy [Scene 8]. Blanche's sexual appetite is disturbingly voracious: she has pursued men, and boys, to the point of ruin, and yet, as we have seen, perceives herself as a victim of desires and circumstances that she cannot control.

Sympathy for Blanche

Despite the scandalous nature of Blanche's sexual past, Williams seeks to develop the audience's sympathy for her soon after Stanley's revelations. Blanche opens up to Stella, and thus to the audience, when she explains that her promiscuity is a symptom of a profound need for security and sanctuary. She euphemistically admits that she

wasn't so good the last two years or so

and that she turned to sexual intimacies when vulnerable for a sense of validation, because:

People don't see you – men – don't – don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you've got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you're going to have someone's protection.
Scene 5

This need for the protection of men is also bound up in her loss of financial security

with the demise of Belle Rêve. Blanche reveals that she wants a relationship with Mitch because it will bring an end to her ruinous desires and unfulfilling one-night stands, and will offer instead an opportunity for permanence in a socially acceptable relationship. However, Stanley informs Mitch about Blanche's past, and he refuses to consider her as girlfriend material.

We watch as Blanche desperately tries to explain to Mitch why she had so 'many intimacies with strangers', as they were

all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with
Scene 9

In particular, she recalls the devastating suicide of her young, gay husband as being the catalyst for her promiscuity, and breathlessly suggests:

I think it was panic, just panic that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection – here and there, in the most – unlikely places – even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy.
Scene 11

Once again, she frames her voracious desire in euphemistic terms of passivity, as the panic 'drove' her to sexual encounters, rather than being something she had control over. The verb 'hunting' is telling, however, as it reveals her aggressive, primal need for stability, which is the key to

understanding the motivations behind her desperate actions.

Mitch's Disgust – Williams' Empathy

Mitch exhibits a dismissive, disgusted reaction to Blanche's past; he fails to sympathise with her plight and instead viciously denounces her –

You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother

Scene 9

before clumsily attempting to rape her as a confirmation of her morally soiled status. Reflecting on Mitch's devastating response, Williams wrote:

he can see only the details of promiscuity, not the underlying panic and need for protection which had forced this upon her.

John Lahr: *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (2014)

It is exactly this ability to perceive the complex psychological reasons behind Blanche's damaging behaviour, and to pity them, that Williams wants to encourage in his audience. His desire to affect the audience in this way stems from his empathy with Blanche's struggles, as he openly acknowledges that his work is

emotionally autobiographical [in that] it reflects the emotional currents of my life.

Tennessee Williams: *The Art of Theater* No. 5, Interviewed by Dotson Rader (Issue 81, Fall 1981)

Elia Kazan, who famously collaborated with Williams in staging the play on Broadway, confirms what he sees as a deep affinity between the playwright and his creation:

I'll put it to you plainly, Tennessee Williams equals Blanche. He is Blanche.

John Lahr: *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (2014)

Blanche's Self-Loathing

By the end of the play, the audience sees that Blanche's futile search for validation via short-lived sexual encounters serves only to increase her self-loathing and her loneliness. She is painfully aware of the chasm between her presentation of herself as a demure, genteel Southern Belle, and

the reality of her status: she is an ageing spinster, who is homeless, jobless, and with a reputation in tatters. Unable to bear such pressures, Blanche mentally deteriorates, and her disintegration is completed when she is brutally raped by Stanley. He uses his knowledge of her sexual history as an excuse to debase her further, when he taunts her:

Come to think of it – maybe you wouldn't be bad to – interfere with...

Scene 11

He implies that she has brought this prospective rape upon herself:

We've had this date with each other from the beginning!

Scene 11

Like Mitch before him, Stanley punishes Blanche for her sexual past. An audience is encouraged to view these male responses as unnecessarily cruel and harmful.

In the final scene of the play, we meet a brusque, officious nurse from the institution, who cruelly 'pinions' Blanche's arms in preparation for transporting her away (Scene 11). In contrast to such aggressive treatment, the doctor responds to Blanche with gentleness and respect. He 'crosses to Blanche and crouches in front of her', speaks reassuringly, so that her 'terror subsides a little', and then

draws her up gently and supports her with his arm and leads her through the portieres.

Scene 11

By ending the play with this doctor's compassionate response, Williams is signalling that the audience needs to look beyond Blanche's damaging sexual desires and try to perceive the complex, fragile, woman being driven by them. Perhaps this is the sympathetic response Williams wished he could elicit for himself, when he struggled so painfully with his own self-destructive sexual behaviour.

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Getting confident with unseen poetry

A young man with dark hair, wearing a red button-down shirt over a white t-shirt, is performing on a stage. He is looking slightly to his left with a focused expression. The background is dark with some blurred lights, suggesting a stage setting. Another person is partially visible in the background, out of focus.

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