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Excellent Foppery - Comedy in Shakespeare’s tragedies

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

Gravediggers' humour

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'The readiness is all'

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

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

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

Verbal duelling

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

> *You gave us the counterfeit last night*

and when Romeo fails to comprehend he is told:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clowns, fools and jesters

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

Licensed fools

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

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

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

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

Lear's folly

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

Iago: a malevolent wit

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

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

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

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

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

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

A complex conclusion

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

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Defining poetry Michael Rosen

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

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

Am I bovvered?

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

Let readers decide?

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

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

Intrinsic features of poetry?

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

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

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

A what-is-poetry checklist

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

1. Patterning

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

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

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

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

2. Pithiness

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

3. Proximity

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

> *Busy old fool, unruly sun...*

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

4. Pictures

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

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

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

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

5. Mode of address

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

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

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

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

6. Scavengers

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

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

7. The mix

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

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Print

Openings in Contemporary Fiction – Questions, Challenges and Surprises

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

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

Paul Beatty – The Sellout

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

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

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

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

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

Deborah Levy – Hot Milk

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

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

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

Ottessa Moshfegh – Eileen

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

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

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

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

Graeme Macrae Burnet – His Bloody Project

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

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

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

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

What's Revealed About Contemporary Fiction

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

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

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

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

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Wordsworth, William: a poet of the ordinary

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

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

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

And later in the poem:

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

What does Wordsworth find out about this old man?

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

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

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

> *With envy …*

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

Noticing the unnoticed

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

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

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

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

A frugal life

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

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

Radical in style and subject matter

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

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

He continues that this particular collection of poetry was:

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

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

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

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

Rejecting 'poetic diction'

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

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

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

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

Article Written By: Neil King

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

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

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

Trying Something Out

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

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

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

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

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

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

Orwell and Early 20th-century Essays

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

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

The Extinction of the Essay?

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

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

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

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

Criticism, Judgement and Celebration

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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