

The Lang-Lit Lab

Research Digest 1

Getting Inside a Character's Mind

Literature has the power to transport us to fictional worlds, sometimes very different to our own, and to allow us to experience events outside of our normal everyday lives. Literary fiction also takes us into the minds of characters, giving us some sense of their thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Christiana Gregoriou's chapter on 'Voice' explores some of the ways in which writers can give readers insights into how characters view the world'

Gregoriou draws on the concept of **mind style**, first used by Roger Fowler in 1977 to refer to how language is used to project the workings of a fictional mind and to give readers a sense of how characters organise their ideas and how they project, through their speech and thought, a particular version of reality. Stylisticians working on mind style have often found it fruitful to examine cases where there is something striking or unusual about how authors represent the thoughts and perceptions of their characters. Gregoriou continues this line of research by examining the mind styles of three fictional characters, all of whom we could say are unconventional in some way: Bruno in John Boyne's (2006) *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas*, Camille in Gillian Flynn's (2006) *Sharp Objects* and Susie Salmon in Alice Sebold's (2002) *The Lovely Bones*. Gregoriou's discussion ranges across a number of language levels and concepts to explore characterisation in these novels.

The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas is written from the perspective of Bruno, the nine-year old son of a Nazi commandant posted near to Auschwitz. Bruno is ignorant both of his father's position and of horrors that take place within the concentration camp. Gregoriou explains how even some simple stylistic observations provide insight into Bruno's mind style. For example, he uses extensively co-ordinated clauses and parallel grammatical structures that suggest a childlike view of the world, and he repeatedly shows a lack of awareness of what happens inside the camp, evident in how he labels the prisoners' outfits as 'pyjamas'. The latter is an example of **underlexicalisation**; Bruno has neither the vocabulary nor the schematic knowledge to make sense of the outfits and so uses a word (and a conceptual structure) that he does know. Further similar examples include:

- Bruno's mispronunciations such as 'Out-With' for 'Auschwitz' (Boyne 2006: 24) and 'the Fury' for 'the Führer' (Boyne 2006: 5) which reveal his own way of making sense of these concepts ('Out-With' captures the position of the prisoners outside of Bruno's home but constrained within the camp; 'the Fury' captures Hitler's anger and aggression);
- The chapter titles, which mirror Bruno's view of the world, e.g. 'How Mother Took Credit For Something She Hadn't Done' (Boyne 2006: 67).

As Gregoriou explains, these language patterns both frame the events of the novel through Bruno's world-view and provide the reader with access to a particular – and in this instance, unreliable – fictional mind. Bruno's specific **naming strategies** suggest that his mind is constrained by his age, naivety and innocence; the reader is therefore asked to question Bruno's point of view, using their own knowledge and increasing realisation of Bruno's limitations to make sense of the events and characters in the novel.

The second novel, *Sharp Objects*, is narrated by Camille, a journalist who investigates a murder case in her home town. Camille has a history of self-harming. As the novel progresses, the reader is given insight into her past and how she reflects both on her actions and on her relationship with her body. Camille's self-harming involves carving words into her skin and Gregoriou outlines how, as the novel progresses, Camille is portrayed as having less and less control of her actions. A key marker of Camille's cognitive functioning is the way that she personifies her skin and the cuts on it. In the following examples quoted by Gregoriou, each word that Camille has carved (in italics) demonstrates a degree of **agency**.

Sometimes I hear the words squabbling down at each other across my body. Up on my shoulder, *panty* calling down to *destiny* on my right ankle. On the underside of a big toe, *sew* uttering muffled threats to *baby* just under my left breast. I can quiet them down by thinking of *vanish*, always hushed and regal, lording over the other words from the safety of the nape of my neck.

(Flynn 2006: 78-79)

In contrast, Gregoriou shows how Camille's presentation of her own agency is downplayed as her cutting urges grow. For example she outlines:

- Instances where Camille presents agency as transferred on to the instrument of cutting (the knife) as in 'I could already feel the knifepoint gently pressing against the plump pads of my fingertips' (Flynn 2006: 55);
- Multiple instances of personification, e.g. 'On my left calf *freak* sighed suddenly' (Flynn 2006: 326);
- Camille's own submission to the urge to self-harm, realised through the modal lexical verbs 'I wanted to cut...I wanted to slice *barren* into my skin'.

Like *Sharp Objects*, *The Lovely Bones* also portrays a traumatic event, in this instance the murder of Susie Salmon. Susie acts as the novel's narrator through whom we witness the aftermath of her murder and its effects on her family. Unlike Bruno and (to an extent) Camille, Susie is a

reliable narrator, having a degree of omniscience that enables her to relay details of her murder to us in the opening pages and to move in and out of the minds of other characters as the novel progresses. As Gregoriou argues, Susie is 'reliable and unlimited' (Gregoriou 2014: 177), able to access and then present to us her father's memories, her sister's feelings, and her mother's thoughts including those before Susie was born. Susie is also able to enter the mind of George Harvey, her killer, both immediately following her death and as a much younger man.

As in *Sharp Objects*, Gregoriou outlines how the representation of agency is an important stylistic trait of a character's mind style. In recounting her murder, Susie presents the knife used to kill her as animated. Gregoriou argues that this grammatical configuration works to distance Harvey from the killing, instead presenting Susie's death as ultimately predestined rather than through Harvey's power:

He brought back a knife. Unsheathed, it smiled at me, curving up in a grin...The end came.

(Sebold 2002: 15)

Equally, when Harvey dies as a result of being hit by a falling icicle, Gregoriou points out that agency here is masked by how Susie presents the events. She explains how 'The icicle fell' (Sebold 2002: 327) is presented as an event rather than an action. Put simply, it just happens and, as Gregoriou argues, the grammatical structure downplays Susie's agency in the event. This discussion of agency and the consequent refusal to assign blame is also significant when considering the meaning that Susie gives to the phrase 'the lovely bones' that of course acts as the novel's title. Gregoriou points out that over the course of the narrative the phrase's meaning becomes more and more related to the idea of family connections. She argues that the unconventional pairing of 'lovely' with 'bones' signals both Susie's innocence and our ability to find good in bad. It seems then that Susie's language use helps her to make sense of the world and to reframe loss and pain in terms of recovery and growth. In following Susie's mind style, the reader is also given access to this way of viewing the world.

This is a digest of the following publication:

Gregoriou, Christiana. 2014. 'Voice'. In Peter Stockwell and Sara Whiteley (eds) *The Cambridge Handbook of Stylistics*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 165-178.

Reference

Fowler, Roger. 1977. *Linguistics and the Novel*. London: Methuen.

Trying It Out

Here are some further ideas for exploring mind style with your students

1. Take a character in a novel, poem or play and trace the development of their mind style as the text progresses. Are there any notable changes, shifts or anomalies? How might these be explained in terms of both the text's themes and of the action and events that occur within it?

2. Since Gregoriou argues that it is possible to explore the concept of mind style across different language levels, students could examine which particular language patterns tend to dominate in a text they are studying. For example, Bruno's mind style is largely a result of underlexicalisation (**lexis**) and insufficient schematic knowledge which clashes with the reader's own understanding (**pragmatics**). In contrast, and as Gregoriou notes, much of the power in the presentation of the mind styles of Camille and Susie comes from the ways in which they assign or downplay grammatical agency. What patterns, and at which language levels, do students see emerging in the text(s) they are studying?

3. All of the examples Gregoriou discusses are from novels whose characters have unusual minds or who find themselves in extreme situations. In these cases, it can sometimes be fairly straightforward to isolate particular language patterns. To what extent is the concept of mind style useful in less radical examples?

4. Some fruitful comparative work, perhaps as preparation for NEA, would involve asking students to examine characters from within a single text, across literary texts, or across a literary text and some representation of a mind in non-literary material (e.g. advertising). The contents of this digest would offer a useful starting point for independent wider reading!