

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

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FIRST-PERSON NARRATION: THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN
CONTEMPORARY FICTION

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This thesis comprises a novel and a critical commentary. The novel *Cure for the Damned* is in the Gothic tradition but has a contemporary setting. The story is told by two first-person narrators. Magnus, a forensic psychiatrist, and his partner Tom, a meteorologist, leave their life in central London to set up a therapeutic community in the Sussex countryside. Isolated in a damp cottage on the edge of woodland and cut off from their support network, old hurts and fears surface. Mistrust lies at the heart of their story. Tom and Magnus provide subtly and, at other times, starkly differing accounts of a disintegrating relationship that ends in murder. Both narrators slide between truthfulness, untrustworthiness and fallibility in a world where the real is undone by deception and trickery. The subplot is informed by the Orpheus myth, introducing a magical realist strand to the narrative in which the underworld intrudes in dreams, imaginings and hallucinations. In the commentary to accompany the creative practice element of the thesis, I use the theories developed by Elke D'hoker, James Phelan and Greta Olson to examine three broad categories of unreliable first-person narration in a trio of well-known works: narrative instability in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, bonding and estranging unreliability in *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov, and the untrustworthy narrator in Donna Tartt's *The Secret History*. In exploring the impact of these different types of unreliability on my own novel *Cure for the Damned*, I aim to show how the study of narrative theory is a useful tool for a writer of fiction, in that intuitive and sometimes impulsive choices are made conscious, thereby opening up narrative options, as well as clarifying and providing solutions to essential concerns of voice, structure and mood.

Key words: narrative instability, bonding and estranging unreliability, untrustworthy, fallible, Orpheus myth, magical realism, Gothic.

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THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION:
FIRST-PERSON NARRATORS IN *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*, *LOLITA*,
THE SECRET HISTORY AND *CURE FOR THE DAMNED*

Introduction

My intention in this critical commentary is to examine key theoretical conceptualisations of unreliable narration in three well-known novels, Henry James' (1898) novella *The Turn of the Screw*, Vladimir Nabokov's (1955) *Lolita*, and Donna Tartt's (1992) *The Secret History*. By examining the way in which the first-person narrator functions in the above-mentioned novels, my aim is to gain a better understanding of its operation in the creative practice element of this thesis in my own novel *Cure for the Damned*. Narrative theory is a useful tool in this respect, as the emphasis is not on judging the quality of the writing, but rather on taking a distanced, dispassionate look at the function and effects of different conventions, in this case the unreliable narrator. In *The Turn of the Screw*, my focus is on narrative instability in a tale where the real is mixed with the otherworldly, and transmitted through the consciousness of a disturbed narrator. In *Lolita* I explore the ways in which the unwary reader is initially encouraged to bond with a narrator, and how this bond breaks down over the course of the narrative. In *The Secret History*, I examine how a narrator can be both untrustworthy and fallible at different times in the narrative, sliding between genuinely misreading events, and deliberately lying to the reader. In the following chapters I aim to show that these three different examples of unreliability are relevant to my own novel. In *Cure for the Damned* the two firstperson narrators, Tom and his partner Magnus, give differing accounts of events that end in a death; whether it is murder or not is left open for the reader to decide. Similarly, each of the above-mentioned novels are narrated by someone with something to hide; murder in the case of *Lolita* and *The Secret History*, and a mystery that will never to be solved in *The Turn of the Screw*.

Cure for the Damned has two first-person narrators who are both protagonists.

Given that the homodiegetic narrator is central to *The Turn of the Screw*, *Lolita*, and *The Secret History*, I mean to examine the nature of the connection between author and reader, the varying degrees of authority and reliability, and how these narrators affect the way readers interpret the story. The concept of the unreliable narrator grew out of Wayne Booth's rhetorical investigation into author function formulated in the (1961) first edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. As a writer of fiction, my approach in this commentary falls broadly under the rhetorical umbrella, in that it takes the author's intentions into account in the production of meaning. From a rhetorical perspective narrative is conceived as a 'purposive act of communication about characters and events' (James Phelan, 2006, p.298). The emphasis is placed on 'somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened' (2006, p.298). What is seen as important is how narrative influences the reader's understanding and values, and how the reader receives what she or he is being told. This approach differs from a more broadly based poststructuralist, cognitivist conceptualisation which examines the underlying rules of narrative, and focuses on the structure of a text, rather than referring to character development and voice.

Creative Practice element – *Cure for the Damned*

The title *Cure for the Damned* is carried over from an earlier draft of the novel. In this earlier version, Magnus is a mad doctor, a psychiatrist working in the 1760s for the famous Dr Battie, who unlike the brutal Munro, director of Bedlam at the time, believed that most madness was curable with the proper therapeutic treatment. Leopold, a vile member of the King's Messengers, an early version of MI5, is brought to Magnus, convinced he is possessed by the devil. For this version of the novel I did a huge amount of research around the subject of Georgian mad houses and the Methodist belief in exorcism as a cure for insanity. Despite repeated attempts to tell the story of Magnus' efforts to cure his powerful patient who insists on exorcism, the novel died on me.

The move to a contemporary setting was liberating, my eighteenth-century Magnus became a forensic psychiatrist, and Tom, his eighteenth-century servant, became his partner. The eighteenth-century novel was told in close third person, focalised through Magnus. Retold in the present day, Tom narrates the story in first person. I kept the original title *Cure for the Damned* because more recently, when researching the Orpheus myth, I discovered a quote taken from Graves' (1955) retelling of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in which Orpheus is described as 'temporarily suspending the tortures of the damned' in the underworld with his 'plaintive music' (Graves, 1984, p.112). This cemented a connection with Magnus, who has spent his life working with the criminally insane, many of them psychopaths, traditionally seen as incurable and beyond hope.

In the first draft of this contemporary version of the story, the focus is on the therapeutic community run by Magnus and Tom, and the disastrous revenge attack of one of Magnus' ex-patients, who is based on Leopold, the King's messenger in the

eighteenth-century version. I received notes from an agent at Curtis Brown telling me that the novel fell uncomfortably between genres and needed a much clearer sense of the marketplace. I was also informed that the relationship between Tom and Magnus had been sacrificed for detailed descriptions of Magnus' therapeutic community. I spent a year rewriting the novel, working from the agent's notes. In this second draft, still written from Tom's perspective in the first person, I focused on Tom and Magnus' flight to the cottage, where Magnus is pursued to his death by a vengeful expatient whom he has experimented on, and abandoned when all hope of finding a cure fails. I did an enormous amount of research on psychopathy, reading endless papers and case notes, hoping to build a convincing antagonist. Nevertheless, in focusing on the psychological thriller with an eye to the marketplace, I was inadvertently overlooking the advice I had been given by the agent, which was to work on the central relationship, that of Magnus and Tom.

This second draft was then sent to an editor suggested by the agent. Essentially his six-page report returned a verdict that was not dissimilar from the agent's: the central relationship still wasn't working. He thought that the narrator Tom was too 'cranky' and suggested I tell the story in third person so as to broaden the scope to include Magnus' more stable perspective. I went back to the drawing board. In this third draft I gave Magnus a voice. The novel is now told in first-person from both his and Tom's perspectives. Once Magnus begins his side of the story, a shift occurs and the novel becomes a domestic relationship story about the devastating consequences of lack of trust.

I decided to include a prologue, something inspired by the three novels under discussion. In the Prologue the reader is told the horrible end at the start, before, in the course of the novel, discovering how it came about. Chapter One starts with the visit to the damp cottage on the edge of woodland in the South Downs. Magnus loves its

quaint old-world charm, whilst Tom is horrified by it, frightened by the shadow of Beechwood, a nearby mental hospital where Magnus has a new job. In subsequent chapters I flash back to their first meeting, told from their separate viewpoints. They find sanctuary in each other, but there are problems. Magnus' long-held fixation with Alex, a countertenor opera singer who he has loved from afar for over fifteen years, must be destroyed in order for him to build a life with Tom; and he must find a way of accepting Tom's adopted niece Kitty. They manage for a couple of years until Tom's mother dies and he has a breakdown. Magnus takes the opportunity to spirit Tom away to the countryside, in part because of the new job, but also as a way of ditching Kitty. She is left behind in London, and he has Tom to himself. But, perversely, now that he is alone with Tom, he finds him abhorrent since his collapse, and is unable to bear his weakness.

In this draft, I have taken nearly fifty thousand words to lay the groundwork, in an attempt to convince the reader that Tom and Magnus are heading towards the disaster described in the Prologue. Tom is desperately trying to hold it together following his breakdown after his mother's death, but is failing miserably. He develops a hatred for Carl, one of the builders renovating the cottage. Carl is openly homophobic and doesn't bother to conceal his contempt from Tom, who doesn't help himself by hiding away all day and not coming out till after dark. Magnus, like Orpheus, abandons Tom, and goes off to work to heal the sick at the new hospital, Beechridge, perched on the hill overlooking the cottage. Left on his own, Tom bonds with a stray one-eyed cat, developing a fierce attachment to the creature. When he finds his cat caught in trap near his caravan he immediately suspects Carl. His suspicions are confirmed on discovering Carl trapping animals in the woods. He tries to talk about his concerns with Magnus but Magnus has troubles of his own: he is being pursued by Adam, a vengeful ex-patient from his previous hospital, and faces a

tribunal. The strain triggers his old fixation, and he starts to feel the opera singer Alex's presence in the cottage.

Tom picks up on Magnus' reignited fixation, and so begins a horrible pulling apart as they creep off into their separate corners, and think their private, frightened angry thoughts about the other. When Tom's cat is killed, neither speaks of the incident. Magnus goes off to work as usual and returns that night to discover that Carl has been taken into hospital having suffered a near-fatal accident. He suspects Tom of attempting to murder Carl. The last thread of trust is broken. Both Tom and Magnus misinterpret apparently incriminating evidence – a text message sent by Magnus, and a bag of bloodstained clothes hidden by Tom – as proof of the other's treachery. Tom thinks Magnus is taking steps to have him sectioned and incarcerated in his hospital. The disaster that follows is triggered by a patient at Magnus' new hospital, who claims to have discovered an entrance to the underworld. This subplot, drawing on the Orpheus myth, runs throughout the story, and ties in with both Magnus and Tom's urgent need to speak to the dead. Re-examining the Orpheus myth whilst writing the current fourth draft of the novel has clarified the reasons for the disastrous collapse of the central relationship. Both Tom and Magnus are fatherless men brought up by a strong mother who abandons them when she disappears into the underworld. Tom has a breakdown towards the start of the novel, convinced that his last painful encounter with his mother inadvertently caused her death. In contrast, Magnus never properly grieved for his mother who died when he was twenty. He runs away to Canada, re-emerging seven years later as a medical doctor, and embarks on a career in psychiatrics, working with the criminally insane. Locked off from close emotional contact, he falls in love with a dangerous unobtainable object, Alex, who effectively becomes his Eurydice and beckons him to his death at the end of the book.

Ovid, in his description of the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice, paints a dismal scenario: at their wedding Eurydice is dressed in a shroud, already in love with death. Afterwards, Orpheus abandons her, going off into the woods to gather healing plants. Shunned by her husband, Eurydice doesn't have the strength to resist death when she is bitten by a snake, and lets go of life, crossing over into the underworld. In respect of Tom and Magnus' relationship, the roles of Orpheus and Eurydice are interchangeable; at times Tom is Eurydice and at other times he is Orpheus, and vice versa, according to how each is perceived by the other, and the role they inhabit at the time. In a chapter near the end of the book, Tom (as Orpheus) finds Magnus (as Eurydice) dying in the frozen car; he could save him, but bitterness and mistrust stop him, and he leaves him to die. When he turns back, it is too late; Magnus has stumbled off into the woods and suffers the same fate as Orpheus, beaten to death by Carl's friends in the homophobic attack described in the Prologue.

As mentioned earlier, the main body of the narrative is divided between partners, Tom and Magnus, with the occasional interjection from Kitty, Tom's unofficially adopted niece, and his estranged sister Angela. As with *The Turn of the Screw*, *Lolita* and *The Secret History*, the Prologue sets the scene. Magnus tells the reader that he has been murdered in a homophobic attack in the woods at the back of the cottage. He then steps back and allows Tom to take control of the narrative for the first two chapters. As the novel progresses, both Tom and Magnus become increasingly secretive, mistrustful, paranoid and treacherous, with neither of them having the final word in terms of veracity. My interest as a writer is in the grey area where the reader is undecided about a narrator. With a lack of indicative clues and signals, how is the reader to know if the narrator is supplying the truth, and even if the reader is in possession of the facts, how can they be sure that the narrator's interpretation is sound? Here my focus is on that hinterland between fantasy and the

real, as encapsulated in the Orpheus myth, providing the magical realism subplot that comes to fruition in the final four chapters of the novel as Magnus and Tom's relationship splinters, and Magnus faces his own death. In the case of Magnus' narration, the experiencing self in first-person present tense is the result of trauma following his violent death, and is indicative of an inability to achieve retrospective distance from the recent past. Whereas Tom, despite coming across as the more obviously mentally unstable, is nevertheless able to achieve some measure of hindsight in being able to give his account of events in the past tense.

The First-Person Narrator

I was advised that switching to the third person would broaden the perspective of my novel. But most third-person novels are focalised through one person who occupies the figural centre stage. Often a writer working in the third person chooses to shift perspective between chapters as a way of broadening the scope. Celeste Ng's (2016) novel *Everything I Never Told You* moves skilfully between the various members of an unhappy Chinese American family, revealing secrets to the reader that fill in a more complete picture; in the same way, a novel narrated in the first person can switch between narrators to provide different perspectives. How is the writer to make the choice? Does the third person, even when closely focalised, allow more breathing space? The author, in following the character, can draw back and inform the reader what has gone before, and what might follow, setting the scene, providing relevant family history etc.; however, a first-person narrator is capable of drawing back, assuming a teller mode and filling the reader in on background details in the same way.

Narrative theory is useful in addressing these sorts of queries as it can categorise and describe a range of options that have been used by storytellers. Franz K. Stanzel (1986, p.51) describes ‘three narrative situations [...] the authorial, figural and first-person’. Monica Fludernik (2009, p.152) notes that first-person narrative and authorial narrative foreground the narrator figure; there is a ‘distinct teller persona’ although the first-person narrator often figures as the protagonist. She points out that the authorial narrator who does not have a homodiegetic function has an external perspective on the story, whilst with the figural or heterodiegetic narrative situation ‘the reader [is] not being told things (teller mode) but being shown them (telling versus showing), seeing them – as it were – unfold before his/her very eyes’ (2009, p.152). In a lot of figural narrative, the focal character is not necessarily the narrator; in fact the impression given is that there is no narrator. Events unfold through the central character’s perspective, what James called the ‘reflector character’, allowing the reader to access the fictional world through the consciousness of a central character.

Fludernik (2009, p.152) makes the point that in first-person narrative, a distinction is made between ‘the self as protagonist (experiencing self) and the (usually) retrospective narrator as the narrating self’. With most first-person narrators the focus can shift, moving between the narrating self and the experiencing self. With a story such as a confession, where the events are recalled in retrospect, the narrator looks back at his/her younger self with the benefit of hindsight, encouraging him/her to ruminate and evaluate his/her past actions, although ‘ideally, experience and evaluation should be in equilibrium’ (2009, p.90). Fludernik (2009, p.152) notes that in some first-person narratives ‘the experiencing self predominates’. The reader knows as little as the protagonist and is swept along with them, experiencing events as they happen with little time or space to reflect and impose any sort of order.

Conversely, the peripheral first-person narrator, often a minor character, takes an authorial narrative position, and can be naïve and a little credulous, taken in by the charismatic protagonist. Fludernik (2008, p.90) points to Nick Carraway in Scott Fitzgerald's (1926) *The Great Gatsby* as an example of this type: 'an ideal device for making the main protagonist seem unapproachable, impenetrable or mysterious'. Tartt's Richard Pape in *The Secret History*, discussed in detail in Chapter Three, although a homodiegetic narrator participating in the action, gazes in on the impenetrable world of Henry Winter and his clique. He can only guess at what they really think and will never know because he will never be admitted to the inner sanctum.

Fludernik (2008, pp.92–93) notes that the authorial narrator, unlike the reflector character or the figural narrator, has the 'godlike' ability to peer inside the characters' minds. The great novels of the nineteenth century have authorial narrators, e.g. (1871) *Middlemarch*, (1869) *War and Peace*, as do most of Dickens' novels (with some notable exceptions). In these novels, there is a sense of a real communication between the narrator and the image of the author, the implied author; whereas in firstperson or figural narratives, the 'first-person narrator is a distinct fictional character' (2008, p.92), not normally confused with the author. Stanzel (1986, pp.57–58) points out that if an attempt is made 'to transpose the first-person narrative into a third person narrative, that is, to abolish the personal union between main character and narrator and to introduce a narrator situated outside the fictional world of the characters [...] one encounters great difficulty immediately'. He goes on to explain that in a third-person authorial narrative like, for example, *Tom Jones*, the first-person narrator would have to become two characters, the character in the scene and the character situated outside the action, whereas in a close third-person narrative situation, the first-person narrator would be eliminated, and would become a reflector

character whom the reader would get to know intimately, indirectly as it were. This sheds light on the difficulty I faced in attempting to transform a first-person novel into third person. The transformation is fraught with difficulties because of the opposition between an internal perspective and an external one. Stanzel (1986, p.59) explains: 'The fact that the parts of the internal and external perspective behave so differently when a transposition is attempted indicates that the difference between the two perspectives is a matter of structure rather than style.' This helps clarify an instinctive decision I made not to follow the editor's advice and write in close third person, thereby transforming Tom solely into a reflector character and eliminating him as a narrator. Instead I kept Tom's first-person narrative and incorporated a second firstperson narrator. In short I felt forced into making a choice between an authorial and figural narrative situation, when in fact I wanted to combine both modes; this is because the voice is what comes first for me when writing fiction. Character interaction, story and place are wrapped up in the voice, and if I lose the voice, or voices as I have them, then I lose the novel. In both first-person and authorial narrative, the narrator turns round and addresses the audience in teller mode, either in commenting on the behaviour of another character, or filling the reader in on important basic information of time, date, setting, and social status. The authorial narrator gains the reader's trust and tells them about a fictional world that they don't belong to, or no longer belong to; as in Magnus' case in *Cure for the Damned*, who from his ghostly position reports on the past from beyond the grave and informs the reader of the outcome in advance. By including Magnus' voice, and at a later stage Kitty's, and in the penultimate chapter Angela's, the first-person narration provides an external perspective on another character from their own internal, often flawed, worldview.

Fludernik (2009, p.153) notes that first-person narrators 'are inherently limited in their perspective and potentially untrustworthy'. All too often, as with the narrators in the novels mentioned above, they have an agenda and this can 'come into conflict with a true representation of what happened' (2009, p.153). All first-person narrators, whether they mean to or not, seek to justify their behaviour. They are subjective, at the mercy of their feelings, and to a certain extent fallible; some much more so than others. They range from 'unacknowledged bias' to extreme, devious unreliability at the other end of the scale (2009, p.153). In most cases, the reader wants to trust the narrator and starts out prepared to give him or her the benefit of the doubt, but often an uneasiness creeps in, and the further the reader moves into the story, the more the narrator's credibility slips, until he or she is revealed as dishonest, deluded, naïve, and sometimes downright mad. The reader will have realised long before they reach this point that the narrator's worldview clashes with that of the implied author; a gap has opened up and the reader quickly learns to read between the lines, becoming watchful, vigilant, no longer prepared to take the narrator's account of events on face value. The reader, in short, has become suspicious.

The Unreliable Narrator

The concept of the unreliable narrator was initially formulated by Booth in 1961; here I quote from the (1983) second edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (pp.158–59): 'I have called a narrator reliable when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say the implied author's norms), unreliable when he does not.' Once the reader's suspicions are aroused, a conviction grows that the author has created someone who cannot be trusted, and a covert communication

between author and reader is established behind the narrator's back. For the most part, it is not the author's intention to make the narrator look ridiculous, it is more a subtle process of unravelling, in that he or she is unmasked through clues that a mindful reader will pick up from the text.

Booth devised the notion of unreliability within a rhetorical frame that evolved from his concept of the implied author, the picture that the reader conjures up in his/her mind as they read the text. The author's 'second self', the conscious or unconscious presentation of themselves that is inserted into the text in a myriad of disguised ways, conjures up an idealised implied author – clever, cool, quirky as with Tartt; learned, pernickety, fastidious, morally exacting as with James; playful, provocative, a multilingual European wedded to the Old World, as with Nabokov. The reader absorbs the author's second self by a process of often-unconscious osmosis. And it is this osmosis that helps in identifying the widening gap between the implied author and the narrator.

Phelan (2006, p.300) points out that throughout his work, Booth is concerned with the ethical role of fiction. He sees it as having the power to be both a malign as well as a beneficial influence on the reader, and develops 'the complex exchanges between author and audience, into the metaphor of books as friends – friends who can be either beneficial or harmful'. Phelan (2006, pp.298–99) notes that in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* Booth focuses on the authorial novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, primarily those by Fielding, Eliot and Dickens, and looks at the ways in which different rhetorical techniques produce different effects on different audiences; for example, the use of overt commentary as opposed to not commenting, or dramatic scenes as opposed to summaries of events. Booth's investigation in this area led him to consider the relations between authors, narrators and audiences, and the version of him or herself that the author constructs in writing the narrative. The 'implied'

author's communication can be direct, which is to say in line with the author's values, and therefore reliable or, conversely, indirect and, so, unreliable; it all depends on whether the narrator's reporting and/or evaluating of a given situation is 'endorsed by the implied author' (2006, p.299). Booth's concern in this respect is with what he calls 'impersonal narration' employed by an ethically suspect first-person homodiegetic narrator. The reader, by following the character's inner life, becomes sympathetic towards him/her and overrides the authorial danger signals. In reference to *Lolita*, Booth (1983, p.390) voices his concern about 'the reader's inability to dissociate himself from a vicious center of consciousness presented to him with all the seductive self-justification of skillful rhetoric'. He raises the notion of an implied author in potential trouble if 'most of his readers [...] identify Humbert with the author more than Nabokov intends' (1983, p.391).

Fludernik (2009, p.27) notes that the 'unreliable first-person narrator functions [...] as a sign of the fictionality of the text' as they are often deliberately designed to be unmasked, to be shown as 'lacking in credibility'. What we are reading is just a story after all, and ultimately not to be trusted. Interpreting a text from a sociopolitical viewpoint, or reading a plot as descriptive of certain psychological issues, is therefore only partially relevant. The German critic Ansgar Nünning (2008, pp.29–69) takes issue with Booth's concept of the implied author for this reason, preferring the concept of unreliability to be replaced with a more reader-orientated approach that takes note of textual signals, such as discrepancies that can be found in the narrative, rather than relying on value judgements involving cultural norms and personal taste. In assessing a narrator's reliability, therefore, we shouldn't be looking to the narrator or the author's norms, but instead should take into account the reader's worldview and what they consider to be normal. Gunther Martens (2008, p.79), acknowledges the broad understanding that unreliability is seen as being tied to homodiegetic character

narration involving an embodied speaker, resting on the notion ‘that words spoken (discourse) can only be refuted by actions within the narrated story world’. Hence unreliability is often linked to aberrant character traits, e.g. the ‘mad monologists’ discussed in Chapter Four in relation to my novel *Cure for the Damned*. The assumption is that an unreliable narration requires the reader to act like a detective, enabling her or him to deduce an alternative scenario by detecting instances of underreporting and or omission. Nevertheless Martens (2008, p.81) concedes that most types of narration involve ‘omissions, indirectness and rearrangement of information’, which seems to imply that reliability is ultimately all but impossible. Martens and Elke D’hoker (2008, p.2) make the point that this might be why unreliability has become a key ‘theoretical touchstone for the distinction between story and discourse in narratology as one of the (very few) defining signposts of fictionality’. This distinction is important. Suzanne Keen (2003, p.4) provides a useful insight in this respect, describing the binary opposition between story and discourse in terms of ‘events as they actually happen, contrasted with the events as they are told by the narrator’. And it is this distinction between the ‘what’ of the story as opposed to the ‘how’ of the narration that sets up a tension between ‘the events as they “really” happened (though as fictions, they didn’t happen) and the events as they are related in the text’ (2003, p.4) that is key to unreliability.

Unreliability: The Rhetorical Approach

At this point, it is important to mention that the discussion of unreliability in literature tends to fall into one of two camps, the cognitivist and the rhetorical. Since unreliability is a feature of narrative discourse, ‘the narrational process or act of

narration' (Fludernik, p.157), most discussions of unreliability tend to take the rhetorical approach. This position was initially formulated by Booth in the *Rhetoric of Fiction*, in which he argues that, given rhetoric is essential to communication, 'the author cannot choose to avoid rhetoric he can choose only the kind of rhetoric he will employ' (p.149). Hence Booth is concerned about the relations between the author, or 'the version that he or she constructs when writing the narrative', which he terms 'the implied author', and the narrator, and the author's intended audience (Phelan 2006, p.10). In this instance it is important to note that 'the implied author, like the implied reader is a projection of the text' (Keen, 2003, p.35). The implied author's communication can be reliable or unreliable, depending on the narrator; in short, reliable narration is endorsed by the implied author, and unreliable narration is not. This position, with its focus on the gap between the narrator and the implied author, differs from the constructivist approach to unreliability, which places the emphasis on the textual signals that suggest the narrator's reliability might be suspect, whilst taking into account the various interpretations readers might come to in relation to different conceptual or cultural contexts underlying these readings.

In the discussion of unreliability in this commentary, the theoreticians covered take a broadly rhetorical approach. Following on from Wayne Booth, Seymour Chatman focuses on the story/discourse distinction, and the narrator's misreporting of the story facts, thereby locating unreliability in the clash between what is reported and what actually happened. Rimmon-Kenan talks about similar textual incongruities, including what actually happens, as opposed to what the narrator reports happening, along with clashes between other characters' views and those of the narrators, as well as the narrator's internal contradictions. Olson points out the differences between the fallible and the untrustworthy narrator, a narrator who gets it wrong unintentionally, for example not being in full possession of the facts, and the narrator who is

deliberately misreporting; I cover this in some detail in my chapter on *The Secret History*. Phelan talks about bonding and estranging unreliability, in which the distance between the audience and the narrator is increased and decreased, according to the narrator's shifting perspective during the course of the narrative, which I discuss in detail in my analysis of Nabokov's *Lolita*. And D'hoker considers narrative instability in terms of the uncertain distance between the implied author and the narrator, covered in Chapter One in my discussion of *The Turn of the Screw*.

Influence of Structuralism

In the 2006 fortieth anniversary edition of *The Nature of Narrative* Phelan contributes a chapter entitled 'Narrative Theory, 1966-2006: A Narrative'. In the opening section he sketches the influence of structuralism on classical narratology, a useful exercise in placing both the cognitivist and the rhetorical approaches in context. He notes that cognitive narratology 'shares the same goal [as structuralism in] developing a comprehensive formal account of the nature of narrative' (p.286). He goes on to explain that the first principle of structuralism is 'to identify the underlying rules – the codes and conventions – of the various domains of meaning-making (e.g., literature, fashion, and even a specific culture)' (p.287), but while structuralist narratology took linguistics as its disciplinary model, seeking out both 'a descriptive grammar of narrative' and discovering 'underlying patterns', cognitive narratology focuses on 'how narrative contributes to human beings' efforts to structure and make sense of their experiences [drawing on] cognitive, evolutionary and social psychology' (p.290).

Key early influences on structuralist narrative theory are the linguist

Ferdinand de Saussure, writing in the early 1900s, the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp, and the French social anthropologist Claude Levi-Straus. Saussure devised a system that analysed the components of language, distinguishing between a formal system of language (*langue*) and individual utterances (*parole*). Levi-Straus' study of mythology across different cultures led him to discover what he termed 'universal laws' in these myths, and by implication human thought. Propp analysed the rules governing Russian folk tales, and was a key influence on 'the Russian formalist distinction between *fabula* (the chronological order of narrative's events) and *sjuzhet* (the order in which a narrative represents those events)' – and vitally the distinction between the 'what' and the 'how' of narrative, 'which they labeled story (*recit*) and discourse (*discors*)'. Phelan makes the point that this story/discourse distinction 'is fundamental to narratology' in grouping events, characters and setting under story – 'and all the devices for presenting these under discourse' (p.289).

Influence of Post-Structuralism

The structuralist approach to the study of literature, as described above, focuses on understanding the larger structures that contain literary works, broadly rules of grammar, underpinned by universal structures, such as might be found in folk tales, myth and fairy tales, and rejects the humanist tradition that seeks to interpret these works on an individual basis.

This reliance on formal structures came under attack by the French philosophers in the late 1960s. Derrida, Foucault, Barthes and Lacan moved beyond a systematic approach, to consider the pressures of ideology and power on human subjectivity. In questioning traditional concepts of honour, justice, knowledge and

truth etc., they sought to expose the constructed nature of traditional humanist thinking. Phelan points out that the influence of post-structuralism shifted the focus from ‘the autonomy of the literary text’ to a consideration of ‘the interconnections between literature and society, and especially the role of literature [...] in inculcating reinforcing challenging or transforming cultural beliefs and value systems’. In this, he includes the ‘work by feminist and critical race theorists emphasizing the difference that race, gender and class make in the writing, reading and theorizing narrative’ (p.292). This approach is very different from the formal system of structuralism, as it takes politics into account, as well as the historical and cultural context at the time the work was produced. The message is very much that the reader should not be ‘a passive recipient to the ideological message of a given text but instead be an active evaluator of that message’ (p.293).

The Death of the Author

Suzanne Keen points out that the rejection of the author in favour of the text and textual relations grew out of structuralism, with the notion that ‘the author should neither be the source nor measure of the text’s meaning. Authority can appear tyrannical at worst, limiting at best’ (2003, p.50). Famously, Barthes in “The Death of the Author” and Foucault in “What is an Author?” questioned authorial intention.

In “The Death of the Author”, Barthes takes issue with the critical focus on the notion of the author as ‘the voice of a single person’ (1977, p.143). Barthes sees the author as a construct, ‘the culmination of capitalist ideology [...] The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his history, his tastes, his passions’ (1977, p.143). The tendency to hunt for

aspects of the author's identity, political views, or other biographical attributes in order to gain meaning is an irrelevance as far as Barthes is concerned. Instead the author should be reduced to the role of 'scripter', there to produce the work but not interpret it. The writer, in short, is 'never original' and 'should know that the internal "thing" he claims to "translate" is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words can be explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely'. Barthes makes the point that 'a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures' (1977, p.148), and that the essential meaning of a given text depends on the reader's response to that work, rather than the interest of the writer. The death of the author clears a space for a variety of readerships; 'we know that to restore to writing its future [...] the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author' (p.148).

Foucault, in "What is an Author?" (1969), also asserts that works of literature arise from a mix of several cultural ingredients, and that the notion of the author as the sole originator is a social construct, particularly linked to capitalist notions of ownership and copyright. In a sense Foucault takes over where Barthes left off, and poses the question as how to 'locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance' (1991, p.105). He contends that the focus on the author's name encapsulates a certain attitude, and develops a theory which he terms 'author function [...] characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within society' (p.108), which sees the author as a capitalist construct, regulating and controlling meaning. He asks 'from where does [the text] come, who wrote it, when, under what circumstances, or beginning with what design?' (p.109). In recognising that the author is not a real individual, and is made up of 'different selves and positions in relation to the text', he looks forward to a time where the old questions focusing on originality, authenticity and expression of the self are replaced by an absence of the need for authorship, a world where 'we would hear hardly

anything but the stirrings of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?’ (p.120).

Booth naturally did not agree with Barthes’ idea of removing the author from criticism, not because he sees the author as the most important consideration, but because as far as he is concerned the reader and the author are not separate entities because they are mutually reliant on one another. Booth’s conceptualisation of the unreliable narrator, one that is at odds with the ‘core norms and choices’ (1983, p.74) of a work of fiction, led him to formulate the notion of the implied author, broadly, the image of the author evoked by particular work, reinforced by the ideological aesthetic sensibility of that work, and how these indicators are evaluated by the reader. Booth asserts that the subjectivity of the author is inescapable, and that the ‘reader will inevitably construct a picture of [the author] who writes in this manner’ (1983, p.71). And as far as Booth is concerned, accepting authorship is a way of talking about the meaning and intentions of an individual work. Phelan has expanded and refined Booth’s ideas concerning unreliability. He makes the very valuable point that ‘the relation between implied author and narrator [...] imagines a very wide spectrum of possible relations. At one end of this spectrum is what I call mask narration, a rhetorical act in which the implied author uses the character narrator as a spokesperson for ideas she fully endorses’ whilst at the other end of the spectrum the narrator can be unreliable in a combination of ways including misreporting, misinterpreting, misreading, and misevaluating (2008, p.9).

Rhetorical and Cognitivist Positions

Phelan (2006, p.290) notes that the cognitivist and ideological approaches favoured by Ansgar Nünning focus on the underlying rules of a 'narrative textual system' and the mental processes that make it possible for the reader to construct or understand a story. Relying on linguistics and social psychology, importance is placed on the frames put around an experience, a default knowledge of a situation, and the recurring sequence of action that accompany these; for example a person's behaviour is different when they enter a restaurant as opposed to a hardware store (2006, p.290).

The rhetorical position differs from the structuralist, cognitive and ideological approach in that it rests on 'the rhetorical triangle – author, text and reader' (2006, p.296). The emphasis is placed on the reader's share in the production of meaning, whilst taking into account textual signals which focus on gaps, and how readers fill these gaps, playing on curiosity and surprise, key elements in building suspense. As mentioned earlier, narrative is seen as an act of communication for a purpose about something that has happened, with special attention paid to the relation between the teller and the audience, and the thing that has happened; 'narrative is a multi-layered communication, one in which tellers seek to engage and influence their audience cognition, emotions and values' (2006, p.297). Phelan points out that this approach has its roots in Aristotle's *Poetics*, with its definition of tragedy as the imitation of an action, arousing fear and pity on its audience. Consequently, individual narratives establish their own ethical dimensions, which emerge in a number of ways, for example the characters' relations to each other, the narrator's relation to the characters and the narratee, and the relation of the implied author to the narrator, and how the reader evaluates the narrative according to their own value system. 'Consequently, the

approach attends to both an ethics of the told and an ethics of the telling' (2006, p.298).

Cognitivist theorists, instead of seeing the ironic distance that Booth talks about as located between the implied author and the narrator, see it as located between the narrator and the reader, thereby erasing the implied author from the equation. Nünning, a key cognitivist theorist, takes issue with the rhetorical model; his fundamental concern is that the norms and values expressed by the implied author act as a moral yardstick, so that determining whether a narrator is unreliable too often relies on 'normal moral standards' and 'basic common sense and human decency' (1999, p.64), which cannot serve as the basis for an impartial judgment. Nünning (1999, p.61) questions these 'culturally accepted frames' as a means of 'accounting for unreliable narration' and rather provocatively asserts: 'To put it bluntly: A pederast would not find anything wrong with Nabokov's *Lolita*.' His point being that the implied author's value system is not what determines unreliability, but rather 'the distance that separates the narrator's view of the world from the reader's or critic's world-model and standards of normalcy' (1999, p.61). It is therefore vital to make these so-called norms explicit when considering unreliable narration. Later Nünning (2008, pp.29–76) re-evaluates his position and acknowledges that he should have taken more note of author and textual function. By noting textual signals that might indicate unreliability, and the ways in which the implied author goes about planting these clues in a given text, he shifts some way towards meeting the rhetorical position with its focus on the communication between implied author and implied reader.

Similarly, Booth (1995, p.165), years later, writing on *The Turn of the Screw*, acknowledges the cognitivist position; although he states that he is writing 'ethical criticism' which focuses on the ethical implications of the various responses of readers to the same text, he makes no mention of the ideal reader and the implied

author, and takes a much looser approach. He constantly invites the reader ‘to probe the possible rewards for responding to this story in one way rather than another’ (1995, p.165). He divides the various interpretations of *The Turn of the Screw* into ‘three broad groups’; those he calls ‘straight’, who believe the ghosts are real, those he calls ‘ironic’, who see the ghosts as the mad imaginings of a deranged governess, and those he calls ‘mazed’ who read the story ‘as rejecting any one interpretation’ (1995, p.169), which is not to say that he believes a text means whatever we make of it. He still sees the author as guiding the reader, and considers readers as only partially free in their interpretation of a given text: ‘Though no one reading can ever triumph over all others, there are better and worse readings. In short, “my” readings, like yours, are inherently corrigible, improvable’ (1995, p.176).

Chapter One

The Turn of the Screw Narrative Instability

Henry James' (1898) novella *The Turn of the Screw* is probably the best-known example of an unreliable narrator in late nineteenth-century literature. James' anonymous governess is so opaque, so slippery, so mysterious, that a definitive account of her stay at Bly has eluded readers since her invention over a century ago. This elusiveness has produced wildly differing interpretations of the novel, with critics unable to agree on whether the ghosts really exist or are invented, and whether James is telling a classic ghost story as he claims in his 1908 Preface, or whether in fact his novel is psychological fiction disguised as a ghost story. There are those who trust the governess's account and read the story as a straightforward horror, while others see her as a madwoman, and read it as a study of hysteria. For an increasing number, the governess's reliability as a narrator is irrelevant, and any attempt to fix a definitive meaning risks destroying the ambiguous essence of the story. The novella is no doubt influenced by James' sister, Alice James, who suffered mental illness, hence his loyalty to his creation, and his refusal, despite her faults, to judge her, and strip the mystery from her story. For me as a reader, the question is not so much are the ghosts real or not, but rather, what might drive someone in the throes of a psychosis to behave in a way that would be inconceivable when they were on the right side of sanity; and the brilliance of the novella is that this intricate, sympathetic account of psychosis is told through the prism of a ghost story, the thing apart from its intrinsic self.

The Story

The Turn of the Screw was originally written for *Collier's*, a popular weekly magazine. It came out in twenty-four instalments from January 1898 to April 1898. The story was published in its entirety in 1908, nearly ten years later. The New York edition contains a tantalisingly ambiguous preface, written in response to the enormous interest generated in the story at the time. Described by James in this preface as a 'romance', the novella has a prologue focalised through an unnamed first-person narrator, who has been given the journal of a governess by a man called Douglas who, it is hinted, has been in love with the governess for many years. From the start, the manner of telling is convoluted and shrouded in mystery. The governess, who is never named, perhaps out of concern for her identity, died ten years previously. Her journal reads as a confession and tells the story of her first post as a governess, a terrifying experience that ended in tragedy with the death of one of her charges, a ten-year-old boy called Miles.

The unnamed narrator first meets Douglas on a weekend retreat in a country house. A group of friends are sitting around the fireside telling ghost stories when Douglas mentions that he has been left a journal that contains an extraordinary tale. His friends are intrigued, and so he sends for the journal, which is kept in his London flat, and the next evening, they settle down to hear him read the terrible story. But first Douglas, who is described as close to death, which is how the journal comes into the possession of the unnamed narrator, feels duty-bound to fill his audience in on the governess's backstory as a way of vouching for her good character. He explains to the assembled company that this was her first position and emphasises her extreme youth and inexperience. He goes on to describe her interview with the handsome, preoccupied uncle of the four-year-old Flora and ten-year-old Miles, who have

recently lost their parents in an accident whilst travelling abroad. Their previous governess died suddenly in mysterious circumstances, hence the haste to fill the post. Like a character in a fairy tale, the governess is given an impossible task to fulfil: to care for two traumatised children, but never once contact their uncle, who wants to be left free to pursue his sophisticated London lifestyle. The unspoken prize, in the mind of the governess, it is hinted, is his admiration and eventual marriage proposal if she fulfils her task.

The Prologue is key to the reader's understanding of the governess. Introduced to the reader by a male narrator, James' clever framing device denies her an independent voice. Her lack of authority robs her of any credibility as a narrator, and effectively renders her an unreliable witness. Priscilla Walton (1995, p.254) contends that the 'I' of James' first-person unnamed narrator in the Prologue, who brings us her story, carries a great deal more weight than the account told by the governess. Her tale is assessed by his friend Douglas, before it begins, so that by the time she is actually able to speak, her 'I' has a lot less authority than either of the men who introduce her. In the 1908 Preface, written ten years after *The Turn of the Screw* was first published, James (1995, p.118) talks of the original source for the story. A male host told him a tantalising fragment of a longer, rather bungled story brought to him by a woman friend. James rather sniffily comments, 'The story would have been thrilling could she have found herself in better possession of it.' Nevertheless, he is intrigued; and, as Walton (1995, p.254) points out, produces a story that is not so much an attempt to write from a female perspective 'but rather a male writer's effort to cross-dress and write from her vantage point'.

Framed by prurient speculations about her youth, inexperience, and aspirations to wed her handsome master, James' governess becomes an object in her own story.

Despite having been written years after the event, her account demonstrates a total immersion in the experience she is describing and an inability to reflect upon it (which might be down to trauma and the neurotic urge to re-inhabit a past horror). Nevertheless, she is not broken by the experience; Douglas informs his audience that after this first posting, she went on to pursue a long and successful career, seeming to indicate that she is more than capable of self-reflection. It is therefore surprising that her creator James, having gone so far as to give her a voice, telling her story in first person – a tense he despised for its lack of distance (2015, p.322) – would deny her the wisdom of retrospection; if not during the course of her narrative, at least in the final chapter. Instead he cuts her off before she has a chance to finish telling her story, as if afraid of what her mature self might have to say about her experience, given the distance of hindsight.

The governess's journal opens with a description of her journey down to Bly, a remote country house that quickly loses its charm as autumn approaches and an atmosphere of depression sets in. Her two charges Miles and Flora are strangely distant. Miles is restless as he should be back at school after the long summer, but has been expelled in mysterious circumstances, and Flora is wrapped up in her own world. Rebuffed by the two children, and cut off from the other servants by a rigid class divide, the governess becomes dangerously isolated. One evening towards the end of autumn she is visited by a frightening apparition, and sees a man with piercing dark eyes gazing down at her from a high tower. A few days later, she sees the same man again, peering in at her through a window. Mrs Grose, the housekeeper, discovers her trembling with fright, and confirms that her description of the apparition fits that of the master's old valet, Peter Quint, who died recently in a violent attack. The governess is now convinced that an unhealthy connection between Miles and Quint was established when he was alive and resulted in the boy's expulsion from school.

She becomes obsessed with the idea that Quint's ghost has returned to claim the boy's soul, and that it is her duty to ward off evil. Her obsession escalates when a week or so later she is out beside the lake with Flora and sees an apparition of a terrible woman communicating with the child. She tells Mrs Grose about the terrifying apparition, and she confirms that her description of the woman matches that of Miss Jessel, her predecessor, who was known to be close to Peter Quint, and died suddenly in mysterious circumstances. The governess, in her mission to save the children, tries to get them to confess their secret communication with Quint and Jessel, but is repeatedly met with resistance.

Unable to bring herself to write to the master and ask him to remove the children from Bly, she finally admits defeat. One Sunday on her way back from church, having made the decision to leave, she passes the schoolroom and sees Miss Jessel sitting at her writing desk. She perceives the apparition as a warning; if she leaves now, the children's souls will be lost forever. Determined that it is up to her, and her alone, to act as their saviour, she embarks on a terrifying battle to detach the children from the ghosts. Her efforts become increasingly punitive and result in Flora being removed from Bly suffering a mental breakdown. Left alone with Miles, she continues her battle. In the final chapter Quint comes to claim the boy, and in the ensuing struggle to wrest him from the ghost's grip, Miles dies of fright in her arms.

The Preface

In his Preface to the 1908 edition (1995, p.122) James describes the ghosts as 'agents in fact; there would be laid on them the dire duty of causing the situation to reek with an air of Evil'. It seems that these ambiguously described entities serve a

two-pronged purpose, both corrupting the children and driving the governess to temporarily lose touch with her sanity. Taking into account James' dual interests in the paranormal and mental instability, Parkinson (1991) points out that these apparitions resemble the hallucinations of the mentally ill, in that they make their appearances at times of intense solitude or anguish in the narrative. The last visitation of Miss Jessel on the edge of the lake, the site of her first terrifying appearance, is actually a comfort to the highly distressed governess because on this occasion she is accompanied by Mrs Grose, whom she is convinced sees what she sees: 'She [Miss Jessel] was there, and I was justified: she was there, and I was neither cruel nor mad. I consciously threw out to her – with the sense that, pale and ravenous demon as she was, she would catch and understand it – an inarticulate message of gratitude' (James, 2012, p.175). But to her intense disappointment Mrs Grose denies seeing anything and removes the frightened, hysterical Flora from her care. Left alone with Miles, the governess is desperate for vindication and determined to extract a confession from him. In the final chapter, when she discovers that the reason for his expulsion from school was over some trivial misdemeanour, and not the dreadful depravity she imagined, she wonders if she has misjudged Miles, and by implication his sister Flora, all along, and experiences a terrifying vertigo-like moment of doubt in her own sanity: 'if he were innocent then what was I? (2012, p.198).

At the start of his 1908 Preface, James claims that a fragmentary anecdote about a couple of children menaced by the ghosts of bad servants was the impetus for his story. But the reader cannot help wondering if James was deliberately misleading about the origins of the story in order to protect his sister. What if, commissioned by *Collier's* to write a ghost story, he started out with the fragmentary anecdote in mind, but as he continued he incorporated aspects of his sister's personality? Certainly the

governess's mode of speech, her agitation, her restlessness and implied sleeplessness, are modelled on someone suffering an acute psychosis.

James' ghosts intrude in moments of daydreaming or acute anxiety. For the governess, they are depraved; for the orphaned children they might well be a source of comfort. As for Mrs Grose, who admits their presence at the end of the book, her stance is equivocal. James, (1995, p.123) in his 1908 Preface, says: 'Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough [...] and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars.' James remains hidden from view and secretive to the last; his carefully contrived ambiguity anticipates the readerresponse criticism of Booth, Phelan and Nünning. The range of interpretations that his story triggered seems to have delighted him, rewarding him 'with success beyond my liveliest hope' (1995, p.123). He is at pains to avoid specifying the depravity that the governess fears with such dread, insisting it is up to the reader to draw on their own personal sense of evil in imagining the threat: 'There is for such a case no eligible absolute of the wrong: it remains relative to fifty other elements, a matter of appreciation, speculation, imagination – these things lay in the light of the spectator's, the critic's, the reader's experience' (1995, p.123).

The Reception of *The Turn of the Screw*

Peter G. Beidler, (1995, pp.127–45), provides a short critical history of *The Turn of the Screw*, which I will summarise below. He makes the point that most of James' contemporaries would have read the novella as a ghost story. It was Edmund Wilson's 1934 landmark essay, "The Ambiguity of Henry James", strongly influenced

by Freud's ideas, which made the case for hallucinations caused by a neurotic case of sexual repression. His essay prompted a huge backlash, with critics questioning his interpretation; if the governess is insane, how did she manage to go on and pursue a long and successful career, as reported by Douglas in the Prologue? And crucially, how was the governess able to describe her first sighting of Quint with such accuracy that Mrs Grose was immediately able to identify him as the master's former valet? When Wilson, unable to defend his position, backed down, psychoanalytic interpretations came out in his support. Stanley Renner (1995, p.224) makes the case that the governess's fear of sexuality causes her to project onto the man in the tower sexual 'stereotypes embodied in the collective mind of her culture'. What followed from the mid-1970s onwards were interpretations that permitted both readings simultaneously. Ernest Tuveson, for example, makes the intriguing observation that the governess is some kind of medium, a conduit through which the spirits of the dead become manifest. Shoshanna Feldman (1995, pp.199–205) argues that any attempt to nail an interpretation and grasp hold of a definitive meaning and obliterate uncertainty is tantamount to an act of violence, which she likens to the governess's determination to prise the truth out of Miles, an act so violent that she ends up killing him. Critics influenced by Feldman largely focused on the governess's participation in the horror, suggesting that she is aligned with the ghosts that she is so terrified of, as they are projections of her own desperate imprisonment. James in his 1908 Preface refuses to provide a single unifying interpretation. Determined not to give anything away, he is careful to distance himself from lurid fantasy when he writes, 'there is not only from beginning to end of the matter not an inch of expatiation, but my values are positively all blanks save so far as an excited horror, a prompted pity, a created expertness' (1995, p.123). James' determined disavowal might well have been prompted by irritation at being called on to defend his imagination. At the start of the 1908 Preface,

explaining the appeal of the source idea for the novella to his critics, he states his case bluntly – back off!

The thing had for me the immense merit of allowing the imagination absolute freedom of hand, of inviting it to act on a perfectly clear field, with no ‘outside’ control involved, no pattern of the usual or the true or the terrible ‘pleasant’. A fairy tale pure and simple. The compactness of anecdote. Over which we are thus led to roam: an annexed but independent world in which nothing is right save as we rightly imagine it (1995, pp.118–19).

Narrative Instability

In my analysis of the unreliable narrator in *The Turn of the Screw*, I focus on the unstable, ambiguous narrative in which the word of the real, filtered through a disturbed narrator, becomes increasingly elusive. I will then go on to examine some of the pressures placed on the narrator, in this case James’ governess, which might account for this narrative instability.

According to Elke D’hoker (2008, pp.148–49) the current unreliability debate is focused on whether unreliability is seen as intentional on the part of the author, or is more of an interpretative strategy for the reader to work out. In her exploration of narrative unreliability in the twentieth-century first-person novel, D’hoker (2008, p.157) discusses the move ‘beyond the traditional form of unreliability where the reader is invited to reconstruct the “truth” of the story by disregarding the narrator’s misguided interpretation of otherwise accurately represented events’ in Ishiguro’s later novels. In these, as with *The Turn of the Screw*, not only is the extent of the distortion of fictional facts difficult to gauge, the distance between the implied author and the narrator is uncertain, so that the reader is denied the pleasures of deciphering and collusion which traditionally accompany unreliable narration. Without a

definitive interpretation, the ironic gap between reader and narrator is lessened, and the sense of superiority towards an unreliable narrator is shut down. D'hoker (2008, p.166) notes that this ambiguous type of unreliability often involves a mix of the realistic with the fantastic, filtered through an often disturbed consciousness, in which the narrator will go to tremendous lengths to avoid facing trauma head-on through 'extreme denials, displacements, projections, digressions and over-interpretations' (2008, p.166).

It is difficult to evaluate the governess's actions in a moral or ethical sense; as with Ishiguro, James avoids 'the position of moral arbiter', leaving it up to the reader to determine the extent of her guilt, an almost impossible task given that that the key 'facts have gone missing' (D'hoker, 2008, p.167). We are never going to know the real reasons behind Miles' expulsion from school, why both Quint and Miss Jessel died, and why their deaths were so close together, or how the children's parents died, and why their uncle is so keen to avoid setting foot in Bly. Has Mrs Grose seen the ghosts as she claims, and is Bly haunted by ghostly presences, or is the governess beset by hallucinations brought on by bad dreams and hysteria? And is she lying to cover up the truth behind Miles' violent death, either to protect herself or the master? What happened to her after the posting at Bly, and why did she place her confession in Douglas' hands? How did they meet, and who is the unnamed narrator who reports her story?

Rimmon-Kenan (2008, p.104), writing about the opaqueness of 'ambiguous narratives' like *The Turn of the Screw*, notes that the reader is put 'in a position of constant oscillation between mutually exclusive alternatives'. James is constantly undermining the credibility of the narrator, and then restoring it again. For example, the reader distrusts her crazed suspicion that Flora has somehow communicated with Miss Jessel at the lake, but then she is restored to credibility when she describes a

ghostly figure that fits an exact description of Quint. These swings occur throughout the novel; most confusing is Mrs Gosse's admission towards the end of the story when she confesses that she has suspected there were ghosts at Bly before the governess arrived. It is this constant instability that renders the novella not so much a matter of interpretation – are the ghosts real; is the governess insane? – but instead what Cook and Corrigan (1980, p.65) describe as 'a narrative strategy' used by 'every narrator (and novelist)' as a means of bridging 'the gap [of the] imagination and the world of experience'.

The brilliance of *The Turn of the Screw* [...] is that James allows the reader to see just how tenuous such narrative strategies always are. By constantly undermining and restoring his narrator's credibility, James transforms a narrative which is potentially either a ghost story or a mystery about a demented governess into a very subtle fiction about the process of fiction itself (1980, p.65).

Pressures on an Already Pressured Narrator

(i) The role of the governess:

The governess is in a traditionally impossible position from the outset. Guy Davidson (2011, p.459) makes the point that as a gentlewoman she is put in temporary charge of the children and household at Bly, but she is essentially a servant, and whether she likes it or not, aligned with the ghosts she so dreads. Her struggle with the ghosts is one of ownership and legitimate authority over the children. On the face of it she is engaged in a power struggle, but there is something more disturbing at play. Two thirds of the way through the novella the governess, unable to bear her ordeal any longer, skips church with the intention of making her escape, but when she returns to the house and finds the ghost of Miss Jessel sitting at the schoolroom table, she changes her mind. Mistaking her predecessor at first for ‘some housemaid who might have stayed at home to look after the place’ (James, 2012, p.156), she quickly realises her mistake:

I had the extraordinary chill of feeling that it was I who was the intruder. It was as a wild protest against it that, actually addressing her – ‘You terrible miserable woman!’ – I heard myself break into a sound that, by the open door, rang through the long passage and the empty house. She looked at me as if she had heard me, but I had recovered myself and cleared the air. There was nothing in the room the next minute but the sunshine and the sense that I must stay (James, 2012, pp.156-7).

What is striking about this description is the hint that the governess glimpses her own reflection in the window, and in a moment of clarity, is horrified by what she has become.

The dreamt-of escape from her impossible position is to marry her employer and become mistress of Bly and mother to the children. Charlotte Brontë’s 1847 *Jane Eyre* haunts James’ novella, feeding into this powerful unspoken longing. Linda

Kauffman (1981, p.177) contends that the governess's 'entire narrative is addressed to the uncle in Harley Street. He is the absent beloved, the embodiment of her romantic desire'; an 'imaginative construction [...] not the actual man but the image, the idol she has invented'. And it is the pursuit of a painfully unrealisable fantasy that ultimately unhinges her. Kauffman (1981, p.182) notes that 'Miss Jessel's symbolic function precisely parallels Bertha Mason's; each tormented woman is the dark, determined, vengeful double which each dutiful, diligent heroine tries to repress'. But whereas Jane's happy ending is enabled by her 'coming to terms with her double' when she criticises Rochester's cruel treatment of his wife, the governess 'refuses to recognise her double', terrified that she and Miss Jessel 'occupy the same place in the structure of the beloved' (1981, p.182). Kaufman (1981, p.190) points to the moment 'at which she realizes that her story will not turn out like Jane Eyre's'. Early in the novel, in Chapter Two, awaiting a communication from the master, she receives a curt note from him accompanied by an unopened letter from Miles' headmaster: 'deal with him; but mind you don't report. Not a word. I'm off' (James, 2012, p. 84). His total rejection is crushing, forcing home the realisation that he cares as little for her as he does the children; filled with bitterness, 'she sets herself to write her story to make sure her virtue is recorded' in a narrative in which the tone is 'consistently self-congratulatory' – she will succeed where others before her failed – and since the master refuses to applaud her, 'she applauds herself' (Kauffman, 1981, p.184). The governess's happy ending is snatched from her. As Davidson (2011, p.462) notes, rather than her dream of 'restoration of the perverted home to its proper and familial and marital order' as in the traditional gothic romance, her story 'ends with a deepening of domestic chaos'. Her tragedy, it would seem, as perhaps was the case with her predecessor, is that her particular personality type exacerbates an already bad situation. Nevertheless, there is the strongest sense from the outset that

she never stood a chance. In the opening chapter of her journal entry, soon after her arrival at Bly, she is shown round the vast rambling house by her young charge Flora: ‘Wasn’t it just a story-book over which I had fallen a-doze and a-dream? No: it was a big ugly antique but convenient house [...] in which I had the fancy of our being almost as lost as a handful of passengers in a great drifting ship. Well, I was strangely at the helm!’ (James, 2012, p.83). She has only just arrived at Bly and already she has fallen into a dream state; confused by her surroundings – the house has traces of older unused buildings and is vast and complex – she is easily lost, forced to rely on the children as her guides. From the moment of her arrival, she is destabilised and never recovers her equilibrium. A queasy seasickness permeates the novella; nothing has any solidity. And as Davidson (2011, p.468) points out, with a lack of narrative certainty, the blurring of day and night, the literal and the metaphorical, ‘the ghostly and the living and the strange and the familiar’, she is adrift in an unstable world, and is herself an unstable entity. Without a proper name, her identity is precarious and her authorship delegitimised. The equivocal nature of her authority, channelled through a male narrator, renders her a bodiless voice, communicating from beyond the grave; still traumatized by events that happened over twenty years in the past, and incapable of the distance of hindsight, she is one of the most compelling narrators of late nineteenth-century literature.

(ii) The epistolary nineteenth-century female narrator:

In considering the pressure brought to bear on James’ governess, the impact of gender ideology on her anomalous position as narrator should not be overlooked. Alison Case (2005, p.320) contends that mastery of the narrative in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century literature is often attributed to the male narrator, whilst

females tend to unselfconsciously tell their stories in epistolary mode, a form which relies on ‘the narrator’s ignorance of the significance of their unfolding story’ (2005, p.320). The homodiegetic narrator of Dickens’ 1850 *David Copperfield* is shown to be capable of retrospective wisdom, which gives his account a ‘narrative authority’, reassuring the reader ‘that this narrator knows whereof he speaks’ (2005, p.320). Whereas in Dickens’ 1853 *Bleak House*, Esther, a fully grown woman, describes her childhood with a pathetic self-critical naivety, blaming herself for her unhappy past and straining to see only the best in her cruel caretakers. Her account is so far from the actual truth that in the telling she appears simple-minded to the contemporary reader. Case (2005, p.314) makes the point that it could be argued that Esther ‘somehow neurotically re-inhabits the earlier state of mind in narrating, that she is traumatically bound to it in some way that precludes the distancing perspective of hindsight’. But if Esther were mentally ill, the book would be incredibly dark and would puncture ‘the inspiring image of self-effacing feminine goodness Dickens’ contemporaries all assumed he intended to create’ (2005, p.315). Esther, like the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, is clamped in place by the rigid gender divisions of the time. If she were to grasp the nettle and dare to give expression to her version of past events, she would effectively ditch her creator’s carefully constructed image of ‘virtuously modest and self-effacing’ (2005, p.317) womanhood, which is central to the novel.

As has already been noted, James (2015, p.322) disliked first-person narration, distrusting what he describes in his 1903 Preface to *The Ambassadors* as ‘the terrible fluidity of self-revelation’. It is significant that he frames the governess’s narration with two male co-narrators, one who reads her journal to the fireside gathering, and the other who, with retrospective hindsight, contextualises her story, telling his audience that she was a little more than a child herself at the time. The extent to which

the governess plunges into the past with barely a glimmer of hindsight is disturbing, particularly as her account was written years after the event. This lack of distancing recall could be because James wants the reader to fully experience the emotional impact of her story. But the abrupt truncation of the narrative following Miles' death comes as a shock, as the reader is denied the comfort of retrospective revelation. James has trapped the governess, as Dickens trapped Esther, in a limbo, in which the distinction between the narrating and the earlier narrated self is collapsed, and in the governess's case remains firmly closed throughout her narrative. That crucial gap that opens up between 'the narrating consciousness and the perceptions of the narrated self' (Case, 2005, p.316) at the moment of revelation never happens. It is hardly surprising that the governess's story has spawned so many conflicting interpretations. The reader is left wondering, is it trauma that robs her of the distancing perspective of hindsight, or is something else going on here? If she were allowed the mature wisdom of hindsight, Douglas' character reference would be shattered. She might emerge furious, spitting, and railing against her negligent employer and a pernicious class system responsible for destroying the lives of three innocent children and herself.

(iii) Torn between the 'seen' and the 'invisible':

There is the strongest sense throughout the novella that James' governess craves the master's recognition; if she cannot allow herself to dream of becoming his wife, she can at least earn his respect for her diligence and bravery. At the start of the novel, whilst out walking in the grounds of Bly at twilight, she ruminates on the master's pleasure at watching her caring for the two children, and imagines meeting him at the turn in the path and seeing him smile with approval. 'I didn't ask more than

that – I only asked that he should *know*; and the only way to be sure he knew would be to see it, and the kind light of it, in his handsome face’ (James, 2012, p.92).

Beth Newman (1992, pp.50–55), exploring feminine identity in *The Turn of the Screw*, examines the impact of bourgeois ideology in defining middle-class femininity in the nineteenth century. Her focus is on the ethos of the Victorian societal ‘gaze’ and its division of women into two camps, the ‘seen’ and the ‘invisible’. Those that were ‘seen’ were either the available woman of questionable morality, or the aristocratic woman of extreme wealth, against whom the middle-class woman was defined. This newly created middle-class ideal became an inconspicuous, marginalised creature, ‘an idealised moral presence whose supervisory gaze imposed order on the household’ (1992, p.57). Newman (1992, p.45) notes that these mutually exclusive definitions of femininity place ‘women on opposite sides of the gaze’ and are woven into the ‘rivalries that structure’ the stories of so many nineteenth-century heroines: ‘the tensions that divide them from themselves’. James’ governess, terrified of the fallen, libidinous Miss Jessel, takes up the opposing stance of moral vigilante, and becomes far more terrifying than her rival. But, in keeping with the traditional governess figure of nineteenth-century literature, she harbours a deep-seated wish to emerge from her invisible persona and be ‘seen’ by the master; instead, whilst out walking in the grounds at Bly (see above), she encounters the bold stare of the ghostly Quint looking down at her from the high tower:

The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky and the friendly hour lost for the unspeakable minute all its vice. But there was no other change in nature, unless indeed it was a change that I saw with a stranger sharpness. The gold was still in the sky, the clearness in the air, and the man who looked at me over the battlements was as definite as a picture in a frame (James, 2012, p.93).

Newman (1992, pp.60–61) points out that her fantasy of being seen by her employer as a person worthy of great responsibility is turned on its head when she meets the intense stare of Quint. She recoils, ashamed of wanting to be admired, and flees into the opposite camp, becoming the tyrannical guardian of Victorian morality in her obsessive supervision of the children. She is caught between ‘two very different scope positions’ (1992, p.61). On one level she has internalised the notion of woman as the object of the libidinal look that is in direct conflict with the ‘unconscious but vigilant woman’ (1992, p.58). Although she consciously chooses domestic invisibility, she cannot ‘divest herself of the unconscious desire to be seen, which influences her insistent seeing and possibly – if the ghosts are hallucinations – the content of what she sees’ (1992, p.61). By inserting the word ‘possibly’ Newman avoids a definitive interpretation; the reader can never know for certain if the ‘apparitions’ are supernatural as James claims in his Preface, or the hallucinations of a terrified governess, barely more than child herself, driven temporarily insane by unbearable pressures placed on her by a repressive conflicted, societal ethos. In refusing to close the story down and supply a definitive meaning, James avoids standing in judgement of the governess. He is clearly critical of her treatment of the children, but in the last instance he refuses to condemn her, and steadfastly refrains from communicating with the reader behind her back, refusing to hint at what really happened – although perhaps his reticence is because he isn’t sure himself.

Cure for the Damned

In the opening chapter of *Cure for the Damned*, the reader is forewarned that Tom's account of unfolding events should not be taken at face value. As he and Magnus approach the cottage, Tom admits that he is not in a good way: 'As for me, I was hanging on by a thread' (p.7). He goes on to confide in the reader, as if they too might experience similar fragmentary hallucinatory moments: 'It's odd how it happens – out of the blue – how the shaky, snarly bit of you is triggered [...] I am used to these flashes, I know how to deal with them' (p.8). Kauffman (1981, p.177) contends that the governess addresses her journal to her employer, the master of Bly, 'an imaginative construct, not the actual man', as part of her pursuit of a 'painfully unrealisable fantasy'; if he refuses to talk to her in the flesh, she can at least write to him. In Tom's case his account provides too much background information to have been addressed to any of his immediate family; yet there is the definite sense that the narratee is on his side, and unlike Humbert and the governess, he does not have to win them over, or convince them of his heroic enterprise. He might be addressing a colleague of Susan's; perhaps the woman at Magnus' funeral with the 'perfectly manicured nails' who seems to share a sympathetic connection with him. His confession is a sincere attempt to make sense of past events; he admits his own instability and doesn't claim to have the monopoly on the truth. I don't see myself as sitting in judgement of him and encouraging a collusion with the reader behind his back; neither have I planted clues as evidence that he is either lying, or incapable of reporting accurately, which is not to say that the reader shouldn't be on their guard and wary of him.

D'hoker (2008, p.164), in her discussion of narrative instability, points out there are characters who will go to great lengths to avoid facing trauma through displacements and denials. Against all his instincts, Tom caves in to Magnus' determination to buy the cottage. When they come across a large rusty trap at the bottom of the garden, he reads it as an omen. 'What Magnus saw as a beautiful piece of mechanical engineering was horrible to me – as horrible as the stench inside the house, as horrible as the sticky ash all over my face and clothes, as horrible as the mouldy little greenhouse' (p.15). Just as James' governess feels that she is aboard 'a great drifting ship' on her arrival at Bly, a queasy uneasiness permeates Tom's account, a sense of impending disaster that he is powerless to stop. In Chapter Sixteen Magnus wakes to find Tom has gone from the bed. He looks out and sees him: 'a dark shape, silhouetted against the tiny window of the builder's caravan. As he turns the light catches the side of his face, his expression is smooth and unruffled, and I realise he is sleepwalking' (p.191). Tom has no memory of the incident, just as he appears to have no conscious control over his obsessive conviction that Carl is responsible for laying the traps in the garden.

Since arriving in the cottage, Tom has hidden away, only venturing out after dark, intimidated by the 'societal gaze' that Newman (1992) describes as so destructive to the governess. In Tom's case it is the homophobic scornful gaze of Carl and his friends. In Chapter Fifteen, two thirds of the way through the novel, he leaves the caravan wrapped in Magnus' overcoat, acutely conscious of being watched by Carl's friends from the roof of the house: 'I trudged through the wet grass, my heels rubbing, a clumping sucking sound, Gogol's nose in the long overcoat, flapping round my ankles like a dark tent, a madman, getting a little bit madder. See if I cared' (p.214). Later in the same chapter Tom chances upon Carl trapping a rabbit in the woods: 'The dead animal dangled gracefully by its hind legs. He ran its fingers along

its back. "Now you hate me," he mumbled' (p.184). At this point there is a momentary reversal, Carl is shamed, and with his credibility restored, Tom embarks on a fight he cannot hope to win.

Towards the end of novel, in his final showdown with Carl, there is a crucial gap in his account, and it is here that he loses credibility. When Carl falls into the fire, instead of going to his rescue, he runs away and hides in the half-finished house where he slips into a 'waking dream' (p.222). At the start of Chapter Twenty-One he says: 'In my dream Carl was on a stretcher, half-dead but still alive. For all I knew he could've walked back out of the woods unscathed. I should've told Magnus the whole story' (p.231). But he doesn't – why not? Realising that Magnus suspects him of attempted murder, his memory is hazy:

Fragments from that morning seeped back: Carl's hand, the dirty, hastily applied bandage held together with flesh-coloured tape, the blood on the sleeve of his shirt, his coat, was the same blood that I'd trodden in outside the caravan, our two bloods mingled with that of the cat's, three bloods mixed. If Carl was dead they'd lock me up for the rest of my life (p. 232).

Towards the end of the novel his credibility is restored when he discovers Magnus in the frozen car. He is clear about his motives for leaving him and going in search of help, knowing full well that: 'Magnus would be dead by the time I reached the main road. No one would blame me; I'd done what all the emergency disaster pamphlets advise you to do. I stood shivering, staring down at the dark hole left by my footprints, only I knew different. I was leaving him to die' (p.235). And why – because he fears that if Magnus lives he will report him for attempted murder. In this instance he redeems himself in owning up to a truth when he could have gotten away with a lie.

Reflections

In *Cure for the Damned*, although there is no suggestion that Lane End cottage is haunted like Bly, the move for Tom and Magnus is clouded in anxiety. The hope is that this new home will bring a peace and order to their lives; instead it brings a deepening domestic chaos. Lane End, like Bly, lies in wait for them, brooding and malignant, a receptacle for all that is wrong in their lives. There is, with both Tom and the governess, an inability to face their demons. It is not a case of whether the ghosts are real or imagined, but more a need to know what triggers the governess's extreme reactions. She is not described as dispositionally prone to hallucinations; according to Douglas, she went on to pursue a long and respectable career. Similarly, Tom, previous to his meeting Magnus, has led a quiet ordered life. But both are under considerable pressure. The governess receives troubling news from home, although we never find out what it is, and perhaps as a consequence, indulges in dangerous fantasies of marrying the master. Tom is recovering from a breakdown following his mother's death; he is guilt-stricken at abandoning Kitty, and frightened by the shadow cast by Alex over his relationship with Magnus. *The Turn of the Screw* is a tale of a temporary insanity, told with insight and sympathy; there is no sense of the reader colluding with the implied author and sneering at the narrator behind her back, and it is this stubborn determination not to close the story down, and give a definitive interpretation, that positions James firmly on the side of his unstable narrator.

Chapter Two

Lolita

Bonding and Estranging

Booth, writing in 1961 in his first edition of *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, draws the reader's attention to the unintentional side effect of Nabokov's brilliant prose in *Lolita*, questioning the ethics of encouraging readers to collude with a self-confessed paedophile. At the time when *Lolita* was first published in 1955 there were readers who fell into Humbert's artful trap. Dorothy Parker (1958, pp.102–3), in a review of *Lolita* for *The New Yorker*, writes: 'It is the engrossing, anguished story of a man, a man of taste and culture, who can love only little girls. They must be between the ages of nine and fourteen, and he calls them nymphets.' She goes on to describe Dolores as 'a dreadful little creature, selfish, hard, vulgar, and foul-tempered. He knows that he knows all of what she is.' Her shockingly crass review proves Booth's point. Now, nearly seventy years later, readers have swung in the opposite direction. Despite Humbert's apparent contrition for the harm he has done Dolores, they do not forgive him. In this chapter, my focus is on what Phelan (2008) calls bonding unreliability, in which the narrator, in this case Humbert, seduces the reader into colluding with him in the full knowledge that they might well loathe his worldview; a seduction encouraged by 'an element of the novel's aesthetics, Nabokov's stylistic virtuosity' (2008, p.22). Nevertheless, as early as Chapter Five in the novel (pp.18– 21), Humbert's reasoning is 'exposed as an elaborate rationalization of pederasty' (2008, p.25) when he introduces his theory of 'nymphets'. From here on, the reader becomes increasingly estranged, so that Humbert's argument throughout Part One of the novel, which claims a grown man can be sexually manipulated by a child, is demolished by the start

of Part Two, as the full horror of his crime becomes apparent.

The Story

Humbert's story is as bizarre as it is unsettling. He marries Charlotte Haze in order to gain access to her twelve-year-old daughter Dolores; Lolita is his pet name for her. When the mother is fortuitously (for him) run down in a random accident, he becomes Dolores' 'parent'. The second half of the book focuses on his flight from his 'daughter's' hometown on a road trip across America. After months of staying in seedy motels he settles in a small town called Beardsley, named after the paedophile artist, where he rents a house and sends Dolores to school. She eventually escapes, aided by another paedophile, the mysterious Clare Quilty. The novel is told in recollection; Humbert is awaiting trial for the murder of Quilty and has written his confession from his prison cell. Although he is being tried for murder, the focus of his confession is his obsessive 'love' for Dolores, whilst the murder of Quilty is an annoying adjunct as far as he is concerned.

The final pages of his confession are chilling. Five years after having escaped his clutches, Dolores writes to him asking for money. He drives out to a remote shack in a dusty wasteland, and finds her married, heavily pregnant and desperately poor. He gives her the four hundred dollars in cash that she asked for, and 'a check for three thousand six hundred more' (Nabokov, 2015, p.278). She is overwhelmed by his 'gift' but what he doesn't tell her is that he has pocketed the money from the sale of her dead mother's house, money that he knows full well that Charlotte Haze would have wanted to go to her daughter rather than a husband she hated. This apparently insignificant detail is telling; despite Humbert's protestations of remorse, he just can't

help himself. The final blow is contained in her letter to her 'Dad' in which she signs herself 'Dolly (Mrs Richard F. Schiller)' (2015, p. 266). At this point we remember the name from the Foreword written by the psychiatrist, John Ray Jr. His account lists the names of those involved in his patient's confession, their whereabouts and occupations, years after the events described, and we recall that a Mrs Richard Schiller died in childbirth.

Critical Reception

Christine Clegg (2000), in her overview of the critical history of *Lolita*, points out that despite an unofficial ban of his novel in America and Britain, Nabokov was never officially brought to trial on charges of pornography and obscenity. In 1956, a year after the novel was published in France, Nabokov felt compelled to write an afterword, "On a Book Entitled *Lolita*" (pp.311–317), to accompany the American debut, in which he is at pains to make a clear separation between artistic and moral concerns: 'For me a work of fiction exists only insofar as it affords me what I shall bluntly call aesthetic bliss, that is a sense of being somehow, somewhere connected with other states of being where art (curiosity, tenderness, ecstasy) is the norm' (pp.314–315). This insistence has led to accusations that Nabokov is indifferent to Humbert's crime, and some critics have gone as far to insist on the monstrous similarities between Humbert and his creator. Annette Michelson (1996, p.4) writing about a contemporary obsession with child abuse, contends that this view is a total misperception, and that Nabokov would have been horrified to know that *Lolita* 'is now 'the generic, vulgate term for an item of what is known as child pornography'.

Clegg makes the point that since *Lolita* has generated so much debate about ‘the relationship between aesthetic form and sexual content [...] the question of morality and art is central to the unfolding critical history of *Lolita*’ (p.12). When, as Nabokov insists, the artistic form is paramount, then the issue of the problematic content becomes less important. Formalist criticism of the 1950s and 1960s tends to focus on the formal features of the narrative, thereby overlooking what happens to Dolores. From the 1980s onwards there is a shift in emphasis from aesthetic considerations to ‘the politics of literary representation [and] the ethics of literature, and the ethics of human relations, the old opposition between morality and art starts to undergo a transformation’ (2000, p.13). Clegg goes on to make the point that this shift is made easier now that *Lolita* has entered the literary canon, making it less contentious to discuss the disturbing content of the novel, a key concern in feminist criticism of the novel.

Although the novel was published in America in 1958 to great popularity and critical success, Clegg (2000, p.18) points out that critics from the late 1950s through into the 1970s, unnerved by the book’s rocky reception, were at pains to keep a distance from ‘the spectral question of pornography’, claiming that the subject had ‘no bearing on the discussion of literature.’ The influential American critic Lionel Trilling’s (1958) broadly humanist critique of the novel, “The Last Lover”, focuses on romantic parody and evocations of courtly love. ‘*Lolita* is about love. Perhaps I shall be better understood if I put the statement in this form: *Lolita* is not about sex, but about love. Almost every page sets forth some explicit erotic action and still is not about sex. It is about love’ (1958, p.364). He goes on to claim that in ‘breaking the taboo about the sexual unavailability of the very young’, it is comparable with the scandal of ‘Tristan’s relation with Iseult, or Vronsky’s with Anna’ (1958, p.368).

In the 1960s, critics eager to avoid further controversy tended to focus on a type of close reading associated with formalist criticism. Page Stegner (1967, p.110), an influential American critic, writes about ‘the great seduction scene at The Enchanted Hunters’ and goes on to complain about the dense, unappreciative reader, one whose ‘inaccurate reading [...] places all the attention on Humbert’s aberration and neglects his suffering and his comedy’. The implication is that the intelligent reader is capable of sympathetic identification with Humbert’s story; after all: ‘Lolita is in reality a rather common, unwashed little girl whose interests are entirely plebian, though in certain respects, precocious’ (1967, p.114).

Julia Bader (1972) heralded a critical change by drawing attention to the problematic over-emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of the text at the expense of the realistic. ‘The questions tackled by *Lolita* are artistic, or aesthetic, and the “moral” dilemma is treated in aesthetic terms. Humbert’s “vice” is the inexpert artist’s brutal treatment of a tantalizingly undeveloped subject, whose fragile soul [he] has violated’ (1972, p.80).

Following Nabokov’s death in 1977, there was an effort to restore his credentials as an ethical writer, in the light of his repeated claims that his sympathies in the novel rest with the child. Richard Rorty (1989, p.141) points out that *Lolita* is in fact about ‘the blindness of a certain kind of person to the pain of another kind of person’; and that Humbert dramatises ‘the particular form of cruelty about which Nabokov worried most – incuriosity’ (1989, p.158). Although he concedes that Humbert is both noticing and heartless, in that he is selectively curious, making him an obsessive, ‘as sensitive as he is callous’ (1989, p.157). But the issue of child abuse refuses to go away. Linda Kauffman (1989, pp.132–3) dismisses questions of

‘aesthetic bliss’ advocated by Nabokov in his “Afterword”. She points out that John Ray Jr.’s lugubrious ‘foreword acts as an injunction against the kind of reading that foregrounds social issues like child abuse’. She goes on to assert that Nabokov’s ‘wry disclaimer’ in terms of a moral agenda ‘is a sham because put simply [it] extends the Humbertian aesthetic manifesto’ and ‘since Ray is the butt of parody, readers will go to any length to avoid being identified with him’ (1989, p.132). She appeals to readers and critics to resist this insidious seduction by having the courage ‘to analyze the horror of incest by re-inscribing the material body of the child Lolita in the text’ (1989, p.133).

Bonding and Estranging Unreliability

As demonstrated by Parker’s 1958 review for *The New Yorker*, some earlier readers were prepared to allow themselves to be seduced by Humbert. His knowing, sophisticated irony, his disdain for all things American, his vast knowledge of highbrow culture, his multilingual accomplishments, his exotic childhood, all have a certain snobbish appeal. As discussed above, earlier readers, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, influenced by prevailing critical opinion, tended to identify with Humbert, interpreting his verbal virtuosity and erudition as an extension of the implied author, thereby misreading the novel as a plea for, if not clemency, at least an understanding of his monstrous creation. The twenty-first-century reader, in contrast, approaches the novel in a very different ideological and critical climate, and is forewarned that they will be meeting one of the most famous paedophiles in literary history.

Leland de la Durantaye (2007, p.84) talks of Humbert’s ‘freakish and acidic irony’ in his account of the death of his childhood sweetheart Annabel, a traumatic

event which he would have the reader believe explains his fixation on girls the same age as Annabel when she died. Annabel's death was preceded by the loss of his mother, struck down by a bolt of lightning. All of this is told with a 'merciless self-parody' (2007, p.84) that leaves the reader unsure what to make of him. At this early stage in the novel some readers might be prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt and interpret the mocking tone as a way of protecting himself from unbearable pain. But as de la Durantaye (2007, pp.86–87) points out, he is soon waxing lyrical about the 'nymphet', asking the reader to judge his paedophilia as an aesthetic activity, accessible to the discerning few: 'the "artist" and the mad man' (Nabokov, 2015, p.17). He then goes on to present his Lolita as a perfection of this type, a piece of art, and encourages the reader to believe that he genuinely fell in love with her. He uses his 'learning' as a means of hoodwinking the reader; for example, his reference to Dante's Beatrice only serves to give a bogus legitimacy to his aesthetic appreciation of what he terms 'the nymphet.' What he doesn't tell us is that Dante was ten years old when he fell in love with his eight-year-old Beatrice.

Phelan, (2008, p.8) in attempting to address the problematic issues raised for the contemporary reader, discusses 'the difficult problem of the relation between technique and ethics in *Lolita*'. He notes the polarization of readers' responses, which he divides into two main groups, those, most common in 1961, that are taken in by Humbert's 'rhetorical appeal', and those far more common today, who are thoroughly resistant. To this end Phelan (2008, p.9) sets out to redefine the concept of the unreliable narrator, distinguishing between what he calls 'estranging unreliability', a type of unreliable narrating that increases the distance between narrator and reader, and 'bonding unreliability', by which the distance is reduced. He notes that the relationship between the implied author and the implied narrator shifts across a wide

spectrum. At one end there is what he calls ‘mask narration’ (2008, p.9) in which the narrator is a mouthpiece for the author. ‘Indeed, the implied author employs the mask of the character as a means to increase the appeal and persuasiveness of the ideas expressed’ (2008, pp.9–10). On the other end is the totally unreliable narrator, who deceives us on all accounts by ‘underreporting, misreporting, misevaluating, underregarding’ and ‘under evaluating’ (2008, p.10). The sliding scale of unreliability is very helpful, as it implies that some narrators are only moderately unreliable, and are consequently far more difficult to spot. Estranging unreliability is more obvious, as the narrator’s worldview is distinct from what we know of the author. Bonding unreliability is in one sense more complex and much more problematic because, as Phelan points out, ‘although the authorial audience recognizes the narrator’s unreliability, that unreliability includes some communication that the implied author – and thus the authorial audience – endorses’ (2008, p.11).

In the case of Nabokov, his bond with his narrator Humbert is a shared virtuosity with language, an artistic soul, and an old-world European heritage. In the opening paragraph of his confession, Humbert says ‘you can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style’ (2015, p.9). Here Nabokov is warning the reader, he might sound like me, he might share certain similarities, love of literature, high art etc., but he is not me. Nevertheless, there is a danger that his warning won’t be heeded, especially as John Ray Jr., the psychiatrist presenting the case for the prosecution in the Foreword, comes across as rather dim-witted and speaks in platitudes. Nabokov is playing a dangerous game here: his cunning narrator, following on after the psychiatrist’s introduction to the accused, makes an appeal to the reader’s vanity; in contrast to John Ray Jr., he is articulate, refined, and steeped in the world of high culture, so the temptation to bond with him on a snobbish level is strong.

Hindsight

Part Two of the novel describes Humbert's abduction of Dolores and their road trip across the States. Although his crazed rhapsodies don't abate, the 'bonding unreliability' that Phelan talks of starts to crumble as the narrator suffers occasional lapses and moments of hindsight break through. Phelan (2013, p.298) points out that Part One ends with a sentence that indicates a slight but significant shift in the narrative, which hints at the narrator's difficulty, now that he has achieved his heart's desire, to hold fast to his delusional self. 'At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go' (Nabokov, 2015, p.142). The first sentence is focalised through Humbert, the character's perspective, 'we made it up very gently' (2015, p.142), which is in line with the deluded perspective that permeates most of the novel; whereas the second sentence is told from the perspective of Humbert the narrator, looking back on the experience from his prison cell: 'You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go' (2015, p.142). The two sentences fight against one another, betraying the narrator's torment, and indicate that on some level he knows exactly what he is doing. Phelan notes that these instances of dual focalisation, as flashes of hindsight break through, happen more and more frequently in Part Two in Humbert's asides to the reader.

Some weeks after he and Dolores have embarked on the road trip and are staying in seedy motels, he lets the reader know about 'her sobs in the night – every night – the moment I feigned sleep' (2015, p.176). And much later, after he has exhausted the road and settled with his 'daughter' in the sleepy fictional town of Beardsley, knowing that Dolores is desperate to escape and participate in ordinary schoolgirl life, he allows her to earn cash, which he steals back from her, trapping her

in a hideous endless cycle: ‘by that time I had brought the prices down drastically by having her earn the hard and nauseous way permission to participate in the school’s theatrical program’ (2015, pp.184–5). These bald accounts of his depravity are unambiguous; whereas in Part One, before he has actually had sex with Dolores, although he alludes to himself as ‘a vampire’, a ‘monster’, ‘a hideous spider’, his descriptions are somehow amorphous and seem to let him off the hook. His perception of himself as an ‘inflated pale’ spider in the ‘middle of a luminous web’ is poetic, on one level enchanting, all part of his seductive toolkit. But when the reader is given the vile, hard little details such as her sobs every night, the ‘wincing bleeding child’ (2015, p.135), the ‘hard and nauseous way’ (2015, p.185) he gets her to earn her permission to participate in ordinary school life, he has given up exonerating himself and is admitting to the harm he has done Dolores. Phelan sees Humbert’s partial self-realisation as evidence of how far he has travelled from rationalising his paedophilia at the start of the novel, and that this change is indicative of ‘Nabokov’s increased use of bonding unreliability through partial progress towards the authorial norm’ (2008, p.25).

Perhaps Humbert reaches a partial realisation of the evil he has visited on Dolores by the end of his confession? In Chapter Twenty, in the role of concerned ambitious father, he reflects on Dolores’ ruined potential when she loses interest in playing tennis, a sport she excelled in: ‘yet I insist that had not something within her been broken by me – not that I realised it then! – she would have had on the top of her perfect form the will to win, and would have become a real girl champion’ (2015, p.232). In the penultimate paragraph of the book, he says: ‘Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least five years for rape and dismissed the rest of the charges’ (2015, p.308). Phelan makes the point that for the first time he is able to use

the word 'rape' and this in itself is an indication of remorse, although some readers see his admission as 'an insincere ploy, just one more move in Humbert's attempt to win the sympathy of the his narratee' (2008, p.26).

Pathological Blindness

Humbert's story is a refusal to think from the standpoint of someone else; de la Durantaye (2007) points to a passage early in Humbert's confession when he turns to the reader and says: 'my story has reached a point where I can cease insulting Charlotte (Dolores' mother) for the sake of retrospective verisimilitude' (2015, p.71). Here he is telling the reader that he has placed a restraint on himself when writing his confession so as to ensure he is a 'conscientious recorder' (2015, p.72) of events. De la Durantaye (2007, pp.92–93) notes that he wants to present a record of himself as he was at the time, without recourse to hindsight. But in the absence of regret, this is just another ploy to skirt around his pathological inability to see anything from Dolores' perspective. He has left her out of the account, and now at the last moment, he has found a sneaky ruse to explain why she is missing.

In a peculiar way, Humbert is disconcertingly truthful about actual events; it is his pathological determination to seduce the reader into seeing things from his demented viewpoint that is typical of the 'mad monologist' discussed in Chapter Four. This desire to convince others of the rightness of a warped vision is a marked tendency with psychopaths; in fact it can become an obsession. What they all share in common is a longing to end their loneliness and find allies.

Nabokov's Humbert might well score very highly on the Hare Psychopathy Checklist, invented years after the novel was written. The Checklist is a screening test

for potential psychopaths consisting of twenty criteria, such as ‘grandiose sense of self-worth, pathological lying, a lack of remorse or guilt’. The scores rank from zero to forty, and those that score above thirty are considered to have strong psychopathic traits. Humbert’s confession does not seek to evade what is coming to him, he doesn’t seem to care whether he lives or dies; but this is because his concern is something far more integral: he wants the reader to be like him, to see things through his eyes. Humbert, like most certified psychopaths, is completely incapable of seeing things from another person’s perspective. Soon after Dolores escapes him, he muses: ‘it struck me [...] that I simply did not know a thing about my darling and that quite possibly, behind the juvenile clichés, there was in her a garden and a twilight, and a palace gate – dim and adorable regions which happened to be lucidly and absolutely forbidden to me’ (2015, p.284). It is as if it has only just occurred to him that she might have an independent life of her own, with thoughts and feelings that are not filtered through his lens. Years later he tracks her down to the dusty shack in the middle of nowhere. Michael Wood (1995, pp.136–37) gives an acutely described analysis of their final meeting.

Much of the power of this chapter of the novel [...] rests on her sheer ruined ordinariness [...] Life with Humbert was a cage, a travelling prison, a dreary round of sexual duty. Quilty [...] turned out to be only quirky Sadeian games. Even so Lolita regards Quilty as ‘full of fun’ and Humbert as a remote, hardly remembered nuisance: [...] she seems stunned and flattened, almost erased by the life she has led.

Wood (1995, p. 139) doesn’t believe Humbert’s remorse. As far as he is concerned, he protests too much, and is too anxious for us to see the change in him. ‘I can’t believe in his repentance because the language of his renunciation is the language of gloating – as indeed his language throughout, however guilty he feels or says he felt, is full of relished remembrance’.

No matter, even if those eyes of hers would fade to myopic fish, and her nipples swell and crack, and her lovely young velvety delicate delta be tainted and torn – even then I would go mad with tenderness at the sight of your dear wan face, at the mere sound of your raucous young voice, my Lolita (Nabokov, 2015, p.278).

Even at this late stage in the narrative, Humbert still has not reached any understanding of the full extent of his crime against Dolores. As mentioned earlier, he lets the reader know of his generosity in coming to her rescue in her hour of need by giving her a generous cheque, far more than the small amount she asked for, but what he doesn't tell the reader is that this money is from the proceeds of the sale of her mother's house, only a part of the money that is rightfully hers – he, presumably, has pocketed the rest.

The Mocked Female Reader

This urge to retell Humbert's confession and give Dolores a voice is a powerful one, especially for the female reader faced with Humbert's lie of a dangerous, deadly female sexuality applied to a twelve-year-old child. Booth (1983, p.390) points out that these types of misreadings of the novel 'do not come from any inherent condition of the novel or any natural incompatibility between author and reader. They come from the reader's inability to dissociate himself from the vicious center of consciousness presented to him with all the seductiveness of self-justification of skillful rhetoric'. Here he seems to be saying that certain male, and some female, readings are predetermined by a misogynistic culture that encourages the unwary reader to be unwittingly receptive to Humbert's 'skillful rhetoric'.

In his address to the female members of the jury, Humbert doesn't bother with flattery, and instead adopts a tone of sneering sarcasm. In Chapter 28 of Book One,

having deposited Dolores in room 342 of The Enchanted Hunters Hotel, already drugged, and prepped for rape, he opens with the lines: ‘Gentlewomen of the jury! Bear with me! Allow me to take just a tiny bit of your precious time. So this was *le grand moment*’ (2015, p.123). For the next few pages he ruminates and is forced to stall the rape when Dolores wakes from her drugged sleep. By the end of Chapter 29, early in the morning, he finally summons up the courage to destroy her:

Frigid gentlewomen of the jury! I had thought that months, perhaps years, would elapse before I dared to reveal myself to Dolores Haze; but by six she was wide awake, and by six fifteen we were technically lovers. I am going to tell you something very strange: it was she who seduced me (2015, p.132).

The implied threat is that if the reader dares to object to his version of events, she is frigid, wrong-headed, dumb, ignorant, petty, prudish; no different from the majority of the adult females in this book. Kauffman (1989) appeals to readers and critics to resist Humbert’s bullying, mocking address, pointing out the impossible position the female reader is placed in: ‘feminist readers have the choice of either participating in their own ‘emasculatation’ by endorsing aesthetic bliss, or demonstrating their humorlessness and frigidity’ (1989, p.135).

Humbert views women with gleeful contempt. His first wife Valerie is described as plump and inarticulate: ‘she waddled by my side, and began to shake her poodle head vigorously without saying a word’ (2015, p.27). His second wife, Dolores’ mother, whom he refers to throughout as ‘the Haze woman’, doesn’t fare much better. He sums her up as ‘one of those women whose polished words may reflect a book club or bridge club, or any other deadly conventionality, but never her soul’ (2015, p.37). The adult female is either as shallow and humourless as Charlotte, or hideous. ‘Pratt’, the headmistress of Dolores’ school in Beardsley, calls Humbert in to talk about her concerns for his daughter, who is not flourishing. His description of

her is devastating: ‘A huge woman, grey-haired, and frowsy with a broad flat nose, and small eyes behind black framed glasses’ (2015, p.193). A few lines on, he describes her ‘liver spotted hands’ noticing that ‘the smoke she exhaled from her nostrils was like a pair of tusks’ (2015, p.194). Her suggestion that Dolores should be seen by the school doctor so enrages him that he briefly thinks of turning her into that despised figure – the wife. ‘Should I marry Pratt and strangle her?’ (2015, p.197). In a later chapter, a nurse, who suspecting something is awry when Dolores is taken to hospital with a raging fever, refuses to allow him access to see his ‘daughter’, is vilified: ‘At one point, I was rather dreadfully rude to a very young and very cheeky nurse with overdeveloped gluteal parts and blazing black eyes – Basque descent, as I learned. Her father was an imported shepherd, a trainer of sheep dogs’ (2015, p.241).

Humbert invites the susceptible reader to collude with him in mocking the enemy. Kauffman (1989, p.135) quotes Judith Fetterly: ‘the female reader is co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded; she is asked to identify with a selfhood that defines itself in opposition to her; and is required to identify against herself’. Humbert’s damning, invalidating descriptions of the various women who might have helped Dolores escape are seamlessly woven into his narrative. However, he is kinder to the unsuspecting female. He describes Mrs Holigan, the charlady that he ‘inherits’ when he briefly settles into 14 Thayer Street, with a grudging acceptance. ‘That kindly and harmless woman had, thank God, a rather bleary eye that missed details, and I became a great expert at bed making’ (2015, p.180).

Humbert’s fear of discovery sharpens his vitriol. When he moves into Thayer Street with Dolores, he is constantly on guard. ‘I often felt we lived in a lighted house of glass, and that at any moment some thin-lipped parchment face would peer through a carelessly unshaded window to obtain a free glimpse of things the most jaded

voyeur would have paid a small fortune to watch' (2015, p.180). These neighbourhood snoops are invariably female: 'that type of haddocky spinster [whose] obscene mind was the result of considerable literary inbreeding in modern fiction' (2015, p.206). How Nabokov hates his own creation. Increasingly hemmed in, Humbert lashes out at Dolores' friends at her new school, terrified that she might confide in one of them. Opal is described as 'a bashful, formless, bespectacled, bepimpled creature' and Avis as 'a plump lateral child with hairy legs' (2015 p.190). Sarah Herbold (1999, p.9) notes that the female reader is 'ostracized, humiliated and condemned'. Shut out of his world, she is consigned to the company of the 'haddocky spinster', the 'frigid gentlewomen of the jury', the 'liver spotted' Pratt, and other 'thin lipped, parchment faced' members. The psychiatrist John Ray Jr., who appears in the Foreword to the novel, falls into the same camp. His account of the prisoner is lugubrious, and pitted with well-worn clichés.

In the 2015 Penguin edition of *Lolita*, there is a black-and-white photograph on the back cover showing a middle-aged Nabokov looking out from the driver's window of his car. The image immediately brings to mind Humbert's six-month road trip with Dolores following her mother's death. It also carries echoes of the 1950s newspaper story that inspired the novel: the two-year ordeal of eleven-year-old Sally Horner, kidnapped by Frank La Salle. Herbold (1999, p.5) points out that both Humbert and his creator lay claim to *Lolita*, 'whom they have invented'. She talks about the underlying Pygmalion theme in the novel that has led feminist critics 'to ask whether there really is a woman in the text, since *Lolita* exists only as Humbert's representation of her' (1999, p.5). She will be forever unknowable. Herbold (1999, p.6) points out that it could be said 'that there is a woman in the text, if only in the form of a trace woman (or girl) who was – or could have been – present, but can no longer be made present, either to author, narrator, or reader'. And as there is 'no

objective reality' in the novel with which to measure Humbert's distorted depiction of her, Lolita as Humbert describes her is all there is to go on. What she appears to be, and what Nabokov signals to the reader in the opening chapter of the book, is a composite of a multitude of pubescent girls such that exist in Humbert's imagination.

Kauffman (1989, p.138) notes that Humbert's blindness to Dolores, his inability to recognise that she has a 'will or life of her own [...] denies not just what is womanly in Lolita – he denies what is human' and why 'he must insist that nymphets are demonic'. In an intriguing signposting of intertextuality, Kauffman comments that 'the myth of demonic children' ties the novel to James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1989, p.138). The governess 'tries to arrest the children's development; the desire to fix things indeed, is one of her motives for writing her retrospective narrative [...] just as Humbert wants to "fix the perilous magic of nymphets"' (1989, p.139).

In both texts [...] how and what you see depends on the frame: James' governess and Humbert Humbert both resort to a fancy prose style to frame a murder [...] In both the governess's narrative and Humbert's, silence, exile, and cunning lie in the gap between past and present, and determine what inflection will be given to the murder of childhood' (1989, p.139).

Clegg, in her critical overview of the novel, refers to the critic Ellen Pifer, who quotes

Nabokov's description of Humbert as 'a vain and cruel wretch who manages to appear "touching". That epithet, in its true, tear-iridized sense, can only apply to my poor little girl [Lolita]' (2000, p.95). And yet Nabokov hands the entire narrative over to her eloquent, persuasive rapist. Perhaps the final word should be with Phelan, who sees the novel in terms of an 'experiment with unreliable narrations [that] set up interpretive and ethical traps for readers' (2008, p.26); a stance which seems to imply that readers should bear some of the responsibility if they are not up to the challenge of avoiding these traps, whether they are duped by Humbert's artful narration as was

common when the novel was first published or, as is the norm today, are overly resistant to Humbert's apparent remorse by the end of his confession.

Cure for the Damned

I was initially surprised to discover just how relevant Phelan's concept of estranging and bonding unreliability is to the narrative structure of *Cure for the Damned*. Tom's self-deprecating narration forges a bond with the reader that is accentuated when intercut with Magnus' rather distant, and at times self-regarding, snobbish delivery. But Tom is not everything that he at first appears. In the opening chapter, on their first visit to Lane End, he is disarmingly open about his tenuous mental stability. 'I had decided that I would submit to his will; if he liked this place I wasn't going to put up a fight. I'd ceased trusting my instincts months back, and was only happy that he still wanted me' (p.7). As they tour the cottage he mooches grumpily from room to room, and when Magnus expresses exasperation, he turns to the reader and asks wistfully: 'Was he ever going to take me seriously again?'(p.10). At the start of Chapter Two he slyly lets the reader know that Magnus is both controlling and unsympathetic: 'I knew Magnus would have the final word; even before my "blip", was how he put it – we never used the word breakdown – he made the decisions' (p.16). And later, when talking about Magnus' demanding high-profile profession, he says: 'from time to time his name would appear in the newspaper in connection with a high-profile patient that he was treating, and I would read with a mixture of awe and disappointment just how much he had hidden from me' (p.16).

With the sly cunning of the underdog, he treacherously encourages the reader to bond with him at Magnus' expense, a tendency that is marked from the start, even

before their relationship falls apart. On the drive back to London, after viewing the cottage, he lets the reader know that he is being coerced into leaving London and abandoning his niece Kitty. Magnus' comment that if the move will make Tom unhappy, they can stay put in London, is undercut by Tom's sly aside to the reader: 'I wished he wouldn't lie; there was no option, there never was with him' (p.18). A page later he rams his point home: 'he was making conversation. It was all decided' (p.22). Later he praises Magnus for doing the right thing in offering Kitty a home, something he is initially unwilling to do; but by this time, nearly fifty pages into the novel, the reader is suspicious of Magnus, and is not receptive to Tom's disingenuous plea on his behalf: 'He was a better person than myself, spontaneously prepared to do the right thing [...] Whereas I was selfish, cowardly, happier than I'd ever been' (p.49).

However, Magnus doesn't do himself any favours; in the Prologue he describes visiting his family shortly after his death, and tells the reader: 'These are my people, the ones I was given to love, and I've not done well' (p.4). Magnus is not only controlling and impatient, as described by Tom; he is, by his own admission, aloof, standoffish and a snob. In Chapter Three, when he embarks on his side of the story, he makes a poor impression. He starts: 'When I first met Tom it wasn't love at first sight, God knows – far from it' (p.32). His description of his colleague's barbecue reeks of disdain; it is not so much his direct condemnation, but more the accumulated details that are so damning, describing a 'dusty house hidden behind an overgrown front garden' (p.32) situated in 'the remote outer reaches of the Piccadilly line' (p.34). He is mortified that 'this clumsy character, with his orange socks and flapping trousers' (p.33) has been introduced as a prospective partner; and yet he is prepared take the risk and accept Tom's invitation. He arrives a week early, humiliating himself by appearing overly keen and exposing his loneliness. And once inside Tom's flat, the humiliation is compounded by meeting a woman and a child: 'for a wild, headsplitting

moment, I think he is married, and that I have read the invitation all wrong' (p.35). Destabilized by a recent bout of flu, he falls asleep on Tom's sofa in the middle of a family domestic, and later when Tom's mother apologises, he lies and says he slept through it all, so as to spare the family the indignity of being overheard by a stranger.

Despite his innate decency and desire to do the right thing, Magnus' problem is that he is selfish; soon after Kitty moves in with them he says: 'six months in, I knew it wasn't going to work for me. Tom's growing bond with his niece, irritating at first, became increasingly painful, a daily reminder of my failure.' He admits that 'it was envy, pure and simple' behind his desire to relocate, and move Tom out of London, away from Kitty. He is brutally aware of his cruelty: 'I slugged it out, quietly, reasonably, knowing full well I was slicing him in half' (p.48). And much later, towards the end of the novel when everything has fallen apart, he reflects on his abhorrence of Tom's mental fragility: 'I am hitched up to my worst fears, and my ungenerous heart cannot forgive him' (p.236).

Kitty describes Magnus as cold, tetchy, and fastidious, and overly concerned with his appearance. Tom lets the reader know that he is controlling, aloof and impatient. Angela hates him. Yet throughout the novel, he performs small acts of kindness, sometimes big acts, such as offering Kitty a home. He is sensitive to the feelings of others, lying to Tom's mother that he slept through a family argument. When he tires of the domestic arrangement with Kitty, he doesn't seek the cowardly way out and pressurise Angela into taking her child back as Tom suspects. He shows sympathy and understanding towards Annie, and has a long track record of success, working with very damaged patients. At the end of the novel, when Angela attends his funeral, she expresses annoyance at his ex-patients' praise of him: 'Stuffy old Magnus had been good for these guys, they really rated him, but the weird thing was the more

these speakers took to the stand, the more the Magnus I knew and disliked solidified' (p.251).

Magnus separates Tom from his niece out of jealousy and a sense of his own inadequacy. But set against Tom's wrongdoings, it pales in comparison. Tom not only has to be cajoled into taking Kitty into their home by Magnus; when Angela, two years later, pays an unexpected visit, now that he has become attached to his niece, all he can think of is hassling her mother out of the door, and paying her not to return. But when faced with having to make a choice between Kitty and Magnus, he relinquishes her without putting up much of a fight. And later, when marooned and miserable in his new home, he forms a passionate attachment with a one-eyed cat that strays into the house, and uses the creature as a conduit to pursue an irrational battle with Carl. Towards the end of the novel, when Carl appears to perish in the fire, Tom's account of the event falters and 'the facts' go 'missing'. The reader at this point might be prepared to forgive him for attempted murder; he is, after all, sorely provoked. But what is unforgivable is his cold-blooded decision to save his own skin at Magnus' expense, choosing to abandon him to die in the frozen car, rather than face a charge for attempted murder.

Reflections

Nabokov's Humbert is very different to both Magnus and Tom, in his knowing self-parodying delivery, his clever archness. As mentioned above, my two first-person narrators are closer in sensibility to James' governess, in that their address to the reader is direct and lacking in irony, which does not mean that either of them is necessarily telling the truth. The truth in *Cure for the Damned*, as in *The Turn of the*

Screw, is elusive, the murder, if it is a murder, is shrouded in mystery, and no blame is apportioned. The reader does not know the true circumstances of Miles' death or the extent of the governess's culpability; similarly it is unclear how responsible Tom is for Magnus' death. The governess, like Tom and Magnus, lies to herself to justify aberrant behaviour; all three share a similar blindness, although Tom less than the governess, and Magnus much less than Tom. Whereas Humbert provides the reader with the bald facts: he murdered Clare Quilty, and raped Dolores. He attempts to cloak his crimes with spurious self-justifications, but the reader can be in no doubt of the facts; his confession, after all, is based on a true-life story.

Chapter Three

The Secret History

Fallible and Untrustworthy

Tartt's Prologue to *The Secret History*, like the Prologue to Nabokov's *Lolita*, indicates that this is a confessional novel; nine years after the event, Richard Papen is ready to tell his story. With the benefit of hindsight, he is able to see more clearly, or so he would have the reader believe. Guilt has clearly prompted his confession, told in atonement for his part in the murder of an old friend whilst an undergraduate at an elite university, Hampden College. Nevertheless, the tone of his address is so selfconsciously knowing that the reader is wary from the start:

Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw', that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now? I think it does. And I think mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs.

A moi. L'histoire d'une de mes folies.

My name is Richard Papen' (Tartt, 1993, p.5).

A pitch-perfect start to a novel, as beautiful as Humbert's ode: 'Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Lo. Lee. Ta' (Nabokov, 2015, p.9). Papen strikes the reader as untrustworthy from the outset. Unlike Humbert, he does not set out to seduce the reader; his duplicitousness, as with the governess and Tom and Magnus, springs from a wilful blindness, a clinging to delusions in the face of a too painful truth. In this chapter I examine the notion as expressed by Phelan (2005) that 'just as a person's view may change in the course of a lifetime, the degree of the narrator's unreliability may vary at different stages of the narration' (Phelan 2005, cited by Olson 2003, p.100). Olson (2003, pp.94–105) develops this idea and differentiates between fallible and untrustworthy narration, pointing out that a narrator

is often not deliberately lying, and can actually be telling their version of the truth, although they are deaf to the implications of what they are saying.

The Story

Looking back on his nineteen-year-old self, Papen tells us how he broke away from his working-class roots in California and gained a scholarship to the Ivy League college in Vermont, New England. At Hampden, he encounters an upper-class clique, majoring in ancient Greek, who want nothing to do with the modern world. As a means of winning their acceptance he manages to gain entry into Morrow's elite 'lyceum', a study group dedicated to the ancient Greek classics. When Papen discovers that five of the core members have been indulging in secret Dionysian rituals in the woods, influenced by the teachings of the sinister Morrow, he is upset that he hasn't been invited. And later, when by chance he finds out that one of these rituals ended badly with a chicken farmer being torn to shreds in an orgy of bloodletting, rather than reporting the incident, or at the very least, severing all contact with the culprits, he helps them cover up the murder. When Bunny, a member of the clique who wasn't present at the murder, finds out and threatens to turn them in to the police, Papen helps his friends murder him, although technically it is Henry Winter, the leader of the clique, who pushes him down the wooded ravine. Bunny's murder happens by the end of Book One, and marks a transitional point in the narrative. Book Two charts the unravelling of the murderous clique, as fear and not very much guilt, mainly terror of being caught, eats away at them, and one by one they collapse, each according to his or her character.

Reflecting on his early years in Plano, California, Papen quotes from his teenage journal: ‘There is to me about this place a smell of rot, the smell of rot that ripe fruit makes’ (Tartt, 1993, p.9). This revulsion for his origins creates a harsh centre to the novel that underlies a refusal to serve any uplifting moral purpose. Although there is more than a nod towards detective fiction, there is no move to restore order where once there had been chaos, in fact quite the reverse. At the end of the novel, the police unwittingly side with the murderers; the group evade a lengthy prison sentence, perhaps even the electric chair, and get off scot-free for both murders, while other students are punished for totally unrelated crimes. The illusion of order is restored; the murderers are released to return to their ordinary lives, and take up where they left off.

The title of the novel is borrowed from the Byzantine historian Procopius, who added a *Secret History* to his official biography of the Emperor Justinian, in which he gives a lurid account of the emperor and his wife Theodora’s shocking depravity. Tracy Hargreaves (2001, p.61) makes the point that the borrowed title ‘throws into confusion’ as to ‘which, now, is the “real” history, the one we are to believe’. There is the strongest sense reading Papen’s confession that owning up to his part in Bunny’s murder would seem to indicate a return to the despised Plano self, and a retreat to a traditional value system that he has been so eager to reject, whereas keeping quiet seals his bond with the murderers, whom despite his protestation to the contrary, he still loves:

I do not now nor did I ever have anything in common with any of them, nothing except a knowledge of Greek and the year of my life spent in their company. And if love is a thing held in common, I suppose we had that in common, too, though I realize that might sound odd in the light of the story I am about to tell (1993, p.7).

Loyal to them to the last, he has squared his conscience nine years previously, and is not about to disrupt the illusion of order by releasing his confession to the world; unlike Humbert, whose crimes are made public, Richard's confession is secret, drawing the reader into an unwitting complicity.

The Novel's Reception

Hargreaves (2001, pp.66–76) provides a brief overview of the reception of *The Secret History*. Published by Knopf in September 1992, the pre-publication hype had been building for months. Tartt, twenty-eight at the time, received a \$450,000 advance. Already a rising literary star while at Bennington College, her connections to the Brat-Pack, the 1980s East Coast group of writers headed by Bret Easton Ellis, a close friend of Tartt's, gave her an air of glamorous cool. Elegant and tiny, she famously told James Kaplan in an interview in *Vanity Fair* to accompany the publication of *The Secret History*, 'I am the exact same size as Lolita' (*Vanity Fair*, September 1992). Enigmatic and intensely private, she quickly became an object of intense curiosity. Kaplan's article added to the hype, creating a portrait of a prodigious talent obsessed with T.S. Eliot, nurtured by obsessive reading whilst a sickly child in a cloistered Southern Gothic household.

Hargreaves (2001, p.66) notes that subsequent reviewers struggled to define the novel – was it Brat-Pack, Southern Gothic, American Gothic or just American *Brideshead*? Some faulted the upper-middle-class characters, finding them indistinguishable and lacking in personality. There was general indecision about whether Tartt was delivering another formulaic Brat-Pack campus novel or not. Pearl Bell, in her *Partisan* review, pointed out that what distinguished Tartt's novel from

the work of her Brat-Pack contemporaries was the move towards high, rather than popular, culture. Comparisons were made with Fitzgerald, Eliot, Bret Easton Ellis, along with references to *Lord of the Flies*, and *Brideshead*, in relation to her creation of a close and rarefied world. Perhaps most problematic was the classical subplot running through the novel; there was a sense that she had taken a step too far in making such a self-conscious display of her erudition, with some critics finding it downright pretentious and implausible. James Woods, writing in *London Review of Books*, acknowledges the nineteenth-century influence on her writing, and comments on her long flowing sentences in contrast to Ellis' 'postmodern fractured' prose style (Woods, 1992, cited by Hargreaves, 2001, p.72).

Despite the mixed reception of the novel, which Hargreaves (2001, p.74) puts down to 'the novel's far from straightforward relationship to literary genres', with critics unable to decide whether it was a crime fiction, a Brat-Pack campus novel, or literary fiction, *The Secret History* achieved a cult status that has survived over twenty years since it was first published. Tartt, secretive and closely guarded as ever, continues to bring out one large novel every ten years; *The Little Friend* came out in 2003, followed in 2015 by *The Goldfinch*, both equally controversial in their way, ensuring the appeal of the Tartt mystique lives on undiminished.

Gatsby

At the start of his narrative, Papen works hard to befriend the reader, angling for sympathy: 'My father was mean, and our house ugly, and my mother didn't pay much attention to me; my clothes were cheap and my haircut too short and no one at school seemed to like me that much' (Tartt, 1993, p.6). The moment he arrives at

Hampden, he is desperate to reinvent himself, and in an effort to gain admittance to Morrow's lyceum, he lies about his origins and invents a couple of eccentric showbiz parents. His lie this early in the narrative strikes a warning note; a person who can disown their parents with so little provocation is not to be trusted. Later he refers to *The Great Gatsby*, rather pompously identifying with the dynamic, self-made Gatsby, but his claim is paper thin; it is true that like Gatsby he comes from a poor family and has moved east, but this is where the similarity between them ends. As Phelan (2013, p.116) points out, Gatsby is the sacrificial stranger. Uprooted from the rural West, he moves into the underworld of New York and makes a fortune, but despite his vast wealth, he will never be accepted by Daisy and her ilk; instead he is punished for his difference. It is Daisy who runs over Myrtle Wilson, but it is Gatsby who is blamed; he must die so that the wealthy Buchanans can continue their charmed existence, their wealth and reputation preserved at all costs. Papen, on the other hand, avoids becoming the sacrificial victim by the skin of his teeth. There is a telling moment towards the end of *The Secret History* when Papen realises that Henry Winter has engineered his complicity in Bunny's murder: 'I was still trying to force back the blackest thought of all [...] Had Henry intended to make me the patsy if his plan had fallen through?' (1993, p. 551). It is a chilling realisation; if the net had closed and his friends had been in danger of exposure, they wouldn't have hesitated in turning on him and because they are clever, rich and resourceful, he would have been defenceless and ended like Bunny, by paying with his life.

Papen is in fact much closer to the rather befuddled narrator Nick Carraway, who reports from the sidelines of the action. But unlike Papen, Carraway learns from his bruising encounter with the ruthless East Coast upper-class elite, as a result of witnessing Gatsby's tragedy. Months after Gatsby's death, he bumps into Tom on Fifth Avenue and reflects:

They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money and their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they made (cited in Phelan, 2013, p.142).

Papen, like Carraway, has his life altered forever by a group of careless wealthy people; if he had never met them, the Bacchanalian spree in the woods would still have gone ahead, and Bunny would have found out and threatened to expose them. Papen was a useful cog; if he hadn't been available at the time, Winter would have found someone else in his place to lure Bunny out to the ravine that fateful day. Both Papen and Carraway are incidental to these people's lives, and ultimately disposable. Papen, like Carraway is cast in the role of character narrator as a means of keeping track of his friend's evil machinations, but in contrast to Carraway, he is ambivalent in his assessment of them, and not only fails to condemn them for the first murder, but actively aids and abets them in the second.

Fallible and Untrustworthy

The perplexing aspect of Papen's infatuation with his wealthy friends is that from the outset they are introduced to the reader with few redeeming qualities; they are inward-looking, snobbish, unfriendly and arrogant. Perhaps Tartt deliberately highlights their least likeable characteristics as a way of pointing out the extent of Papen's infatuation; to the reader they appear rather cardboard and slightly ridiculous, with the implication that if they weren't from exotic wealthy backgrounds, he might not have given them a second glance:

they shared a certain coolness, a cruel, mannered charm which was not modern in the least but had a strange cold breath of the ancient world: they were magnificent creatures, such eyes, such hands, such looks [...] This was a long way from Plano, and my father's gas station (1993, p.33).

Not far into the novel, as a means of circumventing Papen's subjective description of this peculiar group of friends, his dorm-mate Judy Poovey is brought in as a narrative device to give some distance to his infatuated perspective. But when she points out that there is something horribly wrong with them, and relates a chilling incident in which Winter's terrible rage puts a fellow student in hospital, her warning goes unheeded.

Towards the end of the novel, when Papen is finally forced to face the ruthless way he has been used by his new friends, he visits Winter at his house in Water Street, determined to confront him, only to have Winter deftly turn the tables on him: "You don't feel a great deal of emotion for other people, do you?" I was taken aback. "What are you talking about?" I said. "Of course I do." [...] to my horror, I realized that in a way he was right' (1993, p.557). It takes Winter to reveal Papen to himself. These flashes of self-insight are few and far between in the course of his account. The night before Bunny Corcoran's funeral, faced with Mr Corcoran's spontaneous outburst of weeping, Papen suddenly and rather unexpectedly makes contact with his conscience:

Suddenly, and for the first time, really, I was struck by the bitter, irrevocable truth of it; the evil of what we had done. It was like running full speed into a brick wall. I let go of his collar, feeling completely helpless. I wanted to die. 'Oh, God,' I mumbled, 'God help me, I'm sorry' (1993, p.437).

He might have confessed at this point, but is brought sharply into line by a swift kick in the ankle from Francis and obediently assumes the role of grieving friend at Bunny's funeral. Hargreaves (2001) points out that role-playing comes naturally to Papen; in the opening chapter he dismisses his childhood home: 'My years there created for me an expendable past, disposable as a plastic cup. Which I suppose was a

very great gift, in a way. On leaving home I was able to fabricate a new and far more satisfying history' (1993, p.5). Despite his pride in his ability to reinvent himself, there is a tentativeness in his recollection of his early years; describing his childhood in Plano, he stumbles and seems to shrink from close scrutiny. Hargreaves (2001, p.63) points to the occasional flaws in his narrative: 'I am unable to recall [...] I honestly can't remember much else [...] I don't think I can explain'. His hesitancy implies that what follows is only his understanding of events, and not the definitive version. His dissembling leaves the reader slightly wrong-footed; is the past too painful to remember, or is he deliberately setting out to deceive? The double-edged question that looms over the narrative comes down to whether or not he has real remorse for the past and, if he has, will he one day reach a point when he is prepared to own up to his involvement in Bunny's murder?

Olson, in setting out to differentiate between the fallible and the untrustworthy narrator, refers to her understanding of Booth's definition of the unreliable narrator: 'Booth understands narrator unreliability to be a function of irony [...] by which distance is created between the views, actions, and voice of the unreliable narrator and those of the implied author' (2003, p.94). She goes on to question Booth's assertion that unreliable narrators are invariably consistent in their unreliability, and that once they have been unmasked as unreliable, they don't suddenly jump ship, as it were, and conform to the values espoused by the implied author. She points out that Booth has not accounted for the difference between the 'untrustworthy' narrator who 'deviates from the general normative standard implicit in the text; [whereas] by contrast a "fallible" narrator makes mistakes about how she perceives herself or her fictional world. The first concerns the narrator's qualities as a person, and the second her ability to perceive and report accurately' (2003, p.96). Olson argues that unreliability can become something far more complex, as with Papen's account: 'reliability and

unreliability as well as fallibility and infallibility are interrelated rather than diametrically opposed' (2003, p.96). She asserts that 'narrators cannot be neatly divided into categories of unreliable and reliable', and points out that 'narrators exist along a wide spectrum of unreliability' (2003, p.96) [and that] 'they can become more or less reliable during the course of their stories they tell' (2003, p.100).

For most of Book One, Papen is credulous, unsuspecting and enamoured of his glamorous friends, not prepared to probe in any depth, never questioning their acceptance of this humble newcomer. By Book Two, after Bunny's murder, as he moves from naïve fallibility to a partial grasp of the truth, his infatuation begins to wear thin, although his repugnance towards his so-called friends only surfaces as the net closes in. Towards the end of the novel Morrow discovers that the group of friends, Papen included, have engineered Bunny's death. Exposed as a murderer, knowing that Julian has it in his power to call in the police and send them all to prison for the rest of their lives, Papen experiences an epiphany: the scales slide from his eyes, and he sees his teacher 'not [as] the benign old sage, the indulgent protective good parent of my dreams, but ambiguous, a moral neutral whose beguiling trappings concealed a being watchful, capricious and heartless' (1993, pp.573–574). In this instance Papen's awakening is a long time coming, which raises the question that if Morrow hadn't suspected them, would he have remained a figure of 'paternal benevolence' in Papen's eyes?

Often the moments of truth-telling are torn out of Papen, either at times of greatest fear for his own safety, or of furious hurt. Nineteen years old, a freshman at an elite university, seriously out of his depth, and in awe of his wealthy friends, it could be said that Papen does not have the emotional resources to evaluate with a great deal of reliability. At an earlier point in the novel, when he discovers that Camilla has been sleeping with Winter and that her brother Charles is close to going

to the police and confessing all, he is both furious and frightened at the same time. He wakes in the early morning in a cold sweat of realisation. 'I'd been too vain to see it then – he'd led me right into it, coaxing and flattering all the way [...] Bunny had come to me, and I had delivered him right into Henry's hands. And I hadn't even thought twice about it' (1993, pp.550–551). Wisdom, truthfulness and reliability come in patches to Papen; for most of the novel he avoids the truth, not so much because he has set out to deliberately mislead the reader but because at bottom he is a coward. Winter, it turns out, has understood him perfectly: 'Maybe he's divined in me – correctly – this cowardice, this hideous pack instinct which would enable me to fall into step without question' (1993, p.550).

Olson (2003) points to the limitations of the homodiegetic narrator; she refers to Stanzel, who writes that 'it is the particular quality of "personalized narrators" to demonstrate to us the "biased nature of our experience of reality"' (Stanzel, 1984, cited in Olson, 2003, p.101). She expands on her argument: 'fallible narrators do not reliably report on narrative events either because they are mistaken about their judgments or perceptions or are biased [and] because their sources of information are both biased and incomplete' (2003, p.101). When it dawns on Papen that Winter has been playing him all along, he is shocked by his own credulity. 'So much of what I knew was only second hand, so much of it was only what he'd told me: there was an awful lot, when you got right down to it, that I didn't even know' (1993, p.551). His claim is true only to the extent that Winter's deception is a technicality; Papen might not have been fully aware that his fateful meeting with Bunny was engineered by Winter to lure him to his death, but he knew all along that his friends were planning to murder Bunny, and he went along with their plan without a murmur of protest.

Olson (2003, p. 102) talks of the fallible narrator as one whose mistakes the reader perceives to be 'situationally motivated', in that it is external circumstances

that have contributed to their misperceptions rather than ‘inherent characteristics’.

Whereas untrustworthy narrators strike the reader as ‘dispositionally unreliable’; in other words ‘untrustworthiness is a distinct characteristic of the narrator’ (2003, p.102). She asks the reader to consider ‘to what extent the narrator mistakes the information he has access to and the perceptions he has. Does the narrator make these mistakes consistently, and can we imagine circumstances in which the narrator would report infallibly?’ (2003, p.103). This is an intriguing question, one that in Papen’s case is not easy to answer. All the signs seem to indicate that he is by nature ‘dispositionally untrustworthy’. He not only has a tendency to lie to others, but also to himself, as with his rather shamefaced admission towards the end of the novel when talking about his ‘tendency to sentimentalize Morrow, basically to falsify him – in order to make our veneration of him seem more explicable’, which might just as easily be applied to his entire confession. Papen falsifies as a means of explaining away, excusing the inexcusable. These people, who were never really his friends in the first place, have led him into a terrible evil and thus destroyed any chance of his future happiness and whilst he recognises their cruelty, as he does Morrow’s, still he clings on: ‘and still we loved him, in spite of, because’ (1993, p.58). Despite everything, he still loves the group; and given the opportunity to repeat the experience, he admits he would probably not have behaved any differently: ‘I don’t know why we did it. I’m not entirely sure that, circumstances demanding, we wouldn’t do it again. And if I’m sorry, in a way that probably doesn’t make much difference’ (1993, p.311).

As Olson (2003, p.104) asserts, ‘it is possible for narrators to move from being fallible to being untrustworthy in the course of a narration’. Papen vacillates: he both loves his group of friends and he hates them: ‘we were not ordinary friends, but friends till-death-us-do-part [...] it made me sick, knowing there was no way out. I

was stuck with them, with all of them, for good' (1993, p.519). This is Papen's tragedy: as long as he lives, he is caught in perpetual torment between conflicting impulses and it is this that makes him is at times untrustworthy, at times merely fallible; the task for the reader is to move along his reliability spectrum, as it were, and detect when he is being deliberately deceptive, when he is deceiving himself and when he is telling the truth. Only then will the reader know what he/she makes of his claim at the start of Book Two, directly after murdering Bunny:

while I have never considered myself a very good person, neither can I bring myself to believe that I am a spectacularly bad one [...] What we did was terrible, but I still don't think any of us were bad, exactly; chalk it up to weakness on my part, hubris on Henry's, too much Greek prose composition – whatever you like (1993, p.309).

So is Bunny's murder an aberration, committed by a group of impressionable nineteen-year-olds maliciously manipulated by their sinister teacher; or are Papen and his friends innately evil, and could they murder again in the future, given the right set of conditions?

Cure for the Damned

A narrator who shifts between fallibility and untrustworthiness over the course of a narrative can be difficult to pin down; they are often not conscious of their unstable state because they are lying to themselves. In Magnus' case, he lies to Tom but not to the reader. He tells the reader when he is lying, and is fully aware of his bad behaviour. Towards the start of the novel he says that the decision to embark on a serious relationship with Tom was motivated by a need to escape a long-term impossible infatuation with Alex, and that he latched onto his fragment of family as a compensation for his own loss of family ties:

‘Tom’s family was a sort of ‘what if’ – if my mother were still alive, if I hadn’t run away and abandoned Marge – his situation might have been mine. We both had estranged sisters, we both had a niece [...] this sulky, soon-to-be teenager, might’ve been my niece, my sister’s child. I was piggybacking on Tom’s life, living it by proxy’ (p.47).

There is the sense that if he had not landed on Tom as a solution to his problems, rather like the careless Buchanans in the case of Carraway, or the sinister Winter with Papen; he would have found someone else. Tom, in contrast, places Magnus at the centre of his life, so much so that he is prepared to abandon Kitty and move to the countryside to a place he hates. Magnus is fully aware of the imbalance of their relationship and tells the reader that Tom’s ‘first sighting of me at the barbecue, walking out of the billowing plume of fat, was like an apparition, an angel landing beside him, quietly disdainful, and not the least impressed’ (p.44).

Tom convinces himself that Magnus’ inaccessibility is something he wants: ‘I liked it that Magnus kept part of himself back from me. I accepted his secrecy’ (p.193). Later in the same chapter, reflecting on his first sighting of Alex at the concert on the eve of their departure for the countryside, he is at pains to reassure the reader that he has only ever felt ‘a mild interest’ in him, and that he senses ‘a sympathy. I am adept at “synthesising my fears”, Susan calls it. I had synthesised Alex into long and complex scenarios, a ménage à trois, the three of us living in the cottage, visited occasionally by Kitty’ (p.194). This is a devastatingly dishonest description of his inner state; he is in a flat panic and sees Alex as a harbinger of doom.

Life in the damp countryside seems more inhospitable than Tom could have imagined. He develops a fierce attachment to the one-eyed cat, in response to Magnus’ increasing distance from him: ‘I looked up from my laptop and caught his raggedy eye watching me with a look of tender fondness – Magnus never looked at

me like that anymore' (p.173). Similarly, he develops an equally fierce antipathy to Carl as a means of distracting himself from facing the horrible truth that Magnus will never love him as he loves Magnus, or at least his idea of Magnus. His fears are not imagined; after the concert on the night of the eve of their departure for the countryside, Magnus tries to contact Alex, and later lies to Tom when he asks if they are in communication. This is the first time they have talked about Alex, and Tom, disturbed by their conversation, later sleepwalks. Magnus wakes in the night to find him gone from the bed:

I should go to him, help him back to the caravan, God knows he is suffering, but instead I slide away and climb back into the high bed. He might go out into the woods, glide down the lane in his dark clothes, ghostlike, into the middle of the road, picked up by oncoming headlamps only moments before impact' (p.191).

In this passage there is the sense that Magnus wants Tom dead; whereas Tom doesn't reach this point until some time later, when he realises that everything with Magnus is over: 'there was nothing left for either of us now' (p.231). Having detached himself from Magnus, he is no longer deluding himself, and admits that he wants him dead: 'only I knew [...] I was leaving him to die' (p.235). It isn't until this point, when Tom is able to acknowledge the evil in himself, and stop avoiding it by displacing it onto Magnus and Carl, that he becomes trustworthy, and is finally able to tell the reader the truth.

Reflections:

Tartt's first-person narrator is perhaps the most elusive of them all, and shares quite a lot of similar qualities with Tom. He hesitates, vacillates, is frequently indecisive, and throughout his confession, swings from repulsion for his part in

Bunny's murder, to a passive acceptance, admitting nine years later that given the same set of circumstances he might 'do it again' (1993, p.311) He gives very little information about his present circumstances, hinting darkly that he spends a great deal of time mulling over Jacobean murder, seeming to indicate he is working as an academic somewhere, but there is no mention of a partner or his current occupation. Just as a fictional character can move between fallibility and untrustworthiness, depending on the circumstances, a writer too can move along a sliding scale, of keeping a distance, hovering over, and at times inhabiting their characters.

Chapter Four

Cure for the Damned

Myth

In my novel *Cure for the Damned*, the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice informs the central theme of mutual distrust between partners, lovers, husbands and wives. The novel is about close relationships and the pitfalls of intimacy. There are many different versions of the Orpheus story. I will include a short quote from Robert Graves' (1984, p.112) 1955 retelling of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*:

One day, near the temple, in the valley of the river Peneius, Eurydice met Aristaeus, who tried to force her. She trod on a serpent as she fled, and died of its bite; but Orpheus boldly descended into Tartarus, hoping to fetch her back. He used the passage which opens at Aornum in Thesprotis and, on his arrival, not only charmed the ferryman Charon, the Dog Cerberus, and the three Judges of the Dead with his plaintive music, but temporarily suspended the tortures of the damned; and so far soothed the savage heart of Hades that he won leave to restore Eurydice to the upper world. Hades made a single condition: that Orpheus might not look behind him until she was safely back under the light of the sun. Eurydice followed Orpheus up through the dark passage, guided by the sounds of his lyre, and it was only when he reached the sunlight again that he turned to see whether she was still behind him, and so lost her for ever (1984, p.112).

In Ovid's version of the myth there are hints that the marriage of Orpheus and Eurydice is doomed from the beginning. There are no celebrations, Eurydice's robes are ash-coloured rather than saffron or flame, and when Orpheus carries her across the threshold, 'she [is] light as cobwebs and dust. She [is] already a shade anticipating death' (Wroe, 2012, p.113). They are husband and wife for a short time. Orpheus is wrapped up in his own concerns and abandons Eurydice much in the same way Magnus abandons Tom. Orpheus, like Eurydice, is a creature of the woods; he is elusive and timid, not often seen. Poets and artists sometimes catch glimpses of him

in the early mornings on the edge of the woods (Wroe, 2012, p.117). He is a lifegiving free spirit; marriage makes him tetchy and withdrawn, he hates being confined, tied down. Wroe (2012, p.119) wonders if the snake that bites Eurydice 'is Orpheus' familiar? Gods constantly took this shape [...] slithering into knots to mate with, or to escape from, each other'. Or, in Orpheus' case, to murder?

In the novel, the figure of Eurydice is fluid and is not fixed to any one character. As a force that makes the other human, she is the figure of love. In the novel Tom, Magnus and Alex take on the characteristics of Eurydice at different points in the narrative, so that the roles of Eurydice and Orpheus become interchangeable depending on the situation. For example, Tom humanises Magnus, and releases him from his obsession with the opera singer. He becomes his flesh and blood, domestic Eurydice. But Magnus fails him, he cannot let go of his chilliness; he is Orpheus, healer of men, saver of souls, and he focuses on his mission at the hospital, leaving Tom to malingering. He finds Tom's dissolution unbearable, and becomes the architect of his collapse when he turns his back on him. Abandoned by Magnus, Tom starts to crack. He develops an obsessive hatred for Carl, one of the builders renovating the cottage, who makes homophobic insinuations. The situation escalates, and after a nasty altercation, Carl suffers a near-fatal accident. Magnus suspects Tom of attempted murder, and calls on a colleague at the hospital to have him sectioned. That night a blizzard moves in, and they are snowbound before the colleague can get to the cottage. Magnus spends the night in his car and slips into a hypothermic trance. Tom, who has discovered his treachery, finds him half-dead in the car the next day, and leaves him to die. Magnus wakes from his trance, drawn by the vision of Alex on the edge of the woods. The Greeks thought of Eurydice as a druid, a tree spirit, the feminine soul that inhabits the woodland, and it is Alex who calls to the dying Magnus and lures him into the underworld to die. He stumbles out

of the car into the woods, where he encounters Carl and his friends, who are wildly drunk. They are angry and blame Tom for the near-death of their friend, and when they see Magnus they attack him in a homophobic frenzy, beating him senseless. This echoes the tearing-apart of Orpheus by the women of Thrace for renouncing the love of women and turning to men. In the penultimate chapter, Tom follows Magnus into the woods wanting his search to end in his own death, and when he is saved by the rescue team he is furious that he has been ejected from the underworld and will never see his Eurydice again.

Orpheus is killed by the women of Thrace. Some say Dionysus dispatched these women as he was displeased with Orpheus for his Apollonian heritage. Others claim that the women were taking revenge for being spurned by him – after Eurydice’s death Orpheus embraces homosexuality – and they were so furious at his disinterest in them that they tore him apart. Wroe (2012, p.221) notes ‘he was killed [...] because he was different; for what he taught and knew, for how he loved’. Wroe describes how he was torn apart by barbarians, a vulnerable half-clothed man destroyed by the clothed and the armed. Some paintings show the women hurling stones at him. In the novel one of the men hurls a stone at Magnus and catches him on the side of the head. One source describes Orpheus’ body parts scattered ‘like bloody rags through the woods’ (p.223). Tom, having abandoned Magnus to die in the frozen car, relents and goes back to him. When he finds him gone, he goes into the woods, following the bloody pieces of clothing left by Magnus in his flight from his attackers. He finds him dying and lies down beside him in the freezing snow. He feels Magnus ebb away as he crosses the Styx and enters the underworld. He desperately wants to follow, but the world is not yet ready to let go of him. He is found half-comatose by the rescue services a few hours later, with Magnus dead beside him.

Trauma: First-Person Present Tense

Cure for the Damned is largely about trauma. In the Prologue Magnus describes being stoned to death in the woods near the cottage. Throughout, he speaks to the reader in the first-person present tense as he re-experiences the events that culminate in the violent attack. By the end of the novel, rather like a patient undergoing hypnosis, he emerges from his trauma, no longer trapped in the present; he slips into the past tense in the closing chapter, and lets go.

The most common use of the present tense in first-person narration, unless the narrator is relating what they are experiencing in stream-of-consciousness mode without access to past or future knowledge of events, falls into the historical present. Per Krogh Hansen describes it as a ‘form, through which the narrating subject tries to recreate a situation from the past by describing it from the incidents’ perspective [at the same time equipped with] a knowledge of future incidents’ (2008, p.318). In *Cure for the Damned* Magnus speaks throughout in the historical present, so that his knowledge of the past enables him to recreate the situation in the present that is, by the same token, informed by his knowledge of the future. In many instances in the novel he transcends the temporal frame he is describing and talks with the authority of an omniscient narrator. Hansen (2008, pp.318–19) explains that the historical present is constantly reflecting on the past and anticipating the future; it allows the author to communicate key information about time and place, something that is important if there is only one narrator. In establishing a clear distinction between experiencing and narrating, the reader is provided with a valuable frame of reference, making the narrative more intelligible. In the Prologue of *Cure for the Damned* Magnus has already informed the reader that he is dead, he then goes on and explains how he died:

My death appeared as a headline in the local newspaper, *The West Sussex Gazette*: 'Psychiatrist murdered in wood'. In *The Times* the emphasis was slightly different, *Psychiatrist dies in homophobic attack*. Three men are serving life sentences for murder in HM Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight. But I was already dead by the time they got hold of me. I had died quite a few hours before, and the person responsible was Tom. He knows this, and I know this, but neither of us is going to tell.

They came after me, chased me through the woods, trampling, screaming, shouting. They were very drunk. I stopped running and waited for them in the darkest part where there was the least chance of us being disturbed. It is the strangest thing to view yourself from the outside, to see yourself as others see you, no longer trapped inside your own head. My coat is torn at the shoulders; blood seeping from my nose, the side of my face is blue from where one of them has lobbed something at me. My stillness spooks them (p.2).

In this passage Magnus informs the reader in first-person past tense that he was murdered, so that it is immediately obvious he is looking back on an event immediately prior his death. He then slips into the present tense to comment on the event from his current, recently dead perspective: 'Three men are serving life sentences for murder' and in the next sentence slides back into the past tense: 'But I was already dead by the time they got hold of me.' He goes on to reveal that 'the person responsible was Tom'. And then in the final sentence of the paragraph he swings back into the present tense: 'He knows this, and I know this, but neither of us is going to tell.' The traumatic nature of his death prevents Magnus from distancing himself from the memory, forcing him to re-experience it in the painful present. Struggling to get some perspective, he starts his account in the past tense: 'They came after me, chased me through the woods', but he soon lapses into the present tense as the memory takes hold of him: 'It is the strangest thing to view yourself from the outside [...] My coat is torn at the shoulders, blood seeping from my nose.' From this point on he continues in the present tense for the remainder of the novel as he revisits the events leading up to the moment of his death.

The addition of Magnus to the narrative provides another perspective on Tom's collapse, which happens slowly throughout the novel. The reader is not so swamped by Tom's slide into mental instability after his mother's death, and is given some respite by Magnus' more distanced account of events. But when they leave London and are marooned in the countryside, cut off from their normal support network, Magnus falters and shrinks in on himself, losing his stability, so that he and Tom are at points almost indistinguishable from one another; and as this happens around two thirds of the way into the novel, it seemed to me at the time a major insurmountable flaw. With both narrators lacking individuation they would be perceived as speaking in the author's voice. As I did not want to resort to artificial devices, such as introducing figures of speech or character tics, as a means of differentiating them, I was stumped, until I realised that my perceived 'problem' of two narrators collapsing into one was in fact an opportunity to explore a key underlying theme of the novel, that of trauma. In the fourth draft Magnus narrates his side of the story in the first-person present tense in the Prologue only, and continues in first-person past tense. In this latest fifth draft, I decided to have him continue his narration in the first-person present tense throughout the rest of the novel. In this way it could be said that his traumatised version of events has far less authority. His role as the voice of reason is undercut, and a subtle reversal is underway from the outset; whereas Tom, who talks in first-person past tense, achieves a temporal and spatial distance, granting him hindsight, and to a certain extent sanity. Although he is the most obviously disturbed of the two narrators, his increasingly paranoid and obsessive thoughts are viewed from a position of hindsight; there is the sense that he is looking back from a place of sanity on his past unhappy, unhinged self. In contrast, Magnus' credibility as a reliable witness is undermined by his description of his violent death at the start, and further undercut as he continues his side of the story in the present. Only

at the end of the novel, having told his story, is he released, and having recovered his equilibrium, manages to finally gain a distance and finish his account in the past tense.

Hindsight: *Cure for the Damned*

In *Cure for the Damned* the characters ruminate over events and remember how they felt at the time. The shafts of retrospective insight are relatively scarce as both Tom and Magnus are so absorbed in recollecting the past. From time to time they surface and reflect on their motivations. Magnus, caught up in the present, tells the reader that he has known from the start that he would be the one to ‘bring down a whole pile of misery’ on both their heads, in wanting to end the relationship. Similarly, Tom acknowledges that he has always suspected that Magnus would leave him at some point. Yet despite these fleeting moments of reflection, there is the sense that if Tom and Magnus were to revisit the past, little would change. This lack of distancing recall gives both their accounts a peculiar uncanny quality reminiscent of *The Turn of the Screw*. Like James’ anonymous governess, both Magnus and Tom are trapped in a limbo in which the distance between the narrating and earlier experiencing self has more or less collapsed; there is very little sense of what Case (2005, p.313), describes as the crucial gap that should normally open up between ‘the narrating consciousness and the perceptions of the earlier self at the moment of revelation’. For Tom, as with the governess, this moment of revelation never happens. Magnus, on the other hand, once he has re-experienced the events that led to his death, is able to let go of the living and encourage them to go on without him.

I continue onto our old bedroom; Tom is lying on his back snoring softly. I lie down beside him and rest my head against his chest. I want to stay like this all night but I must be gone before dawn. I rouse myself and slither down into his ear where it is rumbling, full of noise, and I have to shout to make myself heard. I tell him to please stop hanging around and contact that nice landscape gardener he's been checking out this past week. I slip back out onto the pillow, and take one last look at him; he's sprawled on his back still snoring. Time to go. The sky is lightening, dawn is on its way. I don't want to miss the boat and have to wait around another year; it's not as if I'm leaving forever (p.264).

As I mentioned earlier, Booth (1983, pp.158–9) famously defines a narrator as reliable 'when they act in accordance with the implied norms of a piece of work and untrustworthy when they do not'. This is interesting because I don't feel an ironic disconnect with either of my narrators, despite recognising that they are not altogether trustworthy. Neither of them deliberately sets out to misinterpret or misreport in the manner of Humbert. And as neither of them is on trial for murder, there is no need to treat the reader as a member of the jury and convince them of their side of the story. Tom and Magnus' stories are remarkably similar, and the differences when they emerge are subtle, because what is really being described is a gradual incremental shift, as they pull further and further apart. On balance neither of them is a more reliable witness than the other. Tom, in telling his story in the past tense, is able to look back on the events from a position of relative distance. But this capacity is matched by Magnus' narration in the historical present, in which he is able to see back into the past and forward into the future.

It could be argued that Magnus and Tom's unstable reliability results from not being in possession of the full facts. Following his altercation with Carl near the bonfire, Tom is unsure what happens to Carl after he leaves, because when he looks back through the wood he has disappeared into the smoke. He dreams that an ambulance arrives and that Carl is carried out of the wood on a stretcher, but it is only a dream and for all he knows Carl could have returned unscathed. Similarly, Magnus

is not in full possession of the facts when he finds the bloodied clothes belonging to Tom hidden under the caravan. Relying on hearsay from Carl's friend Peter, he jumps to the conclusion that Tom is responsible for attempted murder. Subsequently, when Tom discovers the text that Magnus sends to Eric, he assumes that he is intending to hospitalise him. Unsure whether Carl is dead or alive, and terrified Magnus is going to bring a murder charge against him, he leaves him to die in the frozen car. Seen from this perspective, each has only a partial picture, and is therefore fallible rather than untrustworthy; their unreliability is what Olson (2003, p.102) terms as 'situationally motivated', in that external circumstances have contributed to their unreliability, rather than inherent characteristics. In other words, neither of them is dispositionally unreliable, unlike Humbert who by his very nature is untrustworthy. And yet how much does the reader believe of Tom's account of his encounter with Carl beside the burning pyre of animal parts? Did Carl run into the fire to rescue the trap as Tom tells us – or was he pushed? In an earlier chapter, when Tom confronts his mother in a total fury, accusing her of homophobia when she encourages Angela to retrieve Kitty – is this the real reason for his anger? Or is it because he realises that ultimately Angela will always come first with his mother, and that he is not, as he has assumed all his life, the favourite child? Magnus admits that he withholds too much of himself from Tom; he doesn't tell him about his infatuation with Alex, or the details of his work at the hospital, and is deliberately detached from Kitty. But what he is less honest about is the reason he jumps to the conclusion that Tom is responsible for attempted murder. Why does he phone Eric and arrange for Tom to be sectioned before talking to him; is he in fact motivated by a desire to get him out of his life forever? He relents – but again, as with Tom – it is too late.

Ansgar Nünning would argue from a cognitivist perspective that it is up to the reader, according to their own personal frame of references, to judge what sort of

person the narrator is. He worries that ‘representing the work’s norms and values, the implied author is intended to serve as a yardstick for a moralistic kind of criticism’ (2008, p.35); and that it might be more pragmatic to see unreliable narration as ‘an interpretive procedure [...] brought to bear on the juxtaposition between the wording of the text and the [...] cultural or textual norms of the text as constructed by the reader [thus taking into account] ‘the conceptual models or frames previously existing in the mind of the reader or the critic’ (2008, p.49). Whereas Booth sees unreliability as woven into the text by the implied author for the implied reader to unravel, with the implication that there is a correct interpretation of a given text. Henry James, when pushed into a corner about *The Turn of the Screw*, refuses to give a definitive answer as to whether the governess’s account of events is trustworthy or not. In fact, if anything he veers on her side, claiming that the ghosts are real, and not the manifestations of a disturbed psyche. In much the same way, neither Tom nor Magnus, as far as I am concerned, is untrustworthy in the sense of deliberately setting out to mislead the reader. Tom’s behaviour is very strange at times because he is under extreme pressure, but I have never thought that he is dispositionally attuned to murder; although given a set of equally pressurising circumstances at some future point, I suspect, that he, like Tarrt’s Papen, might resort to murder if pushed. Whereas Magnus is not a murderer under any circumstances.

Booth (1995, pp.172–3), writing about *The Turn of the Screw*, talks about the ‘ironic reader’, who is on the constant lookout for clues ‘that betray untrustworthiness in the governess’s account’ as opposed to the ‘straight reader’ who perceives her as ‘generally trustworthy’, and points out that both types of reader will be frustrated, the ‘straight reader’ discovering ‘many signs of her unreliability’ and the ‘ironic reader’ in turn balking at ‘signs that James intends us to see the governess as reliable’. Booth asks the reader to resist the impulse to fall into either camp and instead ‘to see the

story [...] as a maze with many intentionally deceptive false turns and dead ends [and despite James' stated intentions] ensuring the constant frustration of every interpreter' (p.173). Booth here seems to have moved some considerable distance and appears to be conceding that there are no fully reliable narrators, given, as Wall (1994, p.39) points out, that 'the very conventions of narration – selection, orderliness and relative brevity – conspire against the fullest knowledge'.

The Nuclear Family

At the start of Tom and Magnus' relationship there is a sense of a hope that they can build a future happiness together. In taking Kitty into their care, they create their own nuclear family. But once they drive away from the civilising realm of realism and into the dark wood leading to the damp isolated cottage, they enter what Helene Moglen (2001, p.8) describes as the realm of the gothic, and move towards a regressive past in which old hurts and fears surface. Left on his own for days on end while Magnus is out at work, Tom becomes obsessively self-aware, whilst Magnus shores himself up against Tom's collapse by slicing off self-awareness, refusing to face up to the significance of his obsession with Alex. But there is only so long he can hold out. Moglen (2001, p.7) gives an evocative description of this state of mind: 'Focusing on the fundamentally divided nature of the self, fantastic narratives depicted a subject who [...] struggled for integration, but learned that fragmentation was its doom'. Unshackled from the real, those anxieties and wishes that have not been acknowledged in the communal realm surface and the divided self is drawn down to explore the underworld of feeling. Annie, the psychiatric patient treated by Magnus, who later attempts suicide, is a Charon figure, a guide into this underworld, a

realm that Moglen (2002, p.14) describes as ‘the ambivalent yearning that lies at the heart of misogyny’. The fact that this underworld is situated in the space where Magnus is subjected to a homophobic attack that ends in his death demonstrates the psychic mutilation that a rejection of otherness engenders.

The homophobic bullying that Tom suffers at the hands of Carl, whom Magnus at moments seems to side with, is symptomatic of both Magnus and Carl’s rejection of their ‘female self’. Magnus’ rejection of Tom is his way of shoring himself up and avoiding his own madness, whilst Tom, overwhelmingly mistrustful of Magnus, wants him dead. Moglen (2001, p.9) in her description of the gothic antihero, writes: ‘Although he needs a male or female counterpart to complete himself, he is doomed to eradicate or be eradicated by the subjectivity of the other, and because he destroys himself when he destroys that other, his story culminates in madness or in death.’

Madness and Unreliability

As mental instability and the power of hallucinations sit at the heart of *Cure for the Damned*, it is important to address the notion of madness when discussing the theory of narrative unreliability. In the Prologue, Magnus tells the reader that his partner Tom is responsible for his death, marking him out as someone to be approached with caution from the outset. In the first paragraph of Chapter One Tom admits that he is ‘hanging on by a thread’ (p.7) before experiencing a minor hallucination in the car as they approach the cottage. He is repulsed by the smell of the walls, fearful of the garden, sexually jealous of the estate agent whom he suspects of flirting with Magnus, all indications of acute unease. In actuality both narrators are unstable. Whilst Magnus might come across as much more reasonable, and should

have the edge over Tom in terms of reliability, his present-tense delivery is indicative of a traumatised state of mind that renders him incapable of distance, trapping him in experiencing mode and forcing him to relive the past; whereas Tom has a modicum of hindsight conferred by his past-tense narration, despite being mired in paranoia.

Lars Bernaerts (2008), influenced by the work of Ansgar Nünning and Monika Fludernik, examines the concept of the ‘fou raisonnant’ as a self-conscious mad person who uses his or her intellectual powers to justify dubious behaviour; as opposed to the ‘fou imaginant’ who is prey to hallucinations and presents ‘the imagined world as if it were the textual actual world’ (2008, p.186). The ‘fou raisonnant’ is a type of ‘mad monologist’ whose ‘misleading rhetoric’ is ‘characterized by justification and contradiction’ (2008, p.192). Bernaerts (2008, p.193) refers to Fludernik, who contends that this type of twisted logic combines ‘mental imbalance and intellectual lucidity’ and an ‘insane use of reason and rational discourse’ (Fludernik 1999, cited by Bernaerts, 2008, p.193). These narrators, according to Bernaerts, see themselves as outsiders, but at the same time long for understanding and recognition, and will manipulate the narratee in an attempt to elicit sympathy for their warped perspective. He goes on to point out that ‘their discourse embodies deviations and contradictions they deny in the story of their life’ (2008, p.192) and in this way they fall prey to self-incrimination and accusations of unreliability. Bernaerts’ formulation of the ‘fou raisonnant’ fits Nabokov’s terrifying creation Humbert Humbert, self-confessed paedophile and murderer.

According to Bernaerts, sudden outbreaks of madness are not characteristic of the ‘fou raisonnant’, and indeed Humbert never succumbs to hallucinations; everything he tells the reader, despite being narrated through a distorting lens, actually happens. In contrast the ‘fou imaginant’ is prey to the ‘intrusion of delusional worlds’ (2008, p.197). Bernaerts touches on Gogol’s *Diary of a Madman*, and gives the

example of the narrator reporting a conversation between two dogs. These hallucinations are ‘projections of the narrator’s inner worlds’, ‘like a dream that has been brought into reality’ (2008, p.198). This type of narrator, unlike the mad monologist, is incapable of lying; the delusional world intrudes with such force, it literally knocks them sideways, and it is left to the reader to forage for the truth in amongst the narrator’s moments of lucidity, as well as from the reactions of the other characters.

It could be said that Henry James’ governess, beset by hallucinations, falls into the category of ‘fou imaginant’, as do both Tom and Magnus. As a doctor, Magnus is more controlled and logical than Tom at the start of the novel, yet he is not the self-justifying ‘fou raisonnant’ described by Bernaerts. As the novel progresses, he succumbs to the intrusions of the delusional world triggered by the stress of coping with Tom’s breakdown, the move away from London, and an upcoming tribunal. Had I come across Bernaerts’ article before I had added Magnus as narrator in an earlier draft of the novel, I might have been tempted to make him a ‘fou raisonnant’ as a way of contrasting him with Tom’s more fluid ‘fou imaginant’. But taking this path would have unbalanced the novel by making Magnus the aggressor, and Tom the victim, crushed by his bullying superiority. Having both first-person narrators as ‘fou imaginants’ runs the risk of them merging into the one psyche. An alternative might have been to have one of them sane and the other mad, but then this strategy would have pushed the novel out of balance in setting up a ‘reliable’ versus an ‘unreliable’ dichotomy. There are however, very real dangers in not providing what Bernaerts (2008, p.204) describes as a ‘fully coherent story’, as I run the risk of losing some readers towards the end of the novel when the delusional eclipses the real world. Bernaerts (2008, p.204) makes an interesting point when he talks about ‘reality and dream represent[ing] two poles that are linked and rendered viable in the magical

realist work'. By allowing for a certain narrative ambiguity I open the door to magical realism, which at the start of the novel is barely more than a whisper but, as the tensions mount, gradually surfaces until it bursts through into the real world and takes over in the final chapters. I worry that this might be disconcerting for the reader, and can only hope as Bernaerts (2008, p.204) asserts, that once the reader becomes used to a certain frame of reference, they will 'accept incompatibilities as part of any reading, of any world'.

Magical Realism: *Cure for the Damned*

The incorporation of a magical mythical subplot into the novel came about when working on the fourth draft. The addition of Magnus telling his side of story introduced two new characters; Annie, one of his patients, and Alex, the man Magnus has been infatuated with for many years. Annie is suffering from a manic-depressive illness, and in her heightened moments has access to other dimensions, in her case the underworld; it is she who shows both Magnus and Tom, on separate occasions, how to find their way in. Alex is a countertenor, whom Magnus has been infatuated with for fifteen years despite never having spoken a word to him, until he unexpectedly encounters him after a disastrous performance of Gluck's *Orpheus* in a local church. These two new characters, Annie and Alex, are responsible for the subplot which surfaces in a violent outcome in the final chapters of the novel. Once both Magnus and Tom are told by Annie how they can access the entrance to the underworld, they are in a sense lost. It is a dangerous place, and those that go there, do so at their peril – best keep out, is the rather conservative message of the novel. But then there would be no story if Tom and Magnus had heeded this warning.

Jesus Benito, Anna M. Manzanas and Begona Simal (2009, p.38), describe magical realism as incorporating ‘the two traditional impulses at the heart of literature: [...] verisimilitude [so] that others can share your experiences: and fantasy the desire to [...] alter reality – out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images, that will bypass the audience’s verbal defences’ (Kathryn Hume, 1984, cited in Benita et al., 2009, p.38). This notion of a ‘longing for something lacking’ is key to the subplot in *Cure for the Damned*. Magnus is saved from himself when he meets Tom and makes the sensible life-affirming decision to turn his back on his bloodless infatuation and embark on a life of domesticity. But his happiness doesn’t last long: he shuts off from Tom when he most needs him, and is drawn back to the impossible infatuation that can bring him nothing but misery. Maurice Blanchot (1981, p.100), in *The Gaze of Orpheus*, describes the dangerous place that Magnus drifts into: ‘he wants to see her not [...] as the intimacy of a familiar life, but as the strangeness of that which excludes all intimacy [...] the desire for a happy life in the beautiful light of day [is] sacrificed to this one concern: to look into the night at what the night is concealing’. Blanchot goes on to describe this pull towards night as ‘an infinitely problematic impulse, which the day condemns as an unjustifiable act of madness’ (1981, p.100).

When Magnus lies dying in the frozen car, even though a part of him knows that Alex is still alive, he follows his hallucination into the woods, fully aware that he is walking towards his own death. He has left the real world and entered a dream state. The reader is encouraged to travel with him, bypassing the normal defences and sliding with Magnus into the underworld. There is the sense from the first moment that the reader is introduced to Magnus that he has ‘been turned towards [his] Eurydice all along’ (Wroe, 2012, p.112). When he describes his fifteen-year infatuation with a man he has never spoken to, and only encountered from a seat in

the auditorium, the reader is alerted, and fearful for Tom. This man has been living in a deathly isolation far too long, their relationship from the outset does not bode well; it is too much of a burden for Tom, one that he can shoulder when he is well, but impossible after he collapses following his mother's death.

Benito et al. (2009, p.156–7) quote from *The Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Culture*, in which magical realism is described as:

Fiction that does not distinguish between realistic and non-realistic events, fiction in which the supernatural, the mythical, or the implausible are assimilated to the cognitive structure of reality without a perceptive break in the narrator's or characters' consciousness (Standish 1995, Benito et al., pp.156–7).

Both Tom and Magnus are able to distinguish between realistic and non-realistic events: they both know about the dangers of the underworld, and both draw back when Annie points out the entrance; whereas for Annie, there is no division. The entrance to the underworld is as real to her as the canteen of the hospital, Magnus' office, the therapy room; there is no separation.

Benito et al. (2009, p.44), talk about the surrealist dichotomy of the 'visible versus invisible' as described by André Breton in his 1972 *Manifestes du Surrealisme*. For Breton, surrealism has the power to return people to the 'path of total comprehension and restore their original purity' (Breton, 1972, cited by Benito et al., p.44). Magnus hankers after Alex, the purity of the song, untouched by fleshly, worldly concerns. Breton, in his 1972 second manifesto, writes: 'Everything tends to make us believe that there exists a certain point of the mind at which life and death, the real and imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, cease to be perceived as contradictions' (1972, cited in Benito et al., p.123). But as Blanchot (1981, p.45) points out, this 'illumination of the hidden places of the self' is incredibly dangerous.

In the novel, the entrance to the underworld is found in raggedy gaps in the hedgerows, through gates into woods, an opening in a wall. It is a dangerous place, reminiscent of childhood walks in the woods where we would come across a stark sign pinned to a gate, warning us to 'Keep Out' so as avoid electricity pylons, unstable landmass, animal traps, shooting ranges, poisonous crop spray. In the penultimate chapter of the novel, when Angela drives Kitty to Magnus' funeral, she meets Annie, Magnus' ex-patient, who offers to show her the entrance to the underworld. As she leads her towards a gap in the hedge caught in a shaft of sunlight, Kitty, Angela's estranged daughter, races across the graveyard and unwittingly saves her mother when she grabs hold of her arm and leads her back towards the church to meet Magnus' friends.

And finally, a word about ghosts. Magnus is introduced to the reader in the Prologue as a ghost, bound to the corporeal world as a result of a traumatic and very violent death. He describes his descent down the chimney of the cottage, and being blown into the living room to join Kitty, Tom and Angela, who are unaware of his presence. Only Kitty's dog Skinny sniffs him out and watches him as he drifts about the room. Magnus has returned to tell his side of the story, and in this way is seeking release from the trauma binding him to the present; only then will he let go and cease haunting the living. Benito et al. (2009, p.50) point out that magical realism 'suspends a linear conception of time to allow a coexistence of temporalities'. The dream world bleeds through into the real world. There are 'stubborn chunks' where the past finds a way through, perforations, gaps 'not immediately visible to us, so close is our gaze to the objects of perception' (Jameson, 1986, cited by Benito et al., p.50). These holes appear anywhere 'in the door, in the bed: holes. In the hand, in the newspaper, in time, in the air. Everything is full of holes: everything is spongy, just like a colander straining itself' (Julio Cortazar, 1978, cited by Benito et al., p.50). This is a

wonderfully accurate description of the subplot running through *Cure for the Damned* with its gaps in hedges, gates into woods, holes, perforations, some might say portals into the dream world, embedded in a narrative that is part of the horizontal world, the tangible, the so-called objective surface world of reality.

Conclusion

The study of narrative theory has taken me on an interesting journey, one that I would not have naturally embarked on as a fiction writer. Taking a clinical look at mostly unconscious choices, and suspending judgment in terms of the quality of the writing regarding psychological depth, can often produce solutions to previously intractable problems. With my novel *Cure for the Damned*, the study of narrative theory helped in the redrafting stage. Both Hansen and Case's exploration of the use of the first-person present narration, focalised through a traumatised narrator, unable to access the wisdom of hindsight, provided me with insight into a problem I was struggling with at the time, that of trying to distinguish the voices of Magnus and Tom. In recognising Magnus is suffering the trauma of a violent death, I switched to the present tense in his narration, and this subtle slip, which some readers haven't noticed, provided a solution that I would never have stumbled on without recourse to narrative theory.

In my novel *Cure for the Damned*, a couple move and start a new life where, cut off from their normal support network, they fall prey to dangerous forces. Stephen King's (1980) *The Shining*, Ira Levin's (1967) *Rosemary's Baby*, Gillian Flynn's (2015) psychological thriller *Gone Girl*, are all examples of this story template, the

staple of so much horror and suspense writing. Similarly, the idea of a foreigner adrift in a strange land is a recurrent theme that runs through E.M. Forster's novels; his (1924) *Passage to India* is just one example. In Henry James' novels, the unwary American often comes unstuck in an impenetrable maze of European old-world subterfuge. The underlying theme informing the novels under discussion in this commentary is a similar sense of dislocation. James' governess leaves the stability of her family and ventures into dangerous unknown territory, and as a result becomes temporarily unhinged. Humbert Humbert, steeped in European high art, loses his way on American soil, and gives in to dark impulses which eventually cost him his freedom, if not his life. Richard Papen leaves his humble origins in the West and travels east to an elite Ivy League college where he falls in with a dangerous upperclass elite who end up destroying his future happiness. In escaping London for a remote cottage in the countryside, Tom and Magnus' troubles mushroom to frightening proportions.

The ordinary world is made much of in Gothic fiction. In Mary Shelley's (1818) *Frankenstein*, Victor's idyllic Swiss childhood sets the scene for his journey into darkness. Warned by his professor at Ingolstadt to keep away from the dangerous science of galvanism, pride prevents him heeding this advice, and he tumbles headlong into a nightmare of his own making. The governess is fully aware that the position at Bly has been turned down by previous applicants before her, and is not a sensible posting for a young, inexperienced girl; nevertheless she accepts the job, convinced she has the mental stamina to succeed. Humbert, during the entirety of Book One, ruminates on his perilous position, knowing he should get out, but instead he leaps at the opportunity provided by Charlotte's unexpected death and spirits her daughter away into the itinerant life of seedy motel hopping. Papen is warned by Poovey that Winter is a thuggish psychopath, capable of extraordinary unprovoked

bursts of extreme violence – but does he listen? When Magnus forces Tom to leave London and abandon his niece Kitty, in a move to a remote country cottage that he clearly hates on first viewing, he is fully aware of his cruel disregard for his feelings. There is, at the heart of most unreliable narrators, a perverse, wilful blindness; all of the characters mentioned above know on some level that they are headed towards disaster, but stubbornly persist, deceiving themselves, if not the reader. Whether they are deliberately lying is never fully clear. Olson's concept of unreliability, as something not necessarily resulting from a conscious desire to lie or defraud, but often from habit, unconsciousness bias, unmediated effects of trauma, upbringing etc., has been very helpful in developing Tom and Magnus' interweaving narratives. Ultimately it is D'hoker's (2008) re-evaluation of Booth's (1961) conceptualisation of 'unreliability' as a collusion between the knowing reader and implied author at the unreliable narrator's expense, that has been illuminating. I take no pleasure in reading a novel in which I am being required to collude with the implied author behind the narrator's back. D'hoker writes about a very different type of unreliability, one in which 'the irresolvable contradictions and unsettling fantastic events [...] put the reader in pretty much the same position as the narrator: filtering memories, reading expressions, weighing the evidence in a vain attempt to arrive at the truth of the past or at one correct interpretation of events', what she refers to as a 'deviant use of the technique of unreliable narration [one that] loosens the superior bond between implied author and reader and brings the reader closer again to the narrator' (2008, p.166).

As I have indicated in Chapter One, of the three novels under discussion in this commentary, James' novella has had the most significant influence on my own writing. *The Turn of the Screw* is a ghost story, and as George E. Haggerty points out, most ghost stories are essentially tales tending to 'resist the breadth of focus and the almost automatic social interest of the novel in favour of intensely personal concerns'

(1989, p.86), thereby relying on a strong connection between narrator and reader, an intensity that often demands the filter of a first-person narrator. It is the uncertainty of James' first-person narrator, unsure of what she experiences, relying on the power of suggestion, that draws readers in, encouraging them to substitute their own responses for those of the governess, and make the horror their own: 'Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough [...] and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars' (James, 1995, p.123).

In *The Turn of the Screw*, the governess, the servants, Quint and Jessel, and to a lesser extent the children, are a conduit for an evil that is located in a hierarchic, despotic culture that forces the powerless into invidious positions from which there is little chance of escape. As an investigator of late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century morals and manners, James was sensitive to the plight of his often powerless female characters. The enduring appeal of *The Turn of the Screw* rests on his steadfast loyalty to his creation. He protects his governess, refusing to pass judgement on her. By staying just out of view, he avoids providing the reader with the dubious pleasure of collusion and remains sitting on the fence, preserving an ambiguous aloofness. Nevertheless, James cannot escape the fact that reader and author are mutually reliant on one another, and however much he might want to remain hidden in this novella, readers already know him from his many novels, and the ideological and aesthetic indicators will inevitably encourage them to 'construct a picture of the author who writes in this manner' (1961, pp.70–71). Expectations are raised, and predictably the fragmentary story of a couple of orphans visited by the meddlesome ghosts of recently deceased servants becomes, in James' hands, so much more than 'an irresponsible little fiction' (1995, p.117) as he rather unconvincingly claims in his 1908 Preface.

Martin Schofield, in his introduction to the 2008 *Ghost Stories of Henry James*, asserts that the novella gives voice to ‘pressing anxieties about the nature of good and evil, childhood innocence and sexuality, heroism, psychological repression, the social class system, attitudes to women and the nature of literature itself’ (2008, p.XVII). James’ evasive ambiguity when writing about *The Turn of the Screw* prompts Schofield to wonder if there are ‘elements here (perhaps elements arising from his own psyche) which his moral sense cannot fully encompass and explain?’ (p.XIX). Schofield finishes on the reflection that at ‘the heart of the story lies the ambiguity of the perception of evil (how do we distinguish between what is outside us and what is merely in our minds?)’ (p.XXII).

Although Schofield gives a convincing account of James’ moral compass, he is ultimately baffled by his evasive ambiguity. By keeping his intentions well hidden, James leaves the reader free to interpret for themselves, thereby defying Booth’s edict that a writer ‘has an obligation to be as clear about his moral position as he possibly can be’ (1983, p.389) so that there can be little doubt as to the correct interpretation; instead James casts the reader adrift, leaving them unable to judge whether the governess’s unreliability points to a distance between ‘the normal moral standards’ (Nünning, 1999, p.64) of the implied author and those of the narrator. James’ governess is in turns fearless and frightened, caring and despotic, helplessly out of her depth, unable to trust the children, the servants, her employer, and least of all herself. Her account of the fateful events at Bly that winter, leading to a child’s death, is not a deliberate untruth in order to cover up a murder any more than it is the deranged ravings of a madwoman, or an act of self-sacrificing heroism, but instead, as with Tom’s account in *Cure for the Damned*, a genuine inability to untangle the objective truth from subjective experience. Fludernik points out that the first-person narrator is ‘inherently limited in their perspective and potentially untrustworthy’ (2009, p.153) as

they are at the mercy of their feelings and dispositionally incapable of giving an unequivocal account of events. This level of ambiguity can be baffling, but once the reader acclimatises, and stops searching for a definitive interpretation, they find themselves free to indulge what James describes as ‘the need and love of wondering’ (cited in Schofield, 2008, p.14), surely one of the greatest pleasures of fiction.

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