Realism, Modernism, Postmodernism

Five Modern Literary Texts in Context

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Introduction

Art is the most precise (and precious) symbol of life.

<div align="right">Carlos Fuentes</div>

This textbook has been designed as supporting material for the postgraduate course on modern trends in European literature. It focuses on the presentation of five modern literary modes of writing: the **realistic** mode which was brought to its prominence by the nineteenth-century Realist movement; the **stream-of-consciousness** and **'absurdist'** modes which were developed in the context of modernism; and the **magical realist** and **metafictional** modes which are associated mainly with postmodernist literary trends. Each mode is represented by a well-known text which demonstrates the formal aspects of each mode and deals with the thematic concerns typical of the literary movement that influenced its production. The textbook adopts an interdisciplinary approach, placing the chosen literary texts into the historical, philosophical and cultural contexts that shaped their characters, and thereby providing the background knowledge necessary for a deeper understanding of their formal and thematic aspects.

The main theoretical issue that this textbook addresses is the problem of the relationship between the literary text and human reality, a problem which has been at the centre of scholarly discussions since the advent of Western literary criticism among Greek philosophers in the fourth century BC. This problem is presented as being a part of the complex topic of the relationships between the mind, language and the world, an issue which is explored in the modern scholarly fields of psychology, linguistics and the philosophy of language. In drawing the reader's attention to the intersections between these sciences and literary science (i.e., literary history, literary criticism and literary theory), the textbook suggests that the selected literary texts should not only be considered as exemplary representatives of historically specific literary movements. Instead, it also discusses them as literary discourses which encourage us to explore our own perception of the interaction between the subjective world of our mind and the

objective world in which we all exist, and thus encourage us to participate in the ongoing human dialogue about the epistemological, ethical and metaphysical aspects of our individual and social existence.

As the main purpose of this textbook is explanatory, it does not attempt to offer any 'ultimate' truths about the chosen literary texts and the issues that they tackle. Although the textbook provides an insight into the historical development of modern literature from realism through modernism to postmodernism, this development should not be read as a straightforward movement towards increasingly complex forms of literary representations of human reality, nor as a movement towards the revelation of greater truths about life. On the contrary these excursions into the history of *Madame Bovary*, *Mrs Dalloway*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Nights at the Circus* and *Immortality* should help students to develop their own explorations of the possibilities and limitations which each text embodies in its representation of the human experience of reality.

With this purpose in mind the individual chapters of the textbook have been structured in the following manner:

1. An outline of the historical, cultural and philosophical contexts that influenced the creation of the literary text selected as an example of a particular literary mode of writing.

2. Close reading analyses of short passages from the chosen text that illustrate the author's specific use of the major formal and thematic aspects of his/her work.

3. A series of study questions followed by a list of suggested further reading, which should help students to prepare for seminar discussions which are based on the combination of theoretical knowledge and their own interpretations of the selected text.

REALISM

1 GUSTAV FLAUBERT: MADAME BOVARY

The only thing accessible to us is to create an illusion of the world.

Guy de Maupassant

It seems appropriate to begin this textbook on modern literary movements and their varying perceptions of reality with one of the masterpieces of literary realism; *Madame Bovary* (1856) written by 'the father of modern fiction' (Matz, 2004, p. 15) **Gustav Flaubert** (1821-1880). Although Flaubert himself detested the label of 'realist' which his contemporaries had imposed on him, he has always been considered to be one of the leading figures of the nineteenth-century **Realist movement** and of the controversy that it produced. A year after the publication of *Madame Bovary*, Flaubert was put on trial for causing an 'outrage to public morality and religion' (LaCapra, 1982, p. 7) with a novel which the prosecution described as 'a glorification of adultery and an undermining of marriage' (LaCapra, 1982, p. 37). While Flaubert was cleared of all charges, the court still blamed him for the realistic effect of his novel: 'The work in question merits severe blame, since the mission of literature should be to beautify and enhance the spirit by elevating the intelligence and purifying morals rather than to inspire disgust for vice by offering a portrait of disorder that may exist in society' (quoted in Ladenson, 2007, p. 25). The court's criticism implies that Flaubert's realistic images of the 'ugly' aspects of human life (such as adultery) had degraded literature by abandoning the aspirations of the art form to improve the minds and souls of its readers.

This chapter presents *Madame Bovary* as an example of the realistic mode of writing, and explains why the Realist movement undermined the traditional elevating function of literature in the name of truth and also exposes the limits of its quest for 'the real'. Flaubert's book expertly captures both the complexity of human relationships to the world and the intricate nature of the realistic representation of the world in literary texts.

Realism

Of all the literary modes discussed in this textbook, we might assume that realism would be the easiest to understand; its techniques would appear to be dictated by common sense and its approach to reality could be seen as the most natural one. In everyday speech the word 'realistic' tends to imply 'truthfulness' and 'objectivity', and realistic art has traditionally been described as **mimetic,** i.e., representing the world as it is.

The modern literary concept of **mimesis** can be traced back to Aristotle's use of the term to describe 'imitation', but in the sense of 'representation' rather than of simple 'copying'. In his work *Poetics* (c. 335 BC), **Aristotle** suggests that the human instinct to imitate the things around us led to the birth of art:

> First, the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between man and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general;
>
> (Aristotle, 1997, p. 6)

In his discussion of tragedy, comedy and poetry, Aristotle defines the three main forms of artistic imitation: 'The poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects – things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be' (Aristotle, 1997, p. 53). These three kinds of imitation correspond with the three basic tendencies in literature: the first a tendency towards the idealization of reality (the desire to depict things as they ought to be), the second, a tendency towards the mythicization of reality (the desire to depict things as they are said or thought to be), and the third a tendency towards realism (the desire to depict things as they were or are). Only in this final case is the form of imitation '**true to fact**'. Throughout the history of Western art, the first two tendencies were

prevalent in the poetic and dramatic genres of high literature, while realistic representations of things were (with some exceptions) confined to the margins of the literary world. Although its position remained marginal, realism was accepted without any major questioning for several centuries. However the emergence of the new genre of the novel stimulated serious discussions about the ability of art to represent reality objectively; the novel would eventually make realism the focal point of literature and allow its full development.

The rise of the Realist movement in nineteenth-century literature must be seen in the wider cultural context of nineteenth-century Europe. The intellectual climate of the progressive societies, like England or France, identified entirely with a realistic approach to the world; industrialization, the development of science, and the firmly-anchored power of the middle classes had led to the formation of a new system of beliefs and values. The emphasis which the sciences placed on empirical knowledge and observation had spread far beyond the confines of the laboratory. In fact, the whole world was turned into a great laboratory in which everything was to be observed with scientific precision and recorded objectively. The spirit of the times rejected interpretations based on 'things as they ought to be' or as 'they are thought to be', and people wanted instead to see the 'things as they really are'. As a result, readers started to favour realistic literature over 'the fantastic, the fairy-tale-like, the allegorical and the symbolic, the highly stylized, the purely abstract and decorative' (Wellek, 1963, p. 241). Imagination, idealization, myths and legends were seen as obscuring the true picture of reality which was, at the time, 'conceived as the orderly world of nineteenth-century science, a world of cause and effect, a world without miracle, without transcendence' (Wellek, 1963, p. 241). Thematically, the majority of Realist texts which emerged from this world view concerned themselves with the 'low' subject-matter of the ordinary, the everyday, and the unheroic. This led some critics of the genre (such as, for example, Flaubert's prosecutors) to accuse their authors of corrupting their readers by dwelling excessively on the sordid aspects of human existence. For Realists, however, the objective representation of the socio-historical situation in which they and their contemporaries existed was seen as a means of reaching deeper truths about human life, and the use of scientific precision in the creation of this representation became a literary norm of the movement.

Realism as a broad intellectual movement marked the beginning of a true revolution in the perception of reality and of the human position in the world. Every

sphere of modern society from the economy to the Church was affected by the development of natural sciences: '[The] findings of physical sciences appeared to be in absolute contradiction to orthodox Christian statements about man's nature and origin and to raise grave doubts about his role in the universe' (Becker, 1980, p. 9). Every belief, every value was examined and redefined from the perspective of new scientific discoveries. This revolution found its utmost expression in the philosophical ideas of positivism developed by **Gustav Comte.**

The theory of **positivism** directly connected the study of philosophy with scientific methodology. It rejected any metaphysical or theoretical interpretations and stated that empirical, fact-based investigation was the only valid route to knowledge. For nineteenth-century people positivism created a new perspective of reality which opened new possibilities for the relationship of humanity to the world and led to new understandings of human life. With its 'insistence on experience as the source of knowledge' (Becker, 1980, p. 24) positivism focused people's attention on the world that surrounded them and urged them to create a realistic (objective) picture of reality. In literature the positivist tendency acquired the strongest position in the French novel in which the realistic mode of narrative reached 'the highest degree of organisation' (Jenkins, 1978, p. 4).

The French Realist Movement

Although it was German writers who first applied the word realism to literature, in reference to the 'minute description of costume and custom in historical novels' (Becker, 1980, p. 34), Realism only truly achieved its full bloom as a literary movement in France; as one critic has noted, 'it was the French who gave the movement its name' (Becker 1980, p. 141). Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert and Zola are the authors who are most strongly associated with the movement, but they also contributed to the theoretical discussions about the nature and purpose of the realistic representations of the world.

Subject-matter realism

Early Realists such as **Frederic de Stendhal** and **Honoré de Balzac** shared an interest in the problems and issues of the contemporary world and the rejection of the

then prevalent romantic principles of artistic creation. In their efforts to separate themselves from the Romantic movement and its search for 'the transcendental truth of idealism' (Morris, 2003, p. 53), they used careful observations of empirical reality in their attempts to produce truthful images of everyday life. In his 1830 novel *The Red and the Black*, Stendhal (2014) openly discusses the problems involved in objective literary depictions: 'Yes, monsieur, a novel is a mirror which goes out on a highway. Sometimes it reflects the azure of the heavens, sometimes the mire of the pools of mud on the way, and the man who carries this mirror in his knapsack is forsooth to be accused by you of being immoral!'(n.p). In a similar vein, Balzac (1885) assures the reader in the Preface to his novel *Father Goriot* (1835): 'Ah! believe me, this drama is no fiction, no romance. All is true, so true that you may recognize its elements in your experience, and even find its seeds within your own soul' (n.p.).

The emphasis on the objective nature of the novel was taken to a further stage in the works of **Émile Zola**, the best known proponent of **naturalism** – a tendency within the Realist movement in which the positivist approach to literature achieved its peak. Zola's approach to literature was strongly influenced by his study of the natural sciences. In his essay 'The Experimental Novel' (1880) Zola (1893) sees the method of the naturalist novelist as similar to the experimental and observational approach of the scientist. As an observer, the author 'should be the photographer of [social] phenomena, his observation should be an exact representation of nature. . .' (p. 7). As an experimentalist, '[the novelist] introduces an experiment, that is to say, sets his characters going in a certain story so as to show that the succession of facts will be such as the requirements of the determinism of the phenomena under examination call for' (p. 8). Using characters and their stories to depict man as 'a social animal' (p. 25) which develops under the influence of heredity and environment, Zola sees the naturalist novel as a laboratory in which the author-scientist performs his own experiments. Although Zola admits that even the naturalistic novelist cannot avoid leaving traces of his individuality on his artistic product, he still believes that it is the duty of an author to strive for as much objectivity as possible. The aspiration of the naturalist should be to create a literary text which functions as a 'window' to reality. This window, 'the realist screen is plain glass, very thin, very clear, which aspires to be so perfectly transparent that images may pass through it and remake themselves in all their reality' (Zola quoted in Grant, 1970, p. 28).

The approaches of Stendhal, Balzac and Zola to the literary representation of the

world are seen by critics as examples of a specific type of realism which is known variously as **subject-matter realism** (Sőrbom quoted in Villanueva, 1997), **conscientious realism** (Grant, 1970) or **genetic realism** (Villanueva, 1997). This type of realism is based on the three main beliefs. The first of these is the naive realist belief that the world exists in exactly the same form for everyone; this suggests that individual perception is redundant and that simple observation is the main source of our knowledge of the world. The second is the assumption that human language directly represents images of objects and things, and the third is the belief that it is possible to draw a clear line between subjective (or personal) and entirely objective perceptions of reality. Balzac's detailed, documentary-like descriptions of settings which are recreated with 'stunning exactitude' (Becker, 1980, p. 142), Stendhal's concept of literature as a mirror reflecting the world impartially and, of course, Zola's idea of the novel as a scientific record of life were all based on the authors' conviction that they could create 'a faithful reproduction of a univocal reality which precede[d] the text, owing to the transparency or thinness of the literary medium (language) and to the artist's sincerity' (Villanueva, 1997, p. 15).

The relationship between human language and the world is, however, much more complex that the Realists' conception of the literary text as a reflection of life would suggest. Human **language** is not a tool which we can take hold of and use to represent reality. Words are not little 'mirrors' which we can pick up, find out which 'mirror' reflects which 'thing' and then carefully apply each 'mirror image' to the object that it reflects. Since language functions as a system of signs which are attributed to things arbitrarily, there is no essential relation between a word and the thing which it is said to represent; a conundrum to which William Shakespeare famously alluded in his claim that 'that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet'. The arbitrary nature of language becomes a real problem when we realize that our knowledge of the world in which we exist is determined by the concepts of the language that we use. One of the most common fallacies which shape our everyday lives is the belief that our contact with the material world around us is direct, crystal-clear and simple. What can be more obvious than the fact that the world exists objectively? We can see, feel, smell, hear and touch things that are simply there, even if we decide not to perceive them – the world does not disappear just because we decide to close our eyes. And still this perception forms only a very small part of the human experience of the world. In fact, only babies can enjoy this purely **sensory contact** with reality; once

we acquire the ability to communicate using language, we move beyond the stage of merely **sensing** the world and we start to become **aware** of the world. Since our knowledge of the world is always conditioned by the imperfect relation between the reality which we experience directly and the language which we use to conceptualize our experience, the subject-matter realists' striving for the scientific objectivity in literature is clearly problematic.

A further reservation about subject-matter realism arises from the very nature of art itself. Realists who were so eager to separate that which was fictional from that which was real headed in a direction that could only lead to a dead end. Even if it was possible to create a perfect realistic novel that would reflect reality as impartially as a mirror, this 'novel' would no longer be a novel: when a work of fiction (which by definition a novel must be) is separated from fiction, it simply ceases to exist. If it was taken to its logical conclusion, art as a mirror would require the actual disappearance of any hint of authorial influence which could distort its reflection of the world. Anything subjective, anything that would relate this novel-mirror to its author (for example idiosyncrasies of his style or his world vision) would impede the required approach of impartial reflection. Even if such a de-authorization and de-humanization of art was achievable, it would result in the effective death of art which, according to the Aristotelian definition, is the **human imitation** of the world around us. For these reasons, 'in its lower reaches [the practice of subject-matter] realism constantly declined into journalism, treatise writing, scientific description, in short, into non-art; at its highest, with its greatest writers...[including] Zola, it constantly went beyond its theory: it created worlds of imagination (Wellek, 1963, p. 255).

Formal realism

While the proponents of subject-matter realism tried to treat the novel as an exact reproduction of life, the nineteenth-century representatives of what critics call either **formal realism** (Villanueva, 1997) or **conscious realism** (Grant, 1970) refused to treat literature as a mirror reflexion of reality. On the contrary, they tried to construct an artistic picture of the world so similar to the **general perception** of how things were that it would be, in fact, accepted by readers as an accurate copy of the world that they experienced on an everyday basis. They did not accept that the novel was capable of

representing life objectively, but they believed in the possibility of creating a **mimetic illusion** that it did so. This illusion relied on 'the use of certain formal conventions and its compliance with the laws of learning in visual perception, depending on the historical moment and specific culture of a given society' (Ernst Gombrich quoted in Villanueva, 1997, p. 41). While subject-matter realism was motivated by the writer's conscientious attempts to present the reader with an objective truth about the world, formal realism was based on the conscious employment of such formal literary conventions as the **principle of verisimilitude** (*verum* = truth, *similis* = similar) or the **impersonal style of writing**. Through the creation in their works the images of life which resembled the vision of the world generally accepted by readers, formal Realists further enhanced the illusion of objectivity with the apparent 'disappearance' of the author from the text – an effect achieved through the absence of any authorial comment, opinion or judgement. Gustav Flaubert, who is seen by some as 'the first author who became fully aware of the formal realism that he was in effect practising' (Villanueva, 1997, p. 38), believed that 'an author in his work must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere' (quoted in Heath, 1992, p. 104).

The importance of the stylistic aspects of Flaubert's Realist works is especially clear in the case of *Madame Bovary*, a novel which originated from Gustav Flaubert's concept of **the ideal novel as a purely stylistic creation** without any reference to actual life. This concept is, of course, paradoxical and Flaubert himself was well aware that the creation of such an ideal text was unachievable. Nonetheless, it was this 'formalistic quest for pure art' (LaCapra, 1982, p. 65) that helped Flaubert to raise the realistic mode of writing to the level of high art. His original concept of the novel emerged from his unwillingness to accept that art, in its mission to tell 'the truth about ordinary life' (Furst, 1992, p. 3), should aspire to merging with the ordinary, or, in other words, the belief that art and reality should become one. On the contrary, he believed that art should function as a shield from the crudeness of reality. As he states in one of his letters: 'life is such a hideous thing that the only way to put up with it is to avoid it. And one avoids it by living in art' (Flaubert's letter, May 18, 1857, quoted in La Capra, 1982, p. 76). For Flaubert, the refinement of literature serves as a shield from the coarseness of the world; the uniqueness of fiction provides an escape from the common mediocrity of reality; the loftiness of art transcends the baseness of life. Although he initially intended to create the impossible – to write a book about nothing, a book of pure form without any content to dilute its perfection – he instead decided to

prove the power of style to 'transform basely inartistic subject matter into a superlative work of art' (LaCapra, 1982, p. 69). In his most famous novel, Flaubert takes the low subject matter of ordinary, provincial bourgeois life and turns it into a literary masterpiece in which the relationships between art and life, the human mind and the world, illusion and fact are placed at the centre of the reader's attention. *Madame Bovary* claims its important place in literary history from the fact that while the novel offers an almost perfect illusion of objectivity in the representation of its subject-matter, it also underlines the constant presence of the unbridgeable gap between the subjective reality of the human mind and the objective reality of the world. These two major aspects of the novel – the realistic effect of Flaubert's style of writing and his focus on the problematic nature of human relations to the world – form the core of the following, more detailed, discussion of *Madame Bovary*.

Madame Bovary

The story of *Madame Bovary* is relatively simple: set in a sleepy little town, it evolves around the character of Emma Bovary, the young wife of the local doctor, depicting her struggles with what she sees as the unbearable boredom of provincial life. Frustrated by the mundane nature of everyday life with her dull husband, she idealizes the idea of romantic, passionate love, which leads her to two adulterous affairs, financial ruin and, eventually, to suicide. Strongly influenced by her reading of romantic literature, Emma Bovary lives in her own world of illusions which overshadows the real world of her prosaic existence. Although the character of Emma Bovary may display a somewhat exaggerated inability or unwillingness to separate fiction from reality, or to distinguish between sentimental illusions and the essential facts of life itself, she is merely an extreme example of the general human condition in which the problematic relationship between the subjective reality of the mind and the objective reality of the world remains a central concern. In analyzing Emma Bovary and her interaction with the real, the reader can explore the tendency of the human mind to create illusions that we all, to various extents and degrees, impose on the world that surrounds us. An example of the process during which a personal illusion emerges and is imposed on a 'piece' of reality can be found in the following passage chosen for a close reading analysis.

Close Reading Analysis One

The first extract depicts a scene in which Emma Bovary, after a platonic affair with a young clerk, Leon, is in the company of another man, Rodolphe. While they are both watching an agricultural show from a window in an empty room above the marketplace, Rodolphe is trying to seduce her with his talk about passion and fated love. Emma's reaction is described as follows:

> His arms were folded across his knees, and thus lifting his face towards Emma, close by her, he looked fixedly at her. She noticed in his eyes small golden lines radiating from black pupils; she even smelt the perfume of the pomade that made his hair glossy. Then a faintness came over; she recalled the viscount who had waltzed with her at Vaubyessard, and his beard exhaled like this hair an odour of vanilla and citron, and mechanically she half-closed her eyes the better to breathe it in. But making this movement, as she leant back in her chair, she saw in the distance, right on the line of the horizon, the old diligence the 'Hirondel', that was slowly descending the hill of Leux, dragging after it a long trail of dust. It was in this yellow carriage that Leon had so often come back to her, and by this route down there that he had gone for ever. She fancied she saw him opposite at his window; then all grew confused; clouds gathered; it seemed to her that she was again turning in the waltz under the light of the lustres on the arm of the viscount, and that Leon was not far away, that he was coming; and yet all the time she was conscious of the scent of Rodolphe's head by her side. This sweetness of sensation pierced through her old desires, and these, like grains of sand under a gust of wind, eddied to and fro in the subtle breath of the perfume which suffused her soul. She opened wide her nostrils several times to drink in the freshness of the ivy round the capitals. She took off her gloves, she wiped her hands, then fanned her face with her handkerchief, while athwart the throbbing of her temples she heard the murmur of the crowd and the voice of the councillor intoning his phrases. (Flaubert, 1994, p. 112-113)

From Emma's point of view, which dominates the passage, we can identify three main objects which are part of objective reality: Rodolphe sitting beside her in the room, the carriage moving in the distance, and the various people (the councillor and the crowd)

who are gathered in front of the town hall. The passage shows how Emma's interaction with these pieces of objective reality has a sensory root; she **notices** Rodolphe's eyes, **smells** his pomade, **sees** the carriage, and **hears** the councillor and the crowd. However, in Emma's mind this perception of the real is overtaken and overshadowed by her imagination: her sensory perceptions, or that which she sees, smells or hears, serve only as initial impulses which makes her **recall**, **fancy** and **imagine** things that are often romanticized (the dancing with the viscount) or idealized (Leon). A close reading of the extract reveals that her thoughts are constantly moving to and fro between the real and the imaginary: firstly she smells Rodolphe's pomade which leads to the movement from the actual scene to her pleasant recollections of the viscount. Then she returns to reality by breathing in the aroma of the pomade more deeply, but she does so only in order to intensify her image of the viscount. While doing so, the real forces itself into her perception again for a moment when she sees the carriage, but she immediately makes the real give a way to a reverie imagining Leon, her former admirer, at his window. In the next shift in her mind she slips even further away from reality into a confused vision in which the image of the viscount and the image of Leon merge into one. And all the time while she is daydreaming in this way, she remains **conscious** of a 'piece' of reality by her side, Rodolphe, who, however, never transcends the limits of her sensory experience, reduced as he is in her perception to only the scent of his head.

So although Rodolphe's wooing is essentially successful in arousing a strong desire in Emma (the strength of which is indicated by the physical signs accompanying intense emotion, such as sweaty palms, rising temperature and a quickened pulse), he himself never actually becomes 'real' to her. In this intense scene in which Emma has, in fact, fallen for the man by her side, not a single thought in her mind has been devoted to him. On the contrary, Emma, under the influence of her awakened emotions, has created an illusion which she imposes on him. Thus to her Rodolphe becomes a combination of the image of the viscount, the image of Leon, and her old desires for a 'romantic' lover, but the real Rodolphe remains absent from this mixture. The whole scene captures the essence of Emma Bovary's inability to maintain a 'realistic' approach to the world. She fails to make a valid connection between the direct sensory experience of the real and a rational understanding of it. Instead of trying to achieve a rational understanding of reality – in this case to learn what kind of person Rodolphe really is – she constantly creates a world of illusions that, in effect, becomes more real to her than the real world.

Emma's tendency to project her feelings and desires onto the outside world is emphasized throughout the novel and her 'foolish' indulgence in emotions often becomes the target of authorial criticism. This critical tone emerges clearly in the text despite the narrator's seemingly impartial presentation of the character. The following close reading analysis shows how Flaubert uses the stylistic device of **contrast,** inviting the reader to view Emma Bovary with an ironic detachment.

Close Reading Analysis Two

In the early pages of the novel, the boredom and lack of passion in her life has left Emma feeling disappointed with her marriage, and she naively blames this state of affairs on the mundane provincial surroundings in which she lives:

> She thought sometimes that, after all, this was the happiest time of her life – the honeymoon, as people called it. To taste the full sweetness of it, it would have been necessary doubtless to fly to those lands with sonorous names where the days after marriage are full of laziness most suave. In post-chaises behind blue silken curtains to ride slowly up steep roads, listening to the song of the postilion re-echoed by the mountains, along with the bells of goats and the muffled sound of a waterfall; at sunset on the shores of gulfs to breathe in the perfume of lemon-trees; . . . It seemed to her that certain places on earth must bring forth happiness, as a plant peculiar to the soil, that cannot thrive elsewhere. (Flaubert, 1994, p. 29)

Later in the novel, however, Emma's belief that certain places must naturally produce certain types of feelings is placed in clear contrast to her perception of the industrial landscape through which she travels on her way to visit Leon. Her affair with Rodolphe ended, she becomes involved in an amorous relationship with Leon and this fills her with a happiness that influences her perception of the world:

> Then the open country spread away with a monotonous movement till it touched in the distance the vague line of the pale sky. Seen thus from above, the whole landscape looked immovable as a picture; the anchored ships were massed in one corner, the river curved round the foot of the green hills, and the

islands, oblique in shape, lay on the water, like large, motionless, black fishes. The factory chimneys belched forth immense brown fumes that were blown away at the top. One heard the rumbling of the foundries, together with the clear chimes of the churches that stood out in the mist. The leafless trees on the boulevards made violet thickets in the midst of the houses, and the roofs, all shining with the rain, threw back unequal reflections, according to the height of the quarters in which they were. Sometimes a gust of wind drove the clouds towards the Saint Catherine Hills, like aerial waves breaking silently against a cliff.

A giddiness seemed to her to detach itself from this mass of existence, and her heart swelled as if the hundred and twenty thousand souls that palpitated there had all at once sent into it the vapour of the passions she fancied theirs. Her love grew in the presence of this vastness, and expanded with the tumult to the vague murmuring that rose towards her. (Flaubert, 1994, p. 205)

Clearly, nothing can be farther from the idealized countryside that Emma had earlier imagined as a source of happy feelings than the town that she now sees from the carriage. The location is presented to the reader from the 'objective' point of view of the narrator who, as an impassionate observer, describes a type of landscape that is rarely associated with the romantic or the cheerful. On the contrary, it is a landscape that would be typically seen as having a rather gloomy atmosphere: the images of the ships as masses of cold metal resting on the river, of the islands resembling huge *motionless [possibly dead] black fishes*, and of the *immense brown fumes* belching from the factory chimneys; the sound of the *rumbling foundries* mingled with the churches' bells – all of these images create a picture of a nineteenth century industrial town and its prosaic existence. The gloominess of the industrial landscape is further strengthened by the images of the leafless trees, the roofs shining with rain and the gusts of wind, which indicate the 'sadness' of autumn, a season generally associated with melancholic feelings.

Emma appears to be totally unaware of the negative connotations of the landscape: of the industrial **ugliness** despoiling the beauty of nature, the autumnal **sadness** evoked by the end of summer and the lack of sunshine, and the **cheerless** colours (*pale, black, brown, violet*). On the contrary, Emma associates this *mass of existence* with positive feelings (*her heart swelled*, *her love grew*). She perceives it as

the source of positive energy, imagining that the town radiates the *passions* which intensify her own feelings of love. Since Flaubert could rely on the fact that most readers would not share Emma Bovary's perception of this landscape as romantic and inspiring, he could produce in this passage a momentary clash between the reader's and the character's visions of the world. Emma Bovary's perception simultaneously appears as both highly subjective, i.e., far removed from the common, general perception of the world, and also as being so foolishly sentimental that one cannot help but view her with detached amusement.

As could be seen in the analyzed passages, Flaubert uses two main contrasts which invite the reader to adopt an ironical view of the character. The first is the contrast between Emma's earlier belief in the power of certain (idealized) places to evoke romantic feelings and her actual emotional reaction of romantic excitement to the very prosaic landscape of an industrial town. The fact that Emma herself never becomes aware of this contrast intensifies the reader's awareness that she is not capable of transcending the state of sentimental foolishness that dominates her life vision. The second contrast that Flaubert uses to evoke the reader's ironic detachment from the character is the contrast between Emma's and the reader's own emotional reactions to the described landscape; the contrast between the gloomy, melancholic mood that this type of landscape generally produces and the romantic mood which the character 'falsely' attributes to it.

In order to understand how Flaubert creates this 'conflict' between Emma and the reader, we need to pay greater attention to the specific nature of Flaubert's style of writing. As was explained previously, Flaubert's aim in the novel was to use an impersonal style which would hide the presence of the author in the text. This illusion of impersonality is achieved by avoiding any intrusion on the part of the author in the form of authorial comments or openly stated opinions, judgements and points of view. The effect of the apparent impersonality is based on the combination of several narrative techniques: 'the passages of "objective" or "impassive" descriptions, brief interludes of quoted dialogue or interior monologue, and significant use of so-called "free indirect style"' (LaCapra, 1982, p. 126). The **free indirect style** (*style indirect libre*) can be defined as a technique of writing that 'maintains the third person reference and past tense of narration, but like the quoted monologue, it reproduces verbatim the character's own mental language' (Dorrit Cohn quoted in LaCapra, 1982, p. 132).

In the passage under consideration, it is the juxtaposition of the 'objective'

description of the landscape by the narrative voice and the free indirect style presenting Emma Bovary's mental language that evokes the reader's ironic reaction to the scene. The first paragraph of the passage offers the reader a description of the landscape which would seem to be purely objective. With the exception of the first sentence that may be read as presenting Emma Bovary's sense of the monotonousness of the journey, the words used in the rest of the paragraph lack any direct connection with her personal point of view; the author instead creates a picture of an industrial landscape that resembles the landscapes which nineteenth-century readers could see in the real world. To achieve the illusion of objectivity, the narrative voice mostly uses the same neutral vocabulary which any person describing the same piece of reality would be likely to choose: ships are simply black, fumes are brown, hills are green, the churches are chiming, the foundries are rumbling, the wind blows, etc. A close reading of the paragraph, however, reveals that the perfect neutrality of the style is 'spoilt' by two things: firstly, by the author's usage of two similes (ships are like *large, motionless, black fishes*, the clouds are like *aerial waves*) which give the impartial description a poetic dimension, and secondly, by the common cultural connotations of the images that the author adds to the given passage; dark colours (black, brown, violet) are usually considered to be less cheerful than the bright ones, autumn is strongly associated with the end of life and cold autumnal rain evokes melancholy more effectively than summer sunshine. As can be seen, instead of using language to create a mirror image of reality, the author carefully chooses specific words and cultural connotations to construct an artistic representation of reality that would strongly correspond to the general vision of the world typical of a specific (Western) culture and a specific historical period (nineteenth century).

Having created this illusion of objectivity of his representation of the world, Flaubert then moves on in the second paragraph to capture Emma Bovary's subjective perception of the same place. In order to do so, he adopts the free indirect style of writing in which he combines the narrator's vocabulary with Emma's mental language. The expressions like *swelling of heart*, *palpitation of souls*, *vapours of passions* are clearly charged with the romantic sentiments that dominate Emma's thinking. It is the clash of the seemingly impersonal, neutral vocabulary of the narrative voice with the highly personal, sentimental vocabulary of the character that creates the specific ironic point of view: the reader cannot help but perceive Emma as a woman who unconsciously projects her illusions onto reality; a woman who believes that reality itself

adds grandeur to an extraordinary romance, a romance which is in fact nothing more than mundane, provincial adultery.

Further explorations of Emma's character and the ways how her story refers to the broader issue of the relations between mind and the world, art and life, (romantic) illusions and facts will be the focus of seminar discussions about Flaubert's seminal novel.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Analyze in detail the full scene of the agricultural show (Part Two, Chapter VIII) in which Rodolph tries to seduce Emma. How does the narrator make us aware of the contrast between 'romance' and the realities of life? What is the role of irony in this scene?

2. In Close Reading Analysis Two, we noticed how Flaubert uses free indirect style in a way that encourages the reader to perceive Emma with ironic detachment. Find other examples of passages in the novel that produce a similar effect. Can you find other characters in the novel which are presented from the same ironic perspective?

3. Analyze the role of the romantic in Emma's personal life and her relationships with Rodolph, Leon and her husband: How does Emma's idea of romantic love influence her perceptions of these men?

4. How sympathetic (or unsympathetic) are we to Emma and the other main characters at the moment of her tragic end? Why?

5. Through the novel, Flaubert depicts Emma's growing frustration with her life. Is this process accompanied by a similar development of Emma's character?

6. If Emma personifies the romantic vision of a life based on 'illusions' which is the target of the novel's criticism, which character in the novel embodies the realistic approach to life based on 'facts'? Does the author's presentation of this character suggest that Flaubert has a high regard for the realistic vision of life?

7. What is the role of religion in the conflict between the two (romantic and realistic) visions of life?

8. Is morality (a moral conflict) presented as an important issue in the novel?

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MODERNISM

2 VIRGINIA WOOLF: MRS DALLOWAY

**The limits of my language mean
the limits of my world.**

Ludwig Wittgenstein

While the second half of the nineteenth century was dominated by the attempts of Realists to depict the world with scientific objectivity, the twentieth century saw the development of a number of literary styles which tried to overcome the limitations that the realistic method imposed on artistic representations of the world. The first great shift away from Realism came with the emergence of **Modernism**, a movement which acquired a firm position in the world of art in the first decades of the twentieth century. Literary modernism achieved its peak in the period between 1910 and 1930, when Anglo-American authors as **T.S. Elliot**, **Ezra Pound**, **Gertrude Stein**, **Henry James**, **James Joyce**, and **Virginia Woolf** introduced a series of important stylistic developments and experimental techniques which opened a wider range of possibilities in the artistic representation of human perceptions of reality.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was one of the pivotal figures of the Modernist movement, and the innovative style of her novels made a significant contribution to the creation of a unique modernist vision of human life in the turbulent period after the First World War (1914-1918). Her most famous work, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) is one of the most accessible modernist **experimental novels**, and also serves as one of the best examples of the new mode of understanding of modern individuals and of the socio-historical situation in which they existed**.** This chapter places *Mrs Dalloway* in the context of the social, philosophical and theoretical ideas which shaped the novel, and also explains the nature of the experimental techniques which the author uses to convey the modern experience of human reality.

Modernism

Modernism emerged as a broad cultural movement at the turn of the twentieth century in reaction to the socio-economic, cultural and intellectual changes which had been transforming the character of modern societies since the dawn of the Enlightenment in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although the Modern era is often associated with the rise of Reason and the general progress of Western societies, it undoubtedly had its darker aspects and produced major economic, social and political conflicts which eventually resulted in the First World War. The **Great War** (as it was known at the time) is traditionally seen as the historical event that shaped the character of the Modernist movement more than any other, and, indeed, some of the most significant works of modernist literature appeared in the post-war period; these works include T.S. Elliot's poem *The Wasteland* (1922), James Joyce's masterpiece *Ulysses* (1922), and Virginia Woolf's series of great experimental novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *The Waves* (1931). Nevertheless, it is not the battlefields of the Great War which form the focal point of these works. For modernist intellectuals the Great War served as a symbol of the long-term socio-cultural processes which were bringing about a wide range of essential changes in the relationship between the individual and society.

The Great War radically accelerated the process of alienation within societies, a trend which had been gradually emerging in tandem with the modernization of Western societies during the nineteenth century. The processes of industrialization, urbanization and the introduction of new technologies had improved everyday life but had also reduced the dependence of individuals on communities. This development and the concomitant rise of individualism as the principal philosophy of life in advanced capitalism had led to a long-term corrosion of interpersonal relations. As we have seen, the consequences of these negative social trends had already found their reflection in the works of the Realists, and it is no coincidence that one of great Realist themes is the conflict between individuals and the hostility or indifference of their immediate surroundings. The feelings of loneliness and alienation that emerge from this conflict often lead the protagonists of Realist novels to reject the shared values of their society or even to retreat from the society entirely. Modernists continued in this theme through the presentation of individuals who, experiencing

existential loneliness, questioned old beliefs and searched for the meaning of human existence.

The effect of the Great War intensified this corrosion of interpersonal relations, and it marked the definitive end of the era of traditional values and of the possibility of a 'shared ethical realm' (Faulkner, 1977, p. 2). Enlightenment ideas about the natural goodness of human beings and the power of reason to guarantee the gradual progression towards a better society which had dominated the intellectual climate of the eighteen and nineteen centuries were abandoned and intellectuals began instead to focus on the crisis of humanity. Modern writers no longer saw loneliness and the estrangement and isolation from the wider community as the tragic fate of a small number of unhappy individuals, but began instead to perceive this as inevitable aspects of the human condition. This radical change in the intellectual atmosphere was not just an emotional reaction to the shock caused by the Great War. If the conflict had made writers more emotionally sensitive to the tragic evolution of human history, it was contemporary scientific and philosophical knowledge that gave their pessimistic visions a rational basis. Even by the last decades of the nineteenth century, new developments in science, the arts and philosophy had started to challenge the hitherto prevalent understanding of man as an essentially social being whose bondage with other individuals is based not only on his natural need for fellowship, but also on a shared, humanist vision of the world in which it was broadly understood that everyone held the same human values. The belief in the possibility of acquiring objective knowledge about the world as well as the belief in man's ability to clearly distinguish between good and evil, beliefs which still formed the basis of wider social consciousness in the nineteenth century, started to be undermined by new intellectual discoveries.

A serious re-definition of the human situation can be found in the work of **Friedrich Nietzsche** and his **philosophical attack on traditional Christian morality** that had for centuries remained one of the cornerstones of Western culture. Although Nietzsche's questioning of the legitimacy of the Christian understanding of good and evil did not have a direct impact on the ethical system of his contemporaries, it was a philosophical harbinger of the relativity of values which would become typical of twentieth-century morality. Similarly, his now famous declaration that 'God is dead' can be seen as a presage of the significant 'disappearance' of the divine authority from the increasingly secular lives of modern

people. The philosophical redefinition of the relationship between man and God was accompanied by an even more important redefinition of interhuman relations. The traditional understanding of man, based either on the religious concept of the soul, a property which lifts humans above the animal state of being, or on the philosophical concept of man as an 'animal' whose reason enables him to progress towards higher and higher degrees of socialization, civilization and humanization were seriously shaken by a series of new scientific discoveries that appeared at the turn of the century.

One of the most important developments in scientific knowledge was made by **Sigmund Freud** whose psychological studies of the human mind led to the formulation of his psychoanalytical theory of personality, one of the most influential theories of the twentieth century. Freud's development of **psychoanalysis** revealed that, despite thousands of years of civilization and 'humanization', people remained firmly connected with the animal state through their unconscious impulses. Freud's discoveries fostered an increased intellectual interest in uncovering the multiple layers of the human mind, and it became clear that not only was the personality of every individual shaped under the powerful influence of animal instincts (a condition which greatly complicates the entire process of socialization), but also that everybody is locked in a distinct and enormously complex world of their own minds. Resolving the inter-connections between the world of an individual mind and the so called objective world and also determining the extent to which it was possible for individual minds to communicate with each other became the central problems of twentieth-century intellectual investigations.

An important role in these investigations was played by **the philosophy of language** whose most influential theories appeared at the dawn of the new century, especially in the work of **Ferdinand de Saussure**. Saussure's linguistic theory is based on the **structuralist** definition of **language as a system of arbitrary signs**. It sees each linguistic sign as a union of sound and concept, but asserts that these signs lack any inherent connection with the referent, i.e., the object to which the sign refers. Linguistic meanings are produced inside the complex structure of language through a series of differences which distinguish one sign from all the other signs in the system. So for example, the word 'bed' has no meaning in itself or in its essential relation with the object it refers to, but 'the identity of bed as a unit of English' depends on 'the distinctions that separate bed from bet, bad, head, etc.' (Culler,

1986, p. 42). Language and the world cannot therefore be seen as two distinct entities which are connected by human beings in the process of assigning 'names' to worldly objects. On the contrary, as every new-born baby undergoes the process of socialization, language becomes the integral part of individual consciousness which gives each individual his or her awareness of the world and their own self. Consequently, a gap develops between the reality that is accessible to people through language and the so-called 'objective reality'; the reality that exists beyond the concepts of human language. The heightened awareness of the central role of language in human understandings of reality and of the complexity of the relationship which linguistic signs create between the individual and the world made the explorations of language, whether philosophical, linguistic, or literary, a central intellectual problem of the last century. Literary modernism and its major experiment – **the stream-of-consciousness novel** – played a crucial part in these efforts of twentieth-century intellectuals.

Stream-of-consciousness novel

Modernist writers reacted with interest to the newest scientific and philosophical knowledge, and these intellectual discoveries had a direct impact on the character of their work. One of the most significant aspects of modernist fiction is its focus on language and the way in which it forms the world of human consciousness. As one critic noted, 'language and the nature of human discourse [becomes] a major theme for the modernist novelist . . . , for to understand the modern mind we need to understand the medium in which the mind exists' (Faulkner, 1977, p. 38). Unlike the Realists, who often tried to create truthful, objective pictures of the outward world, Modernists turned to 'the inward and subjective as the only true reality' (Spencer, 1991, p. 527). This is not to say, of course, that depictions of the outside world disappeared from modernist fiction; modernist authors presented the world as it was perceived by an individual consciousness rather than in a form which attempted to imitate the 'general experience' of reality. The external world is offered as a part of the complex reality of the mind in which individual consciousness resides.

The complexity of depicting the reality of the human mind forced modernist authors to search for new techniques of writing that would enable them to present

reality to the reader in a communicable form. While the external world is revealed to the individual in relatively stable forms, the inner world of the mind is in a state of constant change that operates independently of the physical laws of space and time. The central experimental form of modernist fiction, known as the **stream-of-consciousness novel**, was intended to depict the unstable character of the human mind by capturing the constant stream of consciousness in which every rational being is destined to live. The origin of this literary experiment is closely connected with the works of William James and Henri Bergson. The investigations of the American psychologist **William James** who coined the term 'the stream of consciousness', and the new theory of time of the French philosopher **Henri Bergson** made significant contribution to the understanding of the workings of consciousness which inform the modernist experimental novel.

William James's **theory of consciousness** is grounded in the fact that in addition to the **speech level of consciousness** there is also a **pre-speech level** which represents the awareness of human experience in a broader sense. The speech level consists of verbalized concepts that are ordered and appear in the form of a 'chain' in which one word follows the other in a sequence. It is the level of the mind that makes it possible for people to formulate their ideas and to communicate them through language in an orderly and logical way. On the other hand, the pre-speech level consists of a whole range of elements that are not 'censored, rationally controlled, or logically ordered' (Humphrey, 1954, p. 3), such as non-verbalized thoughts, sensations, memories, feelings, fancies, imaginings, intuitions, visions, insights that 'appear to one not as a chain, but as a stream, a flow' (Humphrey, 1954, p. 5). Thus consciousness is formed not only by the part of the mind that produces rational thinking, but it instead 'indicates the entire area of mental attention, from pre-consciousness on through the levels of the mind up to and including the highest one of rational communicable awareness' (Humphrey, 1954, p. 2). Therefore one of the main concerns of stream-of-consciousness novelists became the question how to use the verbal means of this highest, most communicable level of the mind to capture realistically the 'levels that are more inchoate than rational verbalization – those levels [that exist] on the margin of attention' (Humphrey, 1954, p. 3).

Another theory which greatly influenced the development of the stream-of-consciousness novel was Henri Bergson's **theory of time as 'duration'**. The essence of this theory lies in its differentiation between **spatial time** and **pure time**.

Spatial time is the scientific conception of time which is intrinsically connected with the concept of space. The awareness of this time, i.e., time as it is perceived in everyday life, is created by human reason on the basis of measurements of changes in space. The constantly changing position of the Earth in space, which causes the cycle of day and night and the cycle of the seasons, allows us to approach time rationally through breaking it up into basic measurable units of time such as hours, days, years, etc. Bergman argues that this rational conception of time cannot provide a full understanding of time in its true essence – as pure time which is independent of space. Pure time (also known as psychological time) is **duration**, formed by the continual melting of one moment into another, which exists beyond the rational separation of time into measurable units. Time as duration, as continuous flow, is, in Bergson's opinion, experienced only at the pre-speech level of the mind, where consciousness itself appears as a continuous stream. At the pre-speech level, the human mind is free of the 'chains' of reason and can move freely, unhindered by the bonds of logical and chronological ordering of experience.

Stream-of-consciousness novelists were faced with the difficult task of using language, the essentially verbal and logically and spatially ordered medium to depict the free, 'chaotic' movement of the non-verbal, pre-speech, area of consciousness and of the pure, psychological, time in which it exists. Henri Bergson formulates the main problem that literature faces in this case as follows:

> [Literature uses] words, which tend to wonder around the object rather than give it an exact meaning . . . Words assume a spatial form on the printed page: they are terms clearly conceived as being external to one another and are not states of consciousness but their symbols, or speaking more exactly, the conventional signs which express them. By the mere fact that we associate one word with another and set them side by side rather than allow them to permeate one another, we fail to translate, when using them, the exact nature of our experience. (quoted in Friedman, 1955, p. 86)

As Bergson suggests, as soon as one attempts to communicate the experience of the pre-speech level of the mind in words, one is forced to destroy the essence of this experience. In order to express the free flow of images, memories, feelings in

words it is necessary to turn them into communicable concepts, a process which requires their reduction to the level of language where the experience of pure flow by necessity disappears. Since '[this pure] flow of consciousness . . . is found on the levels nearing the state of unconsciousness' (Humphrey, 1954, p. 42), it is virtually impossible to capture it wholly by means of language. But what the experimental techniques of the stream-of-consciousness novel make possible is an attempt to capture 'the pre-speech levels [that are] nearer the surface' and which are susceptible to 'the checks and interference' of the external world (Humphrey, 1954, p. 42). Through the use of experimental forms of writing, stream-of-consciousness novelists tried to create a representation of the level of the mind where the sensory experience of the external world and the mental experience of the inner world melt together, constantly prompting the activity of individual consciousness.

Modernist authors also had to choose how best to represent '[the individual] consciousness realistically by maintaining its characteristics of privacy (the incoherence, discontinuity, and private implications), [and, at the same time,] communicate something to the reader through this consciousness . . .' (Humphrey, 1954, p. 62). As the two great representatives of the modernist novel, **James Joyce** and **Virginia Woolf**, showed, there are several ways of recreating the stream of consciousness in literary form. The following short passage from Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), the masterpiece of the genre, demonstrates the narrative technique which Joyce employed to depict the stream of consciousness in the mind of the novel's female protagonist Molly Bloom:

> Yes because he never did a thing like that before as ask to get his breakfast in bed with a couple of eggs since the *City Arms* hotel when he used to be pretending to be laid up with a sick voice doing his highness to make himself interesting to that old faggot Mrs. Riordan that he thought he had a great leg of and she never left us a farthing all for masses for herself and her soul greatest miser ever was actually afraid to lay out 4d for her methylated spirit telling me all her ailments she had too much old chat in her about politics and earthquakes and the end of the world let us have a bit of fun first God help the world if all the women were her sort . . . (Joyce, 1964, p. 871)

The passage, which in its full length spreads over forty pages, presents a **direct interior monologue** written in a form which reproduces the uninterrupted flow of ideas as it would appear in the private world of the individual mind. Joyce spurns the use of punctuation to separate the text into sentences and paragraphs, thereby preventing the logical division of the text into separate meaningful utterances. Molly's mind moves freely back and forth between the remembered past and the imagined future but simultaneously remains in the state of the constant present in which human consciousness exists. There is no authorial interference to interrupt the stream of thoughts and the only principle which shapes the flow is the process of associations which causes the monologue of consciousness to jump constantly from one thought to another. Through these methods, Joyce tried to capture the very nature of the workings of human psyche as realistically as possible. As Robert Humphrey (1954) states:

> The psyche, which is almost continuously active, cannot be concentrated for very long in its processes, even when it is most strongly willed; when little effort is exerted to concentrate it, its focus remains on any one thing but momentarily. Yet the activity of consciousness must leave content, and this is provided for by the power of one thing to suggest another through an association of qualities in common or in contrast, wholly, or partially – even to the barest suggestion. Three factors control the association: first, the memory, which is its basis; second, the senses, which guide it; and third, the imagination, which determines its elasticity. (p. 43)

All the three of these factors determine the activity of Molly's mind, although the fact that Molly's stream of consciousness appears as she lies in bed, memory and imagination play a more central role in her monologue. The external world that Molly perceives is represented only by the room, her sleeping husband and her own body; Molly's fixed position in space allows the author to concentrate exclusively on the movement of her consciousness, thereby providing the reader with 'direct access' to Molly's mind.

Although this technique allows a high level of realism in the portrayal of human consciousness, its main disadvantage lies in the enormous demands which it places

on the reader. If the author presents a stream of consciousness which exists close to the speech level, such as Molly's flux of unspoken thoughts, the reader may find the text demanding but the novel nonetheless remains readable. However, if the author tries to capture deeper levels of consciousness, the communicative quality of language becomes seriously threatened. This problem becomes more acute in Joyce's final experimental novel *Finnegan's Wake* (1939) in which the author's attempt to depict dream consciousness, i.e., the level of consciousness bordering on the unconscious, has rendered the text practically 'unreadable'.

In her novel *Mrs Dalloway*, Virginia Woolf avoids using long passages of direct interior monologue, employing instead different narrative strategies such as **free indirect discourse** and **impressionistic technique.** She creates a text which is more readable than Joyce's experimental novels and which gives the reader the opportunity to study the dynamism of the constant interaction between the external and inner worlds which constitutes the human experience of reality. The following section on *Mrs Dalloway* offers close reading analyses of selected extracts from the novel, and explores Woolf's unique representation of the complexity of the human mind.

Mrs Dalloway

Mrs Dalloway depicts a day in the lives of two Londoners, Clarissa Dalloway, a middle-aged woman of upper-middle-class background who spends the day preparing a party, and Septimus Warren Smith, a young veteran of the Great War whose 'shell shock' (a severe posttraumatic reaction) drives him to take his own life. Although the two characters never meet, their fates 'merge' for one moment when, at her party, Mrs. Dalloway happens to hear about Septimus's death. This leads her to a moment of epiphany – a sudden insight into the nature of human life. While the basic story of the days of the two protagonists is relatively simple, another, more complex story takes place concurrently in the minds of the various major and minor characters, and it is these thoughts which form the core elements of the narrative. This more complex story spans the period of a few decades and transports the reader from London to various locations including India, Bourton (Mrs. Dalloway's parental home) and the battlefields of the Great War. Simultaneously, the novel also

takes the reader from the consciousness of one character to another, with some (primarily those of minor characters) being entered for just a single fleeting moment while others are 'visited' repeatedly for longer periods. Each consciousness provides the reader with a certain limited amount of information, all of which can finally be pieced together to form a complicated mosaic with Mrs. Dalloway at the centre. By these means, the novel presents psychological portraits of the major characters and a representation of the world as experienced by certain individuals at certain points of time and space.

The main technique that Virginia Woolf uses to capture the texture of the consciousness of different characters while preserving the continuity of the story and the intelligibility of presented thoughts is **free indirect discourse.** Woolf constructs free indirect discourse as a smooth movement between the 'indirectly reported thoughts and direct, unedited transcription of consciousness' and her style of writing is often seen as 'the English equivalent of *style indirect libre* [Flaubert's free indirect style] (Friedman, 1955, p. 198). Using a combination of indirect interior monologue (indirectly reported thoughts of characters indicated by such expressions as 'she thought') and directly presented thoughts which are expressed in the character's own mental language, Woolf 'presents unspoken material as if it were directly from the consciousness of a character and, with commentary and description, guides the reader through it, [constantly] interven[ing] between the character's psyche and the reader' (Humphrey, 1954, p. 29).

The following analyses illustrate how Woolf captures the world of a character's consciousness realistically, preserving its characteristic features of incoherence, discontinuity and private implications, and, at the same time, communicates something to the reader through this consciousness.

Close Reading Analysis One

The following passage presents the opening scene of *Mrs Dalloway* in which the protagonist is introduced to the reader in characteristically *in media res* way:

> Mrs. DALLOWAY said she would buy the flowers herself.
> For Lucy had her work cut out for her. The doors would be taken off their hinges; Rumpelmayer's men were coming. And then, thought Clarissa

Dalloway, what a morning – fresh as if issued to children on a beach.

What a lark! What a plunge! For so it had always seemed to her when, with a little squeak of the hinges, which she could hear now, she had burst open the French windows and plunged at Bourton into the open air. How fresh, how calm, stiller than this of course, the air was in the early morning; like the flap of a wave; the kiss of a wave; chill and sharp and yet (for a girl of eighteen as she then was) solemn, feeling as she did, standing there at the open window, that something awful was about to happen; looking at the flowers, at the trees with the smoke winding off them and the rooks rising, falling; standing and looking until Peter Walsh said' 'Musing among the vegetables? – was that it? – 'I prefer man to cauliflowers' – was that it? He must have said it at the breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace – Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or – July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished – how strange it was! – a few sayings like this about cabbages.

She stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall's van to pass. A charming woman, Scrope Purvis thought her (knowing her as one does know people who live next door to one in Westminster); a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, light, vivacious, though she was over fifty, and grown very white since her illness. There she perched, never seeing him, waiting to cross, very upright. (Woolf, 1996, p. 5-6)

As the quoted passage shows, the narrative here is created by three voices – the voice of the omniscient narrator and the internal voices of two characters, Mrs. Dalloway and Scrope Purvis. The omniscient narrator opens the passage by introducing Mrs. Dalloway and informs the reader of her decision to buy flowers. This brief introduction of the character and the indirect presentation of her spoken thoughts (*Mrs. Dalloway **said** that she would buy the flowers*) informs the reader that the consciousness of a specific character is being entered at a specific moment in time. The passage that follows, identified as unspoken thoughts (the reader is told, again by the omniscient narrator, that the sentences are **thought** by Clarissa Dalloway), clarifies the thinking behind the character's decision. On the basis of what Mrs. Dalloway thinks, it is possible to grasp why she goes to buy the flowers herself;

another character, called Lucy, has other work to do, tasks which are probably connected with the fact that the doors will be taken off their hinges and with the planned arrival of Rumpelmayer's men. A further reason is given in the freshness of the morning (apparently pleasant for a walk) which inspires Mrs. Dalloway's exclamatory-like thoughts, which are clear examples of her own mental language (*What a lark! What a plunge!*).

The omniscient narrator then re-appears to indicate to the reader that *a little squeak of the hinges*, which Mrs. Dalloway *could hear now*, makes her think of her opening *the French windows [as she] plunged at Bourton into the open air*. This interruption on the part of the omniscient narrator plays the crucial role of informing the reader that the sensory experience of the external world (the sound of the hinges) takes Mrs. Dalloway's mind to a different place (Bourton) and time (when she was eighteen). The reader, being reminded at the same time of the character's position in actual time (now) and place (she is still in the house and is opening the door whose hinges produce the squeaking sound), can gain 'direct access' to Mrs. Dalloway's consciousness without being confused by its content; as this close reading reveals, what may seem on the surface as chaotic 'skipping' from one thought to another is, in fact, a stream of consciousness governed by an internal logic leading from the train of associations.

As we follow the movements of Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts, we can see that the freshness of the morning of the current day reminds her of the fresh air of another morning, the morning when, as a girl of eighteen, *she was standing there [Bourton] at the open window.* This makes her think about an unpleasant feeling which she had on that morning in the past that *something awful was about to happen*, the remembrance of which is connected with the recollection of the sentence *'Musing among the vegetables?'* which had been uttered at that moment by Peter Walsh. This sentence about vegetables is immediately associated in her mind, with another sentence, *'I prefer men to cauliflowers'* that Peter Walsh had said one morning at Bourton. From her reverie about Peter Walsh from when she was eighteen, her mind is brought back to the present day through the thought that he *would be back from India one of these days, June or – July*. The realization that she *forgot which [month]* leads Mrs. Dalloway to make a judgement about his letters, which are *awfully dull*, before then jumping to thoughts and things which she associates with Peter Walsh: *his sayings, his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness*. Finally, this draws

her mind to pondering on the strangeness of the fact that although *millions of things had utterly vanished [from her memory]*, she should remember *a few sayings like this about cabbages*. At this moment, the flow of Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts is again interrupted by the voice of the omniscient narrator who informs the reader that she *stiffened a little on the kerb, waiting for Durtnall's van to pass*.

This interruption reminds the reader that while Mrs. Dalloway's mind had travelled from the Bourton of the past to the England of *these days*, in reality she is moving out of her house into the streets, apparently on her way to buy flowers. In addition to serving this informative function, the omniscient narrator's sentence also prepares the reader for the 'switch' from Mrs. Dalloway's consciousness to the consciousness of another character, Scrope Purvis. Scrope Purvis, who notices Mrs. Dalloway standing on the kerb without being noticed himself, starts to think about her, thereby providing the reader with some important information about the central character. This information is presented as a combination of subjective opinions (Scrope Purvis thinks of her as a *charming woman* and compares her to a bird) and objective facts (Mrs. Dalloway is over fifty and ill). Mrs. Dalloway is thus presented not only as a subject, whose stream of consciousness has been thus far followed by the reader, but also as an object existing in the external world which can be experienced through the senses of others (such as, for example, Purvis) and become a part of the consciousness of others (she has entered the thoughts of Purvis). This two-fold presentation of Mrs. Dalloway results in a more complex portrait of the character which shows not only her own perception of the world, but also how 'the world' perceives her.

The third function of the narrator's sentence about Mrs. Dalloway's stopping at the kerb is to mark the change of focus in Mrs. Dalloway's consciousness. As the above passage shows, up until this point in the text, the external world appears only briefly in Mrs. Dalloway's mind in the form of the fresh air of the morning and in the sound of the hinges. The sensory perception of the freshness of the air and the sound of the hinges takes Mrs. Dalloway's stream of consciousness to the internal world of her memories, her past feelings, judgements and private reflections. However, at the moment when Mrs. Dalloway has to wait at the kerb for the *Durnvall's van to pass* her mind is forced to concentrate on the external world she physically moves in and this necessity changes the flow of her thoughts. After the short interlude during which Scrope Purvis's thoughts are related, the text comes

back to the main character's consciousness; Mrs. Dalloway's stream is now guided by the sensory experience of external reality as she moves through the streets of Westminster.

Woolf's representation of the external reality of Westminster, which is analyzed below, reflects the modernist awareness of the enormous complexity involved in how individuals experience the world that surrounds us. In the essay 'Modern Fiction' Virginia Woolf comments on this complexity in terms which are often seen as defining the **impressionistic technique** which Woolf uses to capture the interactions between the human mind and the external world.

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there. . . .Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semitransparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. . . . Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearances, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. (Woolf, 1984, p. 199-200)

At every single moment of our perception of external reality, our senses are 'attacked' and overwhelmed by innumerable chaotic impressions. In order to process a meaningful experience of the world, our mind has to select some of the impressions, separate them from the general chaos and integrate them into an ordered system created by our rational interpretation of the sensory perceptions. In this process visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile impulses are converted into linguistic concepts and we realize that we see, hear, smell, taste and touch things. Therefore, at every single moment of our sensory awareness of the world, some degree of subjectivity is at play; our experiences can never be wholly objective. There are two main reasons for this; firstly because we remain unaware of countless

numbers of other impressions and sensory inputs which are also part of the totality of the objective world but which our mind has ignored or rejected. Secondly, because however direct our sensory experience of the objective world is, this experience must become a part of the subjective world of the mind before it can be actually realized. In other words the external world must be converted into language before it can become a part of an individual's awareness of reality.

A close reading of the second extract will allow us to see how Woolf captures this process of 'transformation' of the external world into language through a combination of free indirect discourse and the impressionistic technique of writing.

Close Reading Analysis Two

In the following passage, Mrs. Dalloway, having stopped at the kerb to allow Durtnall's van to pass, turns away from her thoughts about Peter Walsh and starts to focus on the streets of Westminster which surround her:

> For having lived in Westminster – how many years now? over twenty, – one feels even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night, Clarissa was positive, a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense (but that might be her heart, affected, they said, by influenza) before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air. Such fools we are, she thought, crossing Victoria Street. For Heaven only knows why one loves it so, how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh; but the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries sitting on door-steps (drinking their downfall) do the same; can't be dealt with, she felt positive, by Acts of Parliament for that very reason: they love life. In people's eyes, in the swing, tramp, and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June. (Woolf, 1996, p. 6)

At first Mrs. Dalloway's mind is concerned with her anticipation of hearing the chimes of Big Ben ring in the hour. Then she actually hears the sound. The section describing her sensory experience of hearing the clock strike is a good example of how objective reality (the sound) becomes a part of human consciousness; more specifically, of how Mrs. Dalloway becomes aware of the sound. Her first impression is to conceptualize the sound as *booming*, a word which is closely connected with the actual sound of the clock, and which could also be easily used by other people who hear the clock's striking. In this sense, her awareness of the sensory experience has an 'objective' dimension. However, her mind then begins to add other associations to the sound, such as *warning* and *irrevocable*. Unlike *booming*, these words are charged with highly subjective meanings and have specific private implications which reflect Mrs. Dalloway's state of mind more than the actual sound of Big Ben.

The words that her mind connects with the sound of Big Ben provide some indication of her awareness of the irrevocable course of time which is bringing her closer and closer to the end of her life. This awareness of the inevitable end, a feeling which is intensified by her illness, provokes a turn in her stream of consciousness which may at first appear illogical – she starts to think about her love for life. She reflects upon the fact that she shares this love with *the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries*. These thoughts about the poor whom she can see *sitting on the doorsteps (drinking their downfall)* leads her mind to an attempt to capture a complex experience of the world that surrounds her. What follows is an example of the **impressionistic technique** in practice, depicting the way in which the mind receives 'a myriad of impressions' at the same time. The words used to describe the people, objects, vehicles, movements, and sounds give the reader a sense of London as it was experienced by Mrs. Dalloway at *this moment of June*. The focus is placed on the movements and noises of the town, *the swing, tramp, and trudge*, *the bellow and the uproar*, *shuffling and swinging*, the *singing of [the] aeroplane*. The author 'records' the impressions that impact upon the character's mind in a way that captures the rhythm of life in the modern city, recreating the feeling of energy that Mrs. Dalloway enjoys and admires. Words like *triumph*, *jingle* and *singing*, which represent direct transcriptions of Mrs. Dalloway's internal mental language, show that the conceptualization of her visual and auditory experience of the external world is highly subjective, and that it is deeply influenced by the positive feelings of her love for life. Simultaneously, the feeling itself is intensified by the

presence of the reality which surrounds her.

Focusing on the level of the mind where the external world of sensory experience and the inner world of mental experience (feelings, memories, etc.) interact in the process of conceptualization, Woolf's text captures the dynamics of human consciousness. The analyzed passages show that whether one's consciousness focuses its attention on the external world or the inner world, both worlds remain part of it. On the one hand, the sensory experience of the external world determines the inner reality of the mind: the sound of the hinges and the smell of the fresh air evoke specific memories and feelings in Mrs. Dalloway's mind. On the other hand, mental experience also determines an individual's perception of the external world: Mrs. Dalloway's emotions (fear of death, love of life) significantly influence the process of conceptualization of her perception of Westminster. Neither of these two realities can disappear from human consciousness completely since their mutual interaction is the actual source of its existence.

Further explorations of Woolf's representation of this constant interaction of the inner and external realities in the minds of her characters, her employment of experimental narrative strategies and the vision of human life which she depicts in her famous novel will be among the main issues for discussion in the seminar about *Mrs Dalloway*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Prepare a close reading analysis of the passage that focuses on Peter Walsh's consciousness after he has left Mrs. Dalloway's house (p.54-63), noticing how the text represents the constant interaction of the character's sensory and mental experience:

a) Discuss how Peter Walsh's perception of objective reality affects his inner world of thoughts, memories, and fantasies and how this inner world conversely influences his perception of the objective reality.

b) There is one specific point in the text in which Peter Walsh experiences an epiphany - a sudden insight into some important aspect of his life. What is the insight about and what is the source of the insight?

c) The representation of stream-of-consciousness enables the author to present a lot of information about the character in a relatively concise fashion. Make a list of everything which you have learnt about Peter Walsh. Have you collected enough information to gain a complex picture of his personality?

2. Prepare a close reading analysis of the passage which depicts the consciousness of Septimus Warren Smith while he is sitting in the same park as Peter Walsh (p. 75-79). Focus on the following issues:

a) How does the text present the fact that the character is mentally ill?

b) How does the text capture Septimus's rational attempts to fight his madness?

3. Focus on Mrs. Dalloway's relationships with Peter Walsh, her husband, her daughter, and Sally Seton: How do these relationships reflect Mrs Dalloway's personality?

4. Which of the main characters' problems appear to be caused by the specific

historical, cultural and social environment of Britain after the Great War and which can be seen as timeless? Why?

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3 SAMUEL BECKETT: WAITING FOR GODOT

For to be a man is automatically not to be happy.

That is the human situation.

<div align="center">Alberto Moravia</div>

The psychological reality of the human mind which stream-of-consciousness novelists explored in their literary experiments acquired a new form of artistic representation in the last phases of the Modernist movement with the emergence of **absurdist drama** shortly after the **Second World War** (1939-1945). The atrocities of the second world conflict, which had broken out only twenty one years after the end of the Great War, only intensified the bleak view of humanity which had been typical in the works of major Modernists. This bitterness led to the development of a new dramatic genre which combined the oppressive feelings of loneliness, lack of communication, alienation and fear of death which often had plagued the protagonists of the modernist novel with a sense of the absurdity that the environment of the modern world created among its inhabitants.

The leading representative of this new trend in the post-war theatre was **Samuel Beckett** (1906-1989) whose play *Waiting for God* (originally written in French in 1948) is the most famous example of what has become known as the **Theatre of the Absurd**. When *Waiting for Godot* was performed for the first time in Paris in 1953, it was immediately recognized as an important contribution to the development of modern drama. Since then, the play has been translated into more than twenty languages and has been performed all over the world. Due to its enormous popularity, the expression 'waiting for Godot' has entered everyday speech, referring to the act of waiting pointlessly for someone or something that never comes. This chapter focuses on the thematic, formal and symbolic aspects of Beckett's play, placing it into the context of **existentialism** which provided its conceptual framework.

The Theatre of the Absurd

The term **the Theatre of the Absurd** was coined by the literary critic **Martin Esslin** in his seminal 1961 work of the same name. Esslin's study demonstrated that the works of several authors who produced their plays in post-war Paris shared not only a similar vision of the human situation, but also a set of new dramatic techniques which ignored the conventions of traditional **well-made drama**. Esslin applied the term to the works of four main pioneers of the genre in particular; the Irishman **Samuel Beckett**, the Romanian **Eugene Ionesco**, the Russian-Armenian **Arthur Adamov**, and the Frenchman **Jean Genet**. Although these playwrights did not collaborate with each other, their work undoubtedly seems to 'share certain attitudes towards the predicament of man in universe' (Hinchliffe, 1969, p. 1). Esslin (2001) noticed that the playwrights' rejection of the traditional Aristotelian plot structure which aims to convey a meaningful story, the circular structuring of the plays which is suggestive of the static nature of reality, and the lack of causality in both the verbal and nonverbal actions on the stage all conveyed the same main theme of their plays: the 'sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition' (p. 23-24).

The belief that human life is absurd, i.e., devoid of any meaning, was rooted, to a great extent, in the post-war cultural atmosphere of disillusionment. Religious beliefs and also faith in the progressive development of human civilization had been seriously undermined by the war experience: 'the certitudes and unshakeable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away . . . ,they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions' (Esslin, 2001, p. 23). This loss of metaphysical certainties and of the belief in the transcendental meaning of human existence was explored philosophically in the works of French existentialists **Jean-Paul Sartre** and **Albert Camus**, whose reflections became popular among post-war intellectuals and provided the main conceptual basis for absurdist drama. Some of the most important ideas that shaped the character of the Theatre of the Absurd can be found in an accessible and concise form in Albert Camus's essay ***The Myth of Sisyphus*** (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe, 1942*), which posits the problem of life's absurdity as the central problem of modern philosophical thinking. Camus opens his discussion with these impressive words:

> There is but one truly serious philosophical problem and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental

question of philosophy. All the rest – whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories – comes afterwards. These are games one must first answer. (Camus, 1975, p. 11)

With this statement, Camus radically moves the focus of philosophy from the explorations of objective reality of the world and the subjective reality of the mind to the discussion of the problems of the human situation in the world, the meaning of human existence and the value of life itself. As Camus argues in his essay, human existence is absurd in its very essence due to the lack of any intellectual evidence which suggests a transcendental purpose for human life. From a philosophical point of view, the meaninglessness of life arises from the inefficacy of reason and the failure of human knowledge: 'Of whom and of what indeed can I say: I know that! This heart within me I can feel, and I judge that it exists. This world I can touch and likewise judge that it exists. There ends all my knowledge, and the rest is construction' (p. 24). According to Camus, there are only two certainties in human life – the fact that we exist and the fact that we will cease to exist; everything else which we think we know are nothing more than constructs of reason which remain unable to present any objective truth about the world and our place in it. Due to the limitations of human knowledge we are familiar only with its superficial, surface elements; with the phenomena of the world but not with its essence. As a result, we can only ever perceive the world in its parts but never as a complete whole. The human condition is crucially defined by this inability of human reason to uncover any unifying principle of the world, or to prove that there is a divine authority which gives meaning to life. Hence, man ends up as a 'stranger' both to himself and to the world and he is forced to live in an 'unintelligible and limited universe' (p. 25-26).

Camus's agnostic philosophical position does not claim that God does not exist, but that the existence of God or of a transcendental meaning remains unknowable to man and is therefore beyond his limits; quite simply it does not exist for him. As he writes, 'I don't know whether this world has a meaning that transcends it. But I know that I do not know that meaning and that it is impossible for me just now to know it. What can a meaning outside my condition mean to me?'(p. 51). Thus, people, born into a world without meaning, living their lives trapped in a sequence of everyday habitual activities (eating, working, sleeping, etc.) ultimately leading to the inevitability of death might well encounter a profound sense of the emptiness or absurdity of life. It is at this

moment that the problem of suicide arises. What Camus asks is 'Does the Absurd dictate death?'(p. 16). Is suicide not a logical consequence of facing the absurdity of living? The answer to the question is not easy. Firstly, most people never experience this feeling of absurdity. They stick to the 'bad reasons' for living. They accept the culturally constructed explanations of human existence (such as, for example, religions) which bring some 'illusory' sense of meaning into their lives. Others might experience the feeling from time to time unexpectedly, suddenly realizing the futility of their activities. But this feeling is quickly suppressed by the habit of everyday living since 'we get into habit of living before acquiring the habit of thinking' (p. 15). Finally, there are those who do indeed commit suicide. About this act Camus says: 'Dying voluntarily implies that you have recognized, even instinctively, the ridiculous character of [the] habit, the absence of any profound reason for living, the insane character of that daily agitation and the uselessness of suffering'(p.13).

However, it is important to note that suicide can only be seen as a form of liberation from the mechanical, meaningless habit of living, but not as liberation from the sense of absurdity. In fact, Camus perceives suicide as man's defeat, or as his succumbing to the sense of absurdity, a condition which can only be overcome when the full realization of the absurdity of his situation leads to a radical revolt against it: the determination to go on living despite the lack of any transcendental meaning of life. This liberation lies in the assertion that if there is no intrinsic meaning in life which is granted by an external agency (for example by a divine authority), then we are free to create our own reasons for living. The **'everyday man'**, ignorantly believing in the higher purpose of his existence in the world lives under the false impression that he is free, but in reality he has 'adapted himself to the demands of a purpose to be achieved and became slave of his liberty' (p. 57). Yet as soon as the **'absurd man'** (p. 56) acknowledges the absurd nature of an existence which inevitably leads to death, he starts his journey towards liberation. The ability to face death and to accept it as the ultimate end of human life offers us the opportunity to escape from the petty habitual struggles of everyday life and to become 'sufficiently remote from one's own life to increase it and take a broad view of it' (p. 58).

In this way, Camus's philosophical argument which opens with an apparently superficial statement about suicide gradually develops towards a more optimistic finale in which he maintains that the 'absurd man' who admits to and at the same time revolts against the absurdity of existence can achieve not only liberation but also happiness.

Camus uses the example of **Sisyphus**, the mythological figure who is usually seen as a symbol of futile activity, to explain his argument. For Camus, Sisyphus is the classic example of a man in an absurd situation. Endlessly rolling a rock to the top and then watching it falling down, Sisyphus' fate could be considered as tragic. But paradoxically, Camus insists that 'one must imagine Sisyphus happy' (p.111). We can imagine Sisyphus happy if we imagine him as accepting his fate and imposing his own meaning onto the seemingly meaningless activity. The belief that 'the struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart' (p.111) allows Sisyphus to rise above his fate and to become a happy man. Therefore, although Camus begins *The Myth of Sisyphus* with a seemingly pessimistic picture of human existence – its total meaninglessness – his reasoning leads him to an optimistic conclusion: the acceptance of the lack of transcendental meaning in human life opens up the possibility not only of the individual's liberation from the absurd condition, but also the possibility of happiness.

The following section on *Waiting for Godot* shows that although Beckett focuses on the same major problems of human existence, he does not share Camus's optimism and presents the reader/audience with one of the most disturbingly pessimistic literary representations of the human condition.

Waiting for Godot

In *Waiting for Godot*, Samuel Beckett addresses all of the main themes which Albert Camus discusses in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: the purposelessness of human existence, the failure of human knowledge, the tedium and repetitiveness of everyday life, the option of suicide as a possible escape from the overwhelming sense of absurdity which man experiences. However, the crucial difference between Camus's essay and Beckett's drama lies not only in their different approaches to the problem (Beckett's pessimistic vision is in sharp contrast with the optimistic tone of Camus's essay), but also in the different forms which they use to present the idea of absurdity. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus discusses absurdity through closely argued philosophical language which allows readers to consider the absurdity of their life situation while retaining a degree of emotional detachment. On the other hand, Beckett uses the theatrical mode of a nonsensical, absurd, dramatic performance to present the meaninglessness of human existence in the way that compels the audience to confront the sense of

absurdity directly. Thus while Camus philosophically defines the absurd condition of life, Beckett shows what it is actually like to live in this condition.

Waiting for Godot is a 'tragicomedy in two acts' with a relatively simple **plot**. By a barren tree on a country road, two old tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for someone called Godot with whom they have an appointment. The meeting is so crucial for them that waiting for Godot becomes the main activity of their life. However, while they are waiting, they pass the time by performing various activities which are clearly habitual for them: they eat, sleep, talk, and complain about the things that make their everyday life miserable – boots which are too small, a poorly fitting hat, physical pain, nightmares . . . At one point, the tedium of their waiting is enlivened by the arrival of two other men, Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo is an arrogant landowner who treats Lucky like an animal, and he is drawn into a conversation with the tramps. Lucky, whom Pozzo leads around on a rope like his slave, does not speak at all. Still, when ordered by Pozzo to 'think', he gives a long confusing speech and is finally silenced by the others who cannot bear to listen to it any longer. After Pozzo and Lucky leave, Vladimir and Estragon slip back into their routine of waiting. Later in the evening, a small boy arrives and announces that Godot 'cannot come today but he certainly will come tomorrow'. The tramps, sick of their endless, fruitless waiting, briefly contemplate suicide, but they finally decide to go and find cover for the night, and continue their waiting the following day. As the curtain falls to end the first act, they remain standing motionless on the stage. In the second act the whole situation is repeated with only a few variations; the tree has a few leaves, Pozzo is now blind and helpless but still leads the by now completely mute Lucky around.

The simple story naturally encourages us to interpret the play either as a **metaphor** – Topsfield describes the work as a 'universal metaphor for existential tedium' (Topsfield, 1988, p. 98) – or as an **allegory**, a 'dramatic action in which events, characters, and setting represent abstract and spiritual meaning' (Graver, 1989, p. 21). Such readings are supported by the fact that the main elements of the play carry a wide range of **symbolic meanings**. The **road** is often seen as a symbol of the human journey from the cradle to the grave. The **tree** can symbolize both hope (it marks the spot where the tramps are to meet Godot) and death (the tramps consider using it to hang themselves), and of course has two meanings in Christian symbolism, as both the tree of life and as Christ's cross. The pointless **activities** which help them to pass the time of waiting can be seen as symbolizing the 'habit of living' which Camus addresses

in his essay. The **protagonists** Pozzo and Vladimir may be seen as examples of 'everyman', representing the eternal conflict within the dualistic character of human beings – the struggle between the material and the spiritual, the practical and the intellectual, the body and the mind. Finally, the most important symbol of the play – the mystical **Godot**, who is fervently expected to bring a significant change to the tramps' fortune but who never comes, also offers a variety of possible interpretations. Some, like Graver (1989), see him as a symbol of God, the mysterious and stubbornly absent presence Whom man has for centuries striven to 'meet'. This interpretation is supported by the apparent connection between the names Godot and God as well as by a number of Biblical allusions which are present in the play. Others interpret Godot as a symbol of the meaning which man still hopes to find in order to 'give value to his life and distract him from the absurdity of his death' (Fletcher and Spurling, 1972, p. 68); alternatively, the wait for Godot could also be perceived as the wait for death itself (Cormir and Pallister, 1979). Godot thus may represent the death which, although 'not coming today, will surely come tomorrow' and will bring man the relief of escape from the absurdity of his purposeless existence.

According to Esslin (2001), however, all of these symbolic images primarily express 'a psychological reality of the author's mind', functioning as 'the outward projection[s] of states of mind, fears, dreams, nightmares, and conflicts within the personality of the author' (p. 415). The combined elements of the play can thus be seen as creating a 'complex pattern of the *poetic image'* (Esslin, 2001, p. 416) which becomes a means of communicating and sharing the pre-speech level of the mind, which the modernists had striven to represent in their literary works. But while stream-of-consciousness novelists were essentially limited by the exclusively verbal communication of the novel format, the absurdist playwright was free to use a wide range of other tools to evoke the responses of their audience; the use of verbal and non-verbal actions, scenery, situations, atmosphere and their own forms of symbolism all combine to evoke the sense (of absurdity) that the playwright himself had experienced and wished to express. As Esslin (2001) noted, 'The Theatre of the Absurd speaks to a deeper level of the audience's mind. It activates psychological forces, releases and liberates hidden fears and repressed aggressions . . .' (p. 412). While stream-of-consciousness novelists provide the reader with verbal representations of the objective and subjective worlds to demonstrate how human consciousness conceptualizes and rationalizes the reality in which it exists, Beckett instead uses

images of the outer and inner worlds to create an artistic picture of 'the irrational state of unknowingness wherein we exist, this mental weightlessness which is beyond reason' (Samuel Beckett quoted in Graver 1989, p. 23). In other words, Becket in his play tries to capture the feeling that results from the fact that 'we know little about our purpose in life and that there is no escape from the ravages of time and death' (Brown 1968, p. 69).

Beckett's attempt to present human life as a static situation in which nothing **significant** which would change the state of unknowingness occurs is clearly reflected in the formal aspect of the play. *Waiting for Godot* is often seen as a prototype of **anti-drama**, the 'drama of inaction' (Brown, 1968, p. 61), which 'has no exposition, no middle, and no end', where 'the final situation is exactly the same as the opening one' (Brown, 1968, p. 59). The cyclical structure of the play, the lack of realistic plot development and the nonsensical verbal and physical actions of the characters whose tragicomic behaviour appears be out of the normal frame of reference – all of these elements contribute to the sense of absurdity that the readers/audience experience while trying to 'understand' the play. The artistic representation of the relationship between the external reality of the world and the inner reality of the mind also plays an important role in giving rise to the play's absurd effect. While both Flaubert's and Woolf's novels utilize the relationship between the individual mind and the world to represent their characters' **understanding** of life, in Beckett's drama the focus is placed on the unbridgeable gap between subjective and objective reality, a condition which is produced and constantly deepened by the human state of **unknowingness**.

Beckett's symbolic representation of the individual's inability to understand either the world around him or even his own self follows in part from the fact that, in our perception, reality always appears as the intersection of certain place and time. If either of these two aspects of reality is obscured, our vision of the world can become seriously distorted, and we have the feeling that we are no longer connected to reality as we know it. Beckett recreates this lack of knowledge or of a meaningful understanding of reality on the part of the audience by several means. In the case of the portrayal of objective reality on the stage, our knowledge of the presented world is limited by the minimal use of theatrical props which would typically be used to produce the effect of verisimilitude. The entire scenery of the play is comprised of only a road, a tree and a mound, and this authorial decision suppresses the viewer's tendency to perceive theatrical props as a representation of a concrete socio-historical location. Instead, the

scenery becomes an abstract symbol of the trans-historical world in which human fate remains forever constant: the existence on the road between birth and death is filled with the hope, but never with the certainty, that there is some point or meaning at its inevitable end. The aspect of time is also presented in a limited form. The author gives the audience no reference points regarding the ages of the main characters or of the time period in which the events of the play take place. Any references to time which the characters provide in their dialogue create more confusion than clarification; their assertions confuse objective, spatial time with their own perceptions of subjective, psychological time. For example, when Vladimir says in Act I that 'We should have thought of it [their suicide] a million years ago, in the nineties' (Beckett, 1965, p. 10), he mixes up a reference to spatial time (*the nineties*) with a reference to his own subjective notion of time (*a million years ago*). Beckett confuses the audience's sense of time further through the lack of certainty over whether the next day of Act II is really the next day which follows that of Act I or just one of the long train of 'next days' in which the protagonist's basic situation remains the same.

A similar uncertainty prevails in the audience's perception of the subjective reality of the protagonists' minds. An audience's perception of the thoughts of a play's characters is primarily dependent on the dialogues and monologues in the text, but *Waiting for Godot* is marked by the fragmented, confused or purely nonsensical utterances of its characters. While the portrayals of Emma Bovary or Mrs. Dalloway allow us to some extent to enter their inner worlds and identify particular human personality types in their depictions, the extremely limited information which Becket gives us regarding the minds and thoughts of Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky may lead us to feel that we do not understand them at all – in the end, the characters themselves appear to us as absurd.

The following close reading analysis of selected passages from the play discusses how the author produces this effect of absurdity by presenting the characters' own failure to 'know' or grasp the reality in which they exist.

Close Reading Analysis One

The first passage presents a scene from Act II in which Vladimir and Estragon meet again at the same tree and talk about the place where they are waiting for Godot:

Estr. : And here where are we now?

Vlad. : Where else do you think? Do you not recognize the place?

Estr. : (suddenly furious). Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I've crawled about in the mud! And you talk me about scenery! (Looking widely about him.) Look at this muckheap! I've never stirred from it!

Vlad.: Calm yourself, calm yourself.

Estr. : You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!

Vlad. : All the same, you can't tell me that this (gesture) bears any resemblance to . . . (he hesitates) . . . to the Macon country, for example. You can't deny there's a big difference.

Estr. : The Macon country! Who's talking to you about the Macon country?

Vlad. : But you were there yourself, in the Macon country.

Estr. : No, I was never in the Macon country. I've puked my puke of a life away here, I tell you! Here! In the Cackon country!

Vlad. : But we were there together, I could swear to it! Picking grapes for a man called . . . (he grasps his fingers) can't think of the name of the man, at a place called . . . (snaps his fingers) . . . can't think of the name of the place, do you remember?

Estr. : (a little calmer). It's possible. I didn't notice anything.

(Beckett, 1965, p. 61-62)

In this scene it is Estragon whose mind seems to be in the 'state of unknowingness'. Not only does he fail to remember the Macon country that he apparently visited with Vladimir some time ago, but he cannot even recognize the place that he was in yesterday. At first glance this may appear to be nothing more than the simple failure of the old man's memory, his inability to remember the differences and resemblances of the places that he visited and to compare these mental images with the momentary sensory experience; a simple illustration of the rising state of confusion in which Estragon finds himself throughout the play. However a more careful reading of the play reveals that the scene offers far more than just an image of an absent-minded old man.

In actual fact, Estragon has intuitively grasped the absurdity of their shared existence in which the only certainty is death. He urges Vladimir to think about death (*Tell me about worms!*) and then refuses to humour Vladimir in his hope that an external authority (Godot) will 'save' them. He repeatedly forgets why they are waiting

by the tree and even reacts irritably to Vladimir's suggestion that he should be able to perceive the location as a specific space (*landscape*, *scenery*); he is reluctant to accept that the place is distinguishable from other places, like the Macon country, and even doubts that the place has any special significance, such as being the agreed meeting place with Godot. Aware of the absurdity of his existence, Estragon cannot see his past life as a 'history' – a meaningful story filled with work and travel to different places – and instead he perceives his life as a 'static' (unchangeable) situation – for all his *lousy life* he has *crawled about in the mud*. Estragon, in seeing external reality as a *muckheap* – a formless, alien mass of existence – is unable to feel any meaningful connection between his mind and the world around him. The continual interaction between the inner and external reality which turns sensory impulses into meaningful concepts and in doing so endows the perceived world with certain associations (for example, some places are seen as romantic, others as gloomy, nature is seen as our 'mother', etc) is in Estragon's case replaced by a fragmentary vision of the world, separated from the mind by an unbridgeable gap: he fails to 'know' or grasp the world and feels no emotional connection with the indifferent mass of existence which surrounds him.

Close Reading Analysis Two

The second extract from Act II depicts a similar situation in which the character's unknowingness of the world and his alienation from reality is again related to the sense of the absurdity of human existence. The scene presents a dialogue between Vladimir and Pozzo who has now become blind. Vladimir, who perceives the world in the normal conception of the intersection of concrete space and spatial time (time divided into the concrete, measurable units of minutes, hours, days, etc), asks Pozzo to establish certain events in this time. His request is met by Pozzo's furious refusal:

> Vlad. : Before you go tell him to sing!
> Poz. : Who?
> Vlad. : Lucky.
> Poz. : To sing?
> Vlad. : Yes. Or to think. Or to recite.
> Poz. : But he is dumb.

Vlad. : Dumb! Since when?

Poz. : (suddenly furious). Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer.) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.

(Beckett, 1965, p. 89)

Just as Estragon's vision turned the diversity of the world into a formless mass offering no possibility of meaningful interpretation, Pozzo's perception reduces time to an abstract flow in which it becomes impossible to distinguish one day from another. For Pozzo, the past, present and future all merge into one and he does not even attempt to make distinctions between them. In Act I, Pozzo had seemed to find some kind of meaning of his life through his social status and the feeling of power which it gave him over others (such as his slave Lucky). However, he has now been deprived of the sense of certainty, a development through his blindness which has left him dependent on his slave. His view of the world is now strongly influenced by an intense awareness of death (*one day we were born, one day we shall die*) and the sense of the absurdity of the human condition (*They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more*). For man, born to live a purposeless life – *the light [that] gleams an instant* and then disappears into *night* (death) – the perception of time through the concrete units of hours and days has lost its meaning. Pozzo sees no need to distinguish one day from another since to him every day is the same - the same waiting for death.

Close Reading Analysis Three

Beckett's depiction of the uncertainty and confusion which indicate the state of unknowingness appears also in two longer passages which offer direct insights into the private worlds of the characters' minds: Lucky's long **monologue** in Act I and Vladimir's **soliloquy** in the final scenes of Act II. Lucky subjects the other characters to a series of rambling and seemingly senseless thoughts and ideas, but Vladimir makes a private attempt to reflect philosophically on his situation:

Vlad.: Was I sleeping, while others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? (Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir stares at him.) He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. (Pause.) Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (He listens.) But habit is a great deadener. (He looks again at Estragon.) At me to someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause.) I can't go on! (Pause.) What have I said?

(Beckett, 1965, p. 90)

Throughout the play Vladimir is portrayed as the only character who strives to preserve the 'normal' perception of the temporal and spatial aspects of external reality; we repeatedly see him attempt to make sense of the world, and to keep faith in Godot's imminent arrival. This soliloquy reflects his desire to understand his situation and the possibilities that it offers, but, at the same time, it also reveals Vladimir's struggle to control his mind, overcome as it is with confusion. Instead of offering the type of neatly organized philosophical contemplation which we can find in Camus's essay on absurdity, Vladimir's mind instead produces a confused and 'chaotic' stream of thoughts. From his initial reflection on his state of mind (*Was I sleeping, while others suffered? Am I sleeping now?*), he moves to consider the wait for Godot and his relationship with Estragon, before moving on to the greater issues of the human condition (*Astride of a grave and a difficult birth*; *The air is full of our cries*; *But habit is a great deadener*), and succumbing to the recognition of his own state of unknowingness (*of me too someone* [Godot/God?] *is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing*) and finally expressing his sense of exasperation at the absurdity of his situation (*'I can't go on'*). However, at the exact moment that Vladimir admits to the futility of his wait for an external solution to the problem of human existence, he immediately either suppresses or forgets his revelation (*What have I said?*) and revives his hope in Godot. Thus, unlike Camus's 'absurd man', whose philosophical reflections lead him to overcoming the sense of absurdity and achieve the freedom of creating his own sense of existence,

Vladimir's reflections on his situation fail to offer any hope or possibility of escape from the absurd. The feeling of absurdity which enters his mind for a fleeting moment enters his mind is too overwhelming to be faced in its full intensity and its suppression reinforces the static nature of Vladimir's existence. At the end of the play, just as at the end of Act I, he appears, together with Estragon, in the same motionless, trance-like position of waiting for Godot. In contrast with Camus's optimistic vision of man as a 'happy Sisyphus', Beckett stresses the image of an individual who is utterly incapable of finding an active, positive solution to his absurd condition.

Further explorations of Beckett's disturbing vision of human life and the dramatic techniques which he uses to produce the absurdist effects of his play will be among the main tasks for the seminar discussion about this masterpiece of the modernist Theatre of the Absurd.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Analyze the two main characters in detail:

a) What do you learn about Vladimir and Estragon, and about their pasts, their situation, their relationship?

b) What are their individual qualities which make them appear as complementary personalities?

2. Choose a passage which produces a strong sense of absurdity and analyze the means that the author uses to create the absurd effect.

3. Discuss the Biblical allusions found in the text:

a) What is their function in respect to the characterization of Vladimir and Estragon?

b) What is their meaning in respect to the play's presentation of the absurdity of human existence?

4. Vladimir and Estrangon, like Pozzo and Lucky, are also mutually dependent .

a) What is the evidence of this dependency in each case?

b) In what sense are the two forms of dependency different or similar?

c) Does the play emphasize the similarities or contrasts between the two pairs of characters?

5. Analyze the stage directions which suggest some symbolic meaning in the characters' actions.

6. Analyze the theme of suicide as a possible escape from the absurd situation:

a) Is suicide rejected by the play as defeatist or is the tramps' inability to commit suicide presented as their final defeat?

b) What is the role of the comic in the presentation of this theme?

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POSTMODERNISM

4 ANGELA CARTER: NIGHTS AT THE CIRCUS

**They assert that what they are telling is real –
relying upon all the conventions of realistic
fiction to do so – and then they proceed to break
that assumption of realism by introducing what –
within those terms - is manifestly unreal.**

Rosemary Jackson

The sense of despair with which the modernist Theatre of the Absurd confronts the inability of reason to provide any transcendental meaning to human existence is matched, with equal intensity, in the postmodernist forms of literary representations of the world. **Postmodernism** emerged as the dominant intellectual, artistic, literary and cultural movement of the late twentieth century (1960s-1990s), and continued the modernists' iconoclastic rejection of the deification of Reason which had been prevalent since the Enlightenment. Postmodernists took the ideas of modernist thinkers, such as Albert Camus, about the constructed nature of rational knowledge and its inability to provide metaphysical truths as their starting point, and revealed the fallacy of the universality of human understanding, unmasking the Eurocentric and masculinist nature of Enlightenment approaches to knowledge and thought.

The fiction writer, essayist and journalist **Angela Carter** (1940-1992) is one of the leading representatives of postmodernist trends in British literature. Her writings offer a critical re-evaluation of traditional systems of ideas and form a major contribution to the main intellectual discussions of the postmodern era. Her work is often seen as **feminist** due to its focus on the female experience of the world and the critique which it offers of the patriarchal nature of society. This chapter discusses Angela Carter's novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984) in which she uses one of the dominant modes of writing in postmodernist literature – **magical realism**. It will explain the nature of the magical realist representation of human reality and illustrate why Angela Carter 'generally has

been regarded as the British practitioner of magic realism par excellence' (Hegerfeldt, 2005, p. 4).

Magic(al) Realism

The term **magic realism** was coined by the art critic **Franz Roh**, in his 1925 study of a new style of painting which had emerged in Germany during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933). Roh termed the new style 'Post-expressionism', and argued that the defining characteristic of the style was the painter's 'attention to accurate detail, a smooth photograph-like clarity of picture' (Bowers, 2004, p. 8) that was used to reproduce the sense of mystery which exists beneath the surface of the objective world. For Roh, the magic realistic effect of the paintings by such artists as Otto Dix and Max Ernst, resided in the viewer's 'sense of mystery [that] does not descend to the represented world but rather hides and palpitates behind it' (Bowers, 2004, p. 2).

The term **magic(al) realism** (critics tend to use the terms 'magic' and 'magical' interchangeably) entered the literary-critical vocabulary much later, in the 1960s. At first, it was applied to Latin American literary representations of the **marvellous real** that some authors, such as the Cuban novelist **Alejo Carpentier** who himself coined the term, perceived as a unique aspect of Latin American reality (Hegerfeldt, 2005, p.17). The marvellous real which famous magical realists such as **Julio Cortázar**, **Mario Vargas Llosa**, **Carlos Fuentes** or **Gabriel García Márquez** represented in their works was believed to exist in Latin America 'through the continent's history, nature, ways of life and beliefs' (Hegerfeldt, 2005, p. 20). The images of this 'alternative' reality – a reality which could not exist in the European context – were used by these authors to create a postcolonial opposition to the rational vision of the objective world and to challenge and disrupt the hierarchical dichotomy of the rational and irrational which European colonizers had imposed on native cultures. Myths, legends, miracles, mysterious occurrences – everything fantastical and irrational which had been dismissed by European colonizers as superstition and obscure beliefs which must be replaced by the light of (European) Reason – become legitimate aspects of everyday reality in Latin American magical realist texts.

The growing international popularity of the magical realist mode of writing during the **Latin American Boom** of literature in the 1970s and 1980s saw the style influence

the works of other postcolonial writers, like the British-Indian **Salman Rushdie** or the Nigerian **Ben Okri**, but also in the novels of European authors such as **Angela Carter**, **Jeanette Winterson**, **Marina Warner**, **Günter Grass**, **Patrick Süskin**, **Italo Calvino**, and many others. Gradually, magical realism began to lose its association with Latin American exceptionalism, and became to be seen in slightly broader terms as 'an inherently postcolonial mode' (Hegerfeldt, 2005, p. 20). It has subsequently acquired the status of a global literary mode which nonetheless preserves its association with postmodernist criticisms of Western rationality.

The predominance of rational interpretations of reality which emerged from the Enlightenment meant that Western European literature had inherited a strict division between the real and the marvellous. The emergence of the **novel** as the **main genre of the realistic mode of writing** was a result not only of its clear separation from medieval romance with its fantastical elements, but also from other non-realistic genres, such as myths, legends, fairy-tales, or religious narratives. As was discussed in Chapter One, it was seen as impossible to integrate elements of the fantastical, irrational or simply improbable into a genre whose mimetic approach aimed at the objective representation of human reality. Throughout the centuries, **non-realistic genres**, such as **fantasy literature**, **Gothic narratives**, or **sci-fi**, coexisted with the realistic novel, but the latter retained its focus on artistic representations of the world which had been purified from any 'illusory' or magical dimensions. Magical realism, as the term suggests, destroys this clear-cut separation of the real and the unreal and disrupts standard understandings of the realistic genre. Critics have defined this disruption in various ways, ranging from the simple assertion that magical realism is 'the commingling of the improbable and the mundane' (Salman Rushdie quoted in Bowers, 2004, p. 3), to more complex characterizations which describe 'the tendency to depict '"magical", boundary-breaking events as part of the texture of everyday experience' (Punter, 1991, p. 142), or a method which enables an artist to portray the strange, uncanny, eerie, and dream-like aspects of everyday reality (Menton, 1983). Anne Hegerfeldt (2005) states that 'magic realism blends elements of the marvellous, the supernatural, hyperbole and fabulation, improbable coincidences and the extraordinary with elements of literary realism' (p. 51).

Magical realists combine fantastic elements, like the existence of ghosts, disappearances, the transformations of human beings into animals, extraordinary abilities or miracles, with the conventions of realistic narrative in a matter-of-fact

manner, treating the natural and the unnatural as equally normal aspects of reality. Although magical realist narratives create the effect of hesitation and the reader may vacillate between belief and disbelief in the extraordinary occurrences in the story, these narratives ultimately encourage the reader to accept the actual existence of the extraordinary, at least within the textual reality of the novel. The resultant disturbance of the traditional division between realistic and non-realistic genres does not automatically lead to a new form of escapism into the world of fantasy, but, on the contrary, focuses readers' attention on the problems of their everyday existence and forces them to see 'the recognisable world through transformed eyes'(Punter, 1991, p. 143).

Christopher Warnes (2009) identifies two main approaches to the blending of the real and unreal in magical realist narratives and distinguishes between **faith-based magical realism** and **discursive magical realism**: 'Where faith-based approaches utilize the magical in order to expand and enrich already-existing conceptions of the real, discursive magical realism deliberately elevates the non-real to the status of the real in order to cast the epistemological status of both into doubt' (p. 14). Faith-based magical realism, which Warnes (2009) identifies in the works of Carpentier, Asturias and Okri, asks readers to expand their visions of reality and accept the existence of the 'marvellous real'. It presents the **myth-based perceptions of reality** typical in the folk narratives of indigenous peoples as not only valid, but as being potentially more truthful than those offered by the concepts of Western rationalism. On the other hand, discursive magical realism, identified in the works of Márquez and Rushdie, presents the mythical and rational understandings of reality as equally discursive and draws readers' attention to the ways in which language constructs our awareness of the world: 'Where a text utilises the supernatural as a tool for the defamiliarisation of discourse, a process which is usually accompanied by other metaphorical and metafictional devices, we are in the presence of what I refer to as an irreverent, discursive impulse behind magical realism' (Warnes, 2009, p. 16). Thus while faith-based magical realism suggests that the reality in which we exist is much broader than that which is accessible to human reason, discursive magical realism emphasizes the constructed nature of all knowledge, including the knowledge of ourselves.

Magical realists' explorations of the **discursive nature of human knowledge** are informed by the postmodern view of language which developed in the context of poststructuralist philosophy. Poststructuralist philosophers, such as Michel Foucault,

perceive **discourses** as socially, historically and culturally determined forms of language and study how these 'discourses structure both our sense of reality and our notion of our own identity' (Mills, 1997, p. 15). They consider human reality as being constructed from different discursive practices (for example, religious, educational, legal or political forms) which are 'constantly changing and their origins can be traced to certain key shifts in history' (Mills, 1997, p. 26). Instead of using language to describe the objective nature of the world, poststructuralists examine how language produces meaning and also try to determine the historical, social or cultural factors which are capable of producing radical changes in meaning. The work of **Michel Foucault**, perhaps the best known proponent of **discourse theory**, examines how the rise of rational discourse in the eighteenth and nineteenth-centuries generated specific meanings and practices which excluded the mad, the criminal, the sick and the poor from 'normal' society (Foucault, 1989), or how nineteenth century medical and legal discourses participated in the construction of homosexual identity (Mills, 1997, 35). Foucault's work also investigates how social discourses produce **the structures of power relations** which influence identity formation. His study of disciplinary practices (Foucault, 1991) in social institutions such as the prison, the hospital, the school or the military draws attention to the process of the internalization of rules of behaviour which become an integral part of the individual's personality.

The influence that dominant types of discourses have on the construction of personal and social identities is a crucial theme not only in postcolonial magical realist narratives, which focus on the condition of the colonized subject, but also in feminist texts that use the magical realist mode to challenge **patriarchal definitions of gender identities**. Heavily influenced by poststructuralism, feminist theorists explore the ways in which gender identity is constructed in patriarchal discourses and reject the perception of gender identity as 'a consequence of anatomy' (Waugh, 2001, p. 346). Instead they argue that differences in gender identities, understood as 'the social and psychological differences between men and women', are not caused by physical differences between male and female bodies, but are perceived as cultural constructs produced by social norms and institutions (Friedman, 2006, p. 4). As Chris Weedon (1987) points out, feminist criticism maintains that '[i]n patriarchal discourse, the nature and social roles of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male' (p. 2). In feminist discourse the term **patriarchal** is generally used to refer to 'power relations in which women's interests are subordinated to the interests

of men' (p. 2). These power relations take many forms, including 'the internalized norms of femininity' (p. 2). **Feminine subjectivity** is 'constituted in various ways by images of how one is expected to look and behave, by rules of behaviour to which one should conform, reinforced by approval or punishment, through particular definitions of pleasure which are offered as natural and imply ways of being a girl or woman'(p. 99).

Drawing on Foucault's concept of the **docile body** as a body controlled by internalized rules of behaviour, Sandra Bartky (1993) argues that female bodies are more 'docile' than those of males since they are exposed to extra **disciplinary practices** which are intended to construct their femininity. Bartky identifies three main categories of such practices: those concerned with size or weight, those which affect the use of gestures, postures and movements (bodily manners), and 'those that are directed toward the display of this body as an ornamented surface' (p.105). Bartky (1993) lists a wide range of patriarchal restrictions in society which may result in women feeling less 'free' than men, for example the pressure put on women to comply with the aesthetic norms of the beautiful and youthful, or the fact, that certain bodily gestures are seen as inappropriate for a well-behaved woman, or even the fact that male bodies are allowed to take up more space than female bodies (e.g. the way in which men tend to sit differs from the 'proper' feminine way of sitting).

Angela Carter's masterpiece *Nights at the Circus* is informed by these feminist concerns with patriarchal discourses and the restrictions that they impose on the formation of gender identity. As a fiction writer, Carter is particularly interested in the role of literary discourses, such as myths, fairy-tales or Gothic narratives, in the social constructions of femininity and masculinity, and through their rewriting she explores the possibility of disrupting traditional beliefs about the roles of men and women in society. The following section illustrates how Carter uses the magical realist mode of writing to outline feminist meanings and thus challenge the patriarchal vision of the world.

Nights at the Circus

The multilayered narrative of *Nights at the Circus* revolves around the central character of Fevvers, a circus performer on the high trapeze who becomes famous because of

her unique feature; she is a woman with wings. A young American journalist, Walser, who tries to unmask the winged woman as one of the 'Great Humbugs of the World' (Carter, 1994, p. 11) is drawn into the magical world of the circus where the extraordinary, in the form of women who can fly, clowns who can disassemble their bodies, and animals with the powers of reason and prophesy, is the norm. The story is set in the last months of the nineteenth century as the travelling circus, run by an American, Colonel Kearney, moves from London to Saint Petersburg in Russia, before heading for Siberia. The circus serves as an allegorical microcosm of the world, and the picturesque characters who work for the Colonel represent a variety of different human fates. On one level of the narrative, the novel's protagonists, Fevvers and Walser, perform a strong symbolic function as the respective embodiments of 'irrational', 'mysterious' femininity and 'rational', 'down-to-earth' masculinity. However, on another level they also appear as complex characters whose journey with the circus leads them to a new state of self-understanding and self-improvement.

Carter's allusions to and subversions of the eighteen-century picaresque narratives in which 'characters' adventures "on the road" were combined with philosophical discussions about the nature of man and society' (Carter quoted in Haffenden, 1985, p. 87) are deliberate, and her use of the historical settings of nineteenth-century England and Russia and of realistic descriptions of characters is intended to create a clear connection between her novel and the realistic genre. However these connections are constantly disrupted by elements of the improbable or purely fantastical, such as the aforementioned rational animals and woman with wings respectively. The close reading analyses of selected passages from the novel that follows will focus on the narrative techniques that create the magical realist effect of Carter's text and discuss the feminist meanings that these passages produce.

Close Reading Analysis One

The text below presents the opening passage of the novel in which Fevvers narrates her life story to the journalist Walser:

> 'Lor' love you, sir! Fevvers sang out in a voice that clanged like dustbin lids. 'As to my place of birth, why, I first saw light of day right here in smoky old

London, didn't I! Not billed the 'Cockney Venus', for nothing, sir, though they could as well'ave called me 'Helen of the High Wire', due to the unusual circumstances in which I come ashore – for I never docked via what you might call the normal channels, sir, oh, dear me, no; but, just like Helen of Troy, was hatched.

'Hatched out of a bloody great egg while Bow Bells rang, as ever is!' The blonde guffawed uproariously, slapped the marbly thigh on which her wrap fell open and flashed a pair of vast, blue, indecorous eyes at the young reporter with his open notebook and his poised pencil, as if to dare him: 'Believe it or not!' . . . Fevvers, the most famous aerialiste of the day, her slogan, 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' And she didn't let you forget it for a minute; this query, in the French language, in foot-high letters, blazed forth from a wall-size poster, souvenir of her Parisian triumphs, dominating her London dressing room . . . The artist had chosen to depict her ascent from behind – bums aloft, you might say; up she goes, in a steatopygous perspective, shaking out about her those tremendous red and purple pinions, pinions large enough, powerful enough to bear up such a big girl as she. And she was a big girl. (Carter, 1994, p. 7)

As we can see, the author uses two narrative voices in this passage: the voice of Fevvers who introduces herself to Walser (and to the reader), and the voice of the omniscient narrator who introduces the setting, situation and the physical appearance of the character. Both voices participate in the construction of the magical realist effect of the passage, which is comprised of all five of the elements which Wendy Farris (2004) lists as the defining features of magical realism: 'first, the [magical realist] text contains an "irreducible element" of magic; second, the descriptions in magical realism detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world; third, the reader may experience some unsettling doubts in the effort to reconcile two contradictory understandings of events; fourth, the narrative merges different realms; and, finally, magical realism disturbs received ideas about time, space and identity' (p. 7).

The strong presence of the **phenomenal world**, i.e., the world as we normally experience it, is indicated in this passage by the references to a clearly specified social reality and by realistic representations of the world. The repeated references to the geographical setting, in phrases such as *smoky old London*, *Bow Bells* (a church

bell in the Cockney part of London), *London dressing room*, *Paris*, produce the realistic effect of the text because the reader recognizes that these places really exist in the non-fictional world which surrounds us. The realistic effect is supported by the elements which are descriptive of the social setting – i.e., the context that implies certain types of norms, patterns of behaviour, accepted values or forms of knowledge. Fevvers, referring to herself as the *Cockney Venus*, reveals her working-class origins which are realistically reflected in her use of dialect, her lack of the refined manners (she *guffawed uproariously*, *slapped the marbly thigh)*, and also through her profession of *aerialiste* (the circus has traditionally been seen as the preserve of the working classes, either as entertainment or as a profession). In addition, the portrayal of the protagonist as a *big* girl with *steatopygous* physique, *indecorous eyes* and an unpleasant voice which *clanged like dustbin lids* emphasizes the connection of this text with realistic narratives in which the lack of idealized heroines indicates a truthful representation of the ordinary world.

These various elements of literary realism are blended with an **element of magic** – Fevvers' fantastical claim that, like Helen of Troy fathered by Zeus in the form of a swan, she was *hatched.* Such a claim would explain her *tremendous red and purple pinions*, whose 'real' existence appears to be supported by the omniscient narrator's description of Fevvers' portrait in the poster on the wall. This blending of the real and the fantastical is clearly capable of producing **some unsettling doubts** in the reader: the presence of the fantastical, on the one hand, clashes with the conventions of realistic narrative, and, on the other, the realistic elements of the text prevent its straightforward classification as fantasy. Throughout *Nights at the Circus*, this example and the other elements of magic that appear in the narrative become **irreducible**; they have to be accepted as 'facts' in the realistic context of the novel. In consequence, the text encourages the reader to explore the meanings that emerge from this merging of **different realms** (i.e., the realistic with the fantastical, fact with fiction).

In the analyzed passage, Carter merges two different realms – the mythical world in which women can be hatched like Helen of Troy and even have wings, and the ordinary world of nineteenth-century London in which historical women had no wings – not even metaphorical ones. On the contrary, the freedom of most women was seriously restricted by their inferior and largely dependent legal status and by the strict social norms which upheld and supported patriarchy. Fevvers, the bird woman,

functions in the text as a metaphor that the reader must in fact accept literally; she represents a woman who can 'fly' because of the economic independence which her fame grants her and also a woman who possesses the ability to escape from the 'cage' of patriarchal definitions of femininity. Resisting Walser's attempt to unmask her 'true' nature, Fevvers presents her identity as a unity of incompatibles: the unity of the **human** and the **animal** (as a woman with wings); of the **crude** and **ordinary** (as a *Cockney*) and the **extraordinary** (as *Venus* – the classical embodiment of refined beauty); of the **high** (through her self-association with the classical Helen of Troy) and the **low** (as the Helen of the *High Wire*, a participant in the low, popular culture of the circus). Carter uses such references to the figures of classical Greek mythology to draw our attention to the role which classical culture plays in social constructions of femininity.

From a feminist perspective, Helen of Troy, whose abduction by Paris was 'turned' into the cause of the famous Trojan War, functions in Western culture as the **archetype** of classical beauty and feminine passivity – a woman who is primarily a possession or the object of male desires and ambitions. The parallels which Carter draws between Helen of Troy and the heroine of her novel are initially unsettling because there seem to be little justification for such a comparison. Fevvers appearance and manners are not those of a conventionally beautiful, delicate woman and she is an active, independent woman who earns her own living; similarly, guffawing and thigh slapping are not typical traits of passive, docile femininity. When we realize how 'inappropriate' the comparison seems to be, we become aware of certain cultural norms which shape our perception of what is beautiful, attractive and normal. While it may seem natural to us that the 'heavenly' beautiful daughter of Zeus, Helen, should arouse a desire in men which is strong enough to start a war, we may begin to doubt that Fevvers, with her enormous body, fat buttocks, and physical monstrosity (she grows wings!) should appear so attractive to men that she could be billed as a new *Cockney **Venus***.

If we start to question the nature of the conventional aesthetic ideal of beauty which excludes Fevvers, we may begin to realize that feminist theorists have some justification in arguing that this ideal tends to support a patriarchal relationship between men and women. According to Sandra Bartky (1993), patriarchy demands that women adhere, among other things, to 'the image of immaturity' (p. 111). Ideally, women should preserve 'the body of early adolescence', a fragile body 'lacking flesh

or substance' which should be accompanied by 'an infantilized face' that 'never displays the marks of character, wisdom, and experience' (p. 111). With this appearance the female body can then function both as an object of desire and as **a sign of female docility**; her subordinate position in relation to men (p. 111). In consequence, we can notice that Carter's magical realist presentation of her heroine fosters doubts, hesitation and the questioning of accepted values that, as Wendy Farris says, **'disturbs received ideas about time, space and identity'** (2004, p. 7). The aesthetic ideal which may 'normally' appear as rooted in the 'natural' difference between what is beautiful and what is not is unmasked as a cultural construct that actively participates in the patriarchal structure of power relations, signifying women's physical and social dependence on men. A woman, like Fevvers, who is big enough, strong enough and rich enough to escape this dependence does not have to grow real wings to appear, from a patriarchal perspective, as not 'normal', or even 'monstrous'. Through her creation of a female character that upsets the stereotypical cultural dichotomies of the beautiful and the ugly, or the normal and the abnormal, Carter produces a critique of the discourses that shape our perception of the world, our ways of living, even our identities, and offers us the chance to reconsider their validity.

While Fevers, the winged woman, plays the main role in Carter's critique of the **patriarchal definitions of femininity**, Walser has an important function in her feminist explorations of the **social constructions of masculinity**. One of the important elements which feminist theory shares with postcolonial theory is the rejection of the Enlightenment concept of the universality of Western rationality. This concept, which suggests that the rational and scientific methods which emerged in eighteenth-century Europe are equally applicable to all cultures and peoples of the world, has been criticized by postcolonial theorists on the grounds of its Eurocentric and hence implicitly racist nature, while feminists emphasize that 'the notion of a universal rational Subject is [also] implicitly masculine' (Waugh, 2001, p. 344). Eighteenth-century philosophy constructed the concept of Rationality as the 'transcendence of the feminine' (Lloyd, 1993, p. 104), providing a conceptual basis for both the association of advanced Reason with masculinity and the exclusion of women from the public domain. Just as the development of civilization and society was conceived as the long journey from feminized Nature to masculine Reason, the achievements of advanced Reason were measured by the capacity to leave behind the feminine, 'immature stage of

consciousness' (Lloyd, 1993, p. 58). Many Enlightenment ideas were based around the concept that men were more capable of abstract thought, while women, perceived as being closer to the state of Nature, were considered to be in 'possession of other mental traits – taste, sensibility, practical sense, feeling' (Lloyd, 1993, p. 76). In consequence, as Lucy Irigaray (2001) writes, 'even when aspiring to a universal or neutral state, [the rational] subject has always been written in the masculine form, as man. . . . It is man who has been the subject of discourse, whether in the field of theory, morality or politics. And the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and discourse, is always *paternal and masculine* in the West. For women, there remain the so-called minor art-forms: cooking, knitting, sewing and embroidery; and in exceptional cases, poetry, painting and music. Whatever their importance, these arts today do not lay down the law, at least not overtly' (p. 236).

Carter uses the character of Walser, the sensible, sceptical journalist who believes in the ascendency of reason over any forms of the irrational, to criticize the traditional perception of rationality as a masculine quality that makes men naturally superior to all other living creatures, including women. The following section discusses one of several passages in which Carter uses the magical realist mode of narrative to depict the process of Walser's debasement from the rational to the irrational, and from the exalted position of the lord of reason to the debased status of the fool.

Close Reading Analysis Two

In the quoted passage (separated into several sections for the sake of clarity) Walser, still in the role of the rational explorer of Fevvers' 'magical' nature, steps into the circus for the first time in the clown mask which he agrees to wear in order to remain incognito. He encounters a group of trained animals performing a scene and he starts to watch secretly. The 'Educated Apes', who have been left to themselves by their trainer, are 'rehearsing' their performance in the ring. Since their keeper, the trainer's woman, is also paying no attention to them (she is having sex with the Strong Man), the thirteen chimpanzees, dressed in human clothes, give their own performance of 'the "apes at school" number', with twelve 'pupils' seated at school desks and one of them, 'the Professor', writing on the board:

Walser could make no sense of the diagram chalked on the blackboard yet the chimps appeared to be occupied in transcribing it to their slates. The partings in the centres of their glossy heads were white as honeycomb. The Professor made a few swift passes with his left hand and pointed to the lower right-hand corner of the diagram; a female towards the back of the class raised her hand eagerly. When the Professor pointed his cue at her, she performed a sequence of gestures that reminded Walser of the movement of the hands of Balinese dancers. The Professor considered, nodded and chalked in another arabesque on the diagram. The neat, shining heads at once bent in unison and the air shrilled with the scratching of a dozen slate pencils, a sound like a flock of starlings coming in to roost.

Walser smiled under his matte white; how irresistibly comic, these hirsute studies! Yet his curiosity was piqued by this mysterious scholarship. He squinted again at the diagram but could not tease a meaning out of it. Yet there seemed to be . . . could it be? Was it possible? . . . was there *writing* on the blackboard? If he crept round across the Tsar's box, he might be able to see better . . .

(Carter, 1994, p. 107-108)

The scene opens with an important introduction of the difference between the animal performers and the human spectator. As Walser watches the animals' imitation of the rational behaviour of people, he continues to play his chosen role in the circus, that of the secret observer. This is a role which emphasizes his rationality, the faculty in which his personal identity is rooted, and which, despite his clown mask, marks him as a representative of the human ability to think thereby granting him superiority over all other animals. From this lofty position of the rational 'Lord of Creation', the *hirsute studies* of the lower, irrational, creatures can seem nothing more than *irresistibly comic*. However, Walser's superior position is soon undermined by an element of magic: the text suggests the surprising possibility that the 'Educated Apes' are actually *writing* something meaningful on the board. This apparently improbable suggestion (which is later proved to be correct) that the chimpanzees possess the faculty of reason, unsettles the rational/irrational, human/animal binaries which pervade the following images of Walser's degradation.

When the chimpanzees become aware of the unwelcome observer, they instantly start to behave like normal playful animals. The former 'pupils' turn the 'class'

into chaos and the Professor suddenly starts to distribute dunces' caps which have been stored behind the blackboard. Soon Walser is also marked with the sign of the fool:

> He [the Professor] bounced round the ring, disposing a cap on each capering head; then, on impulse, leapt lightly across the barrier and Walser got a dunce's cap, too. . . . The Professor, as if coming to a decision, took hold of Walser's hand . . . and forcibly persuaded Walser down the aisle to the ring. The spinning chimps came to a halt, dismounted, dropped their bikes and clustered round him in a gesticulating circle, so that he could sworn they were discussing what to do with him, although the confabulation took place in noisy silence. . . . The Professor pointed to Walser's dunce's cap. The chimps rocked back and forth on the palms of their feet as if in soundless laughter. Then [one of the chimps] startled him badly, she jumped right up in his arms, and clutching his torso with her hairy thighs, reached up and behind, found the stud at the back of his neck that released his entire shirt-front. Off it snapped. Down she jumped. . . . Now Walser wore nothing but the dunce's cap, which they did not bother to remove, although they made him to take his shoes off so that the Professor could check the number of his toes. It occurred to Walser they thought his white, red and black clown make-up was his real face and that they were, perhaps sympathetic to him because they thought he might be some relation to the baboon. Were they, he pondered, grappling with Darwin's theory – from the other end? Green Hair-Ribbon returned to her desk and the lesson started in earnest. Walser stood before them nude and exemplary, and the Professor prodded him in the thorax with his cue, not urgently, making those swift passes of the hands with which they seemed to communicate. Walser wilted under the scrutiny of the eyes of his little cousins twice removed. Squeak, squeak, went the slate pencils. Prod, went the cue; Walser obediently turned round to present the class with his backside. The Professor expressed particular interest in the vestigial remains of his tail. (Carter, 1994, p. 108-109)

The magical realist effect of this passage arises from the realization that while Walser initially perceived the animals' activities as merely comic imitations of human abilities of reading and writing, he now seems to accept that their acts have a rational basis

(*he could sworn they were **discussing** what to do with him*) and he even considers (***ponders***) the possibility that the chimpanzees are aware of and **grapple with** Darwin's theory. Thus far in the novel, Walser has been presented by the omniscient narrator as a rational man who cannot be easily 'fooled', and thus the reader is encouraged to accept his perception of the extraordinary abilities of the chimpanzees as a 'fact'. The scene undermines Walser's initial superiority not only because his capacity for rational thought is no longer presented as being exclusively human, but also because the scene focuses on those aspects of human nature which bind people to the animal condition.

While the lofty position in which Walser appears at the beginning of the analyzed passage is rooted in the rational character of his human mind that gives him a sense of superiority over the apes, his folly is closely related to the nature of the human body. The overlapping of the irrational and the animal emerges when the clown mask loses its primary signification of the foolish and the comic and seems to mark him as non-human, making him appear as *some relation to the baboon.* As Walser stands amidst the chimpanzees, wearing *nothing but the dunce's cap*, he undergoes the transformation from a human observer into an observed 'animal'; his new identity marked by the *vestigial remains of his tail* and the reminder that chimpanzees are his *little cousins twice removed*. This transformation is particularly relevant in respect of Walser's approach to Fevvers, since his condescending comments concerning the animal-like appearance of the 'bird woman' in the opening pages of the novel appeared to indicate his sense of superiority over her.

This degrading 'animality' of the human body that undermines man's exalted status of a rational being is further stressed when Carter's depiction of Walser's debasement moves towards its culmination. The climax of the passage overlaps with the sexual climax of the Strong Man whose sexual intercourse with the female keeper of the chimpanzees progresses in parallel with the Professor's examination of naked Walser:

> Then the Professor went to fetch a bucket some careless hand had abandoned in the ring, upturned it and stood on it, the better to peer inside Walser's mouth. After that, he stared directly into Walser's eyes, producing afresh in Walser the dizzy uncertainty about what was human and what was not. How grave, how beseeching the Professor looked as he started to open and close his own mouth

like a goldfish reciting a poem. The grunts of the Strong Man began to accelerate. Walser presently understood the Professor wanted him to speak to them, that his speech was of surpassing interest to them. The Professor continued to perch on the bucket, gazing ardently within Walser's mouth at play of tongue and uvula, as Walser hesitantly began: 'What a piece of work is man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!' The Strong Man accomplished his orgasm in a torrent of brutish shrieks, such a hullabaloo that Walser stumbled over his recitation . . . (Carter, 1994, p. 110-111)

The juxtaposition of Walser's eulogizing declamation about the nobility of man's reason with the 'brutish shrieks' of the Strong Man that reveal the less noble, animal side of human nature represents the challenge of the unruly, frenzied animality of the body to the orderly, serious rationality of the mind. As Walser stumbles over his recitation, distracted by the Strong Man's sexual *hullabaloo*, the concept of the nobility of man's (male) rationality clashes with the image of *brutish* animality. The comic effect of the situation is, of course, at Walser's expense; his solemn praise of man's (and his own) reason at the moment of the complete revelation of the irrational, bodily side of human beings seems to be a foolish overemphasizing of the rational which tries but ultimately fails to remain in full control of the irrational aspects of human existence.

The novel features many similar scenes in which Walser encounters some extraordinary/fantastical events that disturb his self-perception, and they finally lead him to the re-construction of his personal identity. The entire process of Walser's transformation presents readers with the opportunity to question their own beliefs about the nature of masculinity and to explore the social discourses that participate in its social construction. Further explorations of Carter's magical realist disruptions of the cultural discourses that participate in the patriarchal constructions of gender identities will be among the main tasks for the seminar discussion about *Nights at the Circus*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Analyze the character of Fevvers in detail, focusing on the function of her wings in the construction of her identity in terms of their personal, social and symbolic aspects.

2. Analyse the episodes in which Walser, having undergone memory loss, stays in the village of a Siberian tribe:

a) How does the episode function in the process of Walser's debasement from the 'pedestal' of rationality upon which he bases his authority?

b) How does the episode challenge the Western concept of the rational/irrational hierarchical dichotomy?

c) How does his experience of the myth-based vision of the world influence his personal transformation?

3. Focus on the three male characters, Colonel Kearney, the Russian escaped convict and the Shaman, and analyze their beliefs, attitudes and behavior:

a) What are the worldviews that these characters represent?

b) How are their visions of reality influenced by the fact/fiction dichotomy?

c) In what sense are these male visions in conflict with the feminist perspectives represented by Fevvers and her foster mother Lizzie?

4. Examine Angela Carter's employment of the fairy-tale and Gothic genres in the passages about Madame Schreck's museum: How does Carter appropriate or rewrite the genres to create feminist meanings about the situation of women in a patriarchal society?

5. Which of the female characters and episodes represent radical feminist issues? Is

this type of feminism supported by the novel?

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6 MILAN KUNDERA: IMMORTALITY

**The final belief is to believe in a fiction,
which you know to be a fiction, there being
nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that
it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly.**

Wallace Stevens

The postmodern philosophy of language, based on the poststructuralist explorations of language in its discursive forms, was not only responsible for inspiring optimism about the possibility of challenging or even re-constructing the dominant discourses of patriarchy, colonialism, and Eurocentricism. On the contrary, the poststructuralist claim that we are all born into systems of social discourses which form our awareness of the world and of our selves led some postmodern intellectuals to reach decidedly more pessimistic conclusions about the human condition. Due to the non-referential character of language, which means that there is no inherent connection between the sign and the thing that it represents, we are all trapped in ever more complex systems of signification whose legitimacy cannot be guaranteed by any verification of their true (factual) or false (fictitious) representations of objective reality. All social discourses are fictions or constructs of the human mind, devoid of any access to the **real** world that exists beyond human understanding. This sense that the distinctions between fiction and reality have become meaningless has found its place in post-war literature mainly in the form of **metafiction** – the dominant mode of the **postmodernist novel**.

While 'the concept of modernism' can be perceived to some extent as 'largely an Anglo-American one' (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 4), **postmodernism** is, without a doubt, an international phenomenon; its influence has been felt in the works of such well-known and varied writers as John Fowles, Julian Barns, Graham Swift, A.S. Byatt, Angela Carter, Salman Rushdie, John Barth, Thomas Pynchon, Don Dellilo, J. M. Coetzee, Jorge Luis Borges, Gabriel García Marquez, Carlos Fuentes, Günter Grass, Umberto

Eco, Italo Calvino, Milan Kundera, and many others. **Milan Kundera** (1929-), whose novel *Immortality* has been chosen as an example of metafiction, started his successful literary career in 1960s Czechoslovakia with his famous novel *The Joke* (1967). Since his emigration to France in 1975 which was motivated by the political situation in his home country, he has established himself as a respected author of exile, and his works have gained international popularity. This chapter focuses on his novel *Immortality* (1991, *L'immortalité*, 1990) in which the author uses the metafictional mode of narrative to reflect on the situation of the postmodern individual. The chapter places the text into the context of the major philosophical theories of the postmodern in order to shed light on its thematic concerns, and discusses the literary techniques that the author uses to produce the metafictional effect of his novel.

Postmodernism

The term **postmodernism** entered literary-critical vocabulary in the 1950s (Cahoon, 1996, p. 3) and was gradually widely adopted to refer to all cultural products (for example, literary texts, media products, visual arts, architecture) that were indicative of some important changes in the cultural atmosphere after the Second World War (1939-1945). These changes were associated with a new phase in the development of advanced Western societies – the move away from modernity into postmodernity. **Modernity**, 'the cluster of social, economic and political systems brought into being in the West from somewhere around the eighteen century onwards' (Sarup, 1993, p. 130), was deeply influenced by the rise and rapid advance of industrial capitalism. As was explained in Chapter One, life in modern industrial societies demanded a rational approach to reality which was to guarantee social progress, the result of which was the promotion and celebration of the institution of science. **Postmodernity** is, on the other hand, seen as 'a new type of social life and economic order [referred to as] post-industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism' (Fredric Jameson quoted in Bertens, 1995, p. 162). **Postmodern societies** are characterized by the switch from a predominantly manual industrial labour force to a largely white-collar workforce focusing on the service sector. Advertising has a strong influence on the consumption patterns of postmodern societies, and such societies have also seen significant changes in lifestyles due to the

hyperinflation of media images, the globalization of culture and the influence of information technologies.

Postmodern philosophers often perceive these social changes in a pessimistic light. They stress, for example, that as economies become more dependent on 'the production of information services' than 'the production of goods', postmodern society generates new types of social rifts between those who are 'working in an incredibly driven, information-soaked world' (Butler, 2002, p. 117) and those who for different reasons cannot 'keep the pace' with this world and therefore remain at the margins of society. Similarly, they point to the devastating influence that the intersection of cultural and economic productions has on the state of postmodern culture: 'Mere changes in taste [influenced by advertising and media images] promote the sale of goods, so that fashion takes over from culture, and the media-led opinion-forming is vital to the economic process' (Butler, 2002, p. 117). The most influential ideas about the state of knowledge in a world driven by information technology and about the nature of cultural experience in societies overloaded by media images are presented, respectively, in the works of two major theorists of the postmodern, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard.

In his seminal work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir,* 1979), **Jean-François Lyotard** develops his ideas about the state of human knowledge in advanced Western societies which have undergone an **information revolution**. He argues that one of the consequences of increasingly computerized societies is that knowledge has been equated with information and turned into a marketable commodity. The truth-value of knowledge has been largely replaced by the **performativity criterion**, as its purpose no longer appears to be the revelation of objective truth about the world, but rather its usefulness or potential for financial profit in the market economy. Lyotard attributes this change in the function of knowledge to the failure of **the Project of the Enlightenment**. The Enlightenment project of cultural and social progress was crucially dependent on the belief that scientific thinking could provide the ultimate means of acquiring universal knowledge about the world and human nature – knowledge that would lead to the general improvement of human life. In Lyotard's opinion, there are two major reasons for the failure of the Enlightenment project. Firstly, **scientific knowledge** has been discredited through the emergence of technological innovations and resultant consequences whose beneficial effect on the progress of humanity is more than

doubtful, such as nuclear weapons, ecological crisis and the depersonalization of human relations brought about by the computerization of society and medialization of reality. Secondly, the supposedly impartial nature of scientific knowledge which claimed exclusive access to the truth has been unmasked as being equally dependent on false 'grand narratives' which attempt to legitimize its superiority over all types of non-scientific **narrative knowledge** (myths, legends, tales).

A **grand narrative** (**metanarrative**) can be defined as a 'comprehensive, totalizing story, which accounts for everything and reduces all little stories to its terms (Belsey, 2002, p. 113); or, in different words, as a totalizing system of thought that provides, in a given historical period, a dominant explanation of the nature of the world and the purpose of human life, and thus shapes the major social and cultural practices in the given community of individuals. Lyotard names two 'grand narratives' of modernity which 'have acted as justifications for institutional scientific research – that of the liberation of humanity and that of the speculative unity of all knowledge' (Sarup, 1993, p. 137). Put simply, modernity argued for the existence of the ultimate truth about the world which could eventually be uncovered through scientific research; in the course of this process of discovery, humanity would be liberated from ignorance and all forms of oppression. This 'objective' truth would have to be accepted universally because unlike traditional narrative knowledge, scientific knowledge is based on verifiable 'facts'. In 'the pre-modern' medieval age, scientific knowledge was not always welcome because it did not always correspond with the Christian grand narrative that relied on the **revealed (Biblical) truth** and the Church's monopoly on its interpretation. On the other hand, modern grand narratives (for example, the humanist narrative of history as a process towards the emancipation of man or the Marxist narrative of history as a journey towards a communist utopia) associated human emancipation with the possession of **verifiable truth.** The widespread possession of verifiable, scientific truth was seen as the source of individual self-improvement and, in consequence, of the improvement of interhuman relations. In general, modern philosophers 'hoped that arts and sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces but also understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, the justice of institutions and even the happiness of human beings' (Sarup, 1993, p. 143).

However, postmodern societies are, as Lyotard claims, defined by their **scepticism towards meta/grand narratives** since such narratives have consistently failed to fulfil their utopistic visions about the inevitable improvement of the human

condition. Without the totalizing effect of metanarratives on the numerous 'small narratives' – various social and cultural **discourses** – which are in constant competition with each other, the postmodern individual experiences a sense of the rising heterogeneity of reality and of the fragmentation of human knowledge. Lyotard, adopting a poststructuralist position, perceives these discourses as **language games**, a term originally introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, which lack any access to transcendental or universal meaning. Although the discourses produce knowledge about the world in which we exist, their 'truths' are relative; since their verification depends on the internal rules of their particular language games, their validity is limited to a specific given context. Just as Biblical truth becomes valid for us only if we accept the rules of the language game of Christianity (its doctrines and rituals), scientific truths can only be perceived as 'facts' if we judge them in the context of the rules (for example methods of verification, scientific vocabulary, conceptual frameworks) produced by and agreed upon by the community of scientists. However, these rules are never fully fixed and are subject to changes or adjustments which result in the creation of further language games; examples of this process include the emergence of Protestantism from the attempts to re-construct Catholicism, or the superseding of the Newtonian physics by the quantum physics. In the case of religion, it is clear that the same source of knowledge, the Bible, can produce a wide range of **different interpretative frameworks** and different versions of the 'ultimate truth'. In the case of science, it brings the belief in its full objectivity into doubt, since what is classified as an objectively verified truth in one paradigm can lose its validity in the context of a new one. Lyotard perceives the plurality of coexisting language games and 'truths' positively, seeing their existence as a source of dissent that prevents the rule of a potentially destructive totalizing grand narrative (such as fascism or communism); after all, we are ultimately free to disagree with any of these relative truths. For many, however, the **postmodern condition** signifies a **crisis** of Western civilization. Postmodern individuals appear to have lost any positive vision of the historical progress of humanity towards some meaningful end; similarly, the apparent relativization of all truths and values in the world of endlessly increasing information has produced a vast epistemological and moral disorientation of the whole postmodern society.

Jean Baudrillard, one of the most influential theorists of the postmodern, focuses mainly on the changes in societies in which cultural production has become a crucial part of the economic system. Drawing on Marxist descriptions of industrial

capitalism in which the spheres of material and cultural production were clearly separated (with the latter being dependent on the former), Baudrillard claims that new technologies of mass reproduction have radically transformed the relationship between economics and culture. In postmodern consumer societies 'it is no longer possible to separate the economic or productive realm from the realms of ideology or culture, since cultural artefacts, images, representations, even feelings and psychic structures have become part of the world of economic' (Connor, 1997, p. 51). Everything, including such 'abstract qualities, like love, goodness and knowledge' (Connor, 1997, p. 51), has acquired an exchange-value and can be sold on the market as a 'commodity'.

According to Baudrillard, a crucial role in these changes in the economic system has been played by mass media, especially TV – the predominant mass medium in the pre-Internet period in which Baudrillard developed his theories. As they produce one of the most important commodities in the postmodern society – **the image**, the mass media have an enormous influence (through, for example, advertising) on determining which material (cars, mobile phones, clothes, etc.) and cultural (TV programmes, films, books, music, etc.) commodities will be produced, and also govern how and by whom these commodities will be created. By influencing fashions, producing styles, encouraging consumption of new products, the mass media create the production-consumption patterns whose *raison d'être* has gone far beyond the simple satisfaction of an individual's basic bodily and spiritual needs. On the contrary, the whole postmodern economy depends greatly on the mass media's ability to generate ever newer needs which can be temporarily satisfied by 'consuming' a new product. In addition, Baudrillard believes that consumption has acquired a wholly new function in the postmodern age, becoming a new form of communication: the objects that we consume (commodities) constitute a system of signs (a type of language) that creates the sense of our relation to society. Put simply, the commodities which we choose or reject, or which we can or cannot afford to consume, define our position in society and to a great extent also our individual identities. As Madan Sarup writes, 'For Baudrillard there is no self-contained individual, there are only ways of using social systems, particularly those of language, goods and kinship, to relate people differently to the social order and thus to construct the sense of the individual' (1993, p. 162). Thus, the ways in which mass media produce the images that influence our consumption choices (either in terms of material or abstract values) play a crucial role in the construction of our personalities and the ways in which we experience our

world.

Baudrillard's further studies into the power of media images led him to formulate his theories of the **loss of the real** and the emergence of the culture of **hyperreality.** In his seminal work *Simulacra and Simulation* (*Simulacres et Simulation*, 1981), Baudrillard makes the radical claim that the predominance of mass media in postmodern societies has rendered any discussion of the relationship between constructed representations of reality (simulacra) and the objective reality to which they supposedly refer entirely meaningless. Due to the hyperinflation of media images in everyday life and our rising dependence on these simulations of the real for our understanding of the world, we live in a state of hyperreality in which images (fiction) appear more real to us than the 'real' reality: 'What is real is no longer our direct contact with the world, but what we are given on the TV screen: TV is the world. TV is dissolved into life, and life is dissolved into TV. The fiction is "realized" and the "real" becomes fictitious' (Sarup, 1993, p. 165). This blurring of the distinction between the real and the fictitious becomes quite apparent if we consider our relationships with fictitious soap opera or sitcom characters. These 'simulacra' can become 'real' to us to the extent that we feel a deep emotional attachment to them; we look forward to 'meeting' them again, take sides in their conflicts, imitate their behaviour, and adopt their lifestyles and their understandings of the world. In consequence, a part of our life (in Baudrillard's opinion the dominant part) is lived within a virtual reality, as we create fictitious bonds and even 'interactions' (the producers of soap operas often use audience feedback to dictate the development of their characters) which could only exist in pre-mass media times in the form of real, actual interpersonal relations with friends, neighbours and other direct contacts. If the media give us the sense that fiction has become our reality to us, it also conversely gives us the sense that the real has become more and more fictionalized, for example in the form of reality shows which apparently present us with the real lives of real people. In actual fact, reality shows and the behaviour of their real life participants are heavily influenced by the complex process of production that includes scripting, directorial decisions, editing, etc. Using these means, the real people who take part in these shows are fictionalized to the extent that from the point of view of the TV audience the distinction between them and soap opera characters becomes practically meaningless. They both appear as equally 'real' to us while in fact they are merely forms of fiction which belong to the same virtual (and therefore

fictitious) world of the media images.

Both major theorists of the postmodern whose main ideas have been briefly summarized here have been criticized for the apparent contradictions or shortcomings which can be found in their theories. Lyotard was attacked for the fact that his argumentation about **the death of all grand narratives** has paradoxically become his own 'grand narrative', which reflects his own attempt to provide an 'objective' explanation of the state of knowledge in the postmodern world. On the other hand, Baudrillard was attacked for the nihilistic effect of his seemingly hyperbolic statements about the **loss of the real**. One example of this was his claim that the excessive media coverage of the first Gulf War (1990-1991), including live coverage of missile attacks and the bombing of Baghdad, had heralded the advent of a new form of war, a virtual war, which was perceived by the TV audience more like a 'hyperreal video game' that the real thing (Sheehan, 2004, p. 31). He also faced criticism for his claims about the media's effective neutralization of any significant forms of social dissent due to the nature of the code of communication that they use: 'A mass medium talks to its audience, says Baudrillard, while never allowing that audience to respond to it and, indeed, confirms its audience's muteness by simulating audience response, via phone-ins, studio audiences, viewers' polls and other forms of bogus "interaction"' (Connor, 1997, p. 53). Although not necessarily incorrect in their descriptions of the experience of postmodern individuals whose conceptualization of the world is more and more dependent on the media's simulations of reality, Baudrillard's statements can be seen as offering a nihilistic vision of human life. In Baudrillard's view, postmodern society seemingly offers no forms of escape from the media generated hyperreality in which we are 'destined' to live lives devoid of any real meaning. Despite the harsh criticism which they provoked, Lyotard's and Baudrillard's theories acquired cult status in philosophical discussions of the 1980s and 1990s and many postmodern intellectuals, including many authors of postmodern literature, felt that 'the "grand narratives" of human progress and liberation, rooted in Enlightenment thought, have lost their credibility; and that a culture of detached media images has come to suffocate and out clone the "real", ousting old-fashioned worries about the relationship of the image and the real' (Peter Brooker quoted in Selden, 1993, p. 175).

This general consensus – **the postmodern sensibility** – can be identified in literature mainly through the metafictional mode of narrative which focuses the reader's

attention on various fictions (narratives, discourses, language games) and the fictional (constructed) nature of human reality.

Metafiction

Metafiction has been defined as 'a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text' (Waugh, 1984, p. 2). Although metafictional elements had also appeared in the literature of the past centuries, most famously in the work of Miguel de Cervantes and Laurence Sterne, metafiction only rose to real prominence in the late twentieth century as a particularly apt form for the literary representation of the postmodern condition. In the light of the poststructuralist claim that human knowledge is invariably narrative (i.e., based on the same principles as literary narration) and fictional (or constructed), metafiction that explores the principles of fictional narratives can be seen as a particularly useful mode of writing. As Patricia Waugh points out, 'If our knowledge of this world [and of our own self] is now seen as mediated through language, then literary fiction (worlds constructed entirely of language) becomes a useful model for learning about the construction of "reality" itself' (1984, p. 3). Unlike traditional realistic narratives which are fictions that seem to offer a mirror-like representation of 'things as they were or are' (see Chapter One), metafiction appears primarily as **a fiction about Fiction**. The term '**Fiction'** should not be understood here only in the sense of imaginative writing but in the broadest possible sense as the general mode of communicating human experiences of the world. In drawing our attention to the process of literary production (the techniques and methods that authors employ and the decisions that they have to make), metafictional writers encourage us to recognize the constructed nature of their **texts**, and also to discern the constructed **textual** nature of **reality** that we all share – the reality of various social and cultural discourses into which we are all born and which we become aware of with the acquisition of language.

One form of social discourse which is repeatedly addressed in metafictional

novels is the discourse of history, and its traditional claims to objectivity are subjected to serious scrutiny. **Historiographic metafiction** (a term coined by Linda Hutcheon) is a specific form of metafiction which rethinks history as 'a human construct' and claims that it exists for us in the form of text (Hutcheon, 1988, p.16.). This type of metafiction suggests that we can only learn about **historical facts** (i.e., the people and events of the past) through a variety of different narratives; from personal accounts of the witnesses of the not-so-distant past or from chronicles and history books written by historians. Metafictional writers problematize the traditional distinctions between the personal (subjective, biased) stories about the past and the apparently objective, neutral accounts of professional historians. They create fictions that rewrite official, accepted histories by showing that such histories also include elements of subjectivity, often in the form of a strong (whether conscious or unconscious) racial, Eurocentric and patriarchal bias. Stripped of its claims to objectivity, the discourse of history is unmasked as a narrative which interprets the human past primarily from the perspective of white European men. In attacking the officially accepted history and by problematizing the very possibility of creating a truly objective account of past events, metafictional writers share Lyotard's scepticism towards the grand narratives of modernity, whose positive visions of the human condition crucially depend on the 'objective' understanding of human history as the long march towards a social utopia. By moving 'smaller' narratives about the past, primarily those representing the perspective of women, colonized people or even various individual perspectives, from the shadows of the grand narrative of the official history, historiographic metafiction contributes to the generally liberal atmosphere of the postmodern era. It, however, also promotes the postmodern epistemological scepticism that signifies a crisis of Western civilization. By drawing the reader's attention to the impossibility of an objective account of history and by stressing the equal value of different perspectives on past events, historiographic metafiction indicates the impossibility of achieving objective knowledge about the purpose of human history, and thus also the impossibility of revealing objective knowledge about the meaning of human life.

The following section on Milan Kundera's postmodern novel *Immortality* focuses on the way in which its author employs the metafictional mode of narrative to explore what remains, even in the postmodern age of epistemological scepticism and moral relativism, the most pressing problem of the human condition – the meaning of one's existence.

Immortality

Milan Kundera structures his novel as a typical postmodernist **collage** text that represents 'the intersection of multiple discourses'(Brockelman, 2001, p. 2) to draw attention 'to the irreducible *heterogeneity* of the "postmodern condition"' (Brockelman, 2001, p. 10). Using different literary discourses, including autobiography, fictional narrative, biography and essay, Kundera creates an **intergeneric play** with the idea of immortality functioning as the point of intersection. The novel focuses on a writer (Milan Kundera) who is writing a novel about the character Agnes and combines the narrative about the fictitious character with anecdotes from Goethe's life, facts from his own past life and essayistic reflections on the state of human life in the contemporary world. At first, this approach may seem like a form of **literary eclecticism** that destroys the purity of the novelistic genre and produces the **fragmentary** nature of Kundera's book. However, the author's eclectic approach results in a textual whole which is carefully structured on the basis of **intertextual** relations between the text of Kundera's narrative about the fictitious Agnes, the texts of various literary works about Goethe and the 'text' of Kundera's life. **Intertextuality**, in the form of parallels, direct references, allusions, quotes and the author's borrowings of characters from other texts, functions in the novel as the main metafictional device that Kundera uses to communicate the textual nature of human reality.

The idea of immortality forms the main thematic parallel between the life stories of Agnes, Goethe and Kundera. The use of the term usually lacks its traditional religious connotations, but, as the author suggests, various secularized notions of immortality remain central to human existence in the postmodern era. Throughout the novel, the individual's desire for some form of immortality (fame, recognition, or, at the very least, being remembered in the minds of relatives) is placed in the context of a society in which the media-induced nihilistic atmosphere of consumerism encourages superficial forms of existence. This critical vision of postmodern life is combined with Kundera's exploration of the relationship between the author and his text and between the text and reality, in which the metafictional (self-conscious) mode of writing plays a central role. The following analyses of selected passages from *Immortality* focus on the presentation of the narrative techniques that Kundera uses to produce the metafictional effect of his text, and on the illustration of his vision of the postmodern experience of the world.

Close Reading Analysis One

The text below presents a passage in which the character of Agnes is introduced to the reader through the voice of the author-figure (Kundera). His description intentionally destroys any possibility of maintaining the mimetic illusion:

> When I wake up, at almost half-past eight, I try to picture Agnes. She is lying, like myself, in a wide bed. The right side of the bed is empty. Who could her husband be? Clearly, somebody who leaves the house early on Saturday mornings. That's why she is alone, sweetly swinging between waking and sleeping.
>
> Then she gets up. Facing her is a TV set, standing on one long, stork-like leg. She throws her nightgown over the tube, like a white, tassled theatre-curtain. She stands close to the bed and for the first time I see her naked: Agnes, the heroine of my novel. I can't take my eyes off the beautiful woman and as if sensing my gaze she hurries off to the adjoining room to get dressed.
>
> Who is Agnes?
>
> Just as Eve came from Adam's rib, just as Venus was born out of the waves, Agnes sprang from the gesture of that sixty-year-old woman at the pool who waved at the lifeguard and whose features are already fading from my memory. At the time, that gesture aroused in me immense, inexplicable nostalgia and this nostalgia gave birth to the woman I call Agnes. (Kundera, 1991, p. 7)

The passage is created as a skilful play on the borders between the real and the fictional. At first, the author-figure, as a **self-conscious narrator**, stresses the fictional nature of Agnes. He reveals to us the moment of the creative process when he *pictures* the heroine of his novel and imagines the first scene from her life. However, only a few lines later he writes about his *seeing* her naked, his inability to *take his eyes off* her and even the possibility that Agnes *senses his gaze*. At the beginning of the passage the author-figure and Agnes appear to exist, respectively, on two separate levels – on the level of the real world that we share with Kundera and on the level of the fictional story that he imagines. Kundera's later use of verbs signifying sensory experience produces the effect of blending. The reader therefore experiences the merging of two textual

levels: Agnes may appear to us momentarily as a real woman who can be seen and who can sense Kundera's gaze, and at the same time we may perceive the author-figure as a fictional character who can adopt a voyeuristic position in Agnes's world. This blending of the fictional and the real plays an important role throughout the whole novel, and Kundera's fictionalized self meets and communicates with some characters (e.g. Agnes's husband), who are nonetheless introduced at the beginning of the novel as being purely products of his imagination.

While at one moment the narrator appears to us as a fictional character which exists on the same level of the text as Agnes, at another moment he emphasizes his status as the creator of Agnes's fictional world. He stresses his god-like position in relation to the protagonist – just as the Biblical God created *Eve* and the mythological Zeus fathered *Venus*, Kundera has created Agnes – and reveals the creative process that leads to the invention of his characters. When writing about Agnes's husband, he makes the reader aware of the type of decisions that writers have to make when constructing a character. He asks himself, *Who could her husband be?*, and then immediately answers his own question by producing an image of a husband which suits his artistic intention; as an individual who leaves his wife alone on Saturday mornings thereby allowing the author to stress her loneliness. In a similar way, he reveals how the image of Agnes has been inspired both by the act of the woman whose *gesture* he observed at the pool and by the feeling of *nostalgia* that the gesture evoked. In this way, Kundera adds a strong **self-referential** aspect to his text, which, in a typical postmodernist manner, destroys the mimetic effect and draws our attention to the process of its construction. The twin presentation of Kundera as the figure who has authored the novel's text and as the real-life character who shares the same textual reality with the novel's fictional characters suggests that any writing about reality (including writing about one's own real self) inevitably functions as its fictionalization.

While providing examples of typical metafictional devices – the use of a self-conscious narrator, self-referentiality, the fictionalization of the author-figure – the passage analysed here also serves as a brief introduction to the novel's thematic concerns. Agnes's initial situation – she wakes up alone, faced by a TV set – has a symbolic role and prepares the reader for the story of her existential loneliness in a society overwhelmed by media images and superficial consumerism. Agnes, a character born out of Kundera's nostalgia, represents the authorial vision of the profound sense of alienation which an individual faced by the loss of **the real** (real

interpersonal relations, real feelings, the real self) may experience in the postmodern world. The following close reading of the second extract reveals that Kundera endows the postmodern condition of loneliness and alienation with an aesthetic dimension, associating it with the lack of beauty in everyday life.

Close Reading Analysis Two

In the text below, the narrator presents Agnes walking the streets of Paris and captures her reactions to the world that surrounds her:

> She parked, got out of the car and set out towards the avenue. She was tired and hungry and because it's dreary to eat alone in a restaurant, she decided to have a snack in the first bistro she saw. There was a time when this neighbourhood had many pleasant Breton restaurants where it was possible to eat inexpensively and pleasantly on crêpes or galletes washed down with apple cider. One day, however, all these places disappeared and where replaced by modern establishments selling what is sadly known as fast food. She overcame her distaste and headed for one of them. Through the window she saw people sitting at tables, hunched over greasy paper plates. Her eye came to rest on a girl with a very pale complexion, and bright red lips. She had just finished her lunch, pushed aside her empty cup of Coca-Cola, leaned her head back and stuck her index finger deep into her mouth; she kept twisting it inside for a long time, staring at the ceiling . . .The tables stood close together, and it was obvious even through the glass that along with the food the guests must be swallowing the smell of their neighbours' perspiration. A wave of ugliness, visual, olfactory, and gustatory (she vividly imagined the taste of a greasy hamburger suffused by sweetish water) hit her in the face with such a force that she turned away, determined to find some other place to satisfy her hunger. . . She said to herself: when once the onslaught of ugliness became completely unbearable, she would go to a florist and buy a forget-me-not, a single forget-me-not, a slender stalk with miniature blue flowers. She would go out into the street holding the flower before her eyes, staring at it tenaciously so as to see only that single beautiful blue point, to see it as the last thing she wanted to preserve for herself from a world she had ceased to love. She would walk like

that through the streets of Paris, she would soon become a familiar sight, children would run after her, laugh at her, throw things at her and all Paris would call her: *the crazy woman with the forget-me-not* . . .(Kundera, 1991, p. 21-22)

As we can see, this passage appears to create the mimetic illusion by allowing the reader to perceive the character as a 'real' person as we follow her movements in the 'real' world and enjoy access to her mental processes. As with the passage from *Mrs Dalloway* which was analyzed in Chapter Two, the text depicts the various reactions of the protagonist's mind to the sensory stimuli of the external world. Agnes's mind, like Mrs Dalloway's, is overwhelmed by the impressions of life in a busy city and the reader can follow her mental reactions to what she perceives at any given moment. Kundera's **free indirect discourse** presents Agnes's awareness of reality as a combination of three elements: direct sensory experience (the streets, objects and people around her), her memories about how the place used to look and her mental images of the future in which she buys a forget-me-not. The images of the external world that Agnes experiences draw attention to a typical feature of postmodern society – the tendency to replace distinctive traditional cultures with uniform mass cultures. Kundera uses the example of traditional French restaurants being replaced by multinational fast food chains to depict this trend. This **globalization** in the form of **coca-colonization** or **Americanization** is seen in a strongly negative light through Agnes's personal associations of the trend with feelings of disgust and ugliness.

Agnes' reluctance to respond to the postmodern lifestyle in terms of morality (good/bad) or metaphysics (meaningful/meaningless) and her preference for aesthetic judgments (beautiful/ugly) stresses the subjective nature of her vision of reality. In the postmodern world in which the 'death' of grand narratives has resulted in the apparent relativization of all 'objective' values, personal likes and dislikes play a crucial role in individuals' constructions of their essentially subjective truths about reality. For Agnes, the ugliness of the world that she *ceased to love* and her sense of alienation from other human beings (she imagines that her need for beauty will turn her into a *crazy woman* in the eyes of other Parisians) become important truths about her life. These personal truths influence both her main life decisions (her choice to leave Paris and abandon her family) and also her idea of afterlife in which the traditional Christian image of blissful immortality is reconstructed as the state of complete solitude. As a personification of the metaphysical desire for solitude, Agnes represents the novel's rejection of the

postmodern condition defined by the crisis of interpersonal relations.

Further explorations of Kundera's image of the postmodern reality presented through the story of his fictional characters, and an analysis of the literary devices of his metafictional novel will be among the main tasks for seminar discussions of *Immortality*.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Compare Agnes with her sister Laura and discuss their intertextual relation with the real-life character Bettina (Goethe's admirer):

a) How does Kundera use contrast in his depiction of the two sisters?

b) Can you relate Bettina on the basis of similarity and/or difference to any of the two fictional characters?

2. Does Kundera's presentation of mass media (represented in the novel by radio) correspond with Baudrillard's theoretical ideas about their effect on postmodern society? What is the role of Bernard Bertrand in this respect?

3. Compare Agnes's rebellion against the postmodern lifestyle with the rebellion of Professor Avenarius:

a) Is the difference in their approaches related in any way to their gender difference?

b) Which of the two rebellions, if either, appears to be supported by the novel?

4. If the modern individual is defined by the rational principle (the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am'), what does the novel see as being the defining principle of the postmodern individual? Do you agree with the narrator's argument on this point?

5. How does the novel present the problem of the meaning of human life? Is there a place for God in the novel's vision of the postmodern world?

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