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The Beauty of Writing: Thoughts and Observations on Twentieth Century Writers

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In reading through the syllabus for this course initially one book caught my eye more than any other—*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* by Jean-Dominique Bauby. I saw the film adapted from the book in 2007 and highly anticipated reading Bauby's unabridged memoir. I believe his writing shows that his spirit and appreciation for life was illuminated to the greatest degree during the fifteen months following his stroke. This is especially ironic given the life he led up to that point was the envy of many.

The way Bauby describes his life being locked –in simultaneously shows the anguish he experienced from his physical handicap, as well as sensitivity and observations about life and love, one may conclude he would not likely have a sense of it in the life he was previously leading. After reading this book several times I have come to believe that Bauby did not write this book solely as a memoir. I believe it was important to him to have a record of his days. This record most likely gave him a sense of purpose and helped him to maintain his sanity in a situation that could not be described as sane. Perhaps it was also an intellectual exercise for Bauby, his brain being the healthiest part of his body.

There is pain and anguish evident in the morning bathing ritual Bauby describes, but how he describes it displays his grace and eloquence with words:

The session with Bridgette ends with a facial massage. Her warm fingers travel all over my face, including the numb zone, which seems to me to have the texture of parchment, and the area that still has feeling, where I can manage the beginnings of a frown. Since the demarcation line runs across my mouth, I can only half smile, which fairly faithfully

reflects my ups and downs. A domestic event as commonplace as washing can trigger the most varied emotions (P.16).

Bauby does a masterful job in this passage of putting the reader in his mind. Though his stroke has made almost his entire body numb, he feels more in his heart than perhaps he ever has. His words are now his expression, as he cannot physically display the emotions he feels. Through the use of imagery in this passage, Bauby brings one into his hospital room where he and Bridgette are visible. The reader can see Bauby as the prisoner in his own body and Bridgette caring for him in the most delicate manner.

It is evident throughout the text that Bauby's predicament has caused him to reflect deeply on what's most important in his life in a way one can assume he has not previously done. In a particularly powerful passage he reflects on the last time he saw his 92-year-old father, it was the week of his stroke. Bauby shaved his father as he had previously, but now he was faced with the reality that he would never see him again; Bauby confined to his wheelchair and his frail father confined to his fourth floor apartment (P.44-45).

Bauby's words leave one to feel he deeply longs for the opportunity to shave his father once again, or to simply be able to see his face:

Every now and then he calls, and I listen to his affectionate voice, which quivers a little in the receiver they hold to my ear. It cannot be easy for him to speak to a son who, as he well knows, will never reply (P.45)

Sadness. That is the emotion that overwhelmingly engulfs me as I read these words. The more I read it, the more poignant it becomes.

It is clear reading Bauby's words that being a father has become paramount in his life. He is clearly torn between the sense of joy they bring home, and his feelings of inadequacy as both a man and a father. Bauby wears his heart on his sleeve throughout the book. He displays vulnerability, however, when discussing Father's Day with his children that I found to be especially moving.

Today is Father's Day. Until my stroke, we had felt no need to fit this made-up holiday into our emotional calendar. But today we spend the whole symbolic day together, affirming that even a rough sketch, a shadow, a tiny fragment of a dad is still dad. I am torn between the joy at seeing them living, moving, laughing, or crying for a few hours, and fear that the sight of all these sufferings—beginning with mine—is not the ideal entertainment for a boy of ten and his eight-year-old sister. However, we have made the wise collective decision not to sugarcoat anything (P.70).

Bauby using sketches and shadows as metaphors for himself gives one a sense of his self-image at this point. He seems to emphasize that he feels much more pain for his children—or others—that have been inconvenienced by his condition, more than any feelings of sorrow he has for himself. His prose and word choice show the depth and range of emotion he had in his final fifteen months on this earth. Bauby puts you in his mind; one feels both his joy and sorrow through his memoir.

While *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* brings the reader through a range of emotions through the heart and mind of Jean-Dominique Bauby, *Saturday* by Ian McEwan makes one a spectator in the narrative. From the beginning of the book I began to feel as if I was close to Dr. Henry Perowne. McEwan gives the reader a sense of who he is beyond the description he offers. The often mysterious and eloquent prose made me feel instantly

invested in Henry and his well being. McEwan shapes his protagonist as ambitious and having a healthy ego, while remaining likable. I found the way he is described to be alluring and interesting:

Henry can't resist the urgency of his cases, or deny the egotistical joy in his own skills, or the pleasure he still takes in the relief of the relatives when he comes down from the operating room like a god, an angel with the glad tidings—life, not death (P.23).

McEwan's use of imagery brings the reader in to be an invisible spectator. I felt as if I was an invisible presence in the room when he was alone with Rosalind before she left for work, in confrontation with Baxter on the street, and witnessing the match between Henry and Jay on the ball court. Describing events in a sophomoric prose without nuance will not bring a reader into the narrative as McEwan does. He shows artistry with the use of metaphor and figures of speech that cause one to visualize the scene he creates with his words.

Despite Baxter's impaired ocular fixation, and his cholera, those quick, jerky movements, the blow that's aimed at Perowne's heart and that he dodges only fractionally, lands on his sternum with colossal force, so that it seems to him, and perhaps it really is the case, that there are surges throughout his body a sharp ridge, a shock wave, of high blood pressure, a concussive thrill that carries with it not so much pain as an electric jolt of stupefaction and brief deadly chill that has a visual component of blinding, snowy whiteness (P. 92-93).

Every word in every sentence of this passage is impactful. It sparks the mind to visualize Baxter and Perowne on the street. I could feel the impact of Baxter's punch hitting my

sternum as it did Henry's. The words concussive thrill caused me to remember an experience I had while scuba diving in Cozumel, Mexico in 1995.

There is a limit to how long a human being can remain submerged at deeper depths in the ocean before he/she may become subject to nitrogen narcosis. Though the feeling is partly euphoric in nature it is also extremely dangerous and may become painful. One develops a delusional sense of security as the brain is simultaneously robbed of oxygen as it absorbs nitrogen. The scale, which the depth/time ratio is measured, is not an exact science. There are variables such as age, physical fitness, and hereditary factors that contribute to how much one is affected.

The impact of this narcosis may cause one to remove the regulator from their mouth because it is believed breathing without apparatus is possible. A person may become very dizzy and lose the ability to differentiate the difference between up and down. In my case the world became suspended in time. At a reef known Punta Sur (southern tip) I began to move lethargically at a depth of 122 feet. Though I understood what was happening to me I was temporarily incapable of doing anything about it (the remedy is to gradually move to higher depth, as rushing upward is likely to cause an entirely different and potentially more dire set of circumstances).

Luckily for me the experience was only momentary and I quickly regained my bearings and slowly moved up to a safer depth. The feeling experienced, however, was both frightening and thrilling at the same time. I envisioned Henry's encounter with Baxter to exhibit the same traits. Though the feeling of fear unquestionably was present in his heart, so too was a temporary thrill. To this point in Dr. Perowne's life it seems his greatest range of human emotion was felt in the operating room. His experience with

Baxter was foreign and tapped in to emotions that were likely deeply embedded within him.

Beyond giving the reader a great sense of Dr. Henry Perowne as a person, I found that through his carefully worded prose McEwan cares deeply for his protagonist, in turn making the reader care. After Perowne's confrontation with Baxter and his hostile racquetball game with Jay he desperately tries to contact Rosalind. The sound of her voice is what he longs for; in her voice he will find solace. I found myself attached to the well being of Henry, wanting him to obtain a modicum of peace after these trying events had transpired.

McEwan holds the reader as a mother does a newborn. This reality makes the fortune of Henry intertwined with that of the reader. In seeing the world through the conceptual lens of Henry I was made to connect and understand him. Henry has many strengths, his career and intellect. But we are also made to see the vulnerabilities of Henry where his wife and children are concerned. These qualities are brought to light through the nuanced approach McEwan employs to through his beautifully flowing and deeply descriptive prose.

While Ian McEwan brings one to a place where Henry Perowne is understood and cared for by the reader, Franz Kafka places one directly in the mind of Gregor Samsa in *Metamorphosis*. As the reader, I understood his dilemma to be my own, Grete to be my sister, and the transformation of his family to be my loss as it was his. Kafka, too, paints Gregor as a young man one does not have difficulty in finding compassion for. He is the breadwinner of his family, cares deeply for Grete, and is the embodiment of all that two parents could want in a son.

Gregor wakes up one morning transformed from a young man ripe with potential, to an unidentifiable insect. At no point during this story does Kafka offer an explanation as to why this transformation has taken place. Gregor is now relegated to an existence one would not wish on an enemy—living on his bedroom floor dependent on his family for food and nourishment.

There is a confluence of two different events during this story. First, there is the physical metamorphosis of Gregor from human being into an insect. Second, and perhaps more dramatic, is the transformation of Gregor's family. He is systematically dehumanized by them and alienated. He goes from being his sisters' hero and the family breadwinner, to their greatest burden.

Though there is no explanation as to how Gregor's physical transformation took place, his father essentially blames him for his predicament with these words: "If it were Gregor, he would have long ago realized that life among human beings is not possible with such a creature and would have gone away voluntarily" (Kafka, P.30). Through further review of this sentence I began to think of the unconditional love that is understood to exist between parents and their children. Gregor was now trapped in the body of an insect, but it was still Gregor inside. This insect contained Gregor's mind, his personality, and his emotions. To his family, though, the reality of Gregor disappeared along with his human appearance.

The love Gregor's family had for him was not without condition. In rereading this story I feel I have discovered something that was not evident to me during the first read: Kafka makes it glaringly obvious that as humans we have a propensity for cruelty given

the situation. Once Gregor becomes a burden to his family he becomes expendable. This reality is most firmly established by the words and feelings of Grete, his sister.

“It has to go,” cried the sister (Kafka, P.30). In order to excommunicate Gregor from the family, Grete has chosen to dehumanize him; she no longer refers to him by his name. Gregor has now become an inanimate object. To Grete and her parents he is no longer a human being; he is an animal and has no place in their home. But how did it come to this? How was Grete able to forget about the brother she so loved and admired?

The metamorphosis of the love and affection the Samsa family had for their son and brother was dramatic and sobering. Gregor felt great guilt over the suffering of his family; in spite of the fact that he had no control over what transpired. Inside Gregor was the same honorable young man who so loved and supported his family, who went to work faithfully everyday, who secretly planned to send his sister to a conservatory so she could pursue her dream of studying violin (Kafka, P.17). Where, now, was the unconditional love from his family?

In rereading this story I found myself focusing more and more on why Kafka may have decided to exclude the cause of Gregor’s metamorphosis. Furthermore, why did this not become a greater focus for his family? Perhaps this was not intended to be the focus as the aforementioned transformation of his family becomes the primary focus of the narrative. In the initial pages I felt as if the reason for the metamorphosis would eventually be unveiled. But as the story progressed it became evident that Kafka’s focus was on revealing the true character of the Samsa family in comparison to Gregor. The cause and reason of his transformation became irrelevant.

The relevance came from the shame and guilt Gregor felt. I empathized with him sitting alone in a dark corner waiting to expire. Empathy wasn't the only emotion evoked when reading *Metamorphosis*, there was anger. Gregor had no one to look out for him in the end, not Grete or his parents, not a friend. A seemingly well-intentioned young man with a bright future ahead of him had it taken away without cause or explanation.

I felt Kafka brought home the sense of abandonment Gregor felt in the end. The pace in which the narrative flows gave me the feeling from the beginning that Gregor was slipping away and could not be saved. There would be no explanation regarding what caused this predicament, and there would be no silver lining in his death. Gregor's death was to be a tragedy without reason.

In contrast to the deep and dark thoughts of the mind of Gregor Samsa, Dave Eggers takes a tragedy—the story of three siblings losing their parents and being involuntarily thrust into a new life in a new city—into a work that employs humor and sarcasm to tell an unlikely narrative in *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. Before the book even begins, Eggers offers “there is no overwhelming need to read the preface. Really. It exists mostly for the author” (Eggers, vii). In describing the writing style of Eggers I always feel the word most appropriate is manic, but on reflecting I now feel that is an incomplete description.

Part of Eggers' narrative style includes details; details about people, places, and events. There are so many details that they feel crammed in at spots, as if he felt he needed to record them before they were forgotten. There is, however, a method to this madness and a flow to his writing that becomes quite distinct after one becomes familiar with it. For

example, the brief soliloquy he offers about the woes of obtaining (and maintaining) a babysitter for Toph is telling.

“ This is our third time with Stephen, who is replacing Nicole, who we liked a great deal—Toph liking her almost as much as I was hoping to like her—but who graduated a few months ago and had the temerity to move away. There was also Janie, the Berkeley student who insisted on having Toph come to her Telegraph Avenue apartment, and who was fine until one night, after she and Toph had been playing soccer in her hallway with a balloon—he usually came home drenched with sweat —she had joked, ‘ You know, Toph, you’re fun to hang out with. We should go out sometime, get a few beers... ’ Thus Stephen” (Eggers, P.110).

Though the pace of this passage is relentless it is meant to symbolize something—the frantic nature of their lives. As a twenty-two year old Dave is essentially still a kid himself. At a time when most young men his age are busy going to frat parties and chasing women, he is the guardian of his grade school brother, occupied with preparing or buying meals, doing laundry and helping Toph with homework. Though his humor and sarcasm is evident in the above paragraph, he undoubtedly feels a sense of resentment towards the position he has been unceremoniously indoctrinated into.

When Eggers reflects upon the realities of others his age—more specifically women he may be interested in dating—he refers to the vast, immeasurable chasm between their respective situations. He continues by admonishing the life of breezy frivolity and limitless cable TV lead by these women (Eggers, P.96). It doesn’t matter if he longs for a life filled with carefree days or not. His predicament precludes him from having the

option. Once he gets the sense that the lack of a choice in the matter is at times razor sharp pebble in his shoe.

There are times within the narrative that Eggers uses a not so subtle mix of humor and wit to move the narrative along while simultaneously showing his age. This can be clearly evidenced in a passage where he and Toph attend the open house at Toph's school. Dave unquestionably feels out of place. Furthermore, his motivations for attending are, perhaps different than other parents present.

After about ten minutes, we're bored. My main reason for coming has gone bust. I was looking to score. I expected flirting. I expected single mothers and flirting. My goal, a goal I honestly thought was fairly realistic, was to meet an attractive single mother and have Toph befriend the mother's son so we can arrange playdates, during which the mother and I will go upstairs and screw around while the kids play outside. I expected meaningful glances and carefully worded propositions. I imagine that the world of schools and parents is oozing with intrigue and debauchery, that under its concerned and well-meaning façade, its two-parent families, conferences with teachers and thoughtful questions directed to the history teacher about Harriet Tubman, everyone is swinging (P.86).

The sentences in this passage are concise. This creates the feeling of tersely punctuated speech. One can hear the voice of Eggers reciting the details of the visit to the open house. The reader may also garner a smirk emanating from his face as he recalls it. I believe we all either know or have met a man like Eggers. This passage will bring this person to the forefront of your mind and by association relate to the character of Eggers.

Dave finds solace spending time with his friends that have made their way to the West Coast from Chicago. They understand the magnitude of what occurred in Dave's family. He is not put in the uncomfortable position of having to explain that the tragic death of his two parents from a disease that showed neither mercy is what thrust him into this position without warning. The feelings of isolation he experiences around people he meets don't exist around his extended family from Chicago; with them he feels at home, at ease.

In a particularly touching passage, Eggers elucidates on what their presence means to him:

The presence of all these people is both surreal and immeasurably comforting. They constitute the only ties Toph and I still have of home, because already, less than a year since we left Chicago, we have lost touch with each and every of our parents' friends, even our mother's friends. Which was odd, Beth and I felt—we expected our progress to be more closely followed, to be checked up on. But it's just as well. Those conversations and epistolary exchanges, when they happened, early on, were always awkward, fraught, their worry for us palpable, poorly hidden, their distrust implicit (P.115).

This passage is riddled with feelings of abandonment and neglect. The lack of interest in their lives by the friends of their parents' make Dave, Beth, and Toph realize how alone they are. This, in turn, makes them value the friends they have more than ever. Their impact cannot be overstated.

These friends now bridge the life before and after the death of Dave's parents. They love Toph as their own. There is no need for a babysitter in their presence; he is loved and appreciated by them. There is already history between them and Toph. In the not so

distant past Toph would sit and watch Dave and his friends rehearse their high school talent show act in the garage. It had only been five years since those days, but what happened in the interim dramatically altered their lives.

Without question Nawal El Saadawi offers the most opinionated prose in her beautiful work—*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*. The narrative follows a determined young female Egyptian physician who challenges the cultural mores of both Egyptian society and the Arab world. The narrative moves at a brisk pace as the reader follows a young Egyptian girl from a home where she always questioned the realities of her society. Why were women thought of as second to men? What made them inferior? Why does Egyptian society ostracize women for wanting more than they are willing to give?

Though the doctor received her medical license at age twenty-five, at no point in the narrative does it feel as if she rests on her laurels: she expects both academic and professional excellence from herself. Though she has accomplished much in her young life professionally, her personal needs and wants are still not respected within her community and the Egyptian society as a whole. There had been little time or opportunity for her to pursue a relationship as all her focus to this point had been on her studies. It was in medical school, she offers, that her view of men changed distinctly from the pedestal her mother and father had placed them on when she was a child.

“This was my first encounter with a naked man, and in the course of it men lost their dread power and illusory greatness in my eyes. A man had fallen from his throne and lay on a dissecting table next to a woman” (Saadawi, P. 25). Seeing a man in this state confirmed what she had inherently believed since childhood: men did not possess some

type of mystical power that made them superior to women. It was a condition of society, not reality.

This realization fueled both a passion and anger within her. The terse paragraph emphasizes the power she gained from the experience of examining the man:

“Who was this society anyway? Wasn’t it men like my brother brought up from childhood to think of themselves as gods, and weak, ineffectual women like my mother? How could such people believe that there existed a woman who knew nothing about a man except that he was an assortment of muscles, arteries, nerves and bones?” (P.25)

It is clearly not her status in society alone that bothers her. It is the status of all women in her society. Her anger is not directed solely at men who relegated women to menial positions in society. She is greatly troubled by the majority of women who have come to accept it. In her eyes they bear a greater responsibility than the men, as they are complicit in the subjugation of their own gender.

The young doctor had an encounter with a patient that served to function as an epiphany for her. To this point she had remained unemotional and detached from patients she treated. She saw them as illnesses that were to be treated and cured more so than human beings with ailments. She elucidates on how one experience changed all this:

“His eyes were fixed desperately on me like a lifeboat just out of his reach. It was as if I had suddenly forgotten all knowledge and had never examined a patient before. For the first time I was really seeing the eyes of a person suffering and hearing the sound of his groans” (Saadawi, P.45).

This experience awoke emotions in her that had been deeply suppressed. She longed to fill a void within her that she was unaware of. She is not willing to allow society to

dictate the conditions. If she is to be in a relationship with a man it is to be as equal partners, no less.

In the society in which she is entrenched, however, for a woman to even desire such a thing is to defy societal norms and is tantamount to volunteering to be ostracized. She feels alone and isolated in her position. Are her professional accomplishments to be all life has to offer her? Should she even make the effort to pursue for more in her life?

Saadawi answers that question by acknowledging that a giant longing to love and be loved lay dormant inside (Saadawi, P.25). This choice of words caused me to visualize a volcano of sorts; it looms large and may lay dormant for a time but will eventually erupt. The sentence is posed as a question and leads me to believe that she wanted these dormant feelings to come alive, she longs and hopes for it. This is further evidenced by how vivid and explicit she is in describing the image of the man she desires.

The imagery Saadawi gives the reader places one within her mind. This offers a sense of the intensity and intimacy the idea of him brings to her heart. She uses words such as timbre, warmth and depth to describe both his physical and emotional features (Saadawi, P.25). Here the reader can hear in her voice the emotional investment she has in this man, how he looks, sounds and feels. There is, however, a tug-of-war between what she sees as right and just versus how society sees her.

The all or nothing abiding principle she alludes to (Saadawi, P.25) seems to be related to the way she had treated her professional life. She took no shortcuts in the field of medicine. If Saadawi had taken a more relaxed approach and settled for a lesser academic standard in her medical studies she would have undoubtedly failed. Why, then, was she to take such an approach with the man of her dreams and life partner? Perhaps more than

any section of the passage, in line 13 the reader is given a true sense of her range of emotions through the wide array of places she describes: factories of science, lofty summits, deep chasms, and deserted forests.

The eloquence Saadawi displays with the vocabulary she uses to explain her emotions evoke a visual imagery in the reader's mind that is almost surreal. Her prose is very calming and gentle when she describes the man of her dreams. There is then a shift in tone as she admonishes those who refuse to acknowledge her right to this desire and live the life she chooses. Her words express a feeling of struggle between her dreams and reality.

A thematic element consistent in this passage is the questioning of true love and its legitimacy. Out of the nineteen lines on page 25, thirteen are posed as questions. Saadwadi makes her feelings of isolation within Egyptian society clear throughout the book. One may draw from the questions she asks an attempt to reconcile why society is as it is. In one respect she seems adamant in her resolve for true independence and equality, but then one may question whether she doubts herself.

Though it is clear that she does not doubt her legitimacy and competence as a physician, is she doubting her legitimacy as a woman because she does not adhere to conventions her society employs? The questions she is asking the reader serve to establish an inner dialogue in one's mind in search of the answers. I also felt the rhetorical nature of several of the questions that she poses may be thought of as a technique used to convince the reader that her feelings are right and just, important for the reader to subscribe to. In other words, for one to lack the inherent ability to see how

marginalized women in this society were, would relegate one to a type of intellectual poverty.

For example: “Hadn’t I wasted enough of my time to satisfy them?” (Saadawi, P.25). This is a short and direct sentence. The first emotion I sensed when reading it was anger. When I visualize Saadawi verbalizing this line, I cannot picture it being orated without contempt and anger, it is not to be expressed in a pleasant manner. Her words then elicit a sense of frustration: And how was I supposed to do it (Saadawi, P.25)? In these words rings a sense of despair. In a society that marginalizes her wants as a woman, how was a man of value to be obtained?

Sadaawi’s use of these questions serves to draw the reader into her mind, to the mind of her character. Once one is in the mind of the character, one is invested in the character. We now care how she feels about this man. We empathize with the frustration she feels. We want to see her prevail. The eloquence she uses to describe her emotions draws the reader close to her; it creates a feeling of intimacy.

The use of the word ‘spectre’ to describe this man makes him more than a man. It symbolizes an apparition or presence of something understood, but perhaps not tangible. This is extremely powerful as Saadawi is giving the reader ingress into her imagination. She refers to her imagination twice within this passage and countless times throughout the book. After reading the passage several times I have garnered that the reason she seems skeptical of her thoughts and imagination is a byproduct of her feelings of isolation.

When one is isolated and alone, the loss of a true sense of things is not uncommon. Though she is not isolated from people, she is isolated from a true sense of belonging and

community. When a person is in a relationship with another who lacks understanding or the ability to relate, it is often described in this manner. Though the person is physically present, there is an emotional void. The feeling of isolation of this kind is present throughout the book; I found the intensity of it in the cited passage most significant.

The reader only feels this tension truly begin to dissipate when she meets a man at a party who she senses is out of the ordinary (Saadawi, P.88). In this passage and throughout the book, Saadawi displays an ability to express a wide array of emotions using a skillful economy of words. This is affected by a beautiful vocabulary in addition to thoughtful and deliberate phrasing. The result is a work that displays both power and grace.

There is a foreshadowing of the impact the young doctor is to make on the world with the life she leads in the first paragraph of the book. In my first reading of this text I was remiss in failing to see its significance:

The conflict between me and my femininity began very early on, before my female characteristics had become pronounced and before I knew anything about myself, my sex and origins, indeed before I knew the nature of the cavity which had housed me before I was expelled into the wide world(P.9).

Using a prose that creates a feeling of both mystery and danger, Ma Jian writes of the tumultuous effects China's one-child policy has on a family. This is a very visual novel. With painfully explicit details the reader comes to understand why Kongzi, believing he is a direct linear descendant of Confucius, will stop at nothing to bring a son into the world with his wife Meili. They already have a daughter, Nannan , but having a male heir

is an great matter of pride in this culture. Lacking permission from the state the family is relegated to life on a dilapidated houseboat on the Yangtze River.

Ma Jian offers a crisp and thoughtful narrative that showcases the inequality between husband and wife as well as the harsh realities of everyday life living a nomadic lifestyle in an effort to evade the authorities. In his prose Jian manages to paint a haunting picture with eloquence. The theme of suffering is present throughout the text. Kongzi is willing to steer the proverbial boat endlessly in his quest to have a son. Meili is made to endure unthinkable physical and mental hardships to fulfill the dream of her husband. Nannan is essentially a passenger on the ship her father stands at the helm of. The harsh realities of the life of this family are evidenced in the passage below:

Kongzi jumps aboard and drives the boat towards the place the fisherman indicated. The banks here are so darkened by dust and pollution that, compared to them, the fumes billowing from the far-away factories look clean. Sickened by the scenery, Meili, stares down at her shoes and reflects on her predicament. To protect what might be Kongzi's precious male heir, she'll have to spend another eight months lying low. When she discovered she was pregnant, she suggested they go straight to Heaven Township, where she knew they'd be safe. But Kongzi said the journey would be too long and arduous, and insisted they find a hiding place closer by. Meili's only hope now is that she'll suffer a miscarriage before the government has a chance to tear the baby out. Inside her wet shoes and socks, her feet feel cold and pinched (P. 142)

The environmental climate that Jian describes conjures up such unpalatable and bleak images one can see the plumes of black smoke emanating from the factories and smell their rancid musk. There is no mistaking the intent of the speech Ma Jian uses in this

passage. He sees the Chinese government and their proclivity for violence as a means to enforce laws appalling. The concept of tearing an unborn child from a woman evokes the most violent of images to be injected into the mind of the reader.

The speech Jian uses brings the reader on to the boat with Kongzi . Meili, and Nanna. There is a sense of desperation present throughout their lives. One comes to understand that life will never be easy for them. Instead, there will simply be degree of difficulty and levels of tolerance that most people would find unthinkable.

There is great emphasis placed on the way Kongzi dehumanizes women. I am not speaking solely about the manner in which he treats his wife, but the lack of regard for the children she carries that happen to be female. There is no measurable degree of nuance used when Ma Jian elucidates on how Kongzi feels about female infants, even before the reader is witness to his treatment of them. They may be sold like a material possession.

Returning to the hut and seeing Nannan sitting alone under the porch and the boat gone, Meili knows at once that Kongzi has gone to give a Waterborn away. 'Where's Daddy, Nannan?' she shouts. 'He said he's taking Waterborn on a trip. He said he'll be back very soon, and when he comes back I'll be his only daughter and he'll only love me.'

'The evil bastard! I know what he's done—he's gone to sell her to the Welfare Office! Kongzi, you monster! You force me to get pregnant, then you take my baby from me. You're worse than the Communist Party. I despise you. I never want to set eyes on you again!' shaking with rage and howling curses, she kicks out at the wok and bowls on the ground, stamps on the peanut oil and mosquito coils she just bought in the village, then

turns round and marches away into the fields. The ducks in the pond flap their wings and take flight (P.176).

It is situations similar to these throughout the narrative where Jian places great emphasis on the life that Meili is relegated to. A peasant woman, she is viewed by Kongzi in terms of what she can provide for him, not as a partner or equal. He shows her no respect, so, she in turn has lost self-respect. The term dark road serves as a metaphor for many things throughout the book; most notably the Yangtze River. I wonder, however, if the dark road may also serve as a symbol of their life path and all they came to encounter.

In contrast to the direct and opinionated prose offered by Ma Jian, Thomas Mann uses nuance as his primary tool in his seminal work—*Death in Venice*. In analyzing passages where Achenbach is speaking so glowingly about Tadzio, I believe he is expressing more than his passion for the boy, perhaps he is attempting to quell the feeling of guilt as a latent homosexual by telling the world how amazing this boy is. In other words, “I find him to be exquisite, and so should everyone else.” I feel he is possibly trying to flesh out feelings of isolation and shame that were attached to his sexuality at the time.

Aschenbach noted with astonishment that the boy was of a consummate beauty: his face—pale and charming reticent, ringed by honey-colored, with a straight nose, lovely mouth, and an expression of gravity sweet and divine—recalled Greek statuary of the noblest period, yet its purest formal perfection notwithstanding it conveyed a unique personal charm such that whoever might gaze upon it would believe he had never beheld anything so accomplished, be it in nature or in art (P.45).

Passion, beauty, youth, and desire are all themes Mann addresses throughout this text. The way he describes Tadzio makes a loud call to the reader to see his beauty as well. He is overwhelmed by the boy and has not satisfied his need to express this reality. Through his words the reader can hear Aschenbach making a plea for the unique creation he sees in Tadzio.

When Aschenbach describes the consummate beauty of the boy as astonishing, he establishes how powerful he finds his physical presence. It's halting to him. I found that it immediately brought my mind to images that could characterize as astonishing throughout my life experiences. For me, it brought to images not of people, but to the beauty of physical locations: the 12-mile stretch of beach in the Turks and Caicos known as Graces Bay, the majestic splendor of Khao Sok, Thailand, and the immensity of remarkable landscapes I have seen in the high desert of southern Utah. To Aschenbach, however, it seems these images of Beauty he sees in Tadzio, come from a place deep inside of him that he has not allowed himself to explore to this point in his life.

We hear Aschenbach reflecting on his life throughout the text. Having been successful at his craft, he is now at an intersection in his life where he feels the need to both assess and explore. Tadzio represents an escape of sorts for Aschenbach. The explicit and awestruck way he is described is representative of a person who is deeply repressed, in terms of his sexuality and the scope of his life as a whole. The presence of this boy has deeply touched him in a way he clearly finds overwhelming. There have been deeply embedded feelings and desires within Aschenbach that have been either ignored or affixed within his unconscious self his entire life.

Aschenbach's obsession with Tadzio is not solely about his repressed homosexuality, it is also about his advancing in years. To Aschenbach, Tadzio's age makes him a symbol of purity and youth, two things that are now behind Aschenbach, not in front of him. There is a yearning inside of him to recapture a youth he cannot relive; he can only hope to experience it vicariously through Tadzio. Though Aschenbach is a man of considerable intellect, he doesn't seem to be terribly self-aware.

The cadence in which Mann writes is telling as Aschenbach's obsession grows. The reader sees him transform into a different person. Aschenbach extends considerable effort to obtain a more youthful appearance, dressing differently, and all the while seemingly unaware of how perverse this obsession had become. What is to be said of a life lived in a repressive state? At this stage of Aschenbach's life he is admittedly worn from his work—both mentally and physically. Perhaps his trip to Venice can be viewed as symbolic of his unconscious being discovered and a trip of personal awakening.

When one looks at the way Mann represents Aschenbach as his protagonist, it can be said that he is essentially his own greatest adversary. Throughout a lifetime of repression, whether conscious or unconscious, Aschenbach is an aging man that has never come to terms with himself, and therefore cannot find peace within. The lack of inner peace and self-realization fueled Aschenbach's obsession with Tadzio, which in turn cost him his life. Aschenbach simply did not understand the enormity of what was within him.

I found this prose reminiscent of Nabokov's *Lolita*. The way that Humbert fetishized Dolores Haze in his mind parallels the way Achenbach views Tadzio. Both texts show that the objects of their affections are considered more than simply people. They stand atop a pedestal; from the power of their presence one is empowered.

Through the words of Mann one sees Aschenbach the artist, his temperament, and his personal demons. It seems apparent to me that Mann has an affinity for Aschenbach, perhaps because they both shared similar struggles throughout their lives. This may call into question whether Mann used his protagonist as an expression of self. The explicit way Mann describes his affections for Tadzio made it difficult for me to separate the author from the protagonist. I felt as if I could hear Mann's voice straight through the words of Aschenbach. Similarly, Aschenbach was said to have issues separating his work from his life. He could not ascertain where his work ended and his life began.

At the time of this writing New York City is experiencing the largest outbreak of Legionnaires' disease. Though the Mayor's office has repeatedly said this problem is well contained and tapering off, the death toll continues to rise. The timing of the outbreak in the city coincided with my reading of *The Plague* by Albert Camus, and the broader realm we have explored in this class during the semester—sick societies.

I found a greater message in *The Plague* than simply a story about the destruction of Oran through sickness. As human beings we all share this planet and should therefore share concern for it and its inhabitants. It seems that Camus is offering these very thoughts: "*No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all*" (P157). In other words, the plague has affected all aspects of life of the Oranian people: their lives and fate are now unmistakably intertwined. So, the people of Oran are now adjusting to what we in modern times would refer to as the new normal.

This text focuses heavily on the theme of realism. The harsh reality of what the plague has brought to their community is now setting in. The time for panic and shock are now

past. The reader sees a vivid picture as to how daily life is now: the suffering, despair and confusion: “ *And the glowing darkness the almost empty town, palled in dust, swept by bitter sea-spray, and loud with the shrilling of the wind, seemed a lost island of the damned*” (P.157). Perhaps this may be looked at as a metaphor to the physical effects of the plague as it attacks one’s senses—the skin, eyes, and smell.

There is also the realization that the latest attack has hit the city center, segregating portions of the populace now makes little sense (P. 158). People have realized no person or people are immune from the plague, it acts at will without warning. It has been acknowledged that the most virulent attacks of the plague occur in groups: soldiers, nuns, prisoners, and monks. What is Camus telling the reader about community or the sense of community? Is the plague acting to prevent community among these groups? One of the main byproducts of the plague is a sense of isolation shared among the Oranian people.

People have now accepted what was once thought unspeakable—the funerals given at light speed for the sake of expediting the process (P.162). There are no longer church services, so priests have the meet for the mourners at the burial site. There are no formalities. The burials have become as routine as brushing ones’ hair in the morning, the new normal. Furthermore, there is a shortage of coffins and burial plots because the bodies are now multiplying at a rate that cannot be accommodated by coffin makers or cemeteries.

One may view the people who remain as the ones who truly suffer. This prose is devastating in the way creates the images of reality on Oran; “*Those few who went out could be seen hurrying along, bent forward, with handkerchiefs or their hands pressed to their mouths*”(P.158). There is an indelible truth one can harness from this sentence—

those who remain are made to suffer. This is not to say they suffer in the physical sense alone, they suffer through the isolation, loss of logic, loss of self.

The changes the Oranians undergo cause them to lose what the meaning of life is. Their emotional loss was just as (if not more) significant than the toll the plague took on people physically (P.170). Since the second phase of the plague took the mind and memory of a person, it essentially took away one's personality. People walk around like drones; they lack any unique emotional fingerprints that they once exhibited. Perhaps this line offers a clear picture of a person after the plague ravages the mind: "*None of us was capable any longer of an exalted emotion; all had trite, monotonous feelings*" (P170).

Now the sense of community they all shared in Oran is the sense of being emotionally lost. They all now feel a similar numbness and are unable to reach into their emotional well and extract anything—it's dry. Perhaps the most telling and poignant statement made about the people of Oran in this chapter is regarding the habit-forming way of life that the plague induced. The sadness and suffering that became commonplace developed into a default function for people; their habit became despair (P.170).

When Camus uses words like dreaded, gray, bitter, and lost he creates a mood and a sense of being that one cannot help to be infected by once read. The reader is brought to Oran and has an emotional experience of witnessing the plague. While this experience can be emotionally draining and intense, it is necessary to understand the narrative that he has crafted. The sense of community is defined by what people don't have, not what they have.

There is no longer any sense of optimism, rather there is an acquiescence to the reality that things will continue to deteriorate. People can no longer expect to be physically

healthy; they can instead expect to be sick. Lastly, (and most substantial) there are no more memories and no more emotions. These are the traits that now connect the people in Oran, a lack of self and a sense of loss.

The way Camus carefully articulates that state of being in Oran is powerful. The figures of speech and darkening prose in the chapter make both the mind and heart heavy. It caused me to ponder the state of the world today. Sick societies that deal with their own form of the plague are not difficult to find throughout the world. There are many that came to mind while reading *The Plague*, but three resonated in a particularly strong manner.

It seems the American media has grown tired of reporting on illnesses that don't directly affect Americans. The sickness of the Somali society was considered news when a given celebrity spoke about it, but the American media can be quite fickle. This does not mean, however, that their failed state status has at all improved. There is a plethora of statistics that one can cite that make Somalia a sick society, but the one that I found most egregious was the infant mortality rate—two out of ten children born will die as infants in Somalia (un.org). After the devastating earthquake that struck Haiti in 2010, cholera infected six percent of the population. To give one the scope of the plague they experienced the number amounted to roughly 600,000 people (un.org). Lastly, there is the African nation of Chad with a life expectancy of 49.7 years—a number that should strike fear in the heart of any rational person.

Returning to the domestic front there is the aforementioned Legionnaires' disease in the Bronx that has not been resolved. In America an estimated 20% of school age children live below the poverty line, which means they essentially cannot afford to pay

for their lunch. At the same time, childhood obesity in the United States has nearly quadrupled over the past thirty years (cdc.gov). 19% of American adults still smoke, greatly increasing their chances of getting heart disease and/or lung cancer.

So, the Plague that Camus so vividly describes exists in different forms in the world that we live in. The horrors that Camus describes are not my reality or the reality of anyone I know, but I am well aware they are the reality of others. This text brought that idea to the forefront of my mind. I suddenly became more aware of the world I live in, the world we all share.

Cross-Cultural Comparison and Contrast

The authors we have read this semester all display a unique voice in the way they tell their story. Through the use of metaphor, imagery, figures of speech, and meter, they create their artistic fingerprint. Some authors strap you in for the ride and allow you to go it alone, while others choose to hold your hand like a parent to a toddler. All the writers want to lure you into their narratives using varied methods they find to be effective.

In his beautiful memoir *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, Jean-Dominique Bauby reflects on his life in the 15-months after a stroke that left him relegated to a bed and wheelchair. The meter of the narrative has the feel of a man taking stock of all that he has as well as all that he's lost. It feels as if it was written as much for himself as for the reader. Though with the exception of blinking an eye he is unable to move and part of his body, he is keenly aware of his surrounding and articulates this well. The way the novel flows made me feel as if Bauby was on an intense spiritual journey in the back nine of his life, allowing the reader to come along as a witness.

In *Saturday*, Ian McEwan evokes a similar feeling of one bearing witness, only with McEwan you are unaware of where the narrative is heading. The prose flows at a pace that causes one to anticipate what's next with every paragraph and page. His thick description of the night sky, his wife Rosalind, and Baxter bring the reader into his world and experience. McEwan, through the use of imagery and nuance, attaches the reader to Dr. Henry Perowne. The heartbeat of Henry becomes your own, as do his thoughts and fears.

McEwan allows one time to take a breath, to step out of his mind temporarily to absorb what he is saying before you're lured back in. This is not the case with Franz Kafka in his seminal work *Metamorphosis*. Kafka places the reader firmly into the mind of his protagonist, Gregor Samsa. There is an overwhelming feeling of sadness I experienced while being lured through the dark prose that addressed Gregor losing himself. He felt ashamed, guilty, and hopeless due to his predicament. The meter seems to slow for the most poignant of moments, Grete's realization that the family will be better off without him, Gregor's feelings of shame over his appearance. Kafka lures the reader into his narrative by identifying the reader to Gregor and his new reality. One cannot help but empathize with him.

While I find Kafka representative of a writer that holds your hand, Dave Eggers takes the reader on a roller coaster ride. Through his recollection of events and two-way conversations, Eggers uses sarcasm, wit and humor in his prose to take you through the events following the untimely death of his parents. While I read this book I envisioned a twenty something male sitting at table at a party reciting a story to me at a pace I felt challenged to maintain with him. This did not dissuade me, however, from listening.

The quickly flowing prose can leave the reader breathless at times, but never to a point where one would consider the option of halting reading it. With every turning page Eggers makes you think, about him, Toph, and his situation. The manic pace seems intentional as it allows you to understand his life without dwelling on his overwhelming loss. Eggers shows great skill in constructing the narrative this way as it does not seem to be an easy feat.

The events he recalls—for example the visit to Toph's school—conjures up images of a sitcom. With every story he tells visualization of it become easier. This is important as it connects the reader more intimately to the story. The reader becomes invested in the characters and the direction their lives take. This is especially true in the case of Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor*.

Terse sentences and paragraphs work to emphasize passion and anger that drive a young female doctor to lead a life that touches many others. The narrative jumps in places, but Saadawi never makes one feel rushed. The reader understands from the beginning of the text that this woman is an exceptional person. We hear thoughts inside her mind regarding society, men and her chosen profession. Through speech laced with intensity and passion the reader experiences an epiphany with her. She comes to understand her purpose and forges forward.

Her opinion is in the forefront throughout the text, it drives the narrative. One comes to want her to be respected as she fights for respect in her personal life. The way Saadawi allows you into her mind to hear her thoughts causes one to garner great appreciation for the young doctor and her accomplishments, furthermore I found it evoked me to want to fight for her as she did for herself. Saadawi is not alone in using an opinionated tone to

drive the narrative, Ma Jian, too, displays strong opinions throughout *The Dark Road*, though he does it differently than Saadawi. *The Dark Road* employs descriptive and eloquent speech to create visual portraits of the harsh realities of a nomad life along the banks of the Yangtze River.

The meter fluctuates with the intensity of the novel. Ma Jian uses longer and more even flowing prose to describe the environment that is the backdrop of the story. When describing violent and visually halting events that occur within this environment the sentences and paragraphs become noticeably more succinct. There is little nuance in the speech of Ma Jian. He makes his objective known directly with intention.

While nuance is a tool not characteristic in *The Dark Road*, it figures prominently in the pages of *Death in Venice* by Thomas Mann. When describing his affections and admiration for Tadzio, Aschenbach uses metaphor and nuance to place emphasis on the powerful effect the boy has on him. The meter is intentionally slow so the reader may savor every word and fully absorb the significance of Tadzio. The deliberate and methodical flow offered by Mann creates the feeling comparable to a dream like state. I never felt as if I was in the story, as I was with *Saturday* or *Metamorphosis*, rather I felt as if I watching from outside the looking glass, unable to be touched or heard.

Albert Camus gives the reader a similar experience as witness from outside in *The Plague*. This is well constructed as one can appreciate the narrative much better from the outside looking in. The meter of the prose feels very well controlled, almost restrained. For me it feels as if Camus wants the reader to appreciate the severity the illness just as Kafka wants the reader to empathize with the reality of Gregor Samsa. The narrative must be restrained to achieve this.

These texts have taught me much about the stylistic differences of writers. Though I enjoyed aspects of all the texts for different reasons, I feel as if I have discovered something entirely exceptional in the work of Ian McEwan. With every paragraph I was made to think and feel. His meticulous word selection coupled with the gently flowing prose is powerful. If the measure of an effective writer is to lure one into a narrative and keep them there for the duration of it, McEwan has undoubtedly succeeded.

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