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## *Of the Devil's Party*

**A Study on Human Enjoyment of Disquieting Fiction**  
**with an Analysis of**  
***The Wasp Factory* and *A Clockwork Orange***

**Supervisor**  
Ch. Prof. Flavio Gregori

**Second Reader**  
Prof. Gabriella Hartvig  
University of Pécs (H)

**Graduand**  
Eleonora Bruttini  
Matriculation Number 987938

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# Introduction

*The reason Milton wrote in fetters  
when he wrote of Angels and God,  
and at liberty when of Devils and Hell,  
is because he was a true Poet  
and of the Devil's party  
without knowing it.*

(William Blake)

Over the last two decades, literary studies unlocked to the insights which cognitive studies such as neuroscience, psychology, cognitive linguistics and evolutionary psychology can offer to the field of narrative theory. Those contributions aim at investigating the relationship between human mind and human artifacts such as literature and art.<sup>1</sup> Unlike the computational theory advanced by the First Cognitive Revolution (1956),<sup>2</sup> which regarded human mind as a computer and mental processes as outputs which resulted from the “information processing”<sup>3</sup> of the mind, recent cognitive studies do not limit human mind to human brain, but they regard it as *embodied* and *extended*.<sup>4</sup> This implies that human mind comprises not only the body, but also its interactions with the environment and with human artifacts. As a result,

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<sup>2</sup> See George A. Miller, ‘The cognitive revolution: a historical perspective’, *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 7 No. 3 (March 2003), pp. 141-44 (p.142): “I date the moment of conception of cognitive science as 11 September, 1956, the second day of a symposium organized by the ‘Special Interest Group in Information Theory’ at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. At the time, of course, no one realized that something special had happened so no one thought that it needed a name; that came much later.”

<sup>3</sup> Harré, cited in David Herman, ‘Narrative Theory after the Second Cognitive Revolution’, *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, pp. 155-75 (p.156).

<sup>4</sup> Marco Bernini, Marco Caracciolo, *Letteratura e scienze cognitive*, (Roma: Carocci editore, 2013), pp. 11-2.

human artefacts, speech acts included, become an expression, or rather an extension, of human mind.<sup>5</sup>

Such a description of human mind results particularly insightful when applied to narrative theory, as it shifts the attention from the literary text to the way in which the reader experiences such text. More importantly, it investigates the way in which both text and reader contribute to create meaning. Texts, in fact, convey the meanings which the author conceived; nonetheless, the readers interpret texts according to their *personal* meanings and to the conscious or unconscious experiences which moulded their personality.

Despite this new interest in readers' experience of the literary text, however, the role which emotions play in shaping such experience is remarkably neglected. One of the reasons for that surprising lack of attention may lie in the nature of emotions which, as evolutionary psychologists assert, are "brain's operations"<sup>6</sup> and therefore already included in the cognitive inquiry. Additionally, the "paradox of fiction",<sup>7</sup> which investigates whether being aware that characters and events are fictitious biases the readers' emotional response towards them, constitutes another obstacle to the thorough analysis of the role of emotions in reading experiences.

The last decade, however, witnessed the emergence of an "affective turn" of cognitive narratology which resulted from studies such as Hogan's and Holland's, which draw from psychology, psychoanalysis and affective neuroscience.<sup>8</sup> It seems,

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<sup>5</sup> Herman, 'Narrative Theory', pp.165-6.

<sup>6</sup> Cosmides and Tooby, cited in Keen, 'Introduction: Narrative and the Emotions', *Poetics Today*, Vol. 32 No. 1 (2011), pp. 1-53 (p.21).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p.29.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 22-34.

therefore, that the current direction of cognitive studies applied to narrative theory promisingly matches the hoped-for ambitions of the Myrifield Manifesto:

We discern a need to shift focus from the *interpretative* preoccupation of current approaches to the *experience* of literature and the arts, which includes the need to study their *emotional* aspects.<sup>9</sup>

In spite of this significant affective turn which focuses on the emotions which generate narratives and which narratives arouse in turn, there is a paucity of solid research on narratives which do not seem to invite an empathic, or rather sympathetic, response on the part of their readers. In fact, as Zillmann interestingly remarks,

[g]iven that our attraction to portrayals of violence and its aftermath is obtrusive in filling movie and television screens and books and papers, in both fiction and nonfiction, it is astounding how little attention psychologists have paid to this phenomenon. Both the construction of theories that might explain the extraordinary appeal of the portrayals in question and the empirical exploration of this appeal have been neglected. In untiring fashion, social psychologists [...] have essentially bypassed the issue of the appeal of fictional and nonfictional violence as a salient element of entertainment.<sup>10</sup>

The purpose of this study, therefore, is that of investigating human counterintuitive enjoyment of disquieting fiction. I use the label “*disquieting fiction*” as an umbrella term which comprises those literary texts which satisfy two criteria: first, they display a significant amount of explicit or implied violent scenes; second,

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<sup>9</sup> Margaret H. Freeman, *Myrifield Manifesto*.

<<https://sites.google.com/a/case.edu/myrifield/Home/symposia/literary-reading--emotion/manifesto>> [accessed 28 January 2016].

<sup>10</sup> Dolf Zillmann, ‘The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence’, *Why We Watch: the attractions of violent entertainment*, ed. by Jeffrey Goldstein, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 179-211 (p.181).

they present scenes which evoke more than disgust in their readers: they provoke *disquietude*.

Far from representing a definitive research on the topic, this study aims at providing insights about what happens in readers' mind and, particularly, in the mind of readers of disquieting fiction. Furthermore, it draws from neuroscience and psychoanalysis in order to suggest hypotheses which explain not only why the readers enjoy this kind of narrative, but also how the narrative itself succeeds in provoking a sympathetic response despite its anti-empathic nature.

For the purposes of this research, I chose to analyse two British novels: *The Wasp Factory* and *A Clockwork Orange*. Since they represent both popular and literary fiction, these novels seem to respond to Keen's invite to consider not only the "high literary canon", but also "a full range of texts [...], unconstrained by value judgments."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they present a striking amount of violent and unsettling scenes, thus satisfying the criteria to be labelled as "disquieting fiction".

This study comprises two parts. The first one, "Part I - Theories" supplies the theoretical background for my research, and it is further divided into two chapters.

Chapter 1 aims at answering the preliminary question: "Why do we enjoy fiction?" and it offers an overview of the main literature on the subject, drawing from neuroscience, psychoanalysis and Theory of Mind. The chapter then illustrates the contributions which works such as Hogan's *Affective Narratology*, Holland's *Literature and the Brain* and Zunshine's *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies* brought to the field of affective narrative theory and to the study of human enjoyment of narrative as a whole.

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<sup>11</sup> Keen, 'Introduction: Narrative and the Emotions', p.40.

Chapter 2 addresses the research question: “Why do we enjoy disquieting fiction?” and it proposes my hypotheses. First, I suggest that this kind of literature manipulates the readers’ expectations so as to mislead their conjectures throughout the whole narrative experience. Indeed, these narratives seem to present several deceitful elements which aim at engaging the readers’ interest and Theory of Mind. As a result, they delude the readers into expecting the kind of resolution which they are accustomed to: a (preferably) happy ending, or rather an “idealized aspect normalcy”.

My second hypothesis argues that disquieting fiction provides a voyeuristic pleasure as it exploits human tendency to morbid curiosity and *Schadenfreude*. Moreover, it suggests that this kind of literature results appealing as it relies on Machiavellian characters in order to enable a Freudian “return of the repressed”. Throughout Chapter 2, I provide examples from a third disquieting novel, *The Collector*, in order to illustrate my suggestions. A complete summary of Fowles’ novel can be found in the Appendix.

In the second part of this study, “Part II - Analysis”, I applied the hypotheses suggested in Chapter 2 to the novels which I selected. Therefore, I simulated the reading experience of average readers who encounter *The Wasp Factory* and *A Clockwork Orange* for the first time. In order to suit the purposes of this research which focuses on literary texts, the analysis of *A Clockwork Orange* supposes a fictitious readership which has never watched Kubrick’s film.

Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 thus examine how *The Wasp Factory* and *A Clockwork Orange* manipulate their readers’ expectations. Secondly, they investigate how the novels maintain the readers’ transportation thanks to subtle deceits. Finally, they

analyse how the narratives succeed in prompting the readers' sympathetic response towards the Machiavellian protagonists which they display.

# **Part I - Theories**

## Why do we enjoy fiction?

According to Sigmund Freud, human instincts are regulated by an innate “pleasure-principle” so as to pursue gratification and avoid pain.<sup>12</sup> The readers’ enjoyment of unsettling fiction seems thus to be counterintuitive: why do disturbing novels engage us in spite of the repugnance they arouse? In order to provide an exhaustive answer, we need to step back and pose a different question first: why do human beings enjoy fiction at all? The following paragraphs analyse three main reasons, namely the pleasure which reading supplies, the emotions which it evokes, and the bond readers and characters share.

### 1.1 Seeking, play and entrancement

When we are engaged in reading, a feeling of pleasure pervades us as the impression of living someone else’s life arises: not only do we seem to lose contact with the reality which surrounds us, but we also feel the same emotions our characters experience (see §1.3). Indeed, reading is a very rewarding activity: it stimulates our brain so as to release dopamine, it appeals to human social wishes, and it provokes a trance experience during which readers receive gratification without acting.

“[L]iterature is only pretend”, Holland states.<sup>13</sup> In fact, we do not have to act on the book in order to feel real emotions: we only have to imagine. To some extent, thus, reading resembles play: it is a safe, fun simulation of contingencies. According to

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<sup>12</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, (New York: Norton, 1990), p.1.

<sup>13</sup> Norman N. Holland, *Literature and the Brain*, (Gainesville: The PsyArt Foundation, 2009), p.57.

Panksepp, whose research contributed to associate specific brain systems and neurotransmitters to basic emotions such as fear and joy, all young mammals feel the urge to play, and they all do it for the same reason: it is pleasurable. Such pleasure, which comes in the form of dopaminergic rewards, derives from the SEEKING system, which activities such as exploratory and social play seem to trigger.<sup>14</sup>

Commonly referred to as “the Brain Reward System” since its discovery in 1954,<sup>15</sup> the SEEKING system is a “positive feeling (euphoria?) of anticipatory eagerness” and it is “exquisitely sensitive to any and all rewards that are within one’s grasp”.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, we can infer that literature can activate our SEEKING system too.<sup>17</sup> Whenever we read a book, in fact, whenever we change our role in the storyworld according to the characters whose point of view we acquire, we play a kind of social play: we can experience as diverse social interactions and events as life could possibly present us with. This safe simulation of counterfactuals enables us to imagine possible outcomes, physical actions and reactions, so that we can choose the best one in case of need.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, whenever we are transported by a book, we “can have the pleasure of the emotions that accompany loss or injury while remaining certain that [we] will suffer the real effects of neither”.<sup>19</sup>

Literature makes this safe enjoyment of emotions possible since it induces a trance-like experience. When we are engaged in reading, we become unresponsive towards information from our body and the environment which surrounds us. This

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<sup>14</sup> Jaak Panksepp and Lucy Biven, *The Archaeology of Mind: Neuroevolutionary Origins of Human Emotions*, (New York - London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), p.355.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p.96.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.100.

<sup>17</sup> Holland, pp. 86-7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.69.

<sup>19</sup> Storey Roberts, cited in Holland, p.57.

happens because “evolution made the brain an economical organ”<sup>20</sup> which tends to avoid dispersions of energies. As a result, when we deliberately choose to focus our attention on one special thing, our thalamus inhibits the transmission of information from other stimuli, thus inhibiting our actions on them as well. However, that would not be enough to explain why we experience a sort of trance during reading. In order to be transported by the book, in fact, we also need to trust what we are reading: we need a “willing suspension of disbelief”,<sup>21</sup> lest any attempt to test the reality of what we are reading interrupt our entrancement.

As Gerrig suggests, “we have a set [...] to believe all stories unless we make an effort to disbelieve”.<sup>22</sup> Thus, when we are engaged in reading, we tend not to doubt, according to what has been called the “principle of minimal departure”: as long as the story does not provide explicit evidence of differences from our real world, we assume that the storyworld reflects our reality.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, since we agree to consider the stories we read as fictional and unreal, we do not plan to act on them; as a consequence, we do not need to test their reality. Our gratification derives from that inhibition of action: we allow ourselves to be completely absorbed in a work of art, which we enjoy as it does not require us to act in order to experience emotions. In this sense, reading appeals to our deepest memories: those of being fed by our mothers. Back then, during the earliest stages of our lives, we did not need to act on the world in order to receive pleasure. Literature feeds and satisfies us likewise.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Holland, p.48.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, cited in Ibid., p.61.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Gerrig, cited in Ibid., p.64.

<sup>23</sup> Alan Palmer, ‘Storyworlds and Groups’, *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, pp. 176-92 (p.181).

<sup>24</sup> Holland, p.141.

## 1.2 Emotions, language and catharsis

Humans are biologically inclined to regard as enjoyable those actions and decisions which grant survival.<sup>25</sup> When they consider possible future situations, in fact, they rely on emotions and imagination in order to choose the best course of action to achieve pleasurable outcomes.<sup>26</sup> When we turn to literature, however, such a tendency poses a problem: why do we find gratification in something which is fictional and which we cannot act on?

Emotions might be the key element to answer this question. In his *Affective Narratology*, Patrick Colm Hogan highlights the crucial role which emotions play with regards to literature. He analyses how different cultures developed similar story prototypes in order to evoke prototypical emotions, thus producing recurring patterns along unrelated literatures of the world.<sup>27</sup> As the author explains, in fact, emotion systems provide the fundamental organizing principles for genres [...].

The major cross-cultural genres come about through convergent development derived from the need of storytellers to produce narratives of general interest.<sup>28</sup>

Prototypical stories, Hogan asserts, revolve around characters and their goals. Such goals derive from characters' emotional responses to events which interrupt a fragile state of normalcy,<sup>29</sup> thus setting the story into motion. However, in order for the narratives to appeal to readers' interest, goals need to be empathically effective: that is,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p.102.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan, *Affective Narratology. The Emotional Structure of Stories*, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p. 238.

<sup>27</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan, 'On Being Moved. Cognition and Emotion in Literature and Film', *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, pp. 237-56 (pp. 250-51). See also: Patrick Colm Hogan, 'Literary Universals', in *Poetics Today*, Vol. 18 No. 2 (Summer, 1997), pp. 223-49.

<sup>28</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan *Affective Narratology. The Emotional Structure of Stories*, p.181.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p.80.

they must be universally acknowledged as important and non-substitutable.<sup>30</sup> The pursuit of an enduring condition of happiness seems one of the most compelling goals to achieve, especially if it is linked to a life or death condition.

According to Hogan, “there are three cross-culturally recurring happiness prototypes, and these happiness prototypes define three cross-culturally predominant narrative prototypes.”<sup>31</sup> First, the goal of romantic union determines the romantic tragicomedy, which relies on two emotions: attachment and sexual desire. Second, achieving a high position in a social hierarchy provides the goal for the heroic tragicomedy, which involves emotions such as pride and anger. Finally, famine, usually caused by a sin which requires a social reparation, is the basis for the sacrificial tragicomedy.

As the prototypical narratives show, literature and emotion share a two-fold connection: on the one hand emotion systems shape the story structures, on the other hand stories themselves stimulate emotions.<sup>32</sup> In fact, as Hogan remarks, emotional response to literature is “a matter of the concrete images we experience when engaging in [the simulation of a character’s experience]. It is also a matter of the emotional memories that are activated during simulation.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, we enjoy literature because it triggers emotional memories. It does so by employing emotional associations, by relying on language and form, and by enabling readers to experience illicit pleasures without guilt.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.129.

<sup>32</sup> Holland, p.105,

<sup>33</sup> Patrick Colm Hogan, ‘On Being Moved.’, p.246.

Each time readers respond emotionally to literature, they do it unconsciously. Emotions are generated in the limbic system, which comprises some of the most ancient parts of the human brain: the hypothalamus, the hippocampus and the amygdala. Whereas the hypothalamus controls the homeostasis of the body by regulating the release of hormones and physical responses to functions such as hunger, pain and sex drive, the hippocampus is involved in memory storage.<sup>34</sup> The amygdala dominates the fight-or-flight instinct, combines memories to positive or negative emotions such as rewards or threats, and it affects the intensity of emotions: its removal or lesion, in fact, causes “a placid calmness”<sup>35</sup> in human beings. As a result, when emotions occur, we experience them as if they were reflexes: we cannot control them consciously.

This is what happens when literature triggers emotional memories: readers experience emotions, whether they are aware of it or not, which are intimately connected with their fight-or-flight instinct and their memorized emotional associations. In the first case, unexpected events, pleasurable or scary imagery, and expressive outcomes such as emotional expressions – be they presented through pictures or through emotional terms – stimulate the amygdala, which produces two kind of responses. The first one is a rapid, “rough” response which grants evolutionary advantages: indeed, it makes us perceive the unexpected as a threat, so that we choose flight over fight and possibly avoid our death. The second kind of response, on the

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<sup>34</sup> Stephanie Liou, *The HOPES Brain Tutorial* (2010), <[http://web.stanford.edu/group/hopes/cgi-bin/hopes\\_test/the-hopes-brain-tutorial-text-version/](http://web.stanford.edu/group/hopes/cgi-bin/hopes_test/the-hopes-brain-tutorial-text-version/)> [accessed 29 October 2015] (Chapters 10 and 12.2).

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Wright, *Neuroscience Online: An Electronic Textbook For The Neurosciences | Department of Neurobiology and Anatomy*, (Houston: The University of Texas Medical School), <<http://neuroscience.uth.tmc.edu/toc.htm>> [accessed 29 October 2015] (Section 4, Chapter 6).

contrary, is slower and evaluative: it analyses the unexpected situation so as to determine whether it was actually a threat.<sup>36</sup> The horror genre bases its success on this kind of direct emotional stimulation.

Memorized emotional associations, on the other hand, resort to “gut feelings”, that is, memories charged with a pleasurable or non-pleasurable value by the hippocampus. The kind of memories involved in this process are long-term memories, and they can be episodic or non-declarative. The first category comprises memories about experiences: they are conscious and they store the emotional responses to a given experience. The second category embraces nonverbal and unconscious memories: they encode body sensations and preverbal experiences into feelings of pleasure and displeasure.<sup>37</sup> Both episodic and non-declarative memories leave traces on us. As Holland explains, “[...] early experiences stored as ‘memory traces’ will affect personality unconsciously and pre-verbally.”<sup>38</sup> At the same time, these memorized associations influence the way readers perceive and respond to literature. In fact, not only fictional situations trigger their memories of similar experiences, but also language and form stimulate their “gut feelings”.

Language pervades every aspect of our life: it allows us to communicate and, more crucially, it shapes the way we think and the way we interact with our world, as it provides the words to identify and understand reality. As Lera Boroditsky affirms, supporting the famous Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,

each [language] provides its own cognitive toolkit and encapsulates the knowledge and worldview developed over thousands of years within a culture.

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<sup>36</sup> Holland, pp. 90-1.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 130-6.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p.137.

Each contains a way of perceiving, categorizing and making meaning in the world, an invaluable guidebook developed and honed by our ancestors.<sup>39</sup>

As a result, since we charge every word with a positive or negative feeling, language entails emotions too. Indeed, not only the brain associates memories to specific words, but it also performs what neuropsychology calls “spreading activation”: a free association of meanings of different words. Such words thus reveal to be bound together in our minds: when we read one, we understand both its plain meaning and the meaning of the words we associate to it.<sup>40</sup>

As Chiarello argues, something similar may happen when we read literature. In fact, although the decoding of language happens in the left hemisphere of the brain, the right hemisphere seems to be involved in meaning-development as well. More importantly, the right hemisphere seems to retain all those meanings which the left hemisphere suppresses: that is, all those emotional meanings which free associations and unexpected metaphors evoke.<sup>41</sup> When we read literature, therefore, we decode it in two different ways: the left hemisphere provides the plain meaning of what we read, while the right hemisphere enriches it with meanings which foster our unconscious emotional associations.

Form, finally, arouses emotions too. The author’s stylistic choices and the reader’s understanding of the text offer an emotional catharsis similar to that supplied by dreams, which disguise repressed fantasies so that our censor allows us to

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<sup>39</sup> Lera Boroditsky, ‘How Language Shapes Thought. The languages we speak affect our perceptions of the world’, *Scientific American*, Vol. 304, No. 2 (2011), pp. 62-5, (p.65).

<sup>40</sup> Holland, p.195.

<sup>41</sup> Chiarello, cited in Holland, pp. 202-6.

experience them.<sup>42</sup> In fact, Holland suggests that writers rely on unconscious defenses when they organize their stories: they do so whenever a “signal of unpleasure” threatens the enjoyment of the literary experience, for example when certain events or descriptions evoke displeasing emotional associations.<sup>43</sup> As a result, the writer may *omit* details or sequences, so as to repress and deny the unpleasant ideas; he may also rely on *irony* or *abstractions*, so as to reverse the unpleasant element by presenting its opposite. Another technique involves *projecting* the threat “outside” and assigning it to an external element, such as, for example, an entire society, or internalize it, so that the characters’ inner life becomes the focus of writers’ and readers’ attention. Sometimes, authors may *split* the unpleasant impulse among several characters or recurring elements in their production. Finally, writers may rely on similes and metaphors in order to *symbolize* what cannot be said.<sup>44</sup>

However, since readers experience literature through the filter of their own inner defences, the literary text may evoke unpleasant or illicit emotional associations. Readers, in fact, “[...] will shape and edit what they see, hear, or read to suit their own inner psychological needs, ‘misreading’ as need be. If readers cannot succeed, they cannot enjoy the work, and they reject it.”<sup>45</sup> Therefore, reading represents a very active experience which requires not only a text, but also readers’ response to it. Indeed, this is what the “bi-active model of reading”,<sup>46</sup> suggests: by means of their form, texts can control and guide part of readers’ response; however, it takes also readers, who bring

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<sup>42</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913), p. 136.

<sup>43</sup> Holland, p. 156.

<sup>44</sup> Holland, p.154-5.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.163.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.175.

to the text their own experiences, set of defences, emotional memories, fears and wishes, to project a meaning into the text. Such meaning would be personal and individualized. Moreover, it would comprise readers' wish-fulfilling thoughts.

Literature offers the chance to sublimate unconscious wishes and fantasies which the conscious mind would not allow. In fact, readers can rely on symbols in the text in order to assign their own meanings to them and, by doing so, they can project their illicit wishes into the text. As a result, when readers interpret it according to those meanings which derive from their unconscious wishes, they deceive themselves into thinking that it is the literary work itself which implies those meanings.<sup>47</sup> They deny responsibility. Thus, they enjoy the emotional catharsis which the text, once enriched with their own associations and illicit projections, enables them to experience.

### **1.3 Dissociation, simulation and empathy**

One of the most appealing features of literature is the chance to observe fictional mental functioning. According to Palmer, "readers enter the storyworlds of novels primarily by attempting to follow the workings of the fictional minds contained in them."<sup>48</sup> We humans, in fact, are obsessed with other people's deeds and feelings: not only do we intimately feel *Schadenfreude* whenever gossip brings this kind of news,<sup>49</sup> but we also "spend a great deal, perhaps most, of our energy seeking to explain ourselves and other people."<sup>50</sup> When we are engaged in reading, therefore, we start creating a deep bond between ourselves and fictional entities called characters, whom

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p.264.

<sup>48</sup> Alan Palmer, 'Storyworlds and Groups', p.177.

<sup>49</sup> Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), p.6-7.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p.11.

we care about as if they were real. This happens for three main reasons: first, human beings have a tendency to attribute a mind to things; second, since we attribute human mental states to characters, they enable us to practice our Theory of Mind; finally, as literature stimulates our ability to simulate other people's feelings and actions, we feel empathy towards fictional characters.

Humans develop the ability to attribute causality to events during the earliest stages of their lives. Such ability, or “intuitive psychology”,<sup>51</sup> is a legacy of our primitive past; attributing a mind and consciousness to things, in fact, offers evolutionary advantages: as Vermeule observes, it is “far better to overattribute agency to potential predators than to underattribute agency and run the risk of complacently getting picked off.”<sup>52</sup> We have an innate tendency to regard self-propelled things as animated and goal-oriented, so that we can treat them as understandable threats which we can fight or flee from and, more crucially, we can predict their actions. Likewise, our “intuitive psychology” enables us to make sense of other people’s behaviours and their intentions, since “attributing mental states to a complex system (such as a human being) is by far the easiest way of understanding it.”<sup>53</sup>

Intuitive psychology, together with human inclination to animate and anthropomorphize things, deceives readers into considering fictional characters as real people. Such deceit takes place in the brain as a short circuit: when we imagine things, the “where” and “what” systems which process information from the sensory organs (see §1.2), dissociate.<sup>54</sup> When we are engaged in reading, in fact, the quick, rough

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<sup>51</sup> Holland, p.115.

<sup>52</sup> Vermeule, *Why Do We Care?*, p.23.

<sup>53</sup> Simon Baron-Cohen, cited in Zunshine, p.196.

<sup>54</sup> Holland, p.119.

information which runs along the “where” pathway becomes irrelevant as we inhibit our motor actions. As a consequence, we process information through the “what” system: it makes us perceive fictional characters as real people, whose mental states we can infer. As Holland states: “the literary character is like an optical illusion for our brains”:<sup>55</sup> it exists in our mind, but its real location is negligible as we do not plan to take action on it.

Although we are aware that literary characters do not exist, we invest them with feelings, desires and thoughts.<sup>56</sup> According to Zunshine, we need little prompting to attribute mental states to fictional characters.<sup>57</sup> this tendency is instinctive, since “we ‘intuitively’ connect people’s behaviour to their mental states [...] even when the author has left us with the absolute minimum of necessary cues for constructing such a representation”.<sup>58</sup> The reason behind this instinct seems to lie in human evolutionary history. Scholars, in fact, trace the origins of the ability to infer other people’s mental states in a massive increase in human brain size during Pleistocene, when human social nature required our ancestors to interact with more and more densely populated groups.<sup>59</sup> Humans thus developed a cognitive adaptation called “Theory of Mind”, which Palmer defines as “our awareness of the existence of other minds, our knowledge of how to interpret other people’s thought processes, our mind-reading abilities in the real world.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p.124.

<sup>56</sup> Lisa Zunshine, ‘Theory of Mind and Experimental Representations of Fictional Consciousness’, *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, pp.193-213 (p.198).

<sup>57</sup> Lisa Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel*, (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2006), p.22.

<sup>58</sup> Zunshine, ‘Theory of Mind’, pp. 202-03.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.196.

<sup>60</sup> Palmer, ‘Storyworlds and Groups’, p.181.

Literature engages us as it stimulates our Theory of Mind. Indeed, since “novel-reading is mind reading”,<sup>61</sup> it presents us with characters whom we attribute feelings to, and it enables us to investigate and interpret their intentions. Readers, in fact, resort to analogies with events they have experienced and to their own stock of emotional memories,<sup>62</sup> that is, their “inference systems”,<sup>63</sup> so as to attribute purposes to characters. As Vermeule suggests, we may do so in order to learn to self-regulate ourselves: Theory of Mind, in fact, “provides images that help the organism navigate the outside world.”<sup>64</sup>

According to simulation theorists, however, we also make sense of characters’ state of minds by simulating events, feelings and actions into our minds. Indeed, we simulate by responding emotionally to characters’ choices, struggles, wishes and goals. As Hogan observes,

one crucial aspect of our emotional responses to other people, both prudential and ethical, involves our willingness and ability to simulate other people’s situations and thereby to some degree experience the emotions they are likely to be feeling. Because literature can foster or inhibit our willingness and ability to simulate the thoughts and feelings of fictional people, it might in principle have the same general sorts of effect on our responses to real people.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>62</sup> Cristina Bronzino, ‘Neuronarratologia ed empatia’, *Neuronarratologia. Il futuro dell’analisi del racconto*, ed. by Stefano Calabrese, (Bologna: Archetipolibri - Gedit Edizioni, 2009), pp. 205-24 (p.214).

<sup>63</sup> Vermeule, *Why Do We Care?*, p.35.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p.36.

<sup>65</sup> Hogan, *Affective Narratology*, p.243.

Virtual simulation of characters' mental states, therefore, may underpin narrative empathy.<sup>66</sup>

Suzanne Keen defines empathy as "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" which "can be provoked by witnessing another's emotional state, by hearing about another's condition, or even by reading."<sup>67</sup> Although further evidence is needed, empathy seems to be strictly connected with our mirror neurons system. Discovered by Dr. Rizzolatti's team in the early '90s, mirror neurons are a special kind of neurons which fire both when actions are performed and when they are witnessed.<sup>68</sup> The neurological ability to virtually simulate other people's actions, therefore, may be what prompts humans to empathize with other people's feelings, as the experiments conducted by Tania Singer and her staff demonstrated. During the experiments, subjects were both shocked and required to watch a loved person being shocked. As their Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) showed, the same emotional areas of the brain lit up when the subjects received pain and when they witnessed it, while the sensory areas did not activate. Furthermore, subjects did not need to actually witness their partner's facial expressions in order to respond empathically: indeed, "an 'arbitrary cue' signalling the feeling state of another was sufficient to elicit empathy."<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> For a detailed report of empirical studies on the subject, see Amy Coplan, 'Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol.62, No.2, (Spring 2004), pp. 141-52.

<sup>67</sup> Suzanne Keen, 'A Theory of Narrative Empathy', *NARRATIVE*, Vol.14, No.3 (October 2006), pp. 208-36 (p.208).

<sup>68</sup> Giacomo Rizzolatti, Corrado Sinigaglia, *So quel che fai. Il cervello che agisce e i neuroni specchio*, (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2006), p.1.

<sup>69</sup> Keen, p.211.

Since people respond empathically to both real and imagined situations,<sup>70</sup> when we read we can feel empathy towards characters, so much so that we create a bond between ourselves and their own being: we may acquire their point of view, or we may reject their deeds. Indeed, since words imply actions and descriptions of mental states, they can play the same role of the “arbitrary cues” of Singer’s experiment to our mirror neurons system.<sup>71</sup> Words, in fact, are arbitrary signals which comprise both their plain meaning and readers’ personal emotional, unconscious associations. When we identify with literary characters, therefore, we feel their emotions and our own; characters thus become the medium through which we can receive pleasure without acting (see §1.1) and without feeling guilty (see §1.2) whenever we let ourselves to be transported in reading.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Luca Berta, ‘Narrazione e neuroni specchio’, *Neuronarratologia. Il futuro dell’analisi del racconto*, pp.187-202 (p.196).

## Why do we enjoy disquieting fiction?

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle ascribed the origins of poetry to human attitude to imitate and to take delight in such imitations, as they enable us to learn something new. Since “to learn gives the liveliest pleasure”,<sup>72</sup> we enjoy the work of art regardless of the nature of its content: be it ugly, be it tragic, be it disturbing, it still provides knowledge and, as a result, delight. However, what kind of knowledge can disquieting fiction transmit?

According to Herman, narratives provide cognitive advantages as they require readers to reconstruct the storyworld into their minds by establishing spatiotemporal connections between events and by attributing physical features as well as mental states to characters.<sup>73</sup> Thus, since narratives help us create and evaluate counterfactuals, not only do they train our Theory of Mind and empathic abilities, but they also enable our brains to form frames about hypothetical scenarios.<sup>74</sup>

Postulated in 1975, the concept of frame first appeared in professor Minsky’s “frames paper” in relation to constructs of AI. As the Encyclopedia of Artificial Intelligence reports, “Minsky envisioned a scheme where knowledge was encoded in packets, called frames [...]. A frame would be activated whenever one encountered a new situation; the tricky part would be to get the appropriate frame to be activated in

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<sup>72</sup> S.H. Butcher, *The Poetics of Aristotle*, (London - New York: The Macmillan company, 1902), p.15.

<sup>73</sup> David Herman, ‘Stories as a Tool for Thinking’, *Narrative Theory and the Cognitive Sciences*, ed. by David Herman, (Leland Stanford Junior University: CSLI Publications, 2003), pp.163-92 (p.169).

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p.170.

the appropriate situation [...].”<sup>75</sup> In this view, frames are “chunks” of information used to organize and navigate the reality more effectively, as they enable the artificial intelligence to select a “script” of actions which it has to perform in order to behave properly in a specific situation. Frames thus resemble what cognitive psychology refers to as “schemata”: a set of general assumptions and expectations about the world, by means of which we can select the most appropriate way of behaving when we encounter new or familiar situations.<sup>76</sup>

Herman suggests that “stories can be studied as a primary resource for building and updating models for understanding the world.”<sup>77</sup> Indeed, since narratives present characters’ feelings and actions connected to the goals they pursue and the obstacles they need to fight, they also supply information about appropriate behaviours within fictional, yet to some general extent plausible, what-if scenarios. Moreover, stories do not only “encode, what, how, where and when a particular course of action can or should be pursued”,<sup>78</sup> they also “mark even the most painful or disturbing experiences as endurable because finite.”<sup>79</sup> Every story, in fact, has an ending: our entrancement ceases to transport us as soon as we close the book. Therefore, we might read disquieting narratives in hopes of learning a positive moral: there is always an ending to the pain we bear.

Another kind of knowledge which disquieting fiction may provide is strictly connected to evolutionary advantages. Holland, in fact, refers to evolutionary

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<sup>75</sup> A. S. Maida, ‘Frame Theory’, *Encyclopedia of Artificial Intelligence*, ed. by S. C. Shapiro, (New York: Wiley, 1990), vol. 1, pp. 302-12 (p.302).

<sup>76</sup> Holland, p.183.

<sup>77</sup> Herman, ‘Stories as a Tool for Thinking’, p.185.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., p.182.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., p.173

psychology to explain why “dead bodies, ‘low’ animals, rotting food”<sup>80</sup> fascinate us: since they are potential threats which we may encounter during our lives, our brain requires us to look at them attentively. Disturbing events such as those described in disquieting literature, therefore, may offer our brain a chance to look closely to potential threatening scenarios, so that we can avoid them or be prepared to fight against them.

Is building new frames and dispelling or taming our fears what leads us to read disquieting fiction? Or do we read disturbing literature because of evolutionary needs? Both those illuminating suggestions seem valid. However, they do not take into account the enjoyment we experience. In fact, we do not find uncanny literature educative, we find it *appealing*. The question, therefore, still holds true: what pleasure do we receive in reading such a discomforting literature?

In this chapter, I propose two hypotheses. The first one is that disquieting fiction is a deceiving kind of literature which manipulates the readers’ expectations. Secondly, I suggest that disquieting fiction avails itself of fascinating Machiavellian characters so as to exploit human tendency to morbid curiosity and *Schadenfreude*.

## 2.1 Deceiving narratives

In his analysis of prototypical narratives, Hogan illustrates how the shared, basic structure of narratives strictly intertwines with the protagonist’s emotions, so that it arouses his or her SEEKING system. In his words, in fact,

first, there is some narratively crucial feature of normalcy. The alteration of this feature in non-normalcy triggers the protagonist’s emotions and generates

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<sup>80</sup> Holland, p.248.

his or her goals. This feature is idealized when the situation has not only stopped giving rise to those emotions and goals but has fulfilled the goals in a way that is intensified and that is no longer fragile or temporary.<sup>81</sup>

The eventual aim to achieve, therefore, is a condition of idealized aspect normalcy, that is “the development of a condition that maximizes the satisfaction of the goal by the establishment of an intensified and enduring condition.”<sup>82</sup> As in the case of the three cross-culturally predominant narrative prototypes (see §1.2), this final condition is preferably, although not necessarily, a state of enduring happiness. The reason for such a preference is emotional: the readers’ empathy towards characters leads them to form expectations about the possible, pleasurable outcomes that characters can eventually achieve.

According to Oatley, one of the main theorists of the “appraisal theory”, readers generate expectations as a result of their identification with characters; provided that their goals interest and engage the reader, the latter evaluates the situations described in a narrative in terms of the impact they may have on characters’ achievement of their goals. As a consequence, readers will show a positive emotional response whenever a situation makes such an accomplishment more likely. Conversely, those situations which prevent the goal achievement will produce a negative emotional response.<sup>83</sup>

Hogan draws on “perceptual theory” to propose a more plastic explanation. In his view, imagination elicits emotions since emotional memories generate anticipations. These can be “short-term expectations”, “working anticipations” and “long-term expectations”, according to the range of potential future they cover.

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<sup>81</sup> Hogan, *Affective Narratology*, p.196.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p.197.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., pp. 42-5. See also Keith Oatley and P.N. Johnson-Laird, ‘Cognitive approaches to emotions’, *TRENDS in Cognitive Sciences*, Vol. 18 No. 3 (March 2014), pp.134-40.

Perception thus triggers emotional associations which, in turn, generate or inhibit expectations about possible outcomes; imagining and evaluating scenarios which may grant or deny those outcomes arouse emotions as well.<sup>84</sup> Hogan's suggestion, therefore, combines appraisal and perceptual theory as it relates characters' goals to readers' own emotional memories and appraisal of situations.

What happens, however, if narratives disappoint the readers' expectations of an eventual condition of enduring happiness, as in the case of disquieting fiction? Unless readers are able "to bring the plot to closure, and that means completing [their] expectations",<sup>85</sup> the literary experience fails to satisfy them. As Holland suggests, the dopaminergic rewards which our SEEKING system releases may provide an explanation to human need for satisfying closures.<sup>86</sup> Therefore, since the SEEKING system activates an eagerness for pleasurable outcomes, it seems to be the anticipation of a gratifying ending what engages the readers of disquieting literature.

My claim is that this kind of disturbing narratives deliberately deludes its readers into expecting an idealized aspect normalcy of enduring happiness by stimulating three main emotional pathways in their minds. First, they exploit the readers' problem-solving abilities through the use of "deceits" which activate the readers' SEEKING system; second, they elicit unconscious emotional associations which awaken the readers' GRIEF system; finally, they rely on multi-sensory imagery so as to arouse the readers' LUST system.

Disquieting narratives arouse our SEEKING system since they offer the readers a chance to challenge their problem-solving abilities. Problem-solving is, in fact, "a

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<sup>84</sup> Hogan., *Affective Narratology*, pp. 48-51.

<sup>85</sup> Holland, p.165.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 168-70.

pleasurable activity for most people”:<sup>87</sup> we take delight in the cognitive challenges which solving puzzles entails because we feel rewarded every time we succeed in finding the right solution. Problem-solving activities, therefore, not only encourage humans to make predictions and hypotheses about unexpected situations, but they also trigger an eagerness for solutions, or rather, for confirmations. Such eagerness is the “intense, enthused curiosity about the world”<sup>88</sup> which the SEEKING system represents, and it stimulates the release of excitatory neurotransmitters such as dopamine and glutamate. Furthermore, it is the euphoria which keeps us engaged in reading, so that we can form, modify, confirm or reject our expectations about a narrative.

How does disquieting fiction foster our expectations? I suggest that it does so by employing a plot device called “MacGuffin.” In his interview with François Truffaut, Alfred Hitchcock tells a famous anecdote to explain what a MacGuffin is:

You may be wondering where the term originated. It might be a Scottish name, taken from a story about two men in a train. One man says, “What’s that package up there in the baggage rack?”

And the other answers, “Oh, that’s a MacGuffin.”

The first one asks, “What’s a MacGuffin?”

“Well,” the other man says, “it’s an apparatus for trapping lions in the Scottish Highlands.”

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<sup>87</sup> Hogan, *Affective narratology*, p.228.

<sup>88</sup> Panksepp, p.98.

The first man says, “But there are no lions in the Scottish Highlands,” and the other one answers, “Well then, that’s no MacGuffin!” So you see that a MacGuffin is actually nothing at all.<sup>89</sup>

MacGuffins, therefore, are trivial elements which catalyse the reader’s attention to such an extent that they purposely mislead her. Since the reader misinterprets the MacGuffin as an essential element of the plot, deeming it “of vital importance to the characters”,<sup>90</sup> she will use her problem-solving abilities in order to make hypotheses about its role. Once deceived by the narrative, she will start making predictions about the closure of the story, which she expects to be, if not a happy ending, at least an idealized aspect normalcy. Such a deceit, therefore, stimulates the activation of the SEEKING system, which induces the reader to keep on reading in order to confirm her hypotheses.

MacGuffins and scenes which challenge our problem-solving skills seem to accomplish the activation of our SEEKING system despite the disturbing, violent or gruesome elements which disquieting narratives present us with. Although it seems counterintuitive to keep on reading and enjoy such a disturbing kind of literature, I suggest that Panksepp’s studies on the emotional pathways of the brain may offer three interesting starting points for further research: the interaction between the SEEKING system and human frontal neocortex; the way the SEEKING system responds to homeostatic imbalances; and the role played by novelty in the activation of that system.

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<sup>89</sup> François Truffaut, *Hitchcock*, (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1985), p.138.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

As Panksepp remarks, the emotional systems are profusely connected to the neocortex, which is involved in thinking processes, so that “when the SEEKING system arouses the human neocortex, it energizes thinking processes – a kind of virtual world – yelling complex learned behaviours that are not instinctual and may even be counterinstinctual.”<sup>91</sup> This would confirm the hypothesis according to which disquieting fiction arouses our SEEKING system because it is a deceiving kind of narrative. Indeed, at first its MacGuffins challenge the readers’ problem-solving abilities so as to make them expect a certain kind of resolution which, if it matched their predictions, would make reading a pleasurable experience. However, when disturbing elements, scenes and characters appear, it might be that our strategic thinking takes the lead, thus making us endure the unpleasant experience in order to reach the end of the book, which we still hope to be at least enjoyable.

Fowles’ novel, *The Collector* (see Appendix), provides an example of the way in which disturbing narratives manipulates the readers’ expectations employing deceits. The sexual tension which the novel builds, indeed, can be regarded as its MacGuffin, as the readers are led to suspect that Frederick may have raped Miranda. He is, in fact, the narrator of his own story, a story which he tells retrospectively and which he seems to revisit morbidly, as if he savoured each moment of Miranda’s imprisonment again and again.

She was still out, on the bed. She looked a sight, the dress all off one shoulder.

I don’t know what it was, it got me excited, it gave me ideas, seeing her lying there right out. It was like I’d showed who was really the master. [...]

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<sup>91</sup> Panksepp, p.102.

So I did that. I took off her dress and her stockings and left on certain articles, just the brassières and the other so as not to go the whole hog. [...]

It was my chance I had been waiting for. I got the old camera and took some photos [...].<sup>92</sup>

Frederick's morbidity is heavily charged with sexual implications, so much so that the readers are very likely to expect a rape scene to take place before the end of the book. Such expectation stimulates the readers' curiosity to keep on reading in order to confirm their hypothesis. The novel, however, deludes their anticipations: there are no rape scenes in *The Collector* – Frederick even feels repulsion at the idea.

The feeling of eager anticipation connected with the SEEKING system does not only emerge when we live positive experiences, but it also appears when we feel unpleasant emotions. Panksepp explains that high levels of corticotropin-releasing factor, which plays an important role in causing stress, and low levels of endorphins, the opioids which our brain spontaneously generates, determine feelings of distress. Although it is still unclear how this activates the SEEKING system, “it may be that a dearth of endogenous opioids alone arouses the SEEKING system, which then urges people and animals to find the social companionship that makes them feel better.”<sup>93</sup> The bond we share with characters and the empathy we feel when we read about their actions, goals and outcomes (see §1.3) may provide the kind of “social companionship” which prompts the release of endorphins. In contrast, when we read about disturbing characters, we may experience that lack of endorphins which induces our SEEKING system to activate in order to find relief. However, since the readers are

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<sup>92</sup> John Fowles, *The Collector*, (London: Vintage Books, 2004), pp. 86-7.

<sup>93</sup> Panksepp, p.100.

less likely to feel empathy towards disturbing characters, I suggest that they replace sympathy with their attempts at mind-reading in order to experience the “social companionship” which they need<sup>94</sup> without feeling guilty.

Considering *The Collector*, Fowles achieves that purpose majestically through the use of two narrators and, consequently, two very different points of view. Indeed, he succeeds in evoking feelings of sympathy towards Frederick, the persecutor; moreover, he leads the readers to dislike the victim, Miranda, who appears moody and spoiled both in Frederick’s account and in the first pages of her diary. Fowles achieves this effect by contrasting Frederick’s feelings, which the readers picture as a naive and sincere devotion when they read Frederick’s account, to Miranda’s intentional mocking of those same feelings:

He’s been secretly watching me for nearly two years. He loves me desperately, he was very lonely, he knew I would always be ‘above’ him. It was awful, he spoke so awkwardly, he always has to say things in a roundabout way, he always has to justify himself at the same time. I sat and listened. I couldn’t look at him.<sup>95</sup>

Since Miranda’s diary retells the same events which Frederick reported in the first part of the book, the readers are offered Miranda’s point of view. They can compare the feelings which the persecutor and the victim feel for each other and, unsettlingly, they perceive Frederick’s as the positive, albeit naive, ones. However, he still remains a chilling persecutor and the readers would not feel comfortable if they

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<sup>94</sup> See Zunshine, *Why We Read Fiction*, p.42: “[...] narratives that challenge their readers’ ToM by their *unusual* and difficult representations of fictional consciousnesses may offer valuable insights into the workings of our consciousness which is anything but predictable, orderly, and simple.” (emphasis mine).

<sup>95</sup> Fowles, *The Collector*, p.122.

sympathized with him. Hence, they employ their Theory of Mind to try to make sense of him and his deeds.

Finally, novelties stimulate the activation of the SEEKING system as well. Changes, in fact, offer a thrill: as long as they are unfamiliar, they are potentially threatening and safe at the same time. However, “when a stimulus ceases to be novel [...] the SEEKING system no longer responds. This phenomenon is known as ‘habituation’.”<sup>96</sup> My claim, therefore, is that we enjoy disquieting fiction because it represents a novelty. Indeed, even though there is a vast abundance of plots, we are accustomed to the basic structure of other kinds of literature such as, for example, the romantic one: we can easily generate expectations which, in most cases, will be satisfied. Disquieting fiction, on the other hand, does not grant satisfaction to our expectations: it prompts and fosters them, but it may or may not fulfill them. Such an uncertainty makes this kind of literature unpredictable and, as a consequence, a constant novelty to enjoy.

The SEEKING system is not the only emotional system which disquieting fiction arouses. Disturbing literature, in fact, exploits its readers’ emotional associations to certain words (see §1.2) to keep them engaged in reading. Whenever a scene evokes unconscious memories or fears of loss and separation, our GRIEF system awakens. As a result, the level of the self-generated opioids in our brain decreases, and, as it happens for the “unpleasant states of homeostatic imbalance”,<sup>97</sup> this activates the SEEKING system which will urge us to keep on reading in order to find relief.

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<sup>96</sup> Panksepp, p.106.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p.99.

An example of activation of the GRIEF system can be found in *The Collector*, every time Miranda distressingly mentions her parents or the life she had before being imprisoned, and which becomes more and more blurred as her liveliness withers:

Every night I do something I haven't done for years. I lie and pray. I don't kneel, I know God despises kneelers. I lie and ask him to comfort M and D and Minny, and Caroline who must feel so guilty [...]. I ask him to help this misery who has me under his power. I ask him to help me. Not to let me be raped or abused and murdered. I ask him for light.<sup>98</sup>

As the readers witness how desperate and helpless Miranda is, they start to feel disquiet. They feel compassion for the victim and, as a result, they feel compelled to keep on reading, hoping for a positive resolution of the plot which could dispel their uneasiness.

Finally, since unexpected rewards activate the SEEKING euphoria so much so that “if rewards are delivered sporadically or every once in a while [...] it develops a sustained anticipatory urge (or a chronic craving)”,<sup>99</sup> another system comes into play whenever the SEEKING eagerness stops being a craving and becomes an actual consumption: the LUST system. According to Holland, the LUST system consummates the gratifications we receive from literature, such as those provided by a story resolving itself in the way we expected it to.<sup>100</sup> When it comes to disquieting literature, however, what gratifications can its readers consummate? I argue that multi-sensory imagery may provide an answer to this question.

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<sup>98</sup> Fowles, *The Collector*, p.119.

<sup>99</sup> Panksepp, pp.106-7.

<sup>100</sup> Holland, p.380.

In her essay about the effects of mental imagery on human enjoyment of art, Gabrielle Starr explains how our mind creates mental images. These images are intimately connected to our memories as they reproduce our personal way to interact with the world and think about it. Mental images can appear spontaneously or they can be stimulated; additionally, they may be experienced more or less vividly.<sup>101</sup> Sensory imagery, that is, imagery which reflects the sensations we would experience through our senses, prompts mental images, thus increasing the readers' engagement in the work of art. Motor imagery is probably the most engaging, since "when we experience imagery of sound or motion, there is corresponding brain activity in auditory or motor cortical areas."<sup>102</sup> When we read words which imply motion, in fact, we form a mental image of such a motion. If the words describe other people moving, we usually prefer to employ visual mental images, while when we imagine to be the subject who moves, not only do we imagine the motion visually, we also employ those areas of our brain which we rely on when we plan our movements. As a result, we actually "feel" the sensations corresponding to the image.<sup>103</sup>

Disquieting fiction uses multi-sensory imagery, that is, imagery which combines sensations experienced through more than one sense, profusely. Although most of the mental images which it provokes may be disturbing, involving violent or gruesome details, it may also depict some unexpected pleasant scenes. When that happens, the readers' SEEKING system activates, followed soon afterwards by the LUST system, which enjoys the pleasant feelings that the stimulation of the readers'

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<sup>101</sup> G. Gabrielle Starr, 'Multisensory Imagery', *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, pp. 275-91 (p.277).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p.281.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., p.282.

senses through mental images produces. The consequence is a re-activation of the SEEKING system as soon as the consumption of the pleasant scene has taken place: we resume the “chronic craving” for more pleasurable scenes as the disquieting narrative deceives us once again.

## 2.2 Morbid curiosity

“When English-speakers hear the word *Schadenfreude* for the first time, their reaction is not, ‘Let me see... Pleasure in another’s misfortunes... What could that possibly be? I cannot grasp the concept; [...]’ Their reaction is, ‘You mean there’s a *word* for it? Cool!’”<sup>104</sup>

In her attempt to define *Schadenfreude*, Vermeule quotes Steven Pinker’s words to emphasize the universality of this emotion. Indeed, human beings experience interest and, more crucially, a subtle kind of delight when they chance to witness other people’s accidents. According to Vermeule, *Schadenfreude* might be correlated with our society’s obsession with hypocrisy, since we tend to consider ourselves as innocent, and we find it extremely gratifying when other people, that is, alleged transgressors, are punished for their vices.<sup>105</sup> Despite its plausibility, however, that hypothesis does not seem to explain sufficiently why other people’s misfortunes are so attractive. I would argue that *Schadenfreude* may entail such a compelling and exciting curiosity in other people’s mishaps since it provides a voyeuristic kind of pleasure. As witnesses of an accident, in fact, we do not have to *act* in order to feel emotions: we can avail ourselves of our Theory of Mind so as to infer other people’s feelings, or we

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<sup>104</sup> Steven Pinker, quoted in Vermeule, *Why Do We Care?*, p.6.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., p.7.

may as well experience them thanks to our mirror neuron system; what is more, however, is that, as witnesses of an accident, we are not going to suffer any physical, actual consequence. The pleasure we feel in other people's misfortunes, therefore, may be fostered by our awareness that, whatever the pain, "it is not happening to me."

This is the kind of voyeuristic pleasure which literature provides. In the case of disquieting fiction, however, it seems licit to question such a delight. How is it possible, in fact, that the readers enjoy this kind of literature, in spite of the dismay which violent scenes of gore and torture should evoke? I suggest that the explanation may lie in the answer to another question: why do we feel compelled to glance at car accidents on the highway? To some extent, we are all morbidly curious.

Morbid curiosity entails an interest, or rather an attraction, towards images and events which society and morality would normally condemn. It is an impulse to sneak a glance at what is forbidden and unacceptable, macabre included. As Dolf Zillmann reports in his essay "The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence", morbid curiosity is universal and can be found cross-culturally, since violent entertainment "proved a success wherever people are free to consume such fare."<sup>106</sup> However, there is little agreement among scholars on the causes of such an impulse.

Some theories consider morbid curiosity as an evolutionary adaptation, some see it as the result of the lack of such an adaptation. According to the first hypothesis, whenever people glance at accidents or indulge in sharing gruesome details about murders, they might be providing their brain with vital information to shape new frames and scripts to follow in case of danger. As Zillmann explains, in fact, "on the premise that monitoring the environment for danger, for potentially threatening violent

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<sup>106</sup> Dolf Zillmann, 'The Psychology of the Appeal of Portrayals of Violence', pp.180-2.

events in particular, proved adaptive over millennia, and that a deep-rooted inclination for such monitoring persists, it can be projected that violent incidents still draw strong attention.”<sup>107</sup> The second hypothesis, on the other hand, consider morbid curiosity as an instinctual response connected to our limbic system, one of the most ancient structures of our brain; thus, it would be the “lack of evolutionary adjustment by the brain [...] that can be held accountable for a continuing, not entirely appropriate sensitivity to danger.”<sup>108</sup>

Although both those hypotheses take into account human morbid interest in disturbing and violent events, they do not explain the subtle enjoyment which people may perceive in witnessing such events. Indeed, why do human beings are fascinated with something as perverse as other people’s death? Jeffrey Goldstein advances an interesting speculation: we might be attracted by death since we are perfectly conscious of our mortality, but we ignore when and how our death will happen, therefore “we are tantalized by images of mortality.”<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, such an obsession with death, violence, torture and bloodshed may be fostered by the protective screen-like quality of media, which might play a role in desensitizing people to pain. Whether we take into account video-games, movies, literature or actual breaking news, in fact, we are aware that the disturbing scenes which we are exposed to “are not happening to us”. This factor thus represents a filter through which people can experience pain without feeling it. More importantly, it is the filter through which they can *feel pleasure* in witnessing such pain without being guilty: it makes them unaware *amateurs of suffering*.

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p.194.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Jeffrey Goldstein, ‘Why We Watch’, *Why We Watch*, ed. by Jeffrey Goldstein, pp. 212-26, (p.224).

Luc Boltanski devotes an interesting chapter of his *Distant Suffering* to the “amateur of suffering”, whom the French sociologist describes as “a new figure of the spectator of suffering: [...] the *connoisseur*, [...] who can extract an aesthetic delight from the spectacle given to [him or her].”<sup>110</sup> In his analysis of Sade’s work, Boltanski highlights the shift of perspective which takes place during a spectacle of suffering and which makes the reader feel sympathy towards sadistic characters. The spectator, in fact, is at first led to feel some kind of pity, be it “*indignation*” or “*tender-heartedness*”, towards an innocent character, “a *pure* unfortunate”.<sup>111</sup> Subsequently, as the unfortunate becomes thankful to a “benefactor”, the reader sympathizes with that new character. However, as soon as this positive feeling is aroused, the benefactor reveals his true nature: “the character on whom the sympathetic charge is fixed shifts from the position of a benefactor to that of a persecutor which entails a form of positive sympathy with the person being cruel.” As a result, the reader’s feelings shifts from pity to pleasure.<sup>112</sup>

Does disquieting fiction employ that same shift in perspective, from indignation to delight, in order for its readers to enjoy its most disturbing scenes? My claim is that it does. Since characters play a pivotal role in making that shift happen, I suggest that disquieting literature employs them in two main ways. First, disturbing characters engage our mind-reading abilities and our CARE system by means of their Machiavellianism. Second, they present themselves as appealing *Doppelgänger* who enable us to experience what our censor represses.

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<sup>110</sup> Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering. Morality, Media and Politics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p.104.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p.107.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p.108.

Readers regards Machiavellian narratives as highly compelling. This happens because human beings are obsessed with other people's reasonings, which constitute vital information in a world dominated by social interactions such as cooperation and negotiation, but also betrayal. According to the Social Intelligence Hypothesis, also known as the Machiavellian Intelligence Hypothesis, human intelligence originated as an adaptive feature, a consequence of more and more complex social interactions.<sup>113</sup> Machiavellian intelligence is thus what fosters human interest in making sense of other people through the use of mind-reading skills.<sup>114</sup> As a result, the more Machiavellian literary characters are, the more intriguing they appear to the readers, who cannot refrain from trying to understand the workings of their fictional minds. Moreover, the most Machiavellian characters in a narrative are unlikely to be the heroes of the story.<sup>115</sup> Whether a character is "good" or "bad", therefore, seems to be irrelevant: as long as it is Machiavellian, it is tantalizing. As Vermeule rightly remarks, "Satan is more one of the most fascinating characters in all of English literature, much more so than God, precisely because his psychology is so Machiavellian."<sup>116</sup>

I suggest that disquieting narratives present us with highly intriguing round characters who succeed in enrapturing their readers: persecutors. They possess a Machiavellian mind as they commit contemptible, perverse acts which the readers feel driven to motivate. In fact, supposing that violent actions are performed randomly, without valid, understandable motives, would be a scary perspective, as randomness prevents predictability. Indeed, human beings tend to attribute an intentionality to

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<sup>113</sup> Blakey Vermeule, 'Machiavellian Narratives', *Introduction to Cognitive Cultural Studies*, pp.214-30 (p.215).

<sup>114</sup> Vermeule, *Why Do We Care?*, p.34-5.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., p.32.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., p.31.

every action, so that potential threats can be understood and thwarted (see §1.3). However, attributing an intentionality, which entails employing mind-reading abilities, enables the readers to understand the persecutors' motives to such an extent that they may even justify their actions. As long as moral judgements do not interfere with the readers' entrancement, in fact, the mere understanding of the persecutors' goals, intentions, past, psychological wounds or insanity may provoke a feeling of sympathy towards these characters.

*The Collector* provides a fitting example. Indeed, considering the sexual tension which the novel builds so as to expect a rape scene (see §2.1), the text puzzles its readers when it presents them with the scene where Miranda tries to seduce Frederick:

Then she turned and was kissing me again, her eyes shut. Of course she'd had three glasses of sherry. What happened then was most embarrassing, I began to feel very worked up and I always understood (from something I heard in the army) that a gentleman always controls himself to the right moment and so I just didn't know what to do. I thought she would be offended and so I tried to sit upright more when she took her mouth away.<sup>117</sup>

Frederick's concerns about offending Miranda because of his reaction to her kisses puzzle the readers as his thoughtfulness seems out of place: after all, he is a kidnapper, he is not expected to be considerate towards his victim's feelings. Hence, the readers start questioning whether Frederick is actually evil, or perhaps just insane. His character seems too complex and multifaceted to discard it as "evil". He does not behave so: he looks naive, tender, scary, chilling, perverse and unintelligent all at

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<sup>117</sup> Fowles, *The Collector*, p.98.

once. Indeed, he is Machiavellian and, as a result, the readers feels fascinated by him and wish to make sense of him.

My suggestion is that this making sense of a character, together with the compassion which it entails, may activate our CARE system. This system, which appears both in female and male brain, gives rise to caring feelings for others, so much so that it can be inferred that “the roots of human empathy reach deep into the ancient circuits [...], where we identify our own well-being with the well-being of others.”<sup>118</sup> As a result, the readers may feel positive affects towards disturbing characters whenever they succeed in identifying with them.

Which techniques do disquieting narratives employ in order to achieve a character identification? Drawing on Suzanne Keen’s research, I argue that disquieting fiction may lead its readers to identificate with the persecutors through the use of a first person narration, which enables the readers to dive into the disturbing mind of their protagonists. As Booth explains, in fact, “*if* an author wants intense sympathy for characters who do not have strong virtues to recommend them, *then* the psychic vividness of prolonged inside views will help him.”<sup>119</sup> Keen also notes that whenever characters live a suspenseful situation, readers are likely to respond sympathetically even though they dislike the narrative.<sup>120</sup> Finally, readers may identify with characters because fictionality works as a protective filter;<sup>121</sup> readers, therefore, may feel free to sympathize with disturbing characters and indentify with them as they are aware that

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<sup>118</sup> Panksepp, p.283.

<sup>119</sup> Wayne Booth, cited in Keen, p.219.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., p.217.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., p.220.

such an identification is fictional: they are distinct entities, they are not the same person at all.

Even though we are conscious that characters do not share our identity and that identification lasts as long as we apply our “willing suspension of disbelief” (see §1.1), the disturbing protagonists of disquieting narratives still exercise their charm. They commit deplorable deeds, nonetheless we keep on reading. Even more, sometimes we reread the descriptions of such contemptible actions. Why? I argue that disquieting narratives resonate with our unconscious, repressed, socially unvirtuous, egoistic wishes. As a consequence, we respond to disturbing characters as if they were our *Doppelgänger*: our dark shadow, free to perform those actions which our censor would never allow.

Otto Rank explored the concept of *Doppelgänger*, which literally means “double goer”, in 1914. Starting from an analysis of the occurrences of figures such as twins, alter egos, mirror-images and shadows in literature, the psychoanalyst highlighted the connection between the concept of the double and the ego’s essentially narcissistic attitudes. This narcissism, which entails self-preservation as it is self-love by definition, is closely related to “a tremendous thanatophobia”,<sup>122</sup> an obsession with death which haunts human beings and which, in turn, encourages the creation of the double.<sup>123</sup> Be it the impressed image of our face on a photograph, the uncanny fantasy of our mirror-image which may live a life of its own, our shadow on the wall or a character in a book, our *Doppelgänger* does not fear time. It remains young, it is immortal. It defies death and we despise it for this reason. We envy it since it succeeds

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<sup>122</sup> Otto Rank, *The Double. A Psychoanalytic Study*, ed. and translated by Harry Tucker Jr., (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971), p.77.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., p.69.

where we are bound to fail. Yet, we are fascinated by it: the double, in fact, can perform all of our repressed wishes without suffering the consequences. Therefore, it becomes the “detached personification of instincts and desires which were once felt to be unacceptable, but which can be satisfied without responsibility in this indirect way [...].”<sup>124</sup>

I argue that the persecutors which we encounter and are fascinated with when we read disquieting narratives play exactly that role. They are immortal *Doppelgänger* which can act as they wish, regardless of the consequences of their unvirtuous desires. We condemn them because they perform deplorable acts which disquiet us. At the same time, however, they succeed in enrapturing us even though we perceive them as unsettling. This may happen because their deplorable acts which we consciously disapprove evoke unconscious, repressed wishes which our censor does not allow us to express. Together with the theory of the deceiving narratives (see §2.1), this seems to provide a second hypothesis to answer the question: “Why do we enjoy disquieting fiction?”. I suggest that we enjoy it because this kind of literature subtly satisfies our most secret, unconscious desires. However, if it is so, why do we perceive such narratives as unsettling? The reason lies in the nature of those unconscious desires. They are *unheimlich*.

In his 1919 essay, Sigmund Freud investigated the nature of “the uncanny” starting from a linguistic analysis of the German word which refers to this particular kind of fright: *unheimlich*. This is, in fact, the opposite of *heimlich*, which means “not strange, familiar”, thus a first, intuitive definition of the uncanny would regard what is new and unfamiliar as frightening. As Freud argues, such definition is incomplete,

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<sup>124</sup> Ibid., p.76.

since some new and unfamiliar things may not be frightening at all.<sup>125</sup> A more satisfying answer, however, comes from a shade of meaning recorded for the word *unheimlich*: “Uncanny is what one calls everything that was meant to remain secret and hidden and has come into the open.”<sup>126</sup> The uncanny, therefore, assigns a frightening quality to what should be familiar but is kept secret. In a psychoanalytic view, some fears are generated when an impulse is repressed. Therefore, being the repressed impulse something which “was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it through being repressed”<sup>127</sup>, we can consider as uncanny all “that has been repressed and now returns.”<sup>128</sup>

Freud then identifies some motifs which are likely to produce an uncanny effect: a few examples are eyes, apparent inanimate things which turn out to be animated, death, and the possible existence of magic. Among those elements, however, an important role is played by “the double”. According to Freud, in fact, the highly unsettling quality of this figure may depend on the period of its creation, that is “a primitive phase in our mental development.”<sup>129</sup> As Rank illustrated, *Doppelgänger* are, in essence, a primitive, positive response to the fear of death, being the first human double our shadow and, consequently, our soul. Once that primitive phase is surpassed, however, the self fails at acknowledging its double, considering it something *alien*, so that the positive aspects of this figure are substituted by envy,

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<sup>125</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, ed. by David McLintock, (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p.125.

<sup>126</sup> Schelling, quoted in Ibid., p.132.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., p.148.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., p.147.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., p.143.

contempt and hatred.<sup>130</sup> As a result, fears such as that of losing one's self as the *Doppelgänger* gains power arouse.

This view proves particularly interesting for the purposes of this research as it seems to confirm the hypothesis according to which the persecutors in disquieting narratives play the role of our *Doppelgänger*. Indeed, I argue that experiencing the narrative through the persecutors' point of view determines an unsettling result: as we read about their violent deeds, we perceive them as uncanny rather than disgusting. This may happen because the privileged frontline view which a first person narrative offers us enables us to understand the motives and intentions of the characters. Furthermore, it may be that witnessing the violence which persecutors perform through their point of view makes us, to some extent, partners in crime, since we cannot act to avoid it. As a result, the uncanny feeling which we experience may originate from our awareness: we know that our self does not coincide with the characters', but at the same time we feel despicable emotions as we enjoy the performance of actions which our morality forbids. Thus, the *Doppelgänger* acquires an ambiguous value: on the one hand, it frightens us as we wonder whether our enjoyment implies that we are losing our self, that we are as deviated as the character is; on the other hand, it fascinates us whenever it enables us to sublimate unconscious wishes which we are unaware of.

Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* epitomizes the role which the *Doppelgänger* acquires in disquieting narratives and the catharsis which it offers the readers. Dr. Jekyll, in fact, being a respectable gentleman, reflects what readers themselves are: virtuous people with a solid morality. Additionally, both Dr. Jekyll

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

and the readers experience a kind of morbid curiosity: whereas Jekyll's tantalizes his mind to the extent that he conducts experiments in order to divide the bright and dark side of human soul, the readers' morbid curiosity urges them to keep on reading narratives which disquiet them in order to learn how they resolve themselves. It is, however, Mr. Hyde who plays the role of the real *Doppelgänger*: he is the one who can freely satisfy each and every wish which both Jekyll and the readers repress without paying the consequences of his actions. Mr. Hyde is, in fact, a "primitive, unrepressed, and much more happy being [...] who follows at will the pleasure principle and its commands to do whatever feels good, rather than subordinate pleasure to what needs to be done."<sup>131</sup> In doing so, he evokes feelings of disgust in both Jekyll and the readers, whose morality incites them to disapprove his deeds. Nonetheless, he enables not only Dr. Jekyll, but readers themselves, to satisfy all those immoral, unconscious wishes which their censor suppresses.

Disquieting narratives may evoke unconscious wishes not only through depictions of actions and events which stimulate a return of the repressed, but also through language itself. As discussed in §1.2, in fact, words are emotionally charged and they can arouse positive or negative feelings which are strictly personal as they involve emotional associations. Moreover, the meanings which our left hemisphere discards as it decodes the words we read and which our right hemisphere maintains may produce a disquieting effect whenever our unconscious free associations arouse our repressed fears or wishes.

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<sup>131</sup> Michela Vanon Alliata, "'Markheim' and the Shadow of the Other', *Robert Louis Stevenson: Writer of Boundaries*, ed. by R. Ambrosini and R. Dury, (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), pp.299-311 (p.309).

A new question stems from these hypotheses. If the events described by disquieting narratives and the language employed can evoke repressed desires but also fears, why do readers keep on enjoying the story? Why do they not feel traumatized if the excess of reality becomes intolerable? Perhaps the fictionality-screen enables the readers to engage in their reading with a carefree attitude: they are aware that, whenever the story becomes too gruesome or painful for their tastes, they can put down the book and end the pain. However, I would also suggest that such narratives expose their readers to “second-hand” disturbing scenes, as the first-hand performance took place in the mind of the author. Thus, the final text which the reader enjoys may be regarded as the author’s sublimation of her own repressed wishes and fears, which intertwine with the reader’s as soon as the latter starts feeling disquieted.

The form and stylistic choices which the author chooses to distort her fears and wishes and which the reader interprets according to her own traumata and desires is analogous to the way in which dreams distort our wishes so that our censor does not block them (see §1.2). Thus, I suggest that we enjoy disquieting narratives in the same way as we enjoy those dreams which deform our unconscious desires into horrible, undesirable images: the scenes which they depict may be hideous, but it is by means of this unattractive form that we are free to experience the wishes they conceal.

The wishes which I refer to, however, must not be charged morally. They are unconscious and deeply connected to traumata and impulses which took place during the earliest stages of our lives. Alternatively, they might be socially deplorable desires which our morality rightly bans. They are, nonetheless, spontaneous and enjoying them through reading should be considered as innocuous as dreaming them. “Witnessing” a persecutor perform a rape in a disquieting narrative, in fact, by any

means involves being a latent rapist, exactly like dreaming about killing her own son does not imply that a mother would ever *actually* do it. As Freud wisely remarks in his conclusion to *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

Should we take lightly the ethical significance of the suppressed wishes which, as they now create dreams, may some day create other things? [...] [T]he virtuous man contents himself with dreaming that which the wicked man does in actual life. I am therefore of the opinion that it is best to accord freedom to dreams.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp.492-3.

## **Part II - Analysis**

### *The Wasp Factory*

*The Wasp Factory*, published in 1984, is Iain Banks's debut novel. In the author's own words, it is "a first-person narrative set on a remote Scottish nearly-island told by a normality-challenged teenage eccentric with severe violent issues."<sup>133</sup> Frank Cauldhame, in fact, is only sixteen years old, but he performs daily rituals which involve violence on animals, and killed his younger brother and two cousins before turning nine. According to Frank, however, the murders were "just a stage [he] was going through."<sup>134</sup>

Abandoned by his mother soon after his birth, Frank has no official status: he has no birth certificate or insurance card. Moreover, he was mutilated by a dog, which castrated him when he was a child. Those traumata led Frank to hate women, whom he regards as weak, stupid creatures who "live in the shadow of men and are nothing compared to them."<sup>135</sup> As a result, Frank lives in semi-isolation together with his father, a former scientist who retired and who practices chemical experiments in his secret, locked room. Angus Cauldhame, however, is not the only character who owes a secret room. Frank, in fact, steals often away in his loft, which Angus cannot access since his leg is injured, in order to check the status of his Wasp Factory. This is the name of a complicated set of mechanisms applied to the face of an old clock which Frank uses as a divinatory tool. The rituals, which involve an altar decorated with trophies from Frank's depraved acts, a catechism and a wasp to sacrifice to the

<sup>133</sup> Iain Banks, *The Wasp Factory*, (London: Abacus, 2013), Preface, p.x.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., p.49.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., p.50.

Factory, enable Frank to receive a “sign” from the Factory: a prediction or an answer to his questions.

One of the questions Frank consults the Factory for regards his older brother Eric. A former brilliant medical student, Eric became insane after witnessing maggots infest the brain of a hospitalized baby. Since that moment, he had started setting dogs on fire, which resulted in his detention. However, he found a way to escape the mental institution he was confined to, and his whimsical phone calls interrupt Frank’s ordinary routine more and more often: Eric, in fact, is coming back home, and his madness scares Frank, who resorts to the Factory to arrange a set of defences.

It is by the end of the book, however, that *The Wasp Factory* reveals its extraordinary main theme: gender conditioning. As Franks accidentally succeeds in entering Angus’ secret room, in fact, he discovers male hormones, tampons and fake genitalia, making him realize to be his father’s subject experiment: he had never been castrated; indeed, he has always been a woman.

### **3.1 *The Wasp Factory*: deceits**

*The Wasp Factory* displays a significant amount of disquieting elements. Not only most of the scenes which it describes are repugnant as a result of their gratuitous violence, but language itself contributes to disturb the reader as it presents facts in a brutal, frank black humour. Indeed, the protagonist’s name itself, “Frank”, seems to be a carefully-designed hint to foster an unsettling reflection about human beings and their possible inherent violent nature. Frank, in fact, compares himself to his insane brother several times and, even though he admits to be rather unconventional, he does

not deem himself as mad;<sup>136</sup> rather, he regards himself as a victim of the circumstances, as he ascribes his evil deeds to his gender:

It occurred to me then, as it has before, that that is what men are really *for*.

Both sexes can do one thing specially well; women can give birth and men can kill.<sup>137</sup>

Such a stance poses an uncomfortable dilemma to the readers, which are invited to question the wrongness of Frank's actions: is the violence which he indulges in reproachful? Is it the result of his madness? Is he mad, after all? Or does he act the way he does as a result of what has been done to him – namely, the fake castration and subsequent gender conditioning? Did the gender conditioning play a crucial role in creating such an immoral character? And if it is so, does being a man, rather than a woman, entail the right to kill as a result of an inherent violent nature?

This final question is especially disquieting. The readers are not likely to sympathize with Frank; in fact, they are more likely to condemn his actions and profane language. They do not wish to identify with him: they want to feel detached from him, to witness his deeds and judge them as the unexplainable acts of a madman. However, Frank's subtle suggestion that gender may provide an explanation to his violent impulses drills an uncomfortable doubt into the readers' minds: if it is gender, not madness, which entails violence, does it mean that every man is capable to act like Frank? All of a sudden, the narrator puts the readers on an equal footing with himself, instilling the doubt that they might – or might not – act as he does, were they under his same circumstances. Thus, the narrative excites the readers' SEEKING system: they

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., p.154: "At some deep level we understand each other, even thought he is mad and I am sane. We even had that link I had not thought of until recently, but which might come in useful now: we have both killed, and used our heads to do it."

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

need to dispel that uncomfortable doubt. As a result, although they felt an utter repulsion when they read about Frank's three murders, his brutal games with rabbits and his vulgar, unadorned language, their SEEKING system compels them to keep on reading as soon as they reach Chapter 7, which exposes Frank's opinions on gender and the inevitability of violence as a consequence of being a man.

Even though that suggestion seems to provide a preliminary explanation to understand why the readers do not dismiss the novel when they reach the middle of the book, it does not account for the previous chapters. Indeed, why do readers succeed in reaching such a point in the narrative? Why do they keep on reading even though Frank describes gory, unsettling events? Why do they enjoy the novel? I advance that this narrative presents a significant amount of deceits which, as postulated in §2.1, challenge the reader's problem-solving abilities, mislead her expectations, and stimulate her GRIEF and LUST system.

### *Cliffhangers and problem-solving challenges*

The readers of *The Wasp Factory* encounter the first challenge to their problem-solving skills even before the actual narrative starts. Indeed, the title itself, presenting a flying, pestering insect, may evoke the memory of *Lord of the Flies* in some readers' minds, so as to arouse the expectation of a crude, frank, disturbing depiction of youth. The association "wasp – flies" thus stimulates the readers' curiosity, which evolves into three possible outcomes: first, if the reader actually read and enjoyed *Lord of the Flies*, she might set her expectancies so as to read a similar narrative and enjoy it as well; second, if the reader did not enjoy Golding's novel, she might hope and expect *The Wasp Factory* not to resemble *Lord of the Flies*, so as to enjoy a new narrative;

lastly, if the reader did not actually read Golding's novel, but associated the titles nonetheless, she might bring to her reading experience a blurred expectation of what *The Wasp Factory* might be about. Additionally, this may involve a rewarding, dopaminergic feeling at the idea of reading a narrative that probably resembles a Nobel Prize winner's masterpiece.

Titles play an important role in setting the readers' problem-solving skills into motion even if the association "wasp – flies" does not take place. Indeed, the contents page presents, among the twelve chapters which constitute the novel, two teasing titles: "9. What Happened to Eric" and "12. What Happened to Me". Although the title of Chapter 9 does not seem to foster an immediate reaction of curiosity in the reader who does not know who Eric is, the title of Chapter 12 signals two important elements which arouse her interest. First, the narrative will be told by "Me"; thus, since the readers are accustomed to identify with the protagonist of a story, especially if this is a first-person narration, they expect to empathize with this protagonist. Second, since they have such an expectation, the title "What Happened to Me" arouses their SEEKING system suggesting that something *mysterious* will happen to the character which the readers will care about, and that the last chapter will provide the resolution. At this point, the readers become engaged: they want to read about the mystery and discover its solution, therefore they start reading the novel.

The true nature of the narrative, that is, its disquieting, repulsive and unsettling contents, begins to show through as early as page 9. Soon after a grotesque and ironic description which Frank provides of his father, the latter wonders whether the son had been out "killing any of God's creatures". Since the readers are told that Angus has peculiar obsessions, such as that of knowing the measurements of every object in his

house, and that he always makes fun of Frank, they expect his question to be to some extent ironic. However, Frank's lucid, straightforward thought results disquieting:

I shrugged at him again. Of course I was out killing things. How the hell am I supposed to get heads and bodies for the Poles and the Bunker if I don't kill things? There just aren't enough natural deaths. You can't explain that sort of thing to people, though.<sup>138</sup>

Although these words and, especially, Frank's striking "of course" are disturbing enough to warn about what it is that Frank does and deems normal, namely killing, they do not prevent the readers from keep on reading. As soon as they turn the page, in fact, they find the first of a series of "cliffhangers" which recur across the book and provoke the readers' curiosity by alluding to a mystery that the readers might wish to solve:

I didn't blame him, and I didn't doubt that he was also worried about me. I represent a crime, and if Eric was to come back stirring things up *The Truth About Frank* might come out.<sup>139</sup>

Such cliffhangers do not necessarily appear at the end of a chapter; rather, they are significantly scattered throughout the first half of the book, so as to challenge the readers to solve the mystery, to think about answers, to SEEK for a solution. An example of that can be found in the first chapter, where Frank focalizes the readers' attention on Angus' study. Such study, which will indeed prove essential by the end of the novel, tantalizes Frank's mind. As a consequence, the readers are affected by Frank's obsession so much so that they cannot avoid to think of the study as an element which they must remember in order to solve the enigma:

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., p.10. Emphasis mine.

I think there is a *secret* in the study. He had hinted as much more than once, just vaguely, just enough to entice me so that I want to ask what, so that he knows that I want to ask.<sup>140</sup>

An air of mystery surrounds Frank as well. Not only do the readers learn that there is a “Truth About Him” that must not be revealed, but they also find out that he has an “unfortunate disability”<sup>141</sup> which affects the way he looks, making him fat whereas he would like to be “dark and menacing”.<sup>142</sup> Additionally, he mentions the bitter loathing which he feel towards women. He talks about them as his “greatest enemies”, deeming them “weak and stupid” as they “live in the shadow of men and are nothing compared to them”.<sup>143</sup> However, Frank does not examine his hatred in depth; rather, he introduces a new riddle, so that the readers are led to wonder what reason lies behind such an intense disgust:

I don’t even like having them on the island, not even Mrs Clamp [...]. She’s ancient, and sexless the way the very old and the very young are, but she’s still *been* a woman, and I resent that, *for my own good reason*.<sup>144</sup>

Similarly, Frank’s brother, Eric, evokes a feeling of inscrutability in the readers’ mind. He is the object of most of Frank’s worries but, at the same time, he seems to be the only one the boy truly loves. Additionally, although Frank describes him as totally insane, he manages to result rather cunning in Frank’s reports of his conversations with him:

‘I’ll tell you where I am if you’ll tell me what your lucky number is.’

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p.13. Emphasis mine.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., p.50.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., p.51. Second emphasis mine.

‘My lucky number is *e*.’

‘*That’s* not a number. *That’s* a letter.’

‘It *is* a number. It’s a transcendental number: 2.718—’

‘That’s cheating. I meant an integer. [...] How are you, anyway?’

‘I’m fine. How are you?’

‘Mad, of course,’ he said, quite indignantly. I had to smile.<sup>145</sup>

The readers will “encounter” Eric only by the end of the novel. The previous chapters, however, build tension around that unfathomable character, whose insanity they can even doubt. In fact, hints such as the title of chapter 9, “What Happened to Eric”, suggest that he has not always been mad, but something – a new mystery – made him behave the way he does now. Such an hypothesis is encouraged from the beginning, when Frank states:

The whole thing [...] had, I think, a lot to do with *What Happened To Eric*.

Poor unlucky soul; he was just *in the wrong place at the wrong time*, and something *very unlikely* happened [...]. But that’s what you *risk* when you leave here.<sup>146</sup>

Frank’s wording skilfully succeeds in arousing the readers’ SEEKING system. First, the accident which happened to Eric is described as “very unlikely”, so that the readers are offered a rather interesting conundrum to solve. Second, the unlikely event happened when Eric left “here”; the readers may thus wonder where “here” is: is it Frank’s house? Is it the island? And why is it a *risk* to leave it? The more questions the story arouses, the more the readers feel willing to bear the unsettling scenes which

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., p.16.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., p.23. Emphasis mine.

Frank describes, expecting to receive a final reward such as solutions or a happy ending.

*The Wasp Factory* subtly builds the expectation of a happy ending by exploiting the readers' habituation to this kind of ending. Indeed, the vast majority of narratives which present a first-person retrospective narration does not usually end with something bad happening to the protagonist who is telling the story. Therefore, the readers may confide on Frank's use of the past tense in order to trust that they will witness a positive resolution of Frank's confrontation with Eric, and they will also receive an answer to every dilemma. Moreover, the use of the past deludes the readers into thinking that Frank may change and abandon violence once and for all. Such a positive hope is caused, paradoxically, by the descriptions of his three murders, which he shows to the readers through three richly detailed analepses. Although those scenes do disturb the readers, not only because they involve innocent children who are killed by a cold-blooded peer, but also because Frank indulges morbidly in describing his own evil deeds, they are a *flashback* both in the narrative and in Frank's life: they happened, and they were abhorrent; nonetheless, they happened in the past, therefore they do not exist anymore in the present of Frank's life, the present which starts with the end of the book. That feeble hope grows a bit stronger when the readers remember Frank's comment to his murders in chapter 2:

That's my score to date. Three. I haven't killed anybody for years, and *don't intend to ever again.*

It was just a stage I was going through.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., p.49. Emphasis mine.

Eventually, when the readers reach the end of the novel, the time of the narration switches to the present as soon as Frank reveals the truth about him. Such a change in tenses meets, to some extent, the readers' hope that Frank may change as well. However, although Frank affirms that "*now* the door closes, and my journey begins", the ending of the novel sets into motion a new challenge to the readers' problem-solving skills. In fact, Frank's last words are for his mad brother: being him insane, how would he react to "The Truth About Frank"?

Poor Eric came home to see his brother, only to find (Zap! Pow! Dams burst!

Bombs go off! Wasps fry: *ttssss!*) he's got a sister.<sup>148</sup>

The use of the onomatopoeias does not seem casual, since this passage represents the first occurrence of this figure of speech. Rather, it seems to emphasize the disconcerting enormity of Frank's discovery, which he can only compare to explosions. The most intriguing cliffhanger, however, is the reference to the wasps. Indeed, why is that image employed to describe a coup de théâtre? My suggestion is that Frank evokes the rituals he performed in order to receive signs from the Wasp Factory. Thus, "Wasps fry: *ttssss!*" symbolizes Frank's – and the readers' – awaiting to receive an answer to the question: how will Eric react to the news? The readers, however, will not witness the possible outcomes, therefore they can lean towards an idealized aspect normalcy.

### *MacGuffins*

Another strategy which the novel employs in order to foster its readers' curiosity is misleading their attention by means of MacGuffins. The first example

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<sup>148</sup> Ibid., p.244.

which can be found in the text are Frank's "Sacrifice Poles", which appear at the beginning of Chapter 1. Indeed, not only do they provide the title of the chapter which introduces Frank to his readers for the first time, but they also constitute a sheer obsession for the boy, who constantly checks their status, cares for their maintenance and tries to interpret them as harbingers:

I thought again of the Sacrifice Poles; more deliberately this time, picturing each one in turn, remembering their positions and their components, seeing in my mind what those sightless eyes looked out to [...]. My dead sentries, those extensions of me which came under my power through the simple but ultimate surrender of death, sensed nothing to harm me or the island.<sup>149</sup>

Frank will refer to these Poles and the omen which they entail several times during the narration, so as to evoke a feeling of unavoidable forthcoming danger in his readers' mind.<sup>150</sup> Such a feeling of inevitability is further increased by Frank's own thoughts, which he reports by means of enigmatic lexical choices. In fact, he regards the events he narrates as "a Sign"<sup>151</sup> or "[c]ertainly not a coincidence"<sup>152</sup>; additionally, he refers to a stock of roughly assembled weapons which he prepared "for defense rather than offence",<sup>153</sup> so that the readers are led to expect something bad and unfathomable to happen: some event which they are curious to read about. The Sacrifice Poles thus work as proper MacGuffins: they mistakenly catalyse the readers' attention since they trigger the feeling of unfathomable inevitability which recurs across the novel.

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid., p.19.

<sup>150</sup> See Ibid., p.2: "The Factory hadn't been specific (it rarely is), but I had the feeling that *whatever it was warning me about was important, and I also suspected it would be bad [...]*." Emphasis mine.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., p.42.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p.158.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p.70.

Frank's rituals represent a second MacGuffin in the novel. The boy is so concerned about performing them properly that the readers cannot prevent themselves from wondering whether his ceremonies and the Wasp Factory itself have, in effect, magical powers.

Most of the deaths the Factory has to offer are automatic [...].

Death by fire has always been at Twelve, and it is one of the Ends never replaced by one of the Alternatives. I have signified Fire as Paul's death; that happened near to midday, just as Blyth's exit by venom is represented by the Spider's Parlour at Four. Esmeralda probably died by drowning (the Gents), and I put her time of death arbitrarily at Eight, to keep things symmetrical.<sup>154</sup>

The fact that the Factory appears as an essential element of the plot, as it provides the title for the whole novel, affects the readers' perception of it; indeed, they may think that the Wasp Factory is going to play a major role in the narrative, for example by turning out as a *deus ex machina* which employs magic to resolve the plot. Additionally, even though Frank shows the symptoms of OCD (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder),<sup>155</sup> which should instil a doubt about his reliability, he seems to trust his rituals so blindly that the readers experience a feeling of uncertainty when they witness such ceremonies: indeed, why would Frank trust them so senselessly, if they were *completely* useless? Therefore, the readers are misled to SEEK for some kind of witchcraft to happen by the end of the novel.

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., pp. 160-1.

<sup>155</sup> See Ibid., p. 113: "The same if I brush one arm against a wall or a lamp-post; I must brush the other one as well, soon, or at least scratch it with the other hand. In a whole range of ways like that I try to keep balanced, though I have no idea why. It is simply something that must be done [...]."

A quick mention to “KBr” by the end of the book plays the role of a third MacGuffin. Frank has entered his father’s study and is about to discover its secrets when he notices:

Another box from a different drawer said ‘KBr’, which rang a bell somewhere in my mind, but only at the very back of it.<sup>156</sup>

Although the scene is suspenseful enough to keep its readers engaged, as it constitutes, together with Eric’s arrival, the climax of the story, that tiny detail stimulates the readers’ problem-solving skills. In fact, they are likely to mimic Frank and wonder whether they already know the solution to the dilemma as well: did they notice any reference to those letters during the previous chapters? If this is not the case, they expect the narrative to provide a solution. Likewise, those readers who are familiar with chemistry and recognize the chemical formula of the potassium bromide are invited to try and solve the mystery: why is potassium bromide important? Indeed, why would the narrative highlight it if it were not essential? Ultimately, as the Truth About Frank comes out, the readers’ expectations are rewarded as they learn that the bromide was used to inhibit the boy’s sexual impulses.

#### *GRIEF system and Theory of Mind*

*The Wasp Factory* stimulates not only the readers’ SEEKING system, but also their GRIEF – and subsequently CARE – system as it provokes a sense of uneasiness in two main ways: through the description of Frank’s relationship with his mother and through the boy’s reports of his callous violent deeds. Both these elements evoke unpleasant feelings in the reader, who feels compelled to keep on reading in order to

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

find a positive resolution, a reward which can dispel these feelings. In the first case, the text relies on the heartfelt pain which humans experience when they think about separation from or loss of their mother. In the second case, the uneasiness which the readers feel when they remember gory scenes, such as the one which depicts Frank as the killer of several innocent bucks, mixes with their ability to commiserate him nonetheless. Indeed, although the narrative comprises several violent and unsettling sequences, it also offers its readers the possibility to practice their Theory of Mind.

The Bomb Circle, my dad's leg and his stick, his reluctance to get me a motorbike perhaps, the candles in the skull, the legions of dead mice and hamsters – they're all the fault of Agnes, my father's second wife and my mother.

I can't remember my mother, because if I did I'd hate her. As it is, I hate her name, the idea of her.<sup>157</sup>

In Chapter 4, which presents one of the most disquieting scenes of the story – the death of Frank's little brother – the readers learn that Frank was abandoned by his mother soon after his birth. The boy attributes to her “the Bomb Circle”, a name which refers to the place where his little brother Paul died. The term is thus used as a metonymy, so as to emphasize the inevitability of Paul's death as a result of Agnes' unforgivable deed. The readers are likely to interpret Frank's murderers and violent pastimes as a fierce reaction to the pain he had to endure, being an unloved child whose mother did not want to care about. More importantly, they can understand his resentment to the extent that they can accuse Agnes in the same way as he does: indeed, what would have happened if his mother had not abandoned him?

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid., pp. 81-2.

Likewise, when Frank discloses the grief he felt when Eric left the island, the readers are likely to sympathize with him, as his words transmit pain and helplessness, thus revealing his intimate nature as a victim of the circumstances:

I mourned what I knew was the passing of the friend and brother I had known, and felt more keenly than at any other time my injury – that thing which I knew would keep me in my adolescent state for ever, would never let me grow up and be a real man, able to make my own way in the world.<sup>158</sup>

Sincere confessions such as this, together with those scenes which show Frank's merciful side, stimulate the readers to practice their Theory of Mind and try to understand the reasons behind Frank's actions. Sometimes his words make the readers inclined to pity him: when this happens, they wish to keep on reading in order to learn whether Frank will change for good.

### *Unexpected rewards*

*The Wasp Factory* deceives its readers so that they keep on reading the novel despite its disquieting elements by providing them with unexpected rewards which lower the tension and almost obliterate, for a few moments, the unsettling feelings evoked by violent scenes. These unexpected rewards come in the form of pleasant multi-sensory imagery which excites the readers' senses and LUST system.

It was a bomb, stood on its tail.

I went back to it carefully, stroking it gently and making shushing noises with my mouth. It was rust-red and black with its rotund decay, smelling dank and casting a shell-shadow. I followed the line of the shadow along the sand, over

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., p.183.

the rocks, and found myself looking at little Paul, splashing happily about in a pool, slapping the water with a great flat bit of wood almost as big as he was. I smiled, called him over.<sup>159</sup>

Interestingly, the most pleasant multi-sensory descriptions always precede Frank's accounts of his three murderers, so as to deceive the readers. Indeed, they offer the readers pleasant mental images which their LUST system can "consummate" and which excite their SEEKING system so as to crave for more descriptions of the same kind. The readers, therefore, trust the narrative and their own expectations to receive more pleasant rewards; they keep on reading, unaware of the unsettling horrors which they are going to encounter later in the book.

### **3.2 *The Wasp Factory*: morbid curiosity**

*The Wasp Factory* offers its readers several reasons to feel disquieted: from the gruesome depictions of Frank's rituals, which involve killing rabbits or beheading innocent animals so as to use their cold, dead eyes as sentries, to the lucid, ironic report of his three murderers and the chilling lightness of his violent thoughts. Nevertheless, the novel succeeds in entertaining those readers whose taste enables them not to suspend the reading. Indeed, personal taste plays an essential role in determining whether a reader will enjoy a disquieting novel, although this is the case with every literary genre: personal taste slims the list of potential readers – or rather, enjoyers – of a text. This happens because, according to Holland, readers' personal taste is determined by the interaction between their SEEKING system and their personality, which, in turn, is individualized: it is different for each of them, as

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., p.85.

everyone lives unique intrauterine experiences, unique interactions with parents and peers, unique traumata, unique *repressed desires*.<sup>160</sup>

Like every novel, *The Wasp Factory* may or may not appeal to the readers' personal taste. Enjoying such an unsettling novel, however, does not imply enjoying the pain, the gore, the violence which it presents. Rather, it implies that the text strikes subtle chords with its readers, thus exciting unconscious desires. This is the case with Banks' novel, which the readers manage to enjoy thanks to the uncanny feelings which it evokes, the subtle satisfaction of repressed desires which it provides and the Machiavellian reasoning which it entails.

### *Unheimlich elements*

In *The Uncanny*, Freud analyses the uncanny feelings which derive from a particular kind of superstition: the "omnipotence of thoughts". That is the animistic, magical thinking which occurred in the infantile stages of our life, and it is connected to the narcissistic delusion that thoughts can affect the material world. According to Freud, we do not consider magic as plausible anymore, since we overcame that belief when we grew up. However,

we do not feel entirely secure in these new convictions; the old ones live on in us, on the look-out for confirmation. Now, as soon as something *happens* in our lives that seems to confirm these old, discarded beliefs, we experience a sense of the uncanny, and this may be reinforced by judgments like the

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<sup>160</sup> Holland, p.209.

following: ‘So it’s true, then, that you can kill another man just by wishing him dead, that the dead really do go on living [...].’<sup>161</sup>

As §3.1 underlined, a sense of inevitability and plausible magic surrounds the Wasp Factory and Frank’s rituals. Indeed, words such as “a Sign” lead the readers to wonder whether Frank’s deeds are, in effect, guided by a supernatural intention, so that they provide the Wasp Factory itself with a consciousness and the ability to decree who is going to die, and how. Moreover, the novel presents several occurrences of magical thinking, which may feed the readers’ not completely discarded superstitions. For example, Frank regards his father’s uneasiness about the cordite which fills his cellar as caused by “[s]omething about a link with the past, or an evil demon we have lurking [...].”<sup>162</sup> Additionally, Frank’s blindly believes in the magical properties, or, using Freud’s words, the *mana*,<sup>163</sup> of his “powerful things”, that is,

the skull of the snake which killed Blyth [...], a fragment of the bomb which had destroyed Paul [...], a piece of tent fabric from the kite which had elevated Esmeralda [...] and a little dish containing some of the yellow, worn teeth of Old Saul [...].

As a result, the readers do not feel secure about the realism of the novel and, feeling puzzled, they SEEK for a confirmation to their superstition: do trophies actually possess magical powers? Does an inanimate object such as a Wasp Factory have an intention, so as to decide who is going to die? Can Frank interpret supernatural signs for real?

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<sup>161</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, p.154.

<sup>162</sup> Banks, p.64.

<sup>163</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, p.147.

The most *unheimlich* of these suspects about the omnipotence of thoughts which flickers throughout *The Wasp Factory* is represented by Frank's little brother, Paul. Indeed, Frank does show an inflexible assurance when he reveals that

Paul, of course, was Saul. That enemy was – must have been – cunning enough to transfer to the boy. That was why my father chose such a name for my new brother. It was just lucky that I spotted it in time and did something about it at such an early age, or God Knows what the child might have turned into, with Saul's soul possessing him.<sup>164</sup>

The uncanny feelings are further increased by the previous paragraphs, which introduce Saul as the dog which castrated Frank as a child. The same day of Frank's accident – the accident which would change his life forever, bounding him to live as a half-man – Angus killed the dog and little Paul came to the world. Therefore, the readers are lead to wonder whether Saul's soul actually reincarnated in Paul. Such an hypothesis would provide uncanny feelings both to those readers who did not completely overcome their latent belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and those who, on the contrary, did; in fact, the latter would not know what to expect from the narrative: is it realistic or is there some fantasy, after all? Both these stances, however, produce the same result: the readers are likely to justify Frank's actions, since he would not be guilty if there were magic in the world of *The Wasp Factory*; likewise, he could not be entirely blamed for his actions if he were mad.

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<sup>164</sup> Banks, p.140.

### *Satisfaction of repressed desires*

*The Wasp Factory* enables its readers to enjoy a second-hand satisfaction of their unconscious, repressed wishes through their identification with the protagonist. Although it seems counterintuitive to identify with such a disturbing character, the use of a first-person narration facilitates the readers' access to Frank's mind and reasoning, thus providing them with a tool to try and understand his goals and motivation. Additionally, although the readers may not wish to identify with a *persecutor* (see §2.2), they may not always have a choice. This happens, for example, when Frank mentions his father's study for the first time (see §3.1). As he explains that the study holds a secret, thus arousing the readers' curiosity, he also adds:

I don't ask, of course, because I wouldn't get any worthwhile answer. If he did tell me anything it would be a pack of lies, because obviously the secret wouldn't be a secret any more if he told me the truth [...].<sup>165</sup>

Like Frank, the readers do want to know more about the secret: Frank has to gain access to the study to find the solution on his own; likewise, the readers have to keep on reading and figure out the solution to the enigma on their own. The secret in the study thus acquires a double meaning: on the one hand, it represents the mystery which tantalizes Frank's mind and which the readers want to solve; on the other hand, it is a symbol of the whole narrative, as the readers are required to keep on reading in order to learn how the plot resolves itself. In this second sense, the readers, who want to know about the secret (the ending), become Frank, while Frank himself, being the narrator, plays the role of the father, since he will not reveal the solution to the mystery until the end of the book.

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p.13.

Although most of Frank's acts make him despicable, the readers may identify with him whenever his actions strike unconscious chords with them. In these cases, he becomes the readers' *Doppelgänger*: the one who can satisfy all those wishes which censor repressed. Such wishes, which in *The Wasp Factory* seem to be mainly connected to the infantile jealousy towards siblings and other children, undergo a deformation, as would happen with dreams, thus appearing in the narrative in the form of three extremely unsettling murderers. The first one involved Frank's cousin Blyth, whom he killed inserting a snake in his leg prosthesis. The second time, Frank killed his little brother Paul by making him hit a bomb. Finally, he made his cousin get caught in the thread of a huge kite which blew her away.

Interestingly, Frank performed the murderers when he was a child himself, and he admits that he does not have any intention to kill now that he has grown older. Indeed, he defines the murderers "a stage [he] was going through."<sup>166</sup> This seems to reflect what happens in the early stages of children's life, when sibling rivalry – or the jealousy towards other children who may usurp their parents' love – lead children to hate their own siblings, to such an extent that they wish them to disappear. As Freud points out, in fact,

[i]t is particularly interesting to observe little children up to three years old in their attitude towards their brothers and sisters. So far the child has been the only one; he is now informed that the stork has brought a new child. The younger surveys the arrival, and then expresses his opinion decidedly: "The stork had better take it back again."

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p.49

[...] [T]he child knows enough to calculate the disadvantage it has to expect on account of the new-comer.<sup>167</sup>

These competitive feelings thus generate a wish, that is, that her sibling may disappear, which censor represses as soon as the child grows up: using Frank's own words, it is "only a stage."

The most uncanny of the murderers regards little Paul. The readers are likely to feel sympathy towards that little child, whose talk is still simple and unsure. Moreover, Frank himself explains that he did not "bore him any personal ill-will; it was simply that [he] knew he couldn't stay."<sup>168</sup> This sentence triggers the readers' unconscious, repressed wish to get rid of their own siblings or of those children who threatened their role as "the only one". As a result, a morbid curiosity guides them to read about what happened to Paul, and how Frank managed to make his rival disappear. Indeed, they identify with Frank to the extent that they parallel his actions:

I ran down. I stood about fifty metres away from the still steaming crater. I didn't look too closely at any of the bits and pieces lying around, squinting at them from the side of my eye, wanting and not wanting to see body meat or tattered clothing.<sup>169</sup>

Indeed, although they morbidly read about the innocence which Paul hit the bomb with, they "want and don't want" to acknowledge their own pleasure. Their censor, in fact, prevents them to acknowledge it by labelling such pleasure as something immoral which must be rejected. Therefore, since the narrative enables the readers to be mere witnesses of crimes which they are not going to suffer the

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<sup>167</sup> Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, pp. 212-13.

<sup>168</sup> Banks, p.83.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., p.89.

consequences of, they can enjoy the scene on an unconscious level: they can blame the narrative whenever they feel uneasy, although that uneasiness itself represents the evidence of their repressed wish which returns.

### *Machiavellian Eric*

Frank represents quite an engaging round character as he excites the readers' Theory of Mind (see §3.1). Indeed, his actions appear so unmotivated at first that the readers feel compelled to make sense of him. As a result, they try to collect every hint about his past which the narrative provides, so as to try to mind-read that character. Why does he act the way he does? Is it because he was mutilated? Is it because his mother abandoned him? Is it magic which guides him? Is he insane, perhaps? Is it because he thinks he is a man? Or did his father's experiment affect the person he is? Ultimately, is he a victim or a persecutor?

However, there is another Machiavellian character who results extremely fascinating: Eric. In fact, his ironic and sometimes brilliant replies to his brother, together with the hints at a past during which he was perfectly sane and, as Frank describes him, "well-meaning" and "bright"<sup>170</sup>, stimulate the readers' Theory of Mind. The readers want to understand what caused such a clever, talented and well disposed student of medicine to act like a madman, setting dogs on fire and feeding children maggots. Since those compulsions appear so extreme, the readers infer that whatever happened to Eric, it must be a real shock. Therefore, when Chapter 9 opens with the description of the friendly, caring student who Eric was, the readers feel inclined to sympathize with him: indeed, the narrative presents, at last, a *normal*, positive

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., p.83.

character. However, this is only a deceit, which is going to lead the readers to simulate imprudently Eric's actions and feelings in their mind. Such a deceit precedes the most disturbing scene of the novel, which the readers reach quite defenceless.

Eric is working in a nursery. He attends to deformed infants who need special care, and he devotes himself to that duty completely. The day when "it happened", as Frank recalls, Eric was feeding a baby who "was more or less a vegetable"<sup>171</sup> and who did not react to Eric's spoon pressed to his lips. Instead, the child would only breath faintly, "an almost peaceful expression on its usually vacant face."<sup>172</sup> So far, the readers reproduce a mental image of the scene: there is the hospital, it is very hot, Eric is holding an unresponsive ill child. Although it is not a very pleasurable image, nonetheless it does not comprise disturbing elements. Until, a few paragraphs later, the narrative excites the readers' naive and, at the same time, morbid curiosity:

Then he saw something, something like a movement, just a tiny little movement, barely visible on the shaved head of the slightly smiling child.  
Whatever it was was small and slow. [...]

He couldn't see anything, but he looked round the edge of the metal skull-cap the child wore, thought he saw something under it, and lifted it easily from the head of the infant to see if there was anything wrong.<sup>173</sup>

The words "something" and "anything", being indefinite pronouns, stimulate the readers' curiosity. Moreover, as soon as the new paragraph starts, there are two shifts in perspective: at first the scene is presented from the point of view of a boiler-room worker who reaches Eric, sees what the latter saw and throws up; then, the

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., p.185.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., p.186.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., pp.186-7.

readers acquire the point of view of a ward sister, who enters the room and slowly tide everything up, comforting Eric and the workman. However, the narration does not provide any clue about what it is that Eric, the man and the ward sister saw. Thus, the suspense of the scene increases dramatically, which results in a more sympathetic response towards Eric on the part of his readers.

Despite the brief shifts of perspectives, the readers' sympathetic identification switches back to Eric as soon as the text informs them about an action which he had performed,<sup>174</sup> so as to evoke a motor imagery in their mind. Since images of motions "whether invoked by vision or words, is physically, semantically, and temporally linked closely to the experience of motion,"<sup>175</sup> the readers are likely to mentally reproduce the feelings associated to such motions. In this case, they are going to be as shocked and nauseated as Eric is:

Flies had got into the ward [...]. They had got underneath the stainless steel of the child's skull-cup and deposited their eggs there. What Eric saw when he lifted that plate up, what he saw with all that weight of human suffering above, with all that mighty spread of closed-in, heat-struck darkened city all around, what he saw with his own skull splitting, was a slowly writhing nest of fat maggots, swimming in their combined digestive juices as they consumed the brain of the child.<sup>176</sup>

Once again, the narrative builds tension by delaying the moment of the revelation through the use of three repetitions ("what he saw") which increases the readers' morbid curiosity. Indeed, the characters' reaction and those three repetitions

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<sup>174</sup> See Ibid., p.188: "Eric had stuck [the spoon on the open skull of the infant], perhaps thinking in that first instant of his mania to spoon out what he saw."

<sup>175</sup> Starr, p.282.

<sup>176</sup> Banks, p.188.

hint at the upsetting nature of the mystery; nonetheless, the readers' need to make sense of Eric, to understand him, to learn what was the shock which turned him into a madman is greater than the warnings which the narrative mildly provides.

Finally, the maggots scene seems to be quite disquieting not only because of the suspense which the narrative majestically creates, but also because they appear to be a metaphor of insanity. As Freud mentions, in fact, madness produces uncanny feelings as “[h]ere the layman sees a manifestation of forces that he did not suspect in a fellow human being, but whose stirrings he can dimly perceive in remote corners of his own personality.”<sup>177</sup> Therefore, as the fat maggots are consuming the brain of the unaware child who smiles slightly, insanity is bound to consume the brain of Eric, who has been an unaware, normal man until that unforeseeable event. The narrative thus instils a doubt in its readers' mind: could anybody – could they – become unexpectedly mad too?

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<sup>177</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, p.150.

## *A Clockwork Orange*

First published in 1962, Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* owes its fame to Kubrick's film. The novel, in fact, is rather unknown to the public, who assumes the movie to be an accurate adaptation of the book. However, although the film reproduces faithfully most of the events depicted in the novel, there is a major difference between the stories: Kubrick's, in fact, relies on the American edition of the book, which had been published without the last chapter intended by Burgess. As a result, the film and the novel can be considered two masterpieces on their own, inasmuch as they tell two stories which are the same and diametrically opposed at once.

Set in a near-future society, the novel follows the point of view of the teen protagonist: Alex. Together with his gang, Alex spends his time drinking milk and drugs and performing *ultraviolence*, that is, beating people, robbing and raping women for violence's sake. The youngsters who live in this society, in fact, regard violence as pure entertainment, and they speak an obscure slang called *Nadsat* which succeeds in desensitize the readers too.

The novel is divided into three parts, each starting with the same line: ““What's going to be then, eh?””<sup>178</sup> Although the sentence is the same, however, Alex is a different person during each utterances: in fact, while he was free to rove, rape and rob to his heart's content during Part One, he is detained, conditioned and rehabilitated during Part Two and Three. Indeed, since his “droogs” betray him, he is arrested and

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<sup>178</sup> Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*, (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2000), p.3.

later subjected to the so-called “Ludovico Technique”. This is an experimental treatment promoted by the Government in order to condition criminals so as to perceive violence as disgusting. During the treatment, in fact, doctors injects Alex with a substance which makes him feel sick during the show of violent movies. Thus, Alex’s body associates headaches and spasms to violence. Furthermore, since the soundtrack of a movie was Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Alex’s favourite music, his body associates it to disgust as well, so that he is unable to listen to it.

As soon as Alex successfully completes his treatment and becomes unable to react violently to events, he is released. The world around him, however, has changed and he does not have a home anymore. Unable to defend himself when his former friends beat him, he manages to reach “HOME”, the house of F. Alexander, a dissident writer who is working on a book called “A Clockwork Orange” and who considers Alex as a perfect tool to incite people against the Government. Alex, however, had already visited that same house a couple of years before, when he raped Alexander’s wife together with his gang. When the writer hears him speaking *Nadsat*, he suddenly identifies Alex, whom he tortures forcing him to listen to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony until he attempts suicide.

During the third part of the novel, the Government offers Alex the chance to be “restored”, as they need to gain the public opinion. Alex accepts and goes back to his previous life, forming a new gang and performing *ultraviolence*. The last chapter of the novel, however, adds a twist: Alex, in fact, is no longer excited by violence. When he meets his old friend Pete, who has married and is now living a normal life, he suddenly realizes he has grown up: what he wants now is a future, to be a father, to have a son who will act like a rebel and who will, ultimately, grow up himself.

#### **4.1 A Clockwork Orange: deceits**

*A Clockwork Orange* succeeds in disquieting its readers in an explicit way and in a subtle one. In the first case, which coincides mainly with Part One, the novel presents a pitiless protagonist who takes delight in the violent deeds which he commits and who does not even think about repenting: he does enjoy the horror that he performs. In this sense, the novel is on the same lines as *The Wasp Factory* as it unsettles its readers through the detailed showcase of some of the most immoral crimes they can conceive: from robbery and bashings to gang rapes and sexual abuse of under-age girls. Unlike Frank, however, Alex does not only tell his story from his point of view, but he also invokes the readers, addressing them explicitly. By doing so, the readers are called to witness the gruesome *ultraviolence* which he performs, thus becoming victims themselves: indeed, they are *forced* to watch violent scenes in the same way as he is obligated to watch violent movies in Part Two.

In the second, subtle case, the novel disturbs its readers as a result of their own feelings towards Alex. In fact, as soon as Part Two begins, there is a reversal in Alex's role: he is no longer a persecutor; rather, he becomes a victim. As a result, the readers experience a feeling of uneasiness as they still blame him for the despicable acts which he committed in Part I but, at the same time, they know perfectly well how it feels like to be forced to witness nauseating violence. They can thus feel sympathy for the former persecutor, which disturbs them as they wonder what kind of person they are: are they, perhaps, Alex's partners in crime?

Whereas that issue is further addressed in §4.2, this chapter aims at answering the question: why do the readers keep on reading instead of *looking away*? As

suggested for *The Wasp Factory*, I advance that they do so because the novel challenges their problem-solving and mind-reading abilities, it fosters misleading expectations and it provides un hoped-for rewards.

### *Problem-solving challenges and deceits*

As mentioned for *The Wasp Factory*, the first dilemma which the novel poses to its readers is the meaning of its title. Those who are familiar with Cockney slang would recognize the idiom “as queer as a clockwork orange”;<sup>179</sup> nonetheless, acknowledging the origins of the expression would not prove sufficient to satisfy the readers’ curiosity: indeed, it is still unclear what it refers to, and why. The title thus activates the readers’ SEEKING system, which is further excited as soon as the expression “a clockwork orange” appears in the text for the first time:

‘It is a book,’ I said. ‘It’s a book what you’re writing.’ I made the old goloss very coarse. ‘I have always had the strongest admiration for them as can write books.’ Then I looked at its top sheet, and there was the name – A CLOCKWORK ORANGE – and I said: ‘That’s a fair gloopy title. Who ever heard of a clockwork orange?’<sup>180</sup>

Alex’s rhetorical question seems to echo and give voice to the readers’ own puzzlement: in fact, both the protagonist of the novel and its readers are uncertain about the meaning of the title of the book. As a result, that analogy captures the readers’ attention: as they suppose the title of the novel to be related to the title of F. Alexander’s book, they expect the text to provide further evidence to support their assumption. However, the next time the expression “a clockwork orange” appears in

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<sup>179</sup> Blake Morrison, ‘Introduction’, Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*, p.viii.

<sup>180</sup> Burgess, p.18.

the text, it is not to supply such evidence; rather, Alex mentions the expression to refer to himself by the end of Part Two, when actors beat him in front of a public and he finds himself utterly unable to respond to that violence as a result of the Ludovico Technique:

‘Me, me, me. How about me? Where do I come into all this? Am I like just some animal or dog?’ And that started them off govoreeting real loud and throwing slovos at me. So I creeched louder, still creeching: ‘Am I just to be like a clock-work orange?’ I didn't know what made me use those slovos, brothers, which just came like without asking into my gulliver.<sup>181</sup>

This passage offers the readers Alex's own interpretation of the expression “a clockwork orange”, which he uses to convey distress. Once again, the text challenges their problem-solving skills as the hint which Alex provides requires them to speculate about the true meaning of the expression. It is only with the fifth chapter of Part III, however, that the readers begin to understand the true meaning of the title of the novel as Alex picks F. Alexander's book of the same name and leafs through it:

It seemed written in a very bezoomny like style, full of Ah and Oh and that cal, but what seemed to come out of it was that all lewdies nowadays were being turned into machines and that they were really – you and me and him and kiss-my-sharries – more like a natural growth like fruit.<sup>182</sup>

Far from quietening, the readers' curiosity increases as they recognize some features of Alexander's book which resemble the novel they are reading: indeed, like F. Alexander's, Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange* is written in a “bezoomny”, that is, “crazy”, style, and it is likewise “full of Ah and Oh”. That comment seems thus to

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., p.94

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p.117.

refer to what Burgess' novel looks like to those who leaf through it: since it is written using Alex's slang, it seems both unintelligible and colloquial. Furthermore, the theme which Alex highlights, namely the idea that people, who are like fruits – oranges – which God planted, are turned into machines resembles the theme which Burgess' novel explores: is it better to be able to *choose* evil over good, or to be conditioned to despise evil and thus lose human free will? As a result, the readers may wonder whether the book they are reading is perhaps the same book which Alex is leafing through.

This suspect becomes even more disquieting for those readers who are familiar with Burgess' biography: indeed, like Alexander's, the author's first wife died soon after a miscarriage caused by a gang assault, or, as Burgess wrote in the *Evening News*, a "CLOCK-WORK ORANGE GANG KILLED MY WIFE".<sup>183</sup> F. Alexander seems thus to play the role of Burgess' alter ego: they lost their wives because of a gang assault and they are both authors of a book titled 'A Clockwork Orange'. Furthermore, if Alexander is Burgess' double, it seems to follow that Alex, who holds Alexander's book in his hands in the same way as the readers hold Burgess', might be the readers' double too. Therefore, since such a suspect unsettles the readers who do not wish to identify with an immoral character (see §4.2), their SEEKING system urges them to keep on reading in order to reject that conjecture.

The novel offers its readers another kind of challenge to their problem-solving skills when it introduces the Ludovico Technique. Indeed, the text fosters the readers' expectations by alluding to the extraordinary results of the treatment, which "kill[s] the

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<sup>183</sup> Morrison in Burgess, p.xiv.

criminal reflex” and transforms offenders “out of all recognition”,<sup>184</sup> without explaining how the technique works. Moreover, when Dr Branon finally discloses what the treatment consists of, he only says: “We just show you some films.”<sup>185</sup> As a result, the readers’ curiosity increases as they wonder how that exceptional technique, which only consists of showing some films, actually works. However, although that curiosity leads them to read in order to find a solution to the enigma, it is Alex’s and the prison chaplain’s comments which further arouses the readers’ interest in learning how the plot may develop. As Alex reports, in fact,

[...] this Ludovico stuff was like a vaccination and there it was cruising about in my krovvy, so that I would be sick always for ever and ever amen whenever I viddied any of this ultra-violence.<sup>186</sup>

While Alex’s naive understanding of the conditioning which he is subjected to makes the readers wonder whether the treatment would actually prove to be as effective as a vaccination, the prison chaplain’s pointed remark invites the readers to speculate about the quality of Alex’s life after the treatment: since his body forces him to refuse violence, “he ceases also to be a creature capable of moral choice.”<sup>187</sup>

*A Clockwork Orange* does not only rely on challenges to the readers’ problem-solving abilities in order to invite them to keep on reading, but it also deceives them by presenting several elements which deludes the readers into expecting the text to become more pleasurable. For example, Alex’s language, which switches from argot

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<sup>184</sup> Burgess, p.69.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p.73.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid., p.89.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., p.94.

to a refined and solemn speech when he confronts with adults,<sup>188</sup> and his passion for classical music, would portray a charming and cultured young man, if only the boy did not indulge in his violent crimes. Likewise, the acts of kindness which Alex performs in Part I are deceitful as well. In fact, although at first he seems to buy some old beggars something to drink out of sympathy, the narrative later shows that it was only a way to bribe the women to support his alibi when the police questions him.<sup>189</sup> Similarly, when Alex offers his parents the money which he “earned” during the night,<sup>190</sup> the readers are likely to regard that kind action as a hint to the true good nature of the boy, a hint that proves wrong as soon as the narrative presents a new scene of violence. Nevertheless, Alex’s comment about his fake evening work fosters the readers’ hope and curiosity. Indeed, when he refers to his fake job, he explains: ‘For that’s what [my parents] said they believed I did these days.’<sup>191</sup> The wording of this sentence implies a prolepsis, a reference to a future which might be, hopefully, different and more pleasurable than Alex’s account of his past, despicable deeds. As a result, the readers are willing to keep on reading to learn how that possible, pleasurable future came into being.

These deceitful elements do not only misguide the readers’ expectations, but they also engage the readers’ mind-reading abilities. Indeed, even though Alex commits deliberate crimes and enjoys the *ultraviolence* which he performs, he seems to acknowledge how deplorable the criminal world can be:

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<sup>188</sup> See Ibid., p.18: “‘What is this? Who are you? How dare you enter my house without permission,’ And all the time his goloss was trembling and his rookers too. So I said:

‘Never fear. If fear thou hast in thy heart, O brother, pray banish it forthwith.’

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p.9.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., p.38.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., p.37.

They were a terrible grahzny lot really, and I didn't enjoy being with them, O  
my brothers, any more than you do now, but it won't be for much longer.<sup>192</sup>

Once again, the sentence “it won't be for much longer” implies a flash-forward, a hint to a future which Alex is now telling his story from. The future-Alex seems to be perfectly aware of his readers’ disgusted feelings (“any more than you do now”), so that the readers may wonder whether he is a different person now – an assumption which finds further support by the end of Part Three, when Alex leaves his new gang as violence does not make him feel thrilled anymore.<sup>193</sup> As a result, the novel engages its readers’ Theory of Mind as Alex presents himself as a complex, round character who enjoys committing immoral actions and whose account of past deeds, at the same time, seems to hint to the fact that he has possibly changed.

### *MacGuffins*

The novel builds misleading expectations about the plot by means of deceiving elements which work as MacGuffins as they divert the readers’ attention. One of these elements is the famous milk-plus, which also appears in the cover art of the Penguin Books edition, so as to influence the readers’ expectations through the paratext as well. Indeed, since the first scene which the text presents portrays Alex and his “droogs” in the Korova Milkbar as they sip milk-plus and wonder what to do to enjoy their night, the readers are led to wonder whether it is the drug which arouses Alex’s *ultraviolence*. As the narrator explains, in fact,

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., p.64.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid., pp.135-6.

[...] you could peet [the milk] with velloct or synthetics of drenchrom or one or two other vetches which would give you a nice quiet horrorshow fifteen minutes admiring Bog And All His Holy Angels and Saints in your left shoe with lights bursting all over your mozg. Or you could peet milk with knives in it, as we used to say, and this would sharpen you up and make you ready for a bit of dirty twenty-to-one, and that was what we were meeting this evening I'm starting off the story with.<sup>194</sup>

Since the drugs which the milk-plus contains seem to be extremely hallucinogenic and exciting, the readers could easily blame them, rather than Alex's nature, as the real cause of the *ultraviolence*, which would appear only as a side-effect. However, as the plot unfolds, the milk-plus disappears, while Alex keeps on committing deplorable deeds.

The fight between the subversive party and the Government seems to be a second MacGuffin. Indeed, that fight seems to run on the background of the novel, although Alex acknowledges it only by the end of Part Two, when he returns HOME for the second time and he questions F. Alexander about his book. According to the writer, since the "evil and wicked Government" is going to turn into "the full apparatus of totalitarianism", the opponents must use Alex as a political weapon in order to show its "diabolical proposals."<sup>195</sup> The readers, therefore, would expect a sharp and long fight to take place. However, when the battles takes place, it is nothing more than a deliberate torture of Alex, whom Alexander seems to be glad to torment for political purposes – or, rather, for personal ones?

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., p-3

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., p.118.

Finally, the sentence “what’s going to be then, eh?” could be considered as a third MacGuffin. In fact, it recurs three times at the beginning of Part I, II and III. Such a repetition generates expectations in the readers as it implies that something – something shocking, perhaps? – is going to happen. The readers are thus invited to keep on reading in order to find out what will happen. Eventually, the closure of the novel will satisfy their SEEKING as the formula moves from a question to an assertion – “[t]hat’s what it’s going to be then, brothers” –<sup>196</sup> and Alex reveals his plans for his future.

### *Multi-sensory imagery*

Like *The Wasp Factory*, *A Clockwork Orange* offers its readers unexpected rewards through the use of multi-sensory imagery. The first one is interestingly deceiving. In fact, it describes one of Alex’s dream: it is set in a field of flowers, there is a faun which plays a flute, and Beethoven’s music resonates.<sup>197</sup> The readers’ LUST system enjoys that idyllic scene, which reduces the unsettling emotions evoked by violent scenes, deludes the readers into thinking that Alex has changed, and excites their SEEKING system so as to read in order to encounter new and pleasurable scenes.

The second multi-sensory imagery describes the white building where Alex moves in order to be treated with the Ludovico Technique:

[...] [a]nd I was led off to a very nice white clean bedroom with curtains and a bedside lamp, and just the one bed in it, all for Your Humble Narrator. [...] I was told to take off my horrible prison plates and I was given a really beautiful

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid., p.141.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p.55.

set of pyjamas, O my brothers, in plain green [...]. And I was given a nice warm dressing-gown too and lovely tootles to put my bare nogas in [...].<sup>198</sup>

Although this description has a pleasurable effect only by contrast with the description of the overcrowded, dirty cell which Alex was forced to live in during his detention, something in the aseptic look of that new building disquiets the readers, who feel compelled to keep on reading in order to learn whether Alex's conditions have actually improved.

The third multi-sensory imagery completely deceives the readers as it is charged with emotional values. Indeed, the place where Alex seeks refuge is HOME, and it is described as warm, comfortable, somehow maternal as only one's own home can be.<sup>199</sup> This scene thus relaxes the readers before building up the suspense which will lead to Alex's unmasking.

The last multi-sensory imagery is the only one which describes an actual pleasurable scene. Indeed, it depicts Alex's fantasy about a house and a family to care about:

But I has this sudden very strong idea that if I walked into the room next to this room where the fire was burning away and my hot dinner laid on the table, there I should find what I really wanted [...]. For in that other room in a cot was laying gurgling goo goo goo my son.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., p.73.

<sup>199</sup> See Ibid., p.114: "Anyway I went up and had this hot bath, and he brought in pyjamas and an over-gown for me to put on, all warmed by the fire [...]. I fitted downstairs and voided that in the kitchen he had set the table with knives and forks [...], and soon he served out a nice fry of eggiwegs [...]. It was nice sitting there in the warm [...]."

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., p.140.

This image results even more rewarding since it precedes the establishment of a final idealized aspect normalcy. The text, therefore, satisfies those readers who did not dismiss the novel, as it offers them a positive resolution of the plot.

#### **4.2 *A Clockwork Orange*: morbid curiosity**

As mentioned in §4.1, *A Clockwork Orange* disquiets its readers since they become his “only friends”<sup>201</sup> as soon as his *droogs* betray him. Just as they witnessed Alex’s violent and vandalistic acts in Part I, the readers are called to be the only eyewitnesses of the injustices which he has to endure, from sexual harassment in his cell to the torture caused by the Ludovico Technique in Part II and III. Although a morbid curiosity, fostered by the awareness that what happens in the novel does not happen to them, keeps on guiding the readers’ interest in Alex’s vicissitudes, in Part II and III their curiosity does not evoke uncanny feelings. The violent scenes which the readers witnessed in Part I, in fact, were despicable and deplorable, nonetheless they excited a voyeuristic interest in the readers, who could feel compelled to read the same passages more than once, regarding them as uncanny as they were, perhaps, clues of repressed wishes.

By contrast, the injustice and violence which Alex endures in Part II stimulate a feeling of sympathy towards the victim and disapproval towards those who performed such injustices – that is, his ex *droogs*, his fellow prisoners, doctors and F. Alexander: in a word, the traitors. The theme of the betrayal, therefore, seems to strike a deep chord with the readers who, being forced to witness every scene from Alex’s

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<sup>201</sup> Ibid., p.57.

privileged point of view and being continually addressed to as “brothers” and “only friends”, feel as if they were so. This generates an unsettling feeling in turn: does being Alex’s only friends entail that the readers are like him? The novel thus arouses a disquieting feeling since its readers fear that they may lose their own identity as they witness Alex’s crimes without intervening and since they sympathize with him when other people persecute him. Furthermore, the text presents some *unheimlich* elements and stimulates the return of repressed wishes.

### *Unheimlich elements*

The Ludovico Technique scene seems to be one of the most disturbing scene in the whole novel. First of all, it presents an interesting number of unsettling details which exploit people’s most common fears. For example, it involves the injection of unknown substances and the chair which Alex is tied to is referred to as “a dentist’s chair”.<sup>202</sup> The common fear of doctors and dentists is increased by the reference to the straps, which suggests the fear of being harmless and unable to move. All these elements play on the readers’ fight-or-flight instinct (see §1.2), generating an adrenalin tension. However, it is the reference to the eyes what disturbs the readers the most:

One veshch I did not like, though, was when they put like clips on the skin of my forehead, so that my top glaze-lids were pulled up and up and up and I could not shut my glazes no matter how I tried.<sup>203</sup>

As Freud posits in *The Uncanny*, the fear of damaging or losing one’s eyes seems to be intimately connected with an infantile fear of castration.<sup>204</sup> Although the

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p.75.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., p.76.

motor imagery which the scene evokes, and which possibly stimulates the readers' mirror neurons to simulate Alex's experience, seems to be enough to disquiet the readers, Freud's suggestion may explain why that scene seems particularly disturbing; indeed, if it evokes an underlying fear of castration, the elements of the clips which force the eyelids to remain open may result as unsettling as the idea of being blocked and unable to react while the castration takes place.

A second uncanny element which is directly connected to the Ludovico Technique regards Alex's physical sensations. Indeed, he feels the nausea and pain associated with violence even when he only *dreams* about it.<sup>205</sup> As a result, the clear dividing line between reality and dreams seems to falter, which causes the readers to feel disquieted. Indeed, if Alex feels pain when he dreams and when he is awake, is there still a boundary between dream and reality?

*A Clockwork Orange* blurs the boundary lines between dream and reality in further ways, as it defamiliarizes the world which the readers know. In fact, although the storyworld reflects the readers' own world, as the novel is set in London, it is portrayed as a timeless future, a *cacotopia*.<sup>206</sup> The fictitious world which the readers explore while they read, therefore, is at once their own and alien. They do not recognize it, even though it is familiar. Likewise, when Alex reaches HOME, it is not a proper home which he enters. Although its warmth, its cosiness and the scent of the meals which Alexander cooks contribute to make HOME look familiar to Alex's and the readers' eyes, they do not recognize it: indeed, HOME is not a *home*, but an

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<sup>204</sup> Freud, *The Uncanny*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>205</sup> Burgess., p.83.

<sup>206</sup> Flavio Gregori, ““A Clockwork Orange” da Burgess a Kubrick”, *Singin’ in the Brain. Il mondo distopico di “A Clockwork Orange”*, (Torino: Lindau, 2004), pp.7-62 (p.16).

adorned trap which Alex eventually steps into. Furthermore, the novel itself represents a kind of defamiliarized world as it manipulates the readers' expectation of a definite conclusion. In fact, it presents them with two equally plausible endings: a violent one, in which Alex regains his enjoyment of anarchy, and a positive one, in which Alex matures and plans to change his way of life. The novel, therefore, seems to offer its readers a chance to apply their own *free will* to the text: the negative or positive resolution of the plot is a matter of their own choice.<sup>207</sup>

Another element which *A Clockwork Orange* defamiliarizes is language itself. The readers, in fact, are forced to read Alex's story through his own language, the *Nadsat*, which looks almost unintelligible because of its Russian influences. Such influences, however, present English nuances and meanings<sup>208</sup> as *Nadsat* is indeed a defamiliarized English: although the readers can recognize some words, such as, for example, *horrorshow*, their meaning is obscure despite their English-looking signifier. Moreover, its onomatopoeic quality turns it into a baby talk, or rather a teen talk, which mangles the grown-ups' language.<sup>209</sup> In this sense, it returns to the readers as the familiar, uncanny memory of their own lallations, experiments of sounds without a meaning.

Finally, *unheimlich* feelings lurk in the relationship between Alex and F. Alexander who is, in fact, "another Alex."<sup>210</sup> The writer seems to be a more mature version of young Alex, whose name is indeed a diminutive. At the same time, Alexander is everything Alex is not yet: he is an adult. As such, he is also a father-like

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p.37.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid., p.10.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., p.12-4.

<sup>210</sup> Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange*, p.117.

figure, whose wife Alex raped,<sup>211</sup> performing an explicit oedipus complex. Moreover, he is the author of a book which seems to resemble the one which the readers read, that is, Alex's story. In this sense, Alexander represents a prophecy. He is the future, he is the man whom Alex is going to become after the ending of the novel: writer and narrator of his own story, victim of another generation of violent, uncontrollable youngsters.

### *Satisfaction of repressed desires*

The way in which Alex enables his readers to satisfy their unconscious, repressed wishes is by playing the role of their *Doppelgänger*. In fact, even though he evokes feelings of disgust in the readers, who disapprove his deeds, there is something in Alex's freedom to go along with his wishes which attracts the readers. Indeed, his name reveals his nature: he is *a-lex*, that is, without rules.<sup>212</sup> The allure which he emanates, therefore, seems to be of two kinds: an explicit and a subtle one.

The explicit attraction towards Alex shows itself in the boy's interaction with his parents, especially with his mother. When he talks about her, in fact, Alex reveals his attachment towards the woman who carried him in her womb.<sup>213</sup> Therefore, his jealous reaction when he learns, as soon as he is released from the prison, that a certain Joe lives in *his* room seems to be understandable. Indeed, another "child" usurped his mother's love, and the readers can easily sympathize with his resentful emotions. Such

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<sup>211</sup> Gregori, p.34.

<sup>212</sup> Burgess, quoted in *Ibid.*, p.9.

<sup>213</sup> See Burgess, p.37: "[...] and mum gave me a tired like little smeck, to thee fruit of my womb my only son sort of." And p.57: "[...] and my mum squaring her rot for owwwww owwwww owwwww in her mother's grief at her only child and son of her bosom [...]."

an enraged, competitive feeling towards the other “child” is especially aroused when Joe hugs Alex’s mother in front of him:

‘You,’ said this Joe. ‘I’ve heard all about you, boy. I know what you’ve done, breaking the hearts of your poor grieving parents. So you’re back, eh? Back to make life a misery for them once more is that it? Over my dead corpse you will, because they’ve let me be more like a son to them than like a lodger.’ [...] [A]nd there he was like trying to put a son’s protecting rocker round my crying mum, O my brothers.<sup>214</sup>

Furthermore, Alex’s aggressive replies and his attitude of control towards his parents, whom he “taught”,<sup>215</sup> appeal to the readers’ repressed wish to control their own parents. Alex’s behaviour, in fact, reminds the readers of their own adolescence, a stage of their lives during which the continuous fight against parents and their prohibitions – which appeared unreasonable at the time – generated a wish to command them and respond to them in the same way as Alex dares to do.

The subtle attraction which Alex exercises over his readers, on the other hand, exploits their morbid curiosity and the use of the *Nadsat*. This argot, which, as the text explains, consists of “[o]dd bits of old rhyming slang” and “[a] bit of gipsy talk” although “most of the roots are Slav,”<sup>216</sup> makes most of the violence which Alex commits in Part I almost unintelligible. In fact, it takes many pages before the readers can master Alex’s slang properly, and even then, the absence of an official glossary enables the readers’ right hemisphere to play an important role in charging the unknown words with unconscious emotional associations (see §1.2). As a result, the

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., pp.100-1.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., p.26

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., p.86

text initial unintelligible form filters the intensity of the violent images which the content presents. The scene of Alexander's wife gang rape provides a fitting example:

So he did the strong-man on the devotchka, who was still creech creech creeching away in very horrorshow four-in-a-bar, locking her rookers from the back, while I ripped away at this and that and the other, the others going haw haw haw still, and real good horrorshow groodies they were that then exhibited their pink glazzies, O my brothers, while I untrussed and got ready for the plunge.<sup>217</sup>

The readers who encounter this passage for the first time may not understand what is happening in this scene until they encounter the word “plunge”, which, as vulgar as it can be, represents the only explicit allusion to the rape. It is only then that the readers disapprove the content of this passage since the words “rookers”, “groodies” and “glazzies” did not evoke the meanings of “wrists”, “breasts” and “nipples” in their minds. Thus, since the text protects its readers from an excess of reality which could result in abandoning the novel, the narrative employs a subtle strategy: it forces its readers not to intervene – for example, allowing their own censor to disapprove the scene – and to re-read the scene until its meaning is clear. In other words, the narrative makes its readers unaware *amateurs of suffering*. In fact, since they do not master the *Nadsat* yet, when they read the rape scene for the first time they do not feel compassion towards the victim or disapproval towards the persecutor: they understand only vaguely what is happening on the scene. Thus, the unaware readers witness a rape scene and can satisfy possible repressed sexual wishes as they are

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid., p.20.

allowed to blame the text if they enjoy the scene: after all, they did not understand what was going on.

### *Machiavellian Alex*

The readers' identification with Alex is gradual. In fact, whereas in Part I the readers feel seized and dragged to sit next to him and his *droogs* at the Korova Milkbar by means of the vocative "O my brothers",<sup>218</sup> in Part II and III it is the readers who willingly remain by the teenager's side, so much so that Alex calls them his "only friends".<sup>219</sup>

Alex attracts his readers, who are forced to follow him in his performance of *ultraviolence* as he continually addresses them, since he is extremely Machiavellian. Indeed, whereas on the one hand he commits immoral crimes, on the other hand he seems to be not only as charming as a leader, but also very interested in having class. Moreover, his greatest passion is classical music: a passion which is quite unusual among teenagers and which criminals seem unlikely to nurture. The readers are thus led to question whether his love for such an elegant and positive art is perhaps a hint to Alex's hidden, "salvable" nature. The narrative provides contrasting evidence to this assumption. In fact, even though Alex's positive nature seems to be disproved every time he describes the gruesome fantasies which he imagines when he listens to classical music, the injustices which he endures make the readers sympathize with him, regarding him as a defenceless victim.

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., p.3.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., p.57.

[...]After every meal,’ he said, sitting on the edge of the bed, ‘we shall be giving you a shot in the arm. That should help.’ I feel really grateful to this very nice Dr Branon. I said:

‘Vitamins, sir, will it be?’

‘Something like that,’ he said, smiling real horrorshow and friendly.

[...] And indeed, O my brothers, when I got off to bed I found myself a malenky bit weak. It was the undernourishment like Dr Branon had said [...]. But the vitamins in the aft-meal injection would put me right. No doubt at all about that, I thought.<sup>220</sup>

Since Alex does not know the nature of the Ludovico Treatment, he trusts blindly what Dr Branon tells him. However, the readers, who cannot intervene, feel suspicious towards the doctor, but they can only watch Alex become a victim himself. Moreover, the text also enables them to experience Alex’s own feelings of nausea and dizziness by conveying them in a series of repetitions:

So I was put into the bed and still felt bolnoy but could not sleep, but soon I started to feel that soon I might start to feel that I might soon start feeling just a malenky bit better [...].<sup>221</sup>

However, it is the desperate way in which Alex, exposed to the public scorn and unable to defend himself, asks: “Am I just to be like a clock-work orange?”<sup>222</sup> that the readers’ CARE system completely activates. Indeed, they sympathize with this teenager who has lost control over his own body and emotions, who has been deprived of his *free will*, of his human right to choose evil over good. Suddenly, Alex looks no longer as a persecutor, but rather as a victim. He is only a boy

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., pp.73-5.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., p.80.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., p.94.

who seeks desperately “home, home, home.”<sup>223</sup> However, when he succeeds in finding HOME, he does not find a safe place at all.

The readers’ sympathetic response towards Alex increases during the scenes set in Alexander’s cottage as a result of the multi-sensory imagery which rewards the readers’ LUST system (see §4.1) and deceives the protagonist who believes he has finally found a comfortable shelter. When Alex’s incautious words make F. Alexander suspect his real identity, the suspense of the scene imposes the reader to play the uncomfortable role of the witness who cannot intervene. Moreover, when Alexander’s “deliberate torture”<sup>224</sup> leads Alex to attempt suicide, his words generate a utter feeling of compassion in his readers:

But I cracked my back and my wrists and nogas and felt very bolshy pain  
before I passed out, brothers, with astonished and surprised litsos of  
chellovecks in the streets looking at me from above. And just before I passed  
out I viddied clear that not one chelloveck in the whole horrid world was for  
me [...].<sup>225</sup>

Indeed, the readers are the only friends who are “for him”, since, as he explains at the end of the book, “[y]ou have been everywhere with your little droog Alex.”<sup>226</sup> They are the only ones who have never abandoned him, despite his deplorable acts. They are the only friends who did not betray him. As they feel compassion towards this teenager who realizes that violence does not fascinate him anymore and who only wishes to grow up and speak with a “grown-up goloss”,<sup>227</sup> the readers somehow

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., p.112.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., p.124.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., p.125.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., p.140.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid., p.139.

acknowledge *this thing of darkness*. They realize that they have been like him: they have been teenagers, they have had a personal, unintelligible slang; they felt consumed by rage, they yearned for affirming their identity, they yearned for freedom. Luckily, their morality prevented them to express their teenage rebellion by means of rapes and violence. Nonetheless, could they really deny that it was uncannily familiar?

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to suggest hypotheses in order to explain why human beings enjoy disquieting narratives. In doing so, this research aimed at being interdisciplinary, so as to benefit from the contributions which neuroscience and psychoanalysis can offer to the study of literary texts and of the ways in which the emotions they arouse guide the readers' experience of a text. Indeed, as the first part of this research suggested, and as the analysis of the novels subsequently highlighted, disquieting narratives extensively rely on their readers' emotional response to the scenes which they present them with.

One of the most interesting findings is that, although it seems counterintuitive, the emotions which disquieting narratives rely on are mainly positive ones. Indeed, they need to evoke positive feelings so as to maintain their readers' transportation which otherwise would fail to happen. As a result, deceitful elements are scattered throughout the novels to provoke a positive disposition of the reader towards the narrative. Such elements arouse the readers' SEEKING "anticipatory euphoria", they provoke a sympathetic CARE towards puzzling characters, and they offer several LUSTful images of either idyllic or cosy scenes in order to lower the tension which disturbing scenes can generate. Additionally, whenever gruesome and unsettling scenes delude the readers' expectations to enjoy a pleasant reading experience, disquieting narratives bring into play challenges to the readers' problem solving abilities; this does not necessarily involve positive feelings, but it entails a dopaminergic, rewarding incentive to keep on reading nonetheless.

As Chapter 3 and 4 confirmed, both *The Wasp Factory* and *A Clockwork Orange* employ a significant amount of manipulative features. Titles represent the first and most evident examples of deceitful elements. Indeed, the high status of title of a novel or title of a chapter affects the readers' perception of the words printed on the book cover or at the beginning of a new chapter: at once, they become more important than any other word, so that they tantalize the readers' mind. The readers are thus invited to wonder what it is that makes those words so special, what their meaning is. In the case of *A Clockwork Orange*, additionally, the title does not only baffle its readers, but it also coincides with the title of a book which appears *in* the text itself, so that the readers' curiosity escalates.

When the deceits which the texts present come in the form of cliffhangers, they mainly appear as cunning single words such as "secret", "truth" or "sign" (see §3.1). Alternatively, they are hint at desirable – yet deceitful – expectations (see §4.1). The readers' assumptions about Alex's intrinsic, hidden good nature provide an example of this kind: indeed, the references to his ability to switch from *Nadsat* to a refined manner of speech, his craving for elegance in his performance of *ultraviolence* and his extensive knowledge of classical music seem to support the readers' suppositions, so as to invite them to continue their reading in order to find confirmations.

Both novels display interesting MacGuffins. Although they seldom appear as concrete objects in a scene, as it is the case with the Sacrifice Poles and the KBr formula in *The Wasp Factory* and the milk-plus in *A Clockwork Orange*, they succeed in catalysing the readers' attention and curiosity even in the form of hints at feelings. In fact, both the novels foster a feeling of inevitability which, in turn, provoke a feeling of suspense in their readers. However, whereas in *The Wasp Factory* the

feeling of inevitability is mainly aroused by the magical, uncanny aura which surrounds the Factory, in *A Clockwork Orange* it is the repetition of the formula “what’s going to be then, eh?” which alludes to the possibility that something important – something unpredictable – should happen before the end of the book.

Another strategy which *The Wasp Factory* and *A Clockwork Orange* employ in order to stimulate their readers’ SEEKING system is their use of tenses. Both *The Wasp Factory* and *A Clockwork Orange* are retrospective narratives, both end with a shift in the time of the narration which moves from an account of past events to the present. This affects the readers’ experience of the narrative: indeed, the use of the past tense as the main time of the narration enables them to infer that the shocking events which the narrators describe are concluded and that a change hopefully took place, so as to result in a more positive present. The analepses which recur in *The Wasp Factory* and the prolepses which occur in *A Clockwork Orange* work as further support to that inference, which the endings of the novels seem to suggest, as in the case of Banks’ story, or to confirm, as it happens with Burgess’ text.

The two texts analysed succeed in engaging their readers’ as they present puzzling characters which stimulate both readers’ GRIEF and CARE system. In the first case, the narratives provoke a state of uneasiness which the readers strive not to feel. As the analysis of *The Wasp Factory* highlighted, such uneasy feelings are mainly connected to the protagonist’s relationship with his mother, whereas *A Clockwork Orange* relies on the helplessness of its protagonist in Part II and III in order to disquiet its readership. The disquieting element is strictly connected with the activation of the CARE system, which takes place during the reading of both novels. Although it may appear counterintuitive at first, it is the devious nature of the protagonists which

enables the readers' CARE system to activate. In fact, even though Frank's and Alex's despicable actions result in their readers' disapproval, when the wheel of Fortune turns and the texts suggest that these young men might actually be victims – of his father's experiments in the case of Frank and of the Government and society in general in the case of Alex – the readers are likely to pity them. In some cases, they may even sympathize with those ambiguous not-completely-good-nor-completely-evil characters as a result of their attempts at mind-reading.

The last way in which the novels manipulate their readers' expectations is through the offering of unexpected rewards to their readers. The analysis suggested in Chapter 3 and 4 seems to confirm that these rewards come in the form of multi-sensory imagery which inebriates the readers' minds because of the contrast with the violent scenes presented by the narratives, and as a result of their LUSTful stimulation of the readers' five senses. Receiving such un hoped-for rewards misleads the readers who expect more pleasant images of the sort to appear again in the course of the narrative. Thus, they keep on reading, unaware of the unsettling scenes which they are going to encounter later in the texts.

A second interesting finding which emerged from the second part of this study is the connection between disquieting fiction and the projection and sublimation of the readers' repressed wishes. Both novels, in fact, display *unheimlich* elements disguised as fearful images which cause distress in the readers. For example, *The Wasp Factory* relies on the uneasiness which the readers feel when they wonder whether thoughts are actually omnipotent, so much so that they can kill a man or imply the actual existence of a subtle, unknown magic in our world. Likewise, *A Clockwork Orange* stages majestically people's most common fears through the Ludovico Technique, thus

hinting also at a possible fear of castration. Despite their apparent form, both these elements prove to be disguised wishes: as regards Banks' novel, the repressed wish which returns is the childish and narcissistic faith in a magical quality of thoughts; in the case of *A Clockwork Orange*, it is the wish of avoiding castration, injections, dentists and doctors as a whole.

Finally, a third thought-provoking result which this study highlighted is the pivotal role which disquieting protagonists play in directing their readers' emotional response to the texts. Indeed, the use of a first person narrative enables the readers of *The Wasp Factory* and *A Clockwork Orange* to be involved in the protagonists' – and narrators' – reasoning. This, in turn, enables the readers to collect every hint about the way in which these fictitious minds work so as to make sense of them and their motives and goals. The remarkable aspect of this forced witnessing of events, however, is that it results in experiences of sympathy, if not empathy when motor images are strikingly vivid, on the part of the readers. This happens because disquieting characters seem to possess two distinctive features: they are the readers' *Doppelgänger* and they are Machiavellian.

In the first case, the disquieting protagonists of Banks' and Burgess' novels provoke a sympathetic response which the readers are not likely to acknowledge – or rather their conscious mind might not want to. As the readers' *Doppelgänger*, in fact, Frank and Alex are free to go along with their wishes without constraints, thus enabling their readers to enjoy such a liberating experience as well. The readers' repressed desires which Frank and Alex sublimate thanks to their immoral acting mainly regard the infantile jealousy towards siblings and other children (see §3.2) and sexual wishes (see §4.2). As a result, when these characters perform the murders and

the rapes, the readers feel disquieted in two ways: the first and explicit one responds to the readers' censor which condemns and repudiates the characters' deeds; the second and most uncanny reveals that the protagonists' actions sublimate the readers' repressed, unconscious desires.

Frank and Alex succeed in arousing sympathetic responses on the part of their readers because their actions and their reasoning suggest a complex psychology which cannot be dismissed as merely evil. In essence, in fact, they are *too* evil to be only evil. They are miserable as well. Surely their actions make them rather contemptible. However, when they move from being persecutors to reveal their nature of victims of the circumstances, their pain, their helplessness, their frustrated rage suddenly appeal to their readers' sympathy.

Vivid and cunning, puzzling and hopeless, complex creatures made of darkness and light, disquieting characters appear as charming as Milton's Satan. The readers, therefore, enjoy their stories. Even though they may not realize it, even though they may even deny it, the readers feel fascinated. They are of the Devil's party without knowing it.

## Appendix

### The Collector

*The Collector* is John Fowles' first novel. Published in 1963, it received international recognition and proved Fowles one of the most brilliant British writers. Indeed, the novel is quite innovative: it tells the story of a perverted obsession through two points of view: the collector's and the victim's. The book is thus divided in four parts. The first one presents the first-person narrative of Frederick Clegg, a solitary, uneducated collector who has fallen in love with Miranda, a beautiful girl he had noticed one day. The second part presents a first-person narrative as well, although from Miranda's point of view: in fact, Frederick kidnapped and imprisoned her in his house. The third and fourth part, finally, switch back to Frederick's thoughts.

Frederick collects butterflies and is an amateur photographer. He wins a lottery, which enables him to buy an isolated house which he tries to decorate according to what he believes to be Miranda's tastes. Miranda is the reason which led Frederick to buy such a house: in fact, he abducts her so that he can court her freely. He devotes himself to this purpose, buying expensive gifts and surrendering to Miranda's whims. Nevertheless, his attempts are useless: she does not seem to acknowledge his kindness and love. As a result, he promises to free her after a month, but he has no intention to keep his promise. Indeed, as every day goes by, he wants Miranda more and more. It is only when the girl tries to seduce him, however, that he loses his respect for her, so much so that he forces her to pose for nude photographs and neglects her cold, which eventually turns into pneumonia. Since he refuses to call a doctor, however, Miranda

worsens day after day, while Frederick convinces himself not to be the cause of her fate.

The second part of the novel tells the same story, but its perspective is reversed. Readers, in fact, get to know Miranda, who was described as a capricious elitist from Frederick's point of view, as what she really is: a fragile, ordinary young woman, passionately in love with an artist and incredibly fond of life. However, being imprisoned kills her little by little, and the powerless readers can only witness her unfortunate end. The third part, finally, sheds light on which end Miranda came to: she died and Frederick thought about suicide. However, a fourth part concludes the novel. Frederick, in fact, has changed his mind: there was nothing special in his feelings for Miranda. Indeed, he has already set his sight on a new girl to imprison into his house: a new butterfly to add to his collection.

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