Conscious Immersion and the Metamodern: A Critical Analysis of the Immersive Nature of Contemporary Metafiction

Emma Lauren Wisher, BA (Hons), MA, MRes

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Abstract

This thesis exemplifies the immersive nature of twenty-first century metafiction and examines the applicability of the emergent cultural ideology metamodernism through a critical analysis of Gilbert Adair's *And Then There Was No One,* Ben Lerner's *10:04* and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas,* as well as through creative practice with my novel *Papercut. Papercut* relates the story of Eve, a conflicted woman whose life becomes monotonous and restricted following the death of her mother and the disintegration of her relationship with her fiancé Nathan, causing her to devolve rapidly from her vibrant former self. Eve's life begins to change, however, when her estranged brother Jay and his new girlfriend Morgan visit for the week, not just because they encourage Eve to reconsider who she wants to be, but because Morgan reveals the existence of a book called *Rewritten*, of which its plotlines and characters share unnerving similarities with Eve's life. Eve commences an investigation of *Rewritten* and its author Jessica Eden in an attempt to comprehend the book's origin and significance, only for her life, and the lives of those around her, to begin to replicate those of the characters in Eden's novel, causing the distinction between reality and fiction to become increasingly blurred.

Whilst metafiction was once considered to be disruptive of the reader's immersion, contemporary metafiction

demonstrates an oscillation of its historicity, combining its modernist application of forging fictional worlds and characters that reflect how reality and the self are constructed, alongside its postmodern tendencies of foregrounding the artificiality of the text. This fluctuation, or metaxy, of the modern and the postmodern has seen metafiction evolve to become an affective and immersive system of techniques, in which the composition of the text is reinforced as a way to present the fictional world as real. The alternation between the modern and the postmodern is reflective of a wider shift in contemporary literature and ideologies, whereby a new cultural emergent has formed that some theorists refer to as metamodernism. This thesis provides a critical analysis of the immersive nature of contemporary metafiction, and of the suitability of metamodernism, through the identification of a new reading experience that I refer to as conscious immersion, which concerns the relocation of the reader within a wider fictional universe each time she encounters a metareference, instead of being restored to the real world. Alongside the primary fictional world of the main narrative, the fictional universe often features a faux-real world, occupied by a fictional version of the writer, reader and text, to which the reader is relocated through metareferences that are self-referential in nature. This thesis also constitutes a consolidation of existing theory regarding

metafiction into a clear and coherent framework, recategorising metafiction into the three primary forms of thematic, structural and linguistic metareferences, which concern the subject matter, structural composition and linguistic properties of the text.

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PART I:

Papercut (a novel)

[REDACTED]

PART II:

Conscious Immersion and the Metamodern: A Critical Analysis of the Immersive Nature of Contemporary Metafiction

Introduction
Conscious Immersion

I know that Supernatural's just a book, okay? I know the difference between fantasy and reality.

- *Becky Rosen, Sympathy for the Devil*[1]

Metafiction constitutes a commentary on the practices and processes of writing through the act of writing, whereby writerly themes such as the creation of characters and the formation of fictional worlds can be used to explore the paradigm between fiction and reality, as well as the way in which an individual constructs her notions of identity, reality and the self. This foregrounding of the artifice of the text often infers metafiction as being disruptive of the reader's immersion, although I argue that the twenty-first century has seen metafiction evolve from its parodic and deconstructive postmodernism applications to demonstrate a return to modernist depth and affect, drawing upon evocative techniques such as sincerity, situatedness and embodiment to maintain the reader's immersion up until the moment she concludes reading. This thesis provides a critical

[1] 'Sympathy for the Devil', *Supernatural: The Complete Fifth Season* (Warner Home Video/The CW, 2010) [on DVD].

analysis of the immersive nature of contemporary[2] metafiction, arguing for its redefinition as a system of thematic, structural and linguistic techniques that foreground the composition of the text to present its fictional world as real.

The juxtaposition of metafiction and immersion, and of the modern and the postmodern, is reflective of a greater shift in twenty-first century literature, and in contemporary ideologies more widely, of which Ben Masters identifies 'oscillations between idealism and scepticism, conviction and evasiveness, sentiment and irony'.[3] Many theorists have attempted to define this sense of the post-postmodern, with one term of relevance to this thesis being metamodernism, described by David James and Urmila Seshagiri as literature that 'incorporates and adapts, reactivates and complicates the aesthetic prerogatives of an earlier cultural moment'.[4] Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen's discussion of metamodernism is more sustained, defining the metamodern as a 'tension, a being with or among, of postmodernist and modernist – and even realist and earlier – strategies and

[2] 'Contemporary' is used synonymously with 'twenty-first century' throughout this thesis.

[3] Ben Masters, 'Adjustment-Style: From H. G. Wells to Ali Smith and the Metamodern Novel', *Textual Practice,* 35 (2021), 967-95 (p. 988).

[4] David James and Urmila Seshagiri, 'Metamodernism: Narratives of Continuity and Revolution', *PMLA,* 129 (2014), 87-100 (p. 93).

sensibilities'[5] that 'emerges from, and reacts to, the postmodern as much as it is a cultural logic that corresponds to today's stage of global capitalism'.[6] The immediacy of terrorism in the West, destabilised geopolitics and the effects of climate change are just some of the conditions that van den Akker and Vermeulen argue have contributed towards the contemporary 'structure of feeling'[7] and have thus inspired 'the artistic responses and aesthetic innovations'[8] of present-day writers, whereby the world has become uncertain, inspiring a return to more affective and meaningful sensibilities.

The apparent hybridity of the modern and the postmodern requires the harmonisation of seemingly opposing concepts and techniques, however, of which the coexistence of metafiction and immersion is perhaps the most contradictory. Immersion, which I define as the subconscious relocation of the reader from the actual world to the fictional world(s) of the text, concerns a reading experience by which the text is converted into a fictional world in the mind of the reader that can often

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[5] Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 1-19 (p. 9).

[6] van den Akker and Vermeulen, p. 4.

[7] van den Akker and Vermeulen, p. 4.

[8] van den Akker and Vermeulen, p. 17.

feel as vivid as those represented in the visual media of film or television, encouraging the reader to feel as though she has been transported from her own reality to become a temporary spectator or occupant of the text's fictional world. This generation of belief and investment within the fictional world, as well as a corresponding sense of escapism from the actual world, can thus appear to be contradicted by the function of metafiction, which utilises a system of techniques (or metareferences as I refer to them) that challenge immersion through the foregrounding of the text's fictional composition. Whilst some metareferences are internal, relating to writer-characters and in-world texts that explore writerly themes in a way that does not impact upon the reader's immersion, other forms of metafiction consist of self-references to the text and its context, of which Marie-Laure Ryan argues that 'the cost of the metafictional stance is an ontological alienation of the reader from the fictional world' as 'you cannot see the signs and the world at the same time'.[9] Indeed, how can a text be immersive if it is continuously being identified as a compilation of processes and techniques?

[9] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media,* 2nd edn (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2015), p. 284.

This thesis advances our understanding of the oscillating nature of contemporary literature, and critically examines the suitability of metamodernism, by arguing that metafiction has evolved to maintain the reader's immersion through the formation of a new reading experience that I identify as *conscious immersion*. Conscious immersion, which I define as the conscious relocation of the reader between the fictional worlds of the text, relates to the formation of a wider fictional universe in which the reader is aware of her relocation from one fictional world to another. At the centre of the fictional universe is the primary fictional world of the main narrative, of which additional fictional worlds surround it, including those formed by in-world texts read and imagined by the characters, as well as a faux-real world that is formed through self-referential metareferences that foreground the fictionality of the text. Although self-references to the text's construction and context may appear to disrupt the reader's immersion, I believe the faux-real world ensures that immersion is consistently maintained, often through the illusion that the text relates an account of 'real' events, as well as through situatedness and embodiment, where characters are positioned as 'real' people whose lives are influenced by the 'real' environments they inhabit, which not only creates a faux-real version of the actual world, but a faux-real version of the actual writer, text and

reader too. Permeable diegetic levels separate each fictional world, except for the level that distinguishes the fictional universe from the actual world, through which the reader can only travel when she commences or concludes reading.

The positioning of a text's fictional world as 'real' not only enables metafiction to contribute towards the formation of an immersive reading experience, but also influences the reader to consider the relationship between the text and the actual world in which it was written, in which the distance between diegetic levels is seemingly contracted through the inference that reader and character coexist. Patricia Waugh's influential study of metafiction is relevant here, in which she states metafiction 'not only examines the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, [but] also explores the possible fictionality of the world outside of the literary fictional text',[10] as conscious immersion utilises metafiction to challenge the reader's perception of the actual world or her positionality on specific societal concerns and issues. This notion is evident in my novel *Papercut,* which uses metafiction to enhance the text's primary themes of identity, trauma and mental health, reinforcing parallels between the creation of characters and the construction of the self, as well as the way in which an individual's idiosyncratic experiences can

[10] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction,* 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

influence her perception of both the fictional world of the text and the actual world in which she exists, whereby the subjectivity of reality is impacted upon by an individual's emotions, experiences and external pressures.

Papercut relates the story of Eve, a discontented woman plagued by guilt and grief whose life changes dramatically when her estranged brother Jay and his new girlfriend Morgan come to stay for the week. Eve forges a tentative bond with Morgan which intensifies after Morgan reveals the existence of a book called *Rewritten,* of which its plotlines and characters possess striking similarities with Eve's life. Metareferences utilise conscious immersion to relocate the reader back and forth between the primary fictional world of *Papercut* and the additional fictional world of *Rewritten,* whilst Eve's eventual revelation as the 'real' writer of the text instigates the formation of the faux-real world, in which she is implied to be a 'real' person who exists alongside the reader. *Papercut* is thus illustrative of the oscillatory nature of contemporary metafiction, in which the artifice of the text is foregrounded to contribute towards affectivity, immersion and realism, and whilst I do not consider the novel to be a 'metamodern text', instead favouring a style that reflects my interest in genre fiction and the visual media of film and television, the novel's application of metafiction can be understood through its

correlation with the hybridisation evident in metamodernism, as described by Mary K. Holland as 'literature that is aware of being literature operating in a modernist vein, through postmodernist literary techniques turned towards modernist goals'.[11] As such, a brief consideration of the evolution of metafiction, and the emergence of metamodernism, is necessary.

The Evolution of Metafiction

In a discussion of the affectivity of contemporary metafiction, Lee Konstantinou argues that whilst metafiction once focused on 'debunking convention, belief and investment in fictional worlds', it has now returned to modernist sensibilities 'to foster faith, conviction, immersion and emotional connection'.[12] Metafiction has not simply eradicated its historicity, however, but instead demonstrates an alternation between, and elevation of, its modern and postmodern applications.

Modernism arose from an era of innovation and uncertainty, in which a succession of societal, industrial and political developments, as well as global occurrences such as

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[11] Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2013), p. 201.

[12] Lee Konstantinou, 'Four Faces of Postirony', in *Metamodernism*, ed. by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 87-102, (p. 93).

the First World War, saw a rejection of hegemonic ideologies and the utilisation of logic, reason and science to improve and re-examine. This emphasis on improvement and invention is evident in the literature written during this period, with past styles redirected and new techniques experimented with, such as the stream of consciousness, which uses meandering prose to emulate the flow of a character's thoughts. Metafiction was equally prominent, functioning as a technique that Tim Randell argues enabled writers to 'reveal how social conditions produce consciousness, how writers produce that reality, and how readers consume the subjective dreams […] reproduced by writers',[13] contributing towards what Jesse Matz identifies as 'pleasure over new and special immersion in full immediate feeling'.[14] Examples are evident in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,*[15] in which its semi-autobiographical plot parallels protagonist Stephen's self-discovery as a young man with his exploits as an aspiring poet, as well as Virginia

[13] Tim Randell, 'Metafiction and the Ideology of Modernism in Fitzgerald's "Winter Dreams"', *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review,* 10 (2012), 108-29, (p. 117).

[14] Jesse Matz, 'The Novel', in *A Companion to Modernist Literature and Culture*, ed. by David Bradshaw and Kevin J. H. Dettmar, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), pp. 215-26, (pp. 219-20).

[15] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York City: B. W. Huebsch, 1916; repr. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992).

Woolf's *The Waves,*[16] which relates the writerly pursuits of characters Louis, Neville and Bernard, whilst amalgamating voices and styles to explore themes concerning an individual's notion of consciousness and the self. Modernist metafiction can thus be described as constructive, utilising internal metareferences such as writer-characters not only to sustain the reader's immersion and belief in the text's fictional world, but to reinforce how the construction of the text often reflected the way in which individuals construed their perception of the self and reality in the early twentieth century.

As the twentieth century progressed, the growth of capitalism, commodification and globalisation influenced an increased critique of reality, truth and subjectivity, forming a postmodern structure of feeling that was sceptical and ironic. Frederic Jameson defines postmodernism as an 'inverted millenarianism in which premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that',[17] inspiring texts that demonstrate a 'waning of affect'[18] and the replacement of depth with 'a conception of practices,

[16] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931; repr. London: Vintage, 2004).

[17] Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 1.

[18] Jameson, p. x.

discourses, and textual play'.[19] Writers began to parody, imitate and deconstruct conventional forms of writing to distance their work from the sensibilities of modernism, with one of the most dominant means of textual experimentation occurring through a repositioning of metafiction as a technique that foregrounds the fictional composition of the text, thereby disrupting the reader's immersion and ability to forge an affective response. John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*[20] provides an example, alternating between conflicted teenage protagonist Ambrose and the intrusive narration of an author who comments upon the text's composition, as well as Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five,*[21] which precedes its relation of protagonist Billy's non-linear life with a preface-style chapter told from the unreliable narration of an author who discusses the origin of the text. Both instances highlight the self-referential nature of postmodern metafiction, in which writers deconstruct their texts into their component parts, whilst the foregrounded fictionality of the text's world and its characters often constituted a critique of the perceived artificiality of reality

[19] Jameson, p. 12.

[20] John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York City: Doubleday, 1968; repr. New York City: Anchor Books, 2014).

[21] Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (New York City: Delacorte, 1969; repr. New York City: Dell, 1991).

and the self in the increasingly-commodified actual world of the reader.

The twenty-first century has seen the formation of a new emergent cultural ideology, which theorists such as van den Akker and Vermeulen identify as metamodernism, although it is important to note that alternative concepts have been proposed, including Alan Kirby's digimodernism,[22] Raoul Eshelman's performatism[23] and Lee Konstantinou's postirony,[24] each of which are discussed within this thesis due to their considerations of the relationship between metafiction and the generation of depth, affect and immersion. One of the most convincing features of metamodernism, however, is that of the 'meta-' prefix it shares with metafiction, of which its Greek origin can be translated to 'among', 'between' and 'after'. Indeed, metamodernism exemplifies a movement between and among the modern and the postmodern, whilst being tentatively positioned after postmodernism, creating what Masters refers to as a 'commitment to 'oscillation' – or, as I have been finessing it, *adjustment* – as a way of navigating the

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[22] Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009).

[23] Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishers, 2008).

[24] Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016).

middle-way between extremes and of pursuing one of metamodernism's chief concerns: interconnectivity'.[25] This among-between-after paradigm, which I refer to as metaxy, is reflected in contemporary texts through a sense of combining, elevating and innovating existing techniques and sensibilities, forming a hybridisation that Holland describes as 'a kind of post-structural, metafictional version of modernism'[26] that is 'inflected with the twenty-first century mood of possibility for connection within self-conscious acts of writing'.[27] Contemporary metafiction can thus be described as reconstructive, foregrounding the artifice of the text to present its fictional world as real, whereby metareferences oscillate between the internal and the self-referential whilst consistently sustaining the reader's belief and immersion within the text's fictional world. What results is a blurring of the fictive and the 'real', of the fictional world and the actual world: a notion that writers can explore within their texts thematically, structurally or linguistically.

[25] Masters, p. 990.

[26] Holland p. 201.

[27] Holland p. 201.

The Forms of Metareference

This thesis provides a comprehensive recategorisation of metafiction into the three primary forms of thematic, structural and linguistic metareference, which relate to the subject matter, structural composition and linguistic properties of the text. Not only do I exemplify these categories through creative practice with my novel *Papercut,* but also through a critical analysis of three case studies: Gilbert Adair's *And Then There Was No One,*[28] Ben Lerner's *10:04*[29] and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas.*[30] Each text innovatively explores the disruptive and immersive applications of metafiction through the use of specific themes, structures and language, at the same time as illustrating the metaxy of modern and postmodern techniques and sensibilities that are evident in contemporary literature, thus contributing towards my critical examination of the applicability of metamodernism.

Chapter One of this thesis discusses thematic metareferences, which I define as the identification of the text's fictional world as the composition of content and context. Thematic metareferences concern the inclusion of writer-

[28] Gilbert Adair, *And Then There Was No One* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

[29] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

[30] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004).

characters and plotlines that explore writerly practices and processes, while considering how personal and societal issues such as mental health and climate change impact upon the writer-character and her world. Whilst many writer-characters are fictional constructs imagined by the actual writer*,* other texts demonstrate autofiction, defined by Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae as 'a genre that distorts the ontological boundaries between autobiography and fiction'.[31] Autofiction texts feature a fictional version of the actual writer as the protagonist and are often positioned as a 'real' account of the writer's experiences whilst creating the text, as evident in *And Then There Was No One,* where Adair's desire to produce 'a work of genuine depth and ambition'[32] forms a central plotline. This thesis builds upon existing notions of autofiction to identify what I term illusory autofiction as a third form of thematic metareference, in which an entirely fictional character is presented as the 'real' writer and fictive plotlines are portrayed as 'real' memories, such as Eve's positioning as the writer of *Papercut.* In both instances, conscious immersion relocates the

[31] Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae, 'Positions and Perspectives on Pronouns in Literature: The State of the Subject', in *Pronouns in Literature: Positions and Perspectives in Language,* ed. by Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-14, (p. 8).

[32] Adair, p. 90.

reader to the faux-real world, where characters are inferred to be 'real' people and plotlines are related as 'real' events.

The fictional worlds imagined by writer-characters and the layering of fictionality formed through (illusory) autofiction create additional fictional worlds and diegetic levels that compose the wider fictional universe. Chapter Two of this thesis identifies how the structuring of the fictional universe can be foregrounded by structural metareferences, which I define as the identification of the text's fictional world as the composition of structure, genre and form, whereby textual extracts sourced from other texts, alongside a layering of framed and embedded narration, determine the relationships and proximities that exist between each diegetic level. Whereas Ryan claims the process by which 'consciousness relocates itself to another world'[33] impacts upon the reader's immersion, I argue that the fictional universe formed through conscious immersion ensures even the most complex metafictional structures remain immersive, as illustrated by *Papercut,* which combines embedded textual extracts from the in-world fantasy text *Rewritten* with a framing narration based in Eve's faux-real world. A further example is provided by the six distinct but interconnected nested stories of *Cloud Atlas,* which create an amalgamation of genre and form

[33] Ryan, p. 73.

that Nick Bentley describes as being 'interested in the possibility of exceeding or moving beyond postmodern scepticism and identifying the potential for reconstructive (rather than postmodern deconstructive) possibilities'.[34] *Papercut* and *Cloud Atlas* thus use structural metareferences not to foreground the texts' fictionality, but to situate the reader as an inhabitant of the fictional universe, blurring the distinction between the fictional world of the text and the actual world in which she exists.

Texts that comment upon writers and the writing process, as well as those that position the faux-real world as a representation of the actual world, often incorporate linguistic metareferences that foreground the function of the language used within the text, as discussed in Chapter Three of this thesis. Linguistic metareferences, which I define as the identification of the text's fictional world as the composition of language and literary devices, reinforce the relationship between sign and referent to comment upon the conversion of actual world referents into fictional world concepts, whilst highlighting how the reader's perception of the actual world can influence the hermeneutics of the text. Although these forms of

[34] Nick Bentley, 'Trailing Postmodernism: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Zadie Smith's *NW*, and the Metamodern', *English Studies*, 99 (2018), 723-43, (p. 723).

metareference may appear deconstructive, as evident in Svend Erik Larsen's claim that metafiction 'detaches the verbal expression from ordinary meaning and draws attention to language as material process',[35] this thesis positions linguistic metareferences as reconstructive, as the identification of a text's linguistic composition can be used to evoke depth, affect and immersion. An example is evident in *Papercut,* when Eve considers the painful connotations she has attached to specific words, as well as in *10:04,* in which a fictional version of Lerner experiments with the affective functions of language to 'invent a new prosody'[36] for his next novel. Linguistic metareferences also concern the use of specific deictic constructions such as 'you' and 'us' that create the illusion a character is communicating directly with the reader, thereby appearing to reduce the distance between the diegetic levels of the fictional universe and the actual world of the reader through the formation of the faux-real world. Linguistic metareferences thus identify how even the most granular elements of a text can contribute towards immersion and affect, enhancing the more

[35] Svend Erik Larsen, 'Self-Reference: Theory and Didactics Between Language and Literature', *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* 39 (2005), 13-30, (pp. 19-23).

[36] Lerner, p. 37.

complex structures and sustained themes of the wider narrative.

Chapter One
Thematic Metareferences

For whatever reason, our life is a TV show.

- Sam Winchester, *The French Mistake*[37]

Thematic metareferences concern the identification of a text's fictional world as a composition of content and context, in which narrative components such as writer-characters, in-world texts and an exploration of writerly themes contribute towards a commentary on writers and the writing process. Whilst many writer-characters and their texts demonstrate the internal application of metafiction, maintaining the reader's immersion through relating to in-world entities, others are self-referential, consisting of fictionalised versions of the actual writer and text that are positioned within the faux-real world. In both instances, the foregrounding of the constructed nature of plotlines, characters and fictional worlds can be used to reflect how individuals construct the notions of reality and the self in the actual world, while the blurring of writerly themes with societal concerns such as climate change and inequality, as well as personal issues including mental health, allows writers to

[37] 'The French Mistake', *Supernatural: The Complete Sixth Season* (Warner Home Video/The CW, 2010) [on DVD].

explore the way an individual is influenced by her own self-perception and the impact of the world around her. This chapter uses my novel *Papercut* and Gilbert Adair's *And Then There Was No One*[38] to provide a critical analysis of the different forms of thematic metareferences, which I identify as writer-characters, autofiction and illusory autofiction.

Writer-Characters and In-World Texts

An inherent aspect of metafiction is its commentary on writerly practices and processes, as described by Patricia Waugh as a discussion of 'a theory of fiction through the practice of writing fiction',[39] whereby plotlines and themes associated with writing are explored by characters who are writers or readers. Writer-characters dissect the texts they have written and the experiences that have inspired them, whilst reader-characters are influenced and inspired by the texts they have read, resulting in a commentary that not only considers the composition of the text, but the way in which reality, identity and the self are constructed in the actual world. Indeed, a duality is evident between the creation of a character and the

[38] Gilbert Adair, *And Then There Was No One* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

[39] Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction,* 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

formation of an individual's sense of identity, as well as how the composition of a fictional world is often reflective of the 'real' world in which the text was written, thus demonstrating how metareferences can generate depth and affect through an alternation between textual commentary and a consideration of how individuals experience, and are influenced by, the 'real' world. J. M. Coetzee's *Slow Man*[40] provides an example, in which protagonist Paul Rayment's sense of self is challenged when writer Elizabeth Costello decides to fictionalise him as a character in her new book, as well as Yann Martel's *Life of Pi,*[41] where Pi's lavish account of being shipwrecked constitutes a discussion on both the mechanics of storytelling and the subjectivity of reality.

The use of writer-characters to comment on the actual world is not unique to contemporary literature, however, as it is a technique that is evident in modern and postmodern (and earlier) texts. James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*[42] provides an example of the modernist application of writer-characters, relating a plot that details the religious awakening of writer-character Stephen Dedalus as an

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[40] J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2005).

[41] Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 2001; repr. Edinburgh: Canongate Books Ltd, 2002).

[42] James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York City: B. W. Huebsch, 1916; repr. Ware: Wordsworth Editions Limited, 1992).

aesthetician, enabling Joyce to explore themes of writing and religion within the context of early-twentieth century Ireland. Postmodern texts also use writerly themes to comment upon the self and the actual world, often focusing on their perceived artificiality, as demonstrated by the breakdown experienced by the protagonist of Martin Amis' *Money,*[43] John Self, whose pursuit of making a film within an increasingly commodified and greed-driven society culminates in his loss of identity. Both texts use thematic metareferences to encourage the reader to consider the (de)construction of reality and the self, whilst similarly demonstrating the internal application of metafiction in which immersion is maintained due to the protagonists and their texts being in-world entities. A distinction is evident in the tone of each text, however, as modernist texts typically consider the self-discovery of writer-characters in a more hopeful and affective way than that of postmodern texts, in which the writer-character's perception of reality and the self are often positioned as artificial constructs through a tone that is cynical, sceptical or ironic.

Contemporary metafiction combines and elevates its modern and postmodern applications to stimulate a feeling of uncertainty surrounding the notions of reality and the self,

[43] Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984; repr. London: Vintage, 2005).

fluctuating between optimism and scepticism, hope and irony, to reflect the aspirations and anxieties of the twenty-first century. *Papercut* provides an example, using writer-characters as a means to critique an individual's perception of reality and identity, such as the influence writer-character Jessica Eden's book *Rewritten* has on the lives of the other characters and their comprehension of what is 'real'. Eve's first encounter with *Rewritten* occurs following Morgan's claim that the book parallels aspects of their lives, prompting her to scrutinise the text in search of answers. This positioning of Eve as a reader-character enables me to incorporate a textual commentary on several writerly themes, such as the creation of characters and their roles within a narrative, as illustrated by Eve's description of *Rewritten's* Morgan as being 'layered with depth, even if her role remained ambiguous'. Although this emphasis on the composition of *Rewritten* as a text appears to cohere with the postmodern applications of metafiction as disrupting the reader's immersion, of which Theresa Knuth claims 'the mimetic illusion literature creates is often undermined or even destroyed'[44] by metafiction, Eve's discussion demonstrates perhaps the simplest way in which metafiction can achieve what Peter Stoicheff refers to as 'the simultaneous process of

[44] Theresa Knuth, *Forms and Functions of Metafiction* (Berlin: GRIN Verlag, 2005), p. 2.

manufacturing illusion and revealing its artifice',[45] as her comments refer to the composition of an in-world text, and not to *Papercut* itself. Thematic metareferences can thus maintain the reader's immersion by sustaining her within a single diegetic level, as the in-world text exists alongside the character within the primary fictional world.

Thematic metareferences concerning the composition of *Rewritten* do not just illustrate the constructedness of the text, however, as I combine Eve's commentary on elements such as the character of Morgan with a discussion of the way in which individuals construct their identity and sense of self in the actual world. This is demonstrated when Eve states she found it 'hard to determine whether [Morgan] was an antagonist or protagonist, right up until the end', which not only relates to the role Morgan plays in the narrative of *Rewritten,* but also to the uncertainty that the real reader experiences surrounding the intentions of the 'real' Morgan in *Papercut.* This ambiguity arises because Morgan is in fact Lottie, a woman who spent her childhood locked in a basement with a handful of books, including *Rewritten*, with which she connects so deeply that she changes her name, appearance and personality to replicate one

[45] Peter Stoicheff, 'The Chaos of Metafiction', in *Chaos and Order: Complex Dynamics in Literature and Science*, ed. by Katherine Hayles (London: University of Chicago Press, 1991), pp. 85-99, (pp. 89-90).

of the book's central characters. Lottie's connection with *Rewritten* demonstrates an extreme example of what Alison Gibbons identifies as 'a will and ability to process intensities so that we can articulate meaningful emotional reactions or cognitive responses',[46] as the trauma Morgan experiences at the hands of the shapeshifters, as well as her strong and commanding personality, forms a character that Lottie both empathises with and desires to emulate. The generation of emotional response and layered meaning is also extended to the real reader, whose simultaneous discovery of the deceptive games that Lottie has played, as well as the painful instigators that have motivated her, encourages the reader to sympathise with her in spite of the hurt she has caused to the other characters.

Lottie's complex relationship with her identity is a consequence of her desire to distance herself from the abuse and abandonment she has endured, as well as from the insecurities she experiences concerning her appearance. This determination to embody Morgan, who is a fictional construct, is reflective of the constructedness of beauty in the actual world

[46] Alison Gibbons, 'Affect', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism,* ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 83-86, (p. 85).

of the reader, where artificial notions of body image are often misleadingly positioned as 'real' in the media and online. Lottie's belief that she 'had to look like [Morgan] for someone to notice me' prompts her to rewrite her identity and physical appearance, only to be disheartened by the fact she can still see traces of her former incarnations each time she looks in the mirror, resulting in a conflicted self that presents itself as authentic despite being aware of its own artificiality. Nicoline Timmer considers the duality between rewriting a character and rewriting the self, claiming 'metafiction caters very well to the insecure self, a self that constantly needs to assert its presence by being neurotically upfront about its own insecurity',[47] as demonstrated by Lottie's fluctuation between positioning Morgan as a 'real' person and her repeated hints at her own artificiality each time she likens herself to the character in *Rewritten.* As such, thematic metareferences remind the reader of the fictionality of both *Rewritten's* Morgan and the fictive identity that Lottie has assumed, whilst encouraging her to consider the often conflicted way that individuals perceive themselves and those around them in the actual world.

[47] Nicoline Timmer, 'Radical Defenselessness: A New Sense of Self in the Work of David Foster Wallace', in *Metamodernism*, ed. by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 103-16, (p. 107).

The alternation between the composition of Morgan the character and Morgan the identity demonstrates how the oscillatory nature of contemporary metafiction is reflective of the metaxy of metamodernism, in which a simultaneous sense of authenticity and artificiality, and of the 'real' and the fictional, contributes towards a structure of feeling that is both sincere and sceptical. Of course, an oscillation between the modern and postmodern application of metafiction extends beyond metamodernism, which despite its convincing potential as a cultural emergent to succeed postmodernism is not an aspiration that all contemporary writers apply to their texts. Some writers reject metamodern tendencies entirely, creating texts that appear more closely aligned with other cultural emergents, whilst others argue for the prevalence of postmodernism, with even Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen arguing that not 'all postmodern tendencies are over and done with'.[48] As such, many contemporary texts bear traces of the metamodern without constituting a 'metamodern text', as demonstrated by *Papercut,* which incorporates aspects of metamodernism such as a return to depth, affect and immersion, whilst rejecting others, including the free indirect style that is reminiscent of the modernist stream of

[48] Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Notes on Metamodernism', *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture,* 2 (2010), 1-14, (p. 4).

consciousness. Such texts are instead reflective of Lee Konstantinou's claim that 'characteristically postmodern forms, especially metafiction, [can be used] to narrate traditional (or at least non-postmodern) themes, plots and social worlds',[49] whereby metamodernism can be positioned as a framework to comprehend the oscillatory nature of metafiction, instead of functioning as a heuristic label that can be applied to the text.

And Then There Was No One provides a further example of a text that foregrounds the oscillatory nature of contemporary metafiction without being overtly metamodern, featuring a plot in which its protagonist, a fictional version of Adair (who I refer to as Gilbert), desires to progress from the postmodern techniques typically associated with his writing to produce 'a work of genuine depth and ambition',[50] only to succumb repeatedly to intertextuality and unreliable narration, as well as a complex positioning of metafiction, that impact upon his ability to evoke depth and affect. The text can thus be understood through Ben Masters' claim that 'authorial showiness and obtrusiveness [can] come at the expense of so-

[49] Lee Konstantinou, 'Four Faces of Postirony', in *Metamodernism,* ed. by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 87-102, (p. 92-93).

[50] Adair, p. 90.

called human interest',[51] as Adair's writing style can often appear to have been prioritised over elements such as character and plot, at the same time as constituting a text that demonstrates the 'renewed attention to questions of character and, more particularly, human consciousness and feeling'[52] that Masters argues is evident in the 'excessive styles'[53] of some contemporary writers, due to Adair's utilisation of specific literary techniques such as metafiction to contribute towards Gilbert's insecurities, guilt and the decline of his mental health.

Thematic metareferences are an integral component of *And Then There Was No One*, which features various writer-characters and reader-characters who critique each other's in-world texts, enabling Adair to comment on themes associated with writers and writing in a way that does not impact upon the reader's immersion. A prominent example is the prologue to the text, which is styled as a non-fiction account of the life, death and publishing history of writer-character Gustav Slavorigin, which illustrates the application of metafiction, as identified by Knuth, as being 'located on the dividing line between fiction and literary criticism, exploring the relationship between these two

[51] Ben Masters, *Novel Style: Ethics and Excess in English Fiction Since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 7.

[52] Masters, p. 140.

[53] Masters, p. 8.

worlds'.[54] Gilbert's initial positioning as literary critic alternates between an objective discussion of Slavorigin's biography and publishing history, as well as a subjective consideration of Gilbert's readerly response to Slavorigin's novels, with one text of particular interest being that of *A Reliable Narrator,* which Gilbert describes as featuring a 'first-person protagonist [who] is no canonic unreliable narrator […] but a perfectly reliable narrator, except that not a single soul is prepared to rely on him'.[55] Gilbert's commentary on *A Reliable Narrator* incorporates themes of writing style, narrative content and publication, whilst his awareness of Slavorigin's ability to redirect the typically postmodern technique of unreliable narration towards the modernist sensibilities of sincerity and affect is reflective of both Gilbert and Adair's desire to achieve similar sentiments within their own writing.

The significance of *A Reliable Narrator* within the wider plot of *And Then There Was No One* is not just because of Gilbert's desire to replicate Slavorigin's creativity and success, however, but because Gilbert himself demonstrates a gradual shift towards unreliable narration as the text progresses. This deterioration of Gilbert's reliability, and Adair's apparent return

[54] Knuth, p. 2.

[55] Adair, p. 21.

to 'such a tired old cliché of postmodernism',[56] is best demonstrated by Gilbert's critique of another of Slavorigin's texts, *Dark Jade,* of which his initial description of the form and content of the text as being a 'semi-autobiographical account of a fiery homosexual relationship'[57] is later supplemented by a discussion of Gilbert's involvement in the text's subtext and context. In the epilogue, Gilbert reveals he was the one who murdered Slavorigin, not because of his resentment over being turned into 'the character of Robert, the hero's clingy, shabby, talentless lover',[58] but because of his envy over *Dark Jade's* success. Gilbert's biased commentaries on Slavorigin's texts, as well as his motive for murder being that of literary jealousy, thus makes Adair's use of thematic metareferences appear reminiscent of the insincere and parodic applications of postmodern metafiction, although an alternative perspective is offered by Vera Nünning, who argues that unreliable narration can evoke realism through reflecting the way in which 'human beings […] manipulate others to make them behave in a way that ensures their own well-being and survival'.[59] Adair's use of

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[56] Adair, p. 21.

[57] Adair, pp. 2-3.

[58] Adair, p. 246.

[59] Vera Nünning, 'Conceptualising (Un)reliable Narration and (Un)trustworthiness', in *Unreliable Narration and Trustworthiness: Intermedial and Interdisciplinary Perspectives,* ed. by Vera Nünning (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2015), pp. 1-28, (p. 1).

unreliable narration can therefore be attributed towards Gilbert's need to hide his involvement in Slavorigin's death from the other characters, and from the reader, which redirects this typically postmodern technique towards enhancing the realism of Gilbert's desperation.

Gilbert's fixation with Slavorigin is paralleled by his fascination with another writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who becomes a prominent influence on Gilbert's increasingly distorted perception of reality, as illustrated by his decision to murder Slavorigin in a way that resembles a death from a whodunit novel. This blurring of Gilbert's 'real' existence with the fictional lives of characters in Conan Doyle's work, as well as his situatedness within 'a mocked-up replica of the cluttered living-room of Holmes and Watson's digs'[60] at the time of the murder, reflects Gilbert's increasingly confused and paranoid mental state, in which his perception of reality begins to deteriorate. Venkat Ramanan identifies a subjectivity in the way that reality is perceived and experienced, stating 'all human experience is essentially subjective and we have no way of knowing whether others' experiences are like ours',[61] which is a notion that is enhanced in *And Then There Was No One*

[60] Adair, p. 45.

[61] Venkat Ramanan, 'Literature and the Construction of Reality', *Literature & Aesthetics,* 67 (2018), 67-86, (p. 76).

through Adair's use of metafiction, of which Waugh states that metafiction 'draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.[62] As such, Gilbert's merging of his 'real' life with the lives of other writers and their characters not only foregrounds his anxieties over the fictional worlds he creates himself, but also impacts upon his actions and interactions within his own 'real' world, as his obsession with Slavorigin and Conan Doyle eventually results in his inability to differentiate the 'real' from the fictional. The reader is thus reminded of the subjectivity of her own reality, in which her personal experiences and positionalities influence the way she perceives and navigates the actual world.

(Illusory) Autofiction

The writer-characters and in-world texts discussed so far in this chapter demonstrate the internal application of metafiction, consisting of entirely fictional constructs imagined by the actual writer that maintain the reader's immersion through sustaining her within a single diegetic level. Other instances of this form of thematic metareference are self-referential, featuring fictionalised versions of the actual writer as a character, as well

[62] Waugh, p*. 2.*

as in-world texts that possess the same title and plotlines as the actual text. The self-insertion of writers into their work is a technique that is typically associated with postmodernism, as exemplified by Paul Auster's *City of Glass,*[63] which features a layering of eponymous characters to relate the psychological deterioration of a detective fiction writer who loses his concept of reality after becoming a private investigator. Self-referential writer-characters are also evident in modernist texts, however, albeit demonstrating a more implicit approach where the character displays semi-autobiographical similarities to the actual writer, instead of constituting a direct fictionalisation bearing the same name, as well as texts that position entirely fictional characters as the 'real' author of the actual text. Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*[64] provides an example, in which protagonist Miriam Henderson's education, relationships and feminist views reflect that of the actual author, as well as Brian O'Nolan's *At Swim-Two-Birds,*[65] which is structured as a layering of beginnings and endings that are inferred to have been devised by a fictional university student. Once again, both modern and postmodern metareferences encourage the reader

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[63] Paul Auster, *City of Glass* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985).

[64] Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage 1* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1915; repr. London: Virago, 2000).

[65] Brian O'Nolan, *At Swim-Two-Birds* (London: Longmans Green, 1939; repr. Penguin Books, 2001).

to consider her own perception of reality, identity and the self, at the same time as enabling the actual writer to incorporate a self-aware critique of her life and work, with the primary distinction being the sense of distance the actual writer establishes between her own real life and the fictional(ised) experiences of her protagonist.

Contemporary metafiction blurs the 'real' with the fictional through a similarly sustained and complex form of thematic metareference identified as autofiction, which Alison Gibbons defines as 'an explicitly hybrid form of life writing that merges autobiographical fact with fiction'.[66] Autofiction combines autobiographical details with elements that are entirely fictional to create texts in which a fictionalised version of the actual writer is positioned as the protagonist, enabling her to fictionalise and critique particular elements of her life whilst encouraging the reader to consider her own comprehension of how identity is constructed and reality experienced. Despite the postmodern connotations of writers appearing as characters in their own work, Gibbons argues that 'contemporary autofictions narrativize the self not as a game, but in order to enhance the realism of a text and tackle the

[66] Alison Gibbons, 'Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect', in *Metamodernism,* ed. by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 117-30, (p. 120).

sociological and phenomenological dimensions of personal life',[67] thus demonstrating how metafiction has returned to modernist sensibilities such as immersion, depth and affect. Examples are provided by Frédéric Beigbeder's *Windows on the World,*[68] which alternates between the perspective of a fictional father trapped in the World Trade Centre on 9/11 and a fictionalisation of Beigbeder who is deliberating whether to write the novel, as well as Bret Easton Ellis' faux-memoir *Lunar Park,*[69] which combines factual elements regarding Ellis' early career with a supernatural plot concerning a fictional haunting. In both instances, autofiction generates a sense of ambiguity over what is 'real' and what is fictional, whilst exemplifying how metafiction can be used to enhance the realism of the text.

The aim of many autofiction texts is identified by Siddharth Srikanth as foregrounding 'the process of invention in self-narration, or the discursive construction of the self',[70] which Adair achieves in *And Then There Was No One* through

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[67] Alison Gibbons, 'Postmodernism is dead. What Comes next?', *The Times Literary Supplement* (2017)
< https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/> [accessed 23 June 2018]

[68] Frédéric Beigbeder, *Windows on the World*, trans. by Frank Wynne (Paris: Grasset Editions, 2003; London: Fourth Estate, 2004).

[69] Bret Easton Ellis, *Lunar Park* (New York City: Knopf, 2005; repr. London: Picador, 2006).

[70] Siddharth Srikanth, 'Fictionality and Autofiction Author(s)', *Style,* 53 (2019), 344-63, (p. 348).

dramatising and critiquing his insecurities, achievements and writing through the character of Gilbert, whilst experimenting with postmodern form and style in search of 'something more personal, a work of genuine depth and ambition'.[71] One of the ways that Adair strives to evolve as a writer is through distancing himself from the character of Evadne Mount, who is the protagonist of two of his former novels in a trilogy that positions *And Then There Was No One* as the third. Adair fictionalises himself as Gilbert in order to appear within the same diegetic level as Evadne, enabling him to criticise aspects of the character's creation as well as the writing style of the texts in which she features without impacting upon the reader's immersion, such as when Evadne tells Gilbert that 'this is 2011. Postmodernism is dead, it's so last century […] nobody gives two hoots about self-referentiality'.[72] The conflicted interactions between Gilbert and Evadne are therefore reflective of Adair's complicated relationship with his own texts, as his decision to abandon characters that are 'as thin and flimsy as the paper [they're] printed on'[73] culminates in Gilbert throwing himself and Evadne into the Reichenbach Falls, using a plot point that is evocative of Sherlock Holmes' death at the hands of both

[71] Adair, p. 90.

[72] Adair, p. 254.

[73] Adair, p. 253.

Moriarty and Conan Doyle[74] to reflect Adair's desire to dispose of his former characters and identity as a writer.

Of course, Adair's insistence that he longs to abandon postmodernism is juxtaposed by his inclusion of seemingly postmodern techniques, where characters interact with writers and the artifice of the text is reinforced, such as when Gilbert's use of expletives cause him to choke on a 'mouthful of asterisks'.[75] In spite of the apparent disruption of the reader's immersion during these instances, Mary K. Holland argues that contemporary metafiction illustrates what she terms 'metafictive realism', in which 'any attempt to represent reality must also consider and represent the forms, conventions, and materials used to construct representation'.[76] Autofiction provides a detailed example of Holland's metafictive realism, as Gilbert's positioning as the 'real' writer creates the illusion that *And Then There Was No One* is a 'memoir'[77] that not only recalls the 'real' events that inspired him to write the text, but the way he decided to compose it, which enables immersion to be maintained in spite of Adair's repeated foregrounding of the

[74] Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Harper, 1894; repr. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2012), p. 185.
[75] Adair, p. 254.
[76] Mary K. Holland, *The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 89.
[77] Adair, p. 145.

physicality of the text on the page. Even the fantastical elements of the plot, including the seeming impossibility of Gilbert firing an arrow from a violin bow to kill Slavorigin, can be rationalised by Hywel Dix's claim that 'the lived experience is itself subject to the distortions of the imagination and the act of fictionalizing affects the content of the memories',[78] in which Adair uses metafiction to foreground the distorted reality Gilbert believes to be 'real' following the decline of his mental health.

Gilbert's inability to write a text that evokes contemporary sensibilities such as the return to modernist depth and affect is paralleled by his possession of the typically postmodern notions of insincerity and narcissism, as he fluctuates between bitterness towards the successes of his fellow writers and boastfulness over his own achievements. Not only does this hinder his ability to produce affective writing, but also impacts upon his capacity to forge emotional connections with other individuals, including the actual reader, creating a text that often foregrounds an insular look at Adair and his work at the expense of the typical application of autofiction, in which the writer's exploration of the self can be used to influence the reader's perception of her own identity and positionality in the

[78] Hywel Dix, 'Introduction: Autofiction in English: The Story so Far', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. Hywel Dix (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-23, (p. 6).

actual world. Although Adair's use of metafiction appears to be devoid of affect, Gilbert frequently expresses his intention to increase the affectivity of his writing, at the same time as offering subtle glimpses of the insecurities and anxieties that affect him not only as a writer, but as an individual too, in which his failure to innovate causes him to plagiarise ideas from other writers and unintentionally 'self-plagiarise'[79] his own writing. Gilbert can therefore be perceived as an embodiment of the insecure self, both fictionalising and inventing Adair's anxieties over the way he looks and the way he writes, resulting in a character that is reflective of Nick Bentley's depiction of metamodernism as an attempt 'to re-humanize a posthuman or indeed anti-human set of conditions that pertain in much poststructuralist and postmodernist work,[80] as Gilbert's continued search for affect in his writing and his personal life becomes a recurring theme. The shared aspiration of Gilbert and Adair towards contemporary sensibilities, such as those evident in metamodernism, thus becomes integral to *And Then There Was No One* even if it is not fully realised, which is a

[79] Adair, p. 94.

[80] Nick Bentley, 'Trailing Postmodernism: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Zadie Smith's *NW*, and the Metamodern', *English Studies*, 99 (2018), 723-43, (p. 740).

notion that is made more poignant due to the fact that the novel was Adair's last published work prior to his death in 2011.

And Then There Was No One demonstrates a layering of fictionality between Gilbert the writer-character, Gilbert the faux-real writer and Adair the actual writer, in which immersion is maintained due to self-referential metareferences relating to Gilbert's faux-real memoir, and not to the actual text created by Adair. This simultaneous positioning of the text as a 'real' memoir and as a piece of fiction results in the formation of the faux-real world, as a disparity is not only evident between the different versions of Adair, but the worlds in which each individual exists. Marie-Laure Ryan's possible worlds theory identifies the multiple worlds that can arise from a text, stating that a text 'projects not a single world but an entire modal system, or universe, centred around its own actual world',[81] although she claims that 'by overtly recognizing the constructed imaginary nature of the textual world, metafiction blocks recentering and reclaims our native reality as ontological centre'.[82] I argue that the faux-real world enables immersion to be maintained, however, as the reader is relocated within the

[81] Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality 2: Revisiting Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media,* 2nd edn (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 2015), p. 73.

[82] Ryan, p. 284.

wider fictional universe each time she encounters a metareference that foregrounds the fictionality of the text, instead of being restored to the actual world. Conscious immersion thus enhances our understanding of metamodernism by functioning as a new reading experience that resolves the apparent paradox of a text that is both immersive and metafictional, whereby metafiction reinforces the fictionality of the text as way to enhance its realism.

The faux-real world constitutes an integral component of a third form of thematic metareference, which I identify as illusory autofiction. Unlike the fictionalisation of autobiographical fact in autofiction, illusory autofiction concerns texts that are inferred to have been written by an entirely fictional writer-character and relate an entirely fictional plot, making this application of metafiction reminiscent of use of self-referential writer-characters in modernist texts. An example is provided by Briony Tallis in Ian McEwan's *Atonement,* who claims she wrote the 'real' text to ensure her late sister Cecilia can 'survive and flourish',[83] as well as Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,*[84] which is written as if its protagonist, Christopher Boone, has turned his

[83] Ian McEwan, *Atonement* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001), p. 371.

[84] Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2003).

adventures into a novel. Specific techniques are deployed to create the illusion that the writer-character is a 'real' person, such as situating the plotlines in 'real' places to enhance the authenticity of the fictional world, as well as creating a protagonist who embodies certain aspects of the actual writer's experiences, resulting in a blurring of the real, the fictional and the autofictional that Mary Worthington identifies as 'serv[ing] paradoxically both to challenge and to reify the authority of the author'.[85] Illusory autofiction therefore constitutes a more extreme instance of Arnaud Schmitt's depiction of autofiction as not being 'burdened with the standard of "factual debt" that autobiographies or autobiographical novels inherit',[86] as writers can explore aspects of the self in a way that is less self-reflective, whilst creating plotlines that are detached from their actual lives, as demonstrated in *Papercut* by the multiplicity of Eve as both writer-character and 'real' writer, as well as my own role as the actual writer of the text.

The revelation that Eve is the 'real' writer occurs in the epilogue when she narrates details of a book she has drafted entitled 'Papercut', creating the illusion that the text the reader

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[85] Mary Worthington, *Writing Subjects: Authoring the Self, Authorizing the Author in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 67.

[86] Arnaud Schmitt, 'Making the Case for Self-narration Against Autofiction', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies,* 25 (2014), 122-37, (p. 129).

has just encountered is the same one that Eve has penned. This insinuation that Eve and the reader coexist within the same diegetic level requires the formation of the faux-real world, where Eve's commentary on the content and context of *Papercut* relates to the faux-real text that she has written, and not to the actual text written by me. A distinction between Eve as the 'real' writer and me as the actual writer is evident in our differing reasons for writing the text, as I intended to demonstrate the immersive quality of contemporary metafiction whilst Eve's motives are more personal, enabling her to write about 'details that slice and sting' as a way to process the trauma she endured following her mother's death and Morgan's manipulation of her life. Dix's discussion of the inspiration behind autofiction is applicable to Eve, as he states that many (illusory) autofiction texts are 'written in the aftermath of some kind of traumatic experience – real or imagined – so that the process of writing in response to trauma can be seen as a means of situating the self in a new context when other relational constructs have been removed or jeopardized'.[87] Eve's desire to distance herself from her recent experiences, at the same time as eternalising them through fiction, inspires her to write 'a patchwork of fact and fiction, blurring real people

[87] Dix, p. 4.

with fictional characters, physical settings with imagined landscapes, reality with fantasy' to relate 'My story, Morgan's and Mum's', enabling her to process what she has endured and explore who she desires to become through her writing.

Eve can be understood as an embodiment of the impact that guilt, grief and betrayal can have on an individual's sense of identity, as her decision to write an autofiction text allows her to comprehend the influence of her own actions and those of the people around her in transforming her from a vibrant and enthusiastic woman into someone who is insecure, pessimistic and passive. Eve's grief following her mother's death and her guilt upon falling pregnant sends her spiralling into depression, whilst characters such as Nathan, Jay and Morgan take advantage of her newfound insecurities and begin to reshape her into the person they desire her to become, resulting in an individual with no sense of autonomy or control. Srikanth identifies that (illusory) autofiction provides a solution to writers who consider 'autobiographies and novels [to be] formally inadequate to register the truths about the modern self',[88] as Eve's decision to write *Papercut* almost functions as a form of therapy for her, not only enabling her to use her own experiences to write stronger and more affective characters

[88] Srikanth, p. 351.

than she did in her failed draft of *Eternal Light and Shadow,* but to make changes to who she is in her own 'real' world. Indeed, as the novel progresses, Eve begins to realise that she 'spent months hiding away through grief, months being hidden away through guilt, chipped away at by relentless hands until a weaker figure had formed', prompting her to attempt to regain control over who she is, even if this is something that she does not fully realise by the text's conclusion. *Papercut* therefore enables me to explore the discovery and destruction of the self, fluctuating between the modern and postmodern application of thematic metareferences, whilst Eve's lingering doubt about who she is at the end of the text is reflective of the uncertainties and anxieties that metamodernism positions as prevalent in the twenty-first century.

Eve's fictionalisation of her 'real' experiences, as well as my use of illusory autofiction to present fictional characters and plotlines as 'real' people and events, highlights the relationship between metafiction and realism, which is a duality that forms an integral component of Lee Konstantinou's discussion of postirony. Instead of being a 'period concept or new cultural dominant'[89] such as metamodernism, Konstantinou positions postirony as the 'effort to move beyond the problems that irony

[89] Konstantinou, p. 88.

has created for contemporary life and culture',[90] identifying the significance of what he terms 'credulous metafiction'[91] in 'get[ting] readers to believe in the truth of the ostensive scene'.[92] One of the ways I strive to get readers to believe in the fictional world of *Papercut* is through drawing upon Gibbons' notion of autofiction as 'ground[ing] the inner self in an outer reality – in time, space and corporeal being',[93] as I situate Eve in depictions of actual settings in order to enhance the authenticity of her fictional world. This approach is reminiscent of visual media, when film or television is filmed on-location instead of in constructed sets, paralleling the difference between novels that detail representations of actual places and those that construct entirely fictional settings devised from the writer's imagination. The 2019 biopic *Tolkien*[94] provides an example, filmed partially at Oxford University where Tolkien spent his student years, as well as the 2002 film *Adaptation,*[95] in which its autofiction plot is set in New York City where writer-character and actual writer Charlie Kauffman reside, enabling both examples to demonstrate how location can be used to

[90] Konstantinou, p. 88.

[91] Konstantinou, p. 94.

[92] Konstantinou, p. 94.

[93] Gibbons, 'Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect', p. 130.

[94] *Tolkien,* dir. by Dome Karukoski (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2019).

[95] *Adaptation,* dir. by Spike Jonze (Sony Pictures Releasing, 2002).

enhance the illusion that the plot details 'real' people and events. *Papercut* is similarly set in representations of actual locations, ranging from Beeston's high street and Nottingham city centre to Exmoor National Park, each related through detailed depictions of actual streets, shops and parks, such as Beeston's 'imposing houses with their bay windows and fake beams' and the 'old office through the branches of the overhanging trees, nestled above a neat row of shops and cafés' in the middle of Nottingham. The reader is thus able to retrace Eve's fictional footsteps in the actual world, bringing both realism and authenticity to her story through the physical similarities each location shares with its actual world counterpart.

The function of place within a narrative is not just to enhance the realism of the fictional world, but to demonstrate the influence that an individual's environment can have upon her, as well as how an individual's subjective experience can affect how she perceives the 'real' world. Gibbons defines situatedness as the process by which 'the decentred self reasserts itself by grounding its subjectivity in lived experience as well as in the interactions between our bodies and our environments',[96] noting that its affective qualities make it an

[96] Gibbons, 'Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect', p. 130.

integral element of both (illusory) autofiction and metamodernism more widely. Situatedness is demonstrated in *Papercut* through Eve's interactions with various settings, such as the vibrancy she displays upon returning to Nottingham city centre after spending two months working from home, stating she and Jay 'giggled and grinned along Nottingham's streets like the harmonised kids we used to be', as well as the suppression and isolation she endures when she returns to the house, describing it as a 'silent box'. Location thus becomes a prominent influence on Eve's mental health and sense of self throughout the text, whilst her perception of specific places is itself impacted upon depending on her emotional state, such as when she returns to her idealised 'little office in the middle of Nottingham, where [she]'d spent three vibrant years' only to notice 'the wilted plant on the windowsill. Too much water. Too much light', reflecting her own deterioration since she left her former job. My use of situatedness in *Papercut* therefore reiterates the impact that place can have on an individual's identity and her mental health, persuading the reader to explore how situatedness and subjectivity can influence her own mental wellbeing, whilst contributing towards the formation of the faux-real world and thus the structuring of the wider fictional universe, in which conscious immersion relocates the reader across additional fictional worlds and diegetic levels.

Chapter Two
Structural Metareferences

I'm sitting in a laundromat, reading about myself sitting in a laundromat, reading about myself. My head hurts.

- Dean Winchester, *The Monster at the End of This Book*[97]

Structural metareferences identify a text's fictional world as a composition of structure, genre and form, foregrounding the relationships and proximities that exist between different diegetic levels and fictional worlds to establish the complex structuring of the wider fictional universe. Some thematic metareferences take the form of textual extracts that disrupt the conventional layout of the page, typically utilising the internal application of metafiction through appearing to be passages taken from in-world texts, whilst others relocate the reader away from the primary fictional world, shifting the perspective to a narrative voice positioned within a different diegetic level. Often this layering is internal, relocating the reader further away from the actual world through embedded narratives that detail additional fictional worlds created or imagined by the characters, whilst other layers are external to

[97] 'The Monster at the End of this Book', *Supernatural: The Complete Fourth Season* (Warner Home Video/The CW, 2009) [on DVD].

the main narrative, in which framed narratives shift the point of view to a character who is inferred to exist outside of the main text, as illustrated by the self-referential perspective of the faux-real world. Chapter Two utilises a critical analysis of *Papercut* and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*[98] to demonstrate the various forms of structural metareference, which I position as textual extracts, embedded narratives and framed narratives, whilst exemplifying how mimetic themes and mirrored plot elements are often evident within each diegetic level, including that of the actual world.

Textual Extracts

Structural metareferences foreground the interconnectivity of the fictional worlds and diegetic levels that exist within a text, enabling the reader to navigate and comprehend the composition of the wider fictional universe. Not all structural metareferences allude to the existence of an additional fictional world, however, as many adopt the form of textual extracts such as emails, poems and text messages that have been written by one of the characters, thereby maintaining the reader's immersion by sustaining her within the same diegetic level as the main narrative. The aim of textual extracts is to

[98] David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2004).

provide the reader with supplementary information that influences her understanding of the wider text, often through foregrounding subtext and context, whilst encouraging a physical disruption of the conventional layout of the page through the use of font styles and typography that differentiate the extract from the surrounding narrative, effectively functioning as windows into the fictional world that allow the reader to experience the extract in the same way as the character. Examples are evident in both modernism and postmodernism, including André Gide's modernist text *The Counterfeiters,*[99] which begins each chapter with an epigraph sourced from the work of writers such as Paul Desjardins and William Shakespeare, as well as the postmodern *Lost in The Funhouse*[100] by John Barth, which commences with the extract 'Once Upon a Time There was a Story that Began' that instructs the reader to cut out the passage and shape it into a möbius strip. Whilst Gide uses textual extracts to exemplify the experimental quality of modernism, alternating between prose, poetry and plays to enhance the text's themes of counterfeits and intertextuality, Barth's self-referential approach

[99] André Gide, *The Counterfeiters* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Français, 1925; repr. New York: Vintage Books, 1973).

[100] John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse* (New York City: Doubleday, 1968; repr. New York City: Anchor Books, 2014).

encourages the reader to take the deconstructive tendencies of postmodernism literally, reminding her that the fictional world is composed of paper through the inference that the extract can be physically removed from the surrounding text.

Contemporary metafiction demonstrates a return to the immersive application of textual extracts, combining the modernist appreciation of form and experimentation alongside the playful and disruptive tendencies of postmodernism, resulting in a reconstructive style that Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk describe as no longer 'deconstructing surfaces to reveal the absences gaping beneath' but instead offering 'glimpses of a depth that is full of meaning and relevance, even if it may not be directly accessed'.[101] Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*[102] provides an example, utilising a structure that incorporates diary entries from missing Amy that contradict the narration of her husband Nick, enabling Flynn to explore themes of subjectivity and bias, as well as Zadie Smith's *On Beauty,*[103] which begins with a series of emails written by Jerome to his father, Howard, that establish relationships and conflicts prior

[101] Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk, 'Reconstructing Depth', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 151-66, (p. 152).

[102] Gillian Flynn, *Gone Girl* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, 2012).

[103] Zadie Smith, *On Beauty* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005).

to the commencement of the prose narration. The reconfiguration of the page as demonstrated by contemporary textual extracts is thus achieved in a way that is both immersive and affective, whilst the layering of depth through the manipulation of narrative structure encourages the reader to interpret the meaning that has been foregrounded, in which the reader's understanding of the main narrative can be enhanced or disrupted by the additional information provided.

I incorporate various textual extracts into *Papercut* that supplement the reader's interpretation of the wider text, including forum posts and text messages, each of which are distinguished from the surrounding prose through line breaks that suspend the extract between the enclosing paragraphs, encouraging the reader to pause momentarily from the main narrative, as well as through specific font styles and formatting conventions that bring a sense of realism to the extract used. This approach is partly inspired by the influence of visual media on my writing, in which textual forms such as newspaper articles and emails are shown to the viewer in the same format as the character, enabling both individuals to encounter the text simultaneously instead of having the character relate a subjective description of the text through dialogue or narration. This technique can become metafictional, however, when the conventional layout of the screen is disrupted by the way the

extract is represented, as in the case of the television series *Sherlock,*[104] in which the text messages that the characters receive are imposed onto the screen instead of being shown on the characters' phones, enabling the viewer to read and interpret the message whilst simultaneously witnessing the character's physical and emotional response.

Papercut demonstrates a similar approach to *Sherlock* through its use of textual extracts, with one prominent example being the letter Charlotte sends to Lucie regarding her theory that Lucie is actually Jessica Eden, which is formatted using a cursive font that enables the extract to mimic Charlotte's 'spidery' and 'scruffy' handwriting. Not only does the physical aspect of the extract offer clues about Charlotte's motives and mindset, in which her frantic handwriting contributes towards her excitement at unearthing Eden's identity, as well as her desperate mental state, but the inclusion of the extract in full enables the reader to encounter the letter without having to rely upon Eve's subjective narration. Eve's interpretation can often distract the reader from determining the extract's intended meaning, or from its subtext, as discussed by Susan Sontag who identifies the divergences that can arise in a reader's interpretation, of which she states that there is often 'a

[104] *Sherlock,* BBC One (2010-).

discrepancy between the clear meaning of the text and the demands of the (later) readers'.[105] Eve's reaction to the letter focuses specifically on its surface-level meaning, stating 'Charlotte hadn't bothered to provide any evidence to support her bold claim, but she'd figured it out', instead of considering the layering of depth beneath, in which Charlotte's statement that 'I just wanted to thank you for writing something that changed my life' alludes to the influence that *Rewritten* has had on her own identity.

Themes of identity and anonymity are extended throughout *Papercut,* as demonstrated by the messages Eve receives from JessicaEden91 on the *Real Rewritten Readers* website, whereby I use textual extracts to explore the relationship between anonymity and the self, encouraging the reader to consider the collaborative and informative advantages of social media in the actual world, as well as the dangers and consequences of anonymity online. There is a layering of identity with JessicaEden91, as the initial messages are sent by Jay using his mother's old account, before the profile is later accessed by Morgan, who sends the message 'If you'd like to discuss Rewritten and Jessica Eden further, I'm happy to meet in person' as a way to lure Eve to Exmoor. The individualism of

[105] Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London: Penguin UK, 2013), p. 4.

JessicaEden91, whereby each character utilises the account for different means, as well as the unification that occurs through their assimilation of the same persona, creates a disparity between identity and anonymity, and between collaboration and individualism, that is highlighted by Alan Kirby in his discussion of digimodernism, which he positions as an alternative to metamodernism that 'owes its emergence and pre-eminence to the computerization of text'.[106] Digimodernism considers the function of various forms of media, including forum posts, of which Kirby states there is 'a loss of self and an infinite expansion of selfhood; no longer you, you become the text yourself',[107] which is reminiscent of the way in which metafiction can be used to explore the construction of the self and the relationship between fiction and reality. Morgan's use of the JessicaEden91 profile demonstrates Kirby's claims, and the wider applications of metafiction, as the anonymity she gains online further contributes towards her desire to distance herself from her former identities, whilst reflecting her desperation to hide from her traumatic reality by becoming a participant of *Rewritten's* fictional world.

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[106] Alan Kirby, *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture* (London: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), p. 1.

[107] Kirby, p. 106.

Almost all of the textual extracts in *Papercut* are inferred to have been written by individuals using pseudonyms or assumed identities, which is reflective of the wider function of illusory autofiction, where a sense of distance forms between creator and creation through the illusion that the text has been written by a fictional character. This duplicity of the actual and the faux-real versions of *Papercut* means that a distinction is evident between my motivations for incorporating textual extracts, as a way to encourage the active role of the reader in determining the hidden identities of various characters, and the intentions of Eve as the 'real' writer, who is inferred to have included the extracts as a way to provide 'factual' information that enhances the truthfulness of her story. Eve is a character whose life has been affected by her scepticism of the honesty of those around her, as well as her own struggle to position herself as a figure of trust, prompting her to write a text that provides the reader with an honest account of her experiences, incorporating text messages, letters and forum posts that support her version of events. This aspiration towards sincerity is in part inspired by the 'raw, flawed honesty' her mother incorporated into *Rewritten,* whilst being reflective of a wider return to sincerity that is evident in twenty-first century literature. Jasmine Gallagher describes this so-called new sincerity as 'a persistent cultural trend around the world that

can be characterised as the movement away from cynicism, irony and scepticism towards a poetics of recovery, hope and sincerity',[108] whereby, similarly to metamodernism, contemporary texts respond to and distance themselves from the postmodern through producing writing that is more affective and hopeful. Gallagher's notion that new sincerity foregrounds a 'hope for the future because what has been brushed aside or kept silent is given a new form – and thus a new voice'[109] is therefore demonstrated by my positioning of Eve as the writer of *Papercut,* in which she seeks sincerity in her writing to progress from the former dishonesties in her personal life.

Structural metareferences similarly enhance themes of truth and sincerity in *Cloud Atlas,* in which Mitchell employs a chiastic structure of six distinct but connected stories, several of which incorporate textual extracts that enhance the reader's perception of the corresponding narrative. An example is provided by the newspaper article Luisa Rey finds in *Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery,* which is formatted using columned text, a bold headline and a specific font that differentiates the extract from the surrounding prose, enabling it to resemble the 'real' newspaper article that Luisa has

[108] Jasmine Gallagher, 'New Sincerity in New Zealand Poetry', *Journal of New Zealand Literature (JNZL),* 37.1 (2019), 122-43, (p. 122).

[109] Gallagher, p. 140.

encountered. Theorists such as John Lurz argue that the manipulation of the conventional layout of the page can be disorienting for the reader, who is required to 'break out of the uniformly delimited left-right movement involved in conventional reading and roam beyond the normal parameters of standard page design',[110] although I argue that this disorientation enables the extract to stand out to the reader in the same way that the article's headline, 'Scientist Suicide at Int'l Airport Hotel',[111] captures Luisa's attention within the text, as she had planned to interview Rufus Sixsmith prior to his abrupt death. The relationship between reader and character is thus strengthened by their shared response, whilst the physical resemblance between the textual extract and the article that Luisa encounters contributes towards the realism of the text, appearing to reduce the proximity between the fictional world of the text and the actual world of the reader through the inference that it has been sourced from a 'real' newspaper in Luisa's world.

Textual extracts demonstrate a similar role in *Cloud Atlas* to that of *Papercut,* as Mitchell encourages the active role of the reader through situating the newspaper article prior to Luisa's

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[110] John Lurz, *The Death of the Book: Modernist Novels and the Time of Reading* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 96.

[111] Mitchell, p. 115.

response. This positioning of the article enables a disparity to arise between reader and character, as the reader has already witnessed Sixsmith's murder in chapter eighteen, enabling her to comprehend the fictionality of the newspaper's claim that 'a medical examiner at BYPD confirmed there are no suspicious circumstances surrounding the incident',[112] whilst Luisa is forced to search for evidence in order to confirm her certainty that Sixsmith was murdered. A similar instance occurs when Luisa receives a forged letter that she believes to have been written by Sixsmith prior to his death, stating he has hidden the 'report on Swannekke B in a strongbox at the 3rd Bank of California on 9th Street',[113] which contradicts the reader's knowledge that Sixsmith actually left the report at 'Buenas Yerbas International Airport'.[114] In both examples, textual extracts provide the reader with contradictory details that challenge her perception of the truth, which instead of correlating with the subjective stream of consciousness of modernism or the disruptive unreliable narration of postmodern texts, becomes reflective of the application of truth in contemporary literature, of which Kwame Anthony Appiah claims 'it is not skepticism about the very idea of truth that

[112] Mitchell, p. 115.

[113] Mitchell, p. 432-33

[114] Mitchell, p. 110.

guides us; it is realism about how hard the truth is to find'.[115] Luisa's difficulty in obtaining evidence, as well as her own personal struggle when deliberating what to believe, thus enables Mitchell to foreground the complexities of determining truth in the actual world, encouraging the reader to consider the conflict between fact and misinformation in the media and online, in which truth can be undermined by scepticism and fiction can be presented as fact.

The oscillation between the inaccuracies in the textual extracts and the perceived truthfulness of the surrounding narration is enhanced by the ambiguity concerning whether *Half-Lives* is an entirely fictional text encountered by Timothy in *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish,* or whether the manuscript is based on 'real' events experienced by a character who exists within his 'real' world. Timothy speculates that the 'real' writer of *Half-Lives,* 'one dubiously named Hilary V. Hush',[116] is perhaps a pseudonym, which is a notion that is made more explicit in the film adaptation of *Cloud Atlas*, as Luisa's friend, Javier, is revealed to have written the text.[117] Although the ambiguity over Hush's identity is never confirmed

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[115] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2006), p. 144.

[116] Mitchell, p. 158.

[117] *Cloud Atlas,* dir. by Tom Tykwer, Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski (Warner Bros. Pictures, 2012).

in the novel, the implication that the text contains 'real' events is alluded to through the shared birthmark that several of the main characters possess, contributing towards the concept of a reincarnated self and thus a shared world. This inference that Luisa's experiences have been fictionalised into a novel, instead of being related exclusively through the factual 'exposé of this major scandal'[118] in the *Western Messenger* newspaper, demonstrates how fiction writing can be used to evoke sincerity and affect in a way that can often feel more emotive than non-fiction writing. Indeed, Mary K. Holland's claim that 'truth and sincerity depend on acts of storytelling'[119] highlights a duality between the construction of fact and the composition of fiction, whereby textual extracts can contribute towards the truthfulness of the main text, whilst being influenced themselves by the sincerity of the surrounding narration.

Layered Narratives

Whilst textual extracts maintain the reader's immersion through situating her within the same diegetic level as the main narrative, other structural metareferences allude to the existence of additional fictional worlds, in which embedded and

[118] Mitchell, p. 452.

[119] Mary K. Holland, *The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 64.

framed narration utilise a layering of structure to create the wider fictional universe of conscious immersion. Embedded narratives relate an internal layering that relocates the reader deeper within the fictional universe, where fictional worlds are formed from characters' dreams, hypothetical futures or texts they have written, whilst framed narratives are external to the primary fictional world, often shifting the perspective to the faux-real world in which reader and character are inferred to coexist. Relationships are established between each diegetic level, which Gérard Genette categorises as either a 'direct causality between the events of the metadiegesis and those of the diegesis, conferring on the second narrative an explanatory function'[120] or a 'thematic relationship, therefore implying no spatio-temporal continuity between metadiegesis and diegesis',[121] as well as texts in which there is 'no explicit relationship between the two story levels: it is the act of narrating itself that fulfils a function in the diegesis, independently of the metadiegetic content'.[122] Indeed, layered narratives can simply provide the writer with a means to experiment with genre, style and form, resulting in a text that

[120] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method,* trans. by Jane E. Lewin (New York: Cornell University Press, 1983), p. 232.

[121] Genette, p. 233.

[122] Genette, p. 233.

explores and emphasises the processes involved in creating a text.

The layering of narrative structure and the consequential formation of additional fictional worlds comprises an integral aspect of metafiction, stimulating the reader's movement across different diegetic levels whilst enabling writers to similarly shift between voices, styles and techniques. This emphasis on structural experimentation is prominent in modernist metafiction, with perhaps the most complex example being that of James Joyce's *Ulysses,*[123] which relates the experiences of protagonist Leopold Bloom on a single day through a structure that Kent Emerson describes as 'an embodied, multilevel information management structure extending below the surface of the final version we read'.[124] Whilst *Ulysses* maintains the reader's immersion through utilising the internal application of metafiction, bearing a structure that fluctuates between different literary styles, voices and structural forms to celebrate and critique the mechanics of storytelling, postmodern metafiction uses structural metareferences to foreground the artificiality of the text, as

[123] James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1922; repr. London: Penguin Books, 2000).

[124] Kent Emerson, 'Joyce's *Ulysses:* A Database Narrative', *Joyce Studies Annual* (2017), 40-64, (p. 50).

demonstrated by the self-referential structure of Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five,*[125] which uses layered narration to relate the fragmented chronology of protagonist Billy Pilgrim's life, whose story is framed by the interjections of an unreliable narrator who comments on the composition of Vonnegut's text. These self-references do not forge the faux-real world of conscious immersion, however, in which the fictionality of the text is foregrounded to present the text's fictional world as 'real', but instead align with the tendencies of postmodernism: to present the text as a fictional construct in order to comment upon the constructedness of reality and the self in the actual world.

Contemporary metafiction combines the internal and self-referential application of layered narratives to forge reconstructive structures that achieve immersion and affect through presenting the fictional world as 'real', as demonstrated by Giannina Braschi's *The United States of Banana,*[126] which frames a fictional story regarding the September 11th terrorist attacks with several non-fiction essays regarding the role of America in the actual world, as well as Jeanette Winterson's *The*

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[125] Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five, or The Children's Crusade: A Duty-Dance with Death* (New York City: Delacorte, 1969; repr. New York City: Dell, 1991).

[126] Giannina Braschi, *The United States of Banana* (Seattle: AmazonCrossing, 2011).

Stone Gods,[127] in which its characters encounter manuscripts detailing sections of a book of the same name, thereby stimulating the formation of the faux-real world. *Papercut* similarly utilises a reconstructive structure, featuring a fictional universe composed of additional fictional worlds that arise from Eve's drafted novel *Eternal Light and Shadow* as well as the dreamworld featuring the girl and the monster, although the most prominent additional world is that of *Rewritten,* which the reader is relocated to each time she encounters an embedded extract at the beginning of *Papercut's* framing chapters. Jacob Emery's claim that layered narratives are 'crucial precisely because they ask the reader to perform an internal or external "translation" of the text that is qualitatively different from paraphrase'[128] is exemplified by *Rewritten,* as the primary aim of the extracts is to impact upon the reader's comprehension of the main narrative through encouraging her to identify the similarities that exist between both worlds. Indeed, each extract foregrounds a thematic link with the corresponding chapter of *Papercut* that either proves or disproves Morgan's claim that 'everything I do know seems to match the book', such as the mimetic disappearances of Simon and Nathan, which

[127] Jeanette Winterson, *The Stone Gods* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2007).
[128] Jacob Emery, 'Figures Taken for Signs: Symbol, Allegory, "Mise en abyme"', *Comparative Literature,* 64 (2012), 339-55, (p. 346).

constitutes one of the ways Morgan manipulates reality to convince Eve that *Rewritten* is 'some grand prophecy', as well as Eve's decision to side with Jay upon their return to Exmoor, enabling them to deviate from Jason's ambiguous fate in the book. In both examples, embedded narration is used to reflect the subjectivity of reality, in which the reader is relocated back and forth between the different realities of *Rewritten* and *Papercut,* whilst emphasising the distorted reality that Morgan believes to be real.

Rewritten's embedded extracts have the additional function of enabling the reader to experience the text as an occupant of its fictional world, instead of relying upon Eve's typically negative commentary of the book's plot and characters. As a result, the reader is relocated between a primary fictional world that is grounded in realism and an additional fictional world that draws upon fantasy and horror tropes, which identifies how metafictional structures not only transport the reader between diegetic levels and narrative voices, but often across different genres too. Metafiction can enhance genre elements, particularly those of fantasy and psychological thrillers, in which the emphasis of metafiction on the construction of reality and the self becomes more sustained. Linda Hutcheon considers the role of metafiction in fantasy texts, stating 'the invented autonomous cosmos of fantasy

becomes a model in metafiction for the temporal and spatial structuration of both the universe of the work and its very narration',[129] which is evident in the 2011 film *The Cabin in the Woods,*[130] referenced here due to the influence of fantasy and horror film and television on the formation of *Rewritten's* world, in which its slasher movie plot is framed by the perspective of a group of technicians who manipulate the characters into fulfilling their stereotypical roles. Metafiction fulfils a similarly prominent role in psychological thrillers, with John Foxwell arguing that metareferences can 'signif[y] the destabilization of [the character's] sense of self'[131] and 'imitate the disturbing, reality-altering quality of hallucinatory experiences',[132] enabling metafiction to foreground the mental state of the protagonist and present their distorted perception of reality to the reader. Ki Longfellow's *Houdini Heart*[133] offers an example, embedding various stories that have been written by the text's nameless protagonist into a narrative related through unreliable

[129] Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* 2nd edn (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2013), p. 78.

[130] *The Cabin in the Woods,* dir. by Drew Goddard (Lionsgate, 2011).

[131] John Foxwell, 'Enacting Hallucinatory Experience in Fiction: Metalepsis, Agency, and the Phenomenology of Reading in Muriel Spark's *The Comforters', Style*, 50 (2016), 139-157, (p. 141).

[132] Foxwell, p. 154.

[133] Ki Longfellow, *Houdini Heart* (Brattleboro, VT: Eio Books, 2011).

narration, in which her alcoholism and deteriorating mental state are enhanced by the blurring of diegetic levels.

Whilst *Rewritten* merges the genres of fantasy and horror, incorporating supernatural creatures, gory deaths and apocalyptic themes, *Papercut* itself displays genre elements, each of which are enhanced by metafiction. An example is provided by Eden's text, which initially appears to be a 'mystical navy book' that predicts the future, whilst Eve's comprehension of what is 'real' is repeatedly threatened by Morgan's adamance that she will 'eventually see the world through her green eyes', incorporating an element of psychological suspense into the text. This relationship between genre and metafiction allows the reader to experience similar uncertainties and tensions to Eve, as the repeated relocation across diegetic levels enables the reader to similarly question what is 'real', whilst encouraging her to consider the influence that experiences and individuals have on her own perception of reality in the actual world. These genre elements are muted, however, upon the shared realisation of Eve and the reader that *Rewritten* was penned by Eve's late mother, prompting their understanding of the text to shift. H. Porter Abbot identifies how 'framing narratives play crucially important roles in the interpretation of the narratives

they frame',[134] which is evident in *Papercut* through Eve's progression from a surface-level critique of *Rewritten*, of which she identifies 'rushed writing. Stunted arcs and undeveloped characters', to a consideration of her contextual knowledge concerning Lucie's life as a writer and mother. This oscillation between reader-character and bereaved daughter not only enables Eve to form a more affective connection with the book, but allows her to interpret elements of *Rewritten's* world as having been inspired by her mother's life, such as the way Lucie's strong female characters and apocalyptic setting reflect her desire to become more independent and escape her isolated existence in a loveless marriage. *Rewritten's* characters thus constitute an embodiment of Lucie's ideal self, in which she is inferred to have created the novel as a way to alter painful aspects of her reality in a similar way to how Morgan manipulates her own reality to hide from her past, allowing both women to situate themselves within fictional worlds to escape from the trauma in their 'real' lives.

Not only does the positioning of *Rewritten* as an embedded narrative reconfigure *Papercut* into the role of framing narration, but *Papercut* itself is framed by an epilogue, in which the reader is relocated to a 'non-fiction' moment based

[134] H. Porter Abbott, *The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative,* 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 28.

in the faux-real world, where Eve provides the reader with contextual information regarding her decision to write the text. The reader's perception of the main text thus shifts due to the sudden implication that the characters and plotlines are based on 'real' people and events, enhancing the affectivity of traumatic moments such as Lucie's suicide and Charlotte's abuse through the implication that they occurred within the same world as the reader, whilst reinforcing the fact that Eve's references to personal and societal issues such as mental illness and animal cruelty are also comments that are applicable to the actual world. Although this fluctuation between diegetic levels may appear disorientating for the reader, as identified by Dorrit Cohn's claim that 'the boundary between the primary story (the reader's story) and the secondary story (the framed novel) is violated [by metafiction], leading to a confusion between distinct ontological levels',[135] William Nelles argues that 'the move by which a character, frequently a narrator, moves from one diegetic level to another' can 'emphasize the effect of realism'[136] through appearing to contract the perceived distance

[135] Dorrit Cohn, 'Metalepsis and Mise en Abyme', *Narrative,* 20 (2012), 105-14, (p. 105).

[136] William Nelles, 'Stories Within Stories: Narrative Levels and Embedded Narrative', *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure, and Frames,* ed. by Brian Richardson, James Phalen and Peter Rabinowitz (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), pp. 339-53, (p. 351).

between reader and character. Raoul Eshelman's performatism is relevant here, which concerns an alternation between the outer frame of the text and the inner frame of an ostensive scene that encourages 'readers to believe rather than convince them with cognitive arguments',[137] thus highlighting a similar return to sensibilities such as realism and immersion as those identified in metamodernism. Eshelman describes performatism as the reader having 'to identify with something implausible or unbelievable within the frame […] but on the other hand, you still *feel* the coercive force causing this identification to take place',[138] as an oscillation arises between the reader's belief in the fictional world and her comprehension of the process by which the fictional world has been composed, creating a reading experience whereby the reader becomes consciously immersed.

The reader's conscious awareness of her relocation between fictional worlds is prominent in *Cloud Atlas,* in which the novel's six distinct stories initially appear to relate to six disparate fictional worlds, as each new section relocates the reader to an idiosyncratic setting, time period and perspective, each related through a different genre. Again, the relationship between metafiction and genre becomes apparent, creating a

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[137] Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishers, 2008), pp. 36-37.

[138] Eshelman, p. 2.

structure that Patrick O'Donnell describes as a 'mixture of genres, voices, and styles, fluctuating between recognisably traditional narrative modes and those more visibly reflexive and contemporary [which] resists easy classification, yet it bears some of the traces of the 'metamodern'',[139] therefore identifying a relationship between genre and metamodernism too. Current metamodern theory rarely considers the role of genre fiction in contemporary literature, instead focusing primarily on the realism of literary fiction, therefore failing to consider the way in which the fantastical and suspenseful worlds of genre texts can evoke the sentiments and societal conditions of the actual world. *Cloud Atlas* provides various examples, in which its application of genre ranges from the thriller *Half-Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery* to the science fiction *An Orison of Sonmi~451*, as well as the comedic tones of *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish,* which consider the themes of feminism, slavery and ageism respectively. In each instance, Mitchell enhances these themes through the use of genre elements: Luisa's frantic race to prove Sixsmith's murder is paralleled by her struggles to prove herself in a male-dominated industry and society; Sonmi's exploitation as a cloned server, and her difficulties in obtaining autonomy, reflect themes of inequality,

[139] Patrick O'Donnell, *A Temporary Future: The Fiction of David Mitchell* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), p. 15.

otherness and commodification in the actual world; and the comedic tone Timothy uses to narrate his experiences in a care home creates an unnerving commentary on the abandonment and isolation experienced by the elderly. Indeed, Tim Lanzendörfer argues that the 'poetics of genre in the contemporary moment are indicative, indeed even diagnostic, of shifts in the social conditions in which we live and under which we consume literature',[140] whereby genre elements can be used to enhance and enact the anxieties and oppressions of the actual world without having to represent them through realism.

The fluctuation between genre in *Cloud Atlas* is supplemented by a critique of the different generic forms, as each character encounters the text written by the protagonist of the previous section and subsequently comments upon the text's composition, such as Timothy's claim that 'the young-hack-versus-corporate-corruption-thriller'[141] genre of *Half-Lives* has potential despite being overused. Not only does this create a metafictional commentary on the content and context of each section, but also forms a fragmented structure that Nick Bentley argues 'explore[s] (and tentatively celebrate[s]) the

[140] Tim Lanzendörfer, *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel* (Lexington, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), p. 7.

[141] Mitchell, p.

possibility of reducing that fragmentation and deconstruction and the implied disassociation and factional disruptions that are a feature of contemporary societies',[142] as the initially unconnected characters are gradually unified through their encounters with each other's stories. This structure constitutes an alternation between framed and embedded narration, whereby each character's story impacts upon the reader's interpretation of the stories around it, as demonstrated by the embedding of the second part to *An Orison of Sonmi~451* within *Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After,* in which Zachry confirms that 'Sonmi was killed by Old'un chiefs'[143] despite still being alive at the end of her own story, whilst revealing that her orison became a sacred artefact centuries later, turning Sonmi from a 'freakbirthed human' to 'what your ancestors b'liefed was your god'.[144] Sonmi's complex identity, beginning as a cloned server in a diner and concluding with her becoming a godlike entity years after her execution, therefore demonstrates how structural metareferences can be used to explore the notion of the self and the construction of identity, in which the reader's perception of Sonmi's character is

[142] Nick Bentley, 'Trailing Postmodernism: David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, Zadie Smith's *NW*, and the Metamodern', *English Studies*, 99 (2018), 723-43, (p. 740).

[143] Mitchell, p. 291.

[144] Mitchell, p. 291.

enhanced and altered by combining the information provided in her own story with the details included in the framing narration.

The suggestion that *Cloud Atlas* details six separate fictional worlds begins to fade as the reader progresses through the text, as the interconnectivity of the characters and their texts makes it evident that each story is set within the same fictional world during a different period in time, albeit with the aforementioned ambiguity over the authenticity of *Half Lives – The First Luisa Rey Mystery.* This unification of worlds can also be extended to the actual world of the reader, as Timothy's use of direct address when he states 'dear reader'[145] in *The Ghastly Ordeal of Timothy Cavendish,* as well as his claim that his story is 'one's memoirs',[146] infers the events of his story, and of the other stories, are 'real', thereby requiring the formation of the faux-real world in which reader and character(s) are inferred to coexist. The temporality of Mitchell's metafictional structure, oscillating back and forth through time, is illustrative of Mary K. Holland's claim that contemporary literature 'reminds us to look back at what came before and find its place in the stories and plottings we use to make sense of the world',[147] as each story

[145] Mitchell, p. 147.

[146] Mitchell, p. 148.

[147] Mary K. Holland, *Succeeding Postmodernism: Language and Humanism in Contemporary American Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), pp. 201-02.

redirects mimetic personal and societal concerns towards different social contexts and time periods. Examples are evident through the recurring themes of imprisonment and slavery, which range from the flogging of Autua, a nineteenth century slave in *The Pacific Journal of Adam Ewing,* to the future imaginings of *An Orison of Sonmi~451* and *Sloosha's Crossin' an' Ev'rythin' After,* where the dystopian and apocalyptic landscapes demonstrate division and oppression, alongside the recurring motifs of freedom and legacy, such as the moment of peace Sonmi experiences prior to her death, as well as her later eternalisation as a god in Zachry's apocalyptic future. This fluctuation between oppression and freedom, and its consequential notion of history repeating, creates a structure that encourages the reader to apply the mimetic themes of *Cloud Atlas* to the additional diegetic level of the actual world, in which the twenty-first century possesses a unique, albeit familiar, amalgamation of political, societal and ecological concerns to those explored throughout the text.

The insinuation of a shared fictional world, as well as the use of structural metareferences that reduce the distance between the fictional world of the text and the actual world of the reader, is similarly demonstrated by the suggestion that several of the text's main characters are reincarnations of the same individual. Adam, Rufus, Luisa, Timothy, Sonmi and

Meronym are inferred to be embodiments of the same self due to their shared birthmark, forming a structure that Ben Masters describes as a 'movement between accretion (the gathering of selves, stories, styles, and voices) and secretion (the way each voice contains something of the other voices; but also the gradual storing of multiple authorial selves'.[148] Indeed, although each story explores themes of fragmentation and isolation, such as Adam's preference to share his anxieties and conflicts in his journal entries instead of with another character, a sense of connectivity forms through each protagonist's encounters with the stories of the other characters, as demonstrated by Luisa's consideration that 'molecules of Zedelghem Chateau, of Robert Frobisher's hand, dormant in this paper for forty-years, [are] swirling in [her] lungs'[149] upon opening her copy of *Letters from Zedelghem.* Cortney Hopf argues that this layering of structure and identity encourages the reader 'to see herself as just another level, and to imagine the self as a discursive construction as well',[150] in which the metaxy of connectivity and isolation, and of the modern and the

[148] Ben Masters, *Novel Style: Ethics and Excess in English Fiction Since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 165.

[149] Mitchell, p. 453.

[150] Courtney Hopf, 'The Stories We Tell: Discursive Identity Through Narrative Form in *Cloud Atlas'*, in *David Mitchell: Critical Essays*, ed. by Sarah Dillon (Canterbury: Gylphi Limited, 2011), pp. 105–26, (p. 111).

postmodern, forms a reconstructive structure that not only unifies the lives of each character, but also infers that the reader exists alongside them as an inhabitant of the text's fictional universe, whereby her own identity can be perceived as being as constructed as the language used to forge Mitchell's characters.

Chapter Three
Linguistic Metareferences

What makes a story work? Is it the plot, the characters, the text? The subtext? And who gives a story meaning? Is it the writer? Or you?

- *The angel Metatron*, *Meta Fiction*[151]

Linguistic metareferences concern the identification of the text's fictional world as a composition of language and literary devices, in which the typically subconscious process of converting actual world referents into fictional world concepts is foregrounded. Writers transform real or imagined people, places and events into language, creating the detailed fictional worlds of their texts, whilst readers subsequently convert the writer's words into images they can visualise and emotions they can experience, enabling immersion to be instigated and affective responses to form. Metareferences provide a commentary on both of these subjective processes, identifying how a writer or reader's idiosyncratic experiences within their own 'real' world can impact upon the construction of the text and the way it is visualised and received. This relationship

[151] 'Meta Fiction', *Supernatural: The Complete Ninth Season* (Warner Home Video/The CW, 2015) [on DVD].

between the real and the fictional, as well as the perceived constructedness of both notions, is also evident in linguistic metareferences that blur the distinction between the different diegetic levels of the wider fictional universe, whereby the second person pronoun 'you' appears to contract the proximity between reader and character to create the illusion the reader is being directly addressed. Chapter three provides a critical analysis of my novel *Papercut* and Ben Lerner's *10:04*[152] to demonstrate how linguistic metareferences forge a connection between the fictional world of the text and the actual world of the reader, whilst exemplifying how the oscillatory nature of contemporary metafiction enables immersion to be maintained in spite of the foregrounding of the text's linguistic composition.

Signs and Referents

Writers build fictional worlds from language, converting both actual and imagined referents into words (or signs) for the reader to transform into a succession of images in her mind. This conversion of people and places, events and emotions into language, alongside the reconversion of language into images, meaning and emotional response, is integral to Ferdinand de Saussure's study of semiotics, as his distinction between the

[152] Ben Lerner, *10:04* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014).

signifier (the sound-image of the word) and the signified (the meaning evoked)[153] demonstrates how the reader's perception of a referent is often subjective, in which her interpretation of the description provided by the writer, as well as her own application of personal connotations to specific words or phrases, results in variances in how the text is visualised and the type of affective response that forms. Mark Currie argues that the representation of referents as signs, known as the referential function of language, is itself 'implicitly also self-referential because it depends upon the hidden system of differences, systematic and contextual, which give each sign its value,'[154] although metafiction can be used to make this notion more explicit, exploring the dynamic between sign and referent to provide a commentary on the functions of language, often including self-references to the language used within the text itself. As such, the typically subconscious relationship between sign and referent, as well as the meaning and emotional response signified, are foregrounded by linguistic metareferences, enabling writers to consider the complexities of representing referents through language due to its arbitrary nature, whilst highlighting how the subjective connotations

[153] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Roy Harris (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 1983).

[154] Mark Currie, *Metafiction* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 6.

attached to specific words can contribute towards realism and affect.

The use of textual commentary on the referential function of language, as well as the foregrounding of the way in which readers apply meaning to words, has often been an integral aspect of metafiction, enabling writers to examine and critique how fictional worlds are built, imagined and experienced. Modernist metafiction often emphasises the constructive processes involved in creating and imagining fictional worlds, as well as how this reflects the construction of reality and the self in the actual world, as demonstrated by Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*,[155] in which central character Bernard envisages writing his own biography but is unsure how to accurately represent the self through language. Whilst Bernard's discussion of the function and limitations of language demonstrates the internal application of metafiction, maintaining the reader's immersion through relating to in-world texts, postmodern metafiction often consists of self-references to the language used within the text itself, reinforcing the artificiality of the text's fictional world and thus the perceived artificiality of the actual world too. Vladimir

[155] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Hogarth Press, 1931; repr. London: Vintage, 2004).

Nabokov's *Pale Fire*[156] provides an example, formatted as a 999-line poem written by writer-character John Shade which is supplemented by a textual commentary he is also inferred to have written, whereby he repeatedly discusses the composition of the poem and its context, including the language used. Contemporary metafiction combines a consideration of the construction of language into fictional worlds alongside the deconstruction of the text into its component parts to exemplify a reconstructive use of language, in which linguistic metareferences foreground the composition of the text in order to enhance immersion, realism and affect. Examples are offered by Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station,*[157] in which protagonist Adam's repeated manipulation of the truth reveals how he uses language to hide from his anxieties and responsibilities, as well as Dimitris Lyacos' *With the People from the Bridge,*[158] which enhances its themes of loss and death through unfinished sentences for the reader to interpret and complete. Both texts identify how language can be used to (re)construct and represent referents from the actual world, in

[156] Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (New York City: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1962; repr. London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2012).

[157] Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Books, 2011).

[158] Dimitris Lyacos, *With the People from the Bridge* (Nottingham: Shoestring Press, 2014).

which the reader's individual experiences are integral to her interpretation of the text.

The fictional worlds that writers build from language are often reflective of the actual world in which the writer exists, incorporating people and places as characters and settings or turning emotions, societal concerns and personal issues into the text's themes. This conversion of actual world referents into fictional world concepts is also evident in the texts written by writer-characters such as Eve, whose faux-real version of *Papercut* uses language to represent the referents of 'real people [and] fictional characters, physical settings [and] imagined landscapes', as well as 'the purest forms of love. Platonic. Familial. Maternal'. Whilst the representation of 'real' world referents as signs is true of any text, constituting the way in which fictional worlds are constructed and imagined, metafiction can be used to foreground this typically subconscious process, which Mary K. Holland argues can enhance the text's realism through 'harness[ing] traditionally anti-Realist tools such as […] metafiction, in order to represent a highly signification-oriented world that feels as real to us as did the visually mimetic fiction of a more empirically minded nineteenth century'.[159] Indeed, Eve's commentary on the

[159] Mary K. Holland, *The Moral Worlds of Contemporary Realism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), p. 71.

linguistic composition of *Papercut* is not to foreground the artifice of the text, but to position its fictional world as 'real', whereby her comments on the linguistic composition of the text emphasise how her subjective experiences within her own 'real' world have influenced the way she has chosen to represent that world through her writing.

Eve's discussion of language does not just extend to her consideration of her own writing, but to the specific words she encounters within the texts she has read, enabling me to use linguistic metareferences to demonstrate how an individual's subjective experiences not only impact upon the way she constructs her own fictional worlds, but the way she imagines the fictional worlds created by other individuals too. Again, metafiction can be used to foreground a typically subconscious process, this time reinforcing how readers convert signs into mental images in their minds, such as when Eve first encounters *Rewritten* and proceeds to 'scour the pages for proper nouns – the capitalised first letters stood out like coal in the snow', thus initially perceiving the text as a succession of signs, before she considers the subjective connotations she has attached to these words, noting that 'Evelyn. Jason. Devon. Exmoor' are 'Words that [form] part of my autobiography'. An example is offered by Eve's labelling of *Rewritten's* Devonshire setting as being 'vast, isolating, but beautiful' due to her complicated childhood

memories of living in the 'real' Exmoor as a child, as the personal associations she has attached to specific words influence how she visualises the attached referent. This relationship between interpretation and subjectivity is discussed by Alison Gibbons, who claims that 'the decentred self reasserts itself by grounding its subjectivity in lived experience,'[160] which is not only applicable to the relocation of the reader into the fictional world of the text, but to her navigation through the actual world, whereby the subjectivity of lived experience is integral to how both worlds are interpreted and perceived.

The way Eve represents her 'real' world through language, as well as her interpretation of the fictional world of *Rewritten,* are influenced by her mental and emotional state, whereby the trauma she experienced during her difficult childhood, as well as her more recent guilt and grief due to the events that followed her mother's death, impact upon the way she perceives her own reality and thus the fictional worlds she creates and encounters. This is evident during another instance when Eve considers the relationship between sign and referent

[160] Alison Gibbons, 'Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism,* eds. Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), p. 130.

upon receiving a one-word message from JessicaEden91 that reveals Jessica Eden's death to have been 'suicide'. A disparity arises between Eve's description of 'suicide' as 'brief, sharp, unspoken' and the arbitrary properties of the word, as the three syllables of 'suicide' do not make it 'brief', whilst the phonetics of the word make it sound soft, not 'sharp'. Eve's choice of adjectives instead allude to her emotional response to the referent of 'suicide', creating a reading experience that Joanna Gavins and Ernestine Lahey identify as 'greatly dependent on the linguistic cues, provided by the text itself, but also vitally grounded in the context of the discourse',[161] as Eve's abrupt reaction to the word, combined with her repeated vagueness about the way in which her mother died, implies Lucie's death was also suicide, in which 'brief' relates to the condensing of Lucie's complex emotions and circumstances into a single word, whilst 'sharp' reflects the painful reaction the word generates due to Eve's guilt and grief. Eve's emphasis on the physicality and sound of the word therefore relates to the subjective connotations she has attached to the sign, whilst emphasising the complexities of representing certain referents through language due to its arbitrary nature.

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[161] Joanna Gavins and Ernestine Lahey, 'World Building in Discourse', in *World Building: Discourse in the Mind,* ed. by Joanna Gavins and Ernestine Lahey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 1-14, (p. 1).

Eve's description of the word 'suicide' also includes the adjective 'unspoken', which relates to her reluctance to utter the word aloud, as well as her repeated avoidance of discussing suicide elsewhere in the narrative. Eve instead refers to her mother's death using more generalised words and phrases, such as 'I didn't want a stranger knowing about Mum's death' and 'she decided she was done with the world', which foreground her inability to accept the specific circumstances surrounding the way Lucie died. Philip Seargeant and Bill Greenwell's discussion of subtext is relevant here, which they define as 'what the conversation beneath the words is communicating (both between characters, and to the reader/audience)',[162] as Eve's avoidance of discussing the details regarding Lucie's death not only emphasises her guilt, but also allows me to forge a connection between the fictional world of the text and the actual world of the reader, in which Eve's avoidance of discussing suicide, and mental health more generally, is reflective of the perceived taboo of mental illness in the actual world. Almost all of the central characters in *Papercut* experience some form of mental illness, such as Eve's depression and Nathan's low self-esteem, as well as Lottie's complex personality disorder, but at no point do the characters

[162] Philip Seargeant and Bill Greenwell, *From Language to Creative Writing: An Introduction* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 60.

discuss their mental health with each other, as illustrated when Eve claims Nathan 'suggested antidepressants and therapists, instead of offering words of comfort' following her mother's death, or the repeated use of the word 'dark' as a synonym for depression. The characters' repeated preference for signs that distance themselves from the referent of mental health thus not only becomes reflective of their wider reluctance to share meaningful conversations with each other, but also enables me to demonstrate the difficulties people experience when discussing their mental health in the actual world.

Papercut demonstrates how contemporary metafiction can comment on language without impacting upon the reader's immersion, combining a critique of the language used within in-world texts alongside self-references to the linguistic composition of the text itself, used here to contribute towards the illusion that Eve is discussing the 'real' text she has written. This seeming alternation between the internalised application of modernist metafiction and the self-referential aspect of postmodern metafiction results in a reconstructive use of language that Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk refer to as a 'literature of reconstruction',[163] which they position as both a

[163] Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk, 'Reconstructing Depth', in *Metamodernism*, ed. by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 151-66, (p. 153).

distinct concept to metamodernism as well as a solution to the paradoxical nature of metamodernism's metaxy that considers 'the form of engagement which is induced by the oscillation of the artwork'.[164] Indeed, whilst metamodernism emphasises the oscillatory nature of contemporary literature, it rarely provides a textual level analysis of how seemingly contradictory modern and postmodern techniques function alongside each other, including the relationship between linguistic metareferences and the generation of immersion and affect. Huber and Funk's literature of reconstruction aims to rectify this, identifying that in the case of metafiction, contemporary texts 'take their cue from postmodernist insights and deconstructive impulses, but explore the ways in which fictionality and meta-referentiality may serve in the endeavour to reconstruct some kind of meaning that allows for intersubjective communication, for human connection and for a paradoxical authenticity',[165] whereby the redirection of the self-referential aspect of metafiction towards modernist sensibilities such as sincerity and immersion enables linguistic metareferences to contribute towards the excavation of depth and the evocation of affect.

The reconstructive tendencies of contemporary metafiction are further exemplified by Ben Lerner's autofiction

[164] Huber and Funk, p. 152.

[165] Huber and Funk, p. 153.

text *10:04,* in which its protagonist, a fictional version of Lerner (whom I refer to as Ben), is offered an advance to write a new book, prompting him to deliberate the style in which he intends to write it. Ben eventually opts to write a text that is 'on the very edge of fiction',[166] in which he converts referents from his own 'real' world into language, including the referent of the actual world itself, which Alison Gibbons claims contributes towards realism through 'the fragmentation of the subject and the blurring of the fact–fiction ontological boundary'.[167] This faux-real version of *10:04* integrates aspects from Ben's reality into fiction through the conversion of 'real' people and places into signs, as well as various personal and societal concerns that have impacted upon him, such as his anxieties over his identity and the increasing threat of climate change, forging a fictional world that is highly representative of his own 'real' world, whilst similarly reflecting the actual world in which Lerner and the reader coexist. This subconscious process of turning referents into signs is foregrounded by linguistic metareferences that reinforce the function of language, such as when Ben states 'I

[166] Lerner, p. 237.

[167] Alison Gibbons, 'Postmodernism is dead. What Comes next?', *The Times Literary Supplement* (2017)
< https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/postmodernism-dead-comes-next/> [accessed 23 June 2018]

would change names'[168] to hide the identities of the 'real' people who have inspired his characters, thereby establishing distance between the sign and its corresponding referent, alongside instances when he discusses his difficulty in representing complex emotions and contemporary concerns as language due to its arbitrary nature, as demonstrated when he states 'although *exchange* isn't really the word'[169] upon overhearing a woman disguise her social bias through a discussion of the impact of junk food on children. In each instance, immersion is maintained due the layering of fictionality that exists between Ben the writer-character and Ben the faux-real writer, both of which are separate entities to Lerner himself.

Ben's identification of difficulties in using the referential function of language to represent the 'real' world is due to his awareness of how the subjective connotations attached to specific words can impact upon how meaning is accessed and affect is evoked, which is a notion that originates in his memories of the speech delivered by Ronald Reagan following the Challenger disaster, as Ben experienced an emotional response to the linguistic composition of the speech even though he did not understand one of the crucial words. Ben's fascination with the speech centres on its closing sentence,

[168] Lerner, p. 54.

[169] Lerner, p. 97.

‘‘slipped the surly bonds of earth' to 'touch the face of God’,’[170] due to the affective reaction he experienced despite not knowing what ‘surly’ meant, of which he states ‘I had no idea what surly meant then, and it's an awkward modifier in this phrase, since you usually see it in contexts like 'a surly waiter,’ meaning uncivil; a 'surly sky' is threatening or ominous’.[171] A disparity is therefore evident between comprehension and affect, which Raoul Eshelman identifies is because ‘the sign […] is the starting point for acquiring knowledge, not the thing itself’,[172] whereby the idiosyncratic connotations attached to particular words can impact upon the way in which language is interpreted, often preventing the appropriate meaning from being reached. Ben thus becomes dependent on the context of the speech in order to decipher the subtext of the poetic language, realising that ‘slipped the surly bonds of earth’ corresponds with the referent of ‘death’, in which the function of ‘surly’ is used to suggest that the victims have 'escaped a threat as opposed to having succumbed to one – they are in a better place now’,[173] enabling the speech to conclude with

[170] Lerner, p. 112.

[171] Lerner, p. 112.

[172] Raoul Eshelman, *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishers, 2008), p. x.

[173] Lerner, p. 112.

positive imagery instead of returning to a factual account of the horrific events that inspired it.

Ben's determination that 'the meaning of the words was nothing compared to that first experience of poetic measure'[174] emphasises a distinction between the referential function of language and the way prosodics can be used to conjure meaning and affect, as identified by Seargeant and Greenwell as the way 'meaning is conveyed not simply by the content of the utterances (i.e. by the way words refer to things and ideas in the world), but also by their form, structure and patterning'.[175] The affective potential of prosodics is evident in Ben's commentary on the specific poetic devices that feature within Reagan's speech, alongside his consideration of the various emotional responses he experienced, such as when he foregrounds the functional and emotive application of the speech's final sentence, stating 'the iambs offered both a sense of climax and of closure',[176] as well as the way the intonation of the sentence encourages emphasis on specific words, stating 'the alternating stresses lent the speech a sense of authority and dignity, of mourning and reassurance – I felt it in my chest:

[174] Lerner, p. 112.

[175] Seargeant and Greenwell, p. 153.

[176] Lerner, p. 112.

the sentence pulled me into the future'.[177] As such, Ben deliberates that the speech not only encouraged him to feel a sense of optimism and closure upon its conclusion when he first encountered it as a confused child, but also motivates him as a writer several years later, in which he declares 'I was going to read everything and invent a new prosody'[178] in order to write something of his own that generates affect through the way the language is constructed, and not through a reliance upon the meaning of the words themselves.

The linguistic composition of Ben's faux-real version of *10:04,* and consequentially Lerner's actual version of the text, use a foregrounding of prosodics alongside specific linguistic techniques that are typically associated with metamodernism, such as a form of free indirect style that is evocative of the modernist stream of consciousness, as well as linguistic metareferences that are more direct and sustained than those of *Papercut.* This self-referential, free-flowing style, where sentences merge into one another and descriptive imagery is often excessive, is enhanced by the constantly-changing nature of the text's structure and themes, in which an amalgamation of thematic concerns are related across textual extracts and layered narration, creating a narrative that mimics the flustered

[177] Lerner, p. 112.

[178] Lerner, p. 37.

and obsessive nature of Ben's thoughts, whose personal anxieties and insecurities are exaggerated by the uncertainties of societal issues such as climate change. The linguistic composition of *10:04* is thus reflective of Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen's metamodern structure of feeling, which they believe 'captures the increasing awareness…that there is something at stake',[179] as Ben (and Lerner) demonstrate a return to modernist sensibilities such as sincerity and affect in an attempt to counteract the personal and societal uncertainties that impact upon his life and the lives of those around him. Indeed, Ben's decision not to write the book he 'was contracted to write about fraudulence, but the one I've written in its place for you, to you'[180] foregrounds what Ben Masters identifies as 'language's ability to move the reader, both emotionally and intellectually, and to offer new ways of being',[181] as the text establishes a relationship with the reader not only through Ben's honesty over his own personal experiences, but over the way in which he has represented

[179] Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 1-19 (p. 2).

[180] Lerner, p. 237.

[181] Ben Masters, *Novel Style: Ethics and Excess in English Fiction Since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 8.

those 'real' events and emotions through language, encouraging the reader to consider her own positionality in regards to the issues the text has foregrounded through the illusion that the faux-real world is the same world in which she exists.

Direct Address

Linguistic metareferences can further connect the fictional world of the text to the actual world of the reader through the use of specific deictic constructions that create the illusion the reader is being directly addressed. There are three primary forms of deixis: social deixis, which highlights the personal relationship between two entities (e.g. 'you' or 'my'); temporal deixis, which identifies a distance in time (e.g. 'now' and 'then'); and spatial deixis, which considers the physical proximity between two entities or objects (e.g. 'here' or 'there'). In each instance, a deictic centre is established, defined by Erwin M. Segal as the process by which 'a location within the world of the narrative serves as the centre from which the sentences are to be interpreted',[182] of which the narrator or protagonist of the

[182] Erwin M. Segal, 'A Cognitive-Phenomenological Theory of Fictional Narrative', in *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective,* ed. by Judith F. Duchan, Gail A. Bruder and Lynne E. Hewitt (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 61-78, (p. 15).

text typically functions as the focal point for personal, spatial and temporal proximities to be determined. The relationship between deixis and metafiction is perhaps at its most noticeable with that of social deixis, defined by Elena Semino as 'references to the roles of addresser and addressee in communication',[183] as instances when the narrator uses the second person pronoun 'you' or refers to the reader as 'Reader' constitute direct address, which I identify as a distinct form of linguistic metareference. Temporal or spatial deixis is often used to enhance these apparent exchanges, in which words such as 'here', 'this' and 'now' create a sense of immediacy with the reader through reducing the perceived distance between the text's settings and events with the location and moment in which the reader encounters them, thus revealing how even the most granular components of a narrative can contribute towards immersion, realism and affect.

Direct address is perhaps one of the most widely recognised forms of metareference, with one of its most famous instances being the poignant 'Reader, I married him'[184] in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre.* This instance exemplifies how

[183] Elena Semino, 'Deixis and Fictional Minds', *Style*, 45 (2011), 418-40, (p. 422).

[184] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1847; repr. London: Vintage Books, 2007), p. 541.

direct address can be used to enhance the relationship between reader and character through the suggestion of intimacy or familiarity, although it can equally be used to draw the reader's attention to specific themes in the fictional world that are further applicable in the actual world too. These applications of direct address are evident in modernist metafiction, as demonstrated by F. Scott Fitzgerald's short story *Winter Dreams,*[185] which uses the second person pronouns 'you' and 'us' not only to establish a sense of unity between narrator and reader as shared spectators of protagonist Dexter Green's unrequited pursuit of the woman he loves, but to foreground the morals of the story, in which a distinction between reality and idealism is reinforced. Immersion is maintained due to Fitzgerald creating the illusion that the events he is relating are 'real' and can be similarly witnessed by the reader, which is contradictory to the postmodern application of direct address, in which the aim is to reinforce the artificiality of the text by foregrounding the reader's narrative role. Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*[186] provides an example, structured as an alternation between the opening chapters of different novels

[185] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Winter Dreams* (New York City: Metropolitan, 1922; repr. New York City: Start Publishing LLC, 2020).

[186] Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller,* trans. by William Weaver (Turin: Einaudi, 1979; repr. London: Vintage Books, 2010).

and a frame narrative written in the second person that recounts the reader's encounters with each text, embedded with wider plotlines concerning book-fraud and authorial control. Contemporary metafiction demonstrates a reconstructive use of direct address, situating the reader within her foregrounded narrative role to contribute towards the inference that the text relates 'real' events, as demonstrated by Charles Stross' *Halting State,*[187] which is composed of three alternating perspectives written in the second person to enhance the interactivity of the online world in which the narrative is set, as well as Caroline Kepnes' *You,*[188] which uses the second person pronoun to create the illusion that obsessive protagonist Joe is communicating with the woman he is stalking. In each instance, direct address contributes towards the formation of the faux-real world, in which reader and character are inferred to communicate.

Metafiction's return to modernist sensibilities such as sincerity and affect has seen direct address evolve from its disruptive postmodern applications to contribute towards the illusion that the events of the text are 'real', whereby the apparent communications between reader and character infers

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[187] Charles Stross, *Halting State* (London: Orbit, 2008).

[188] Caroline Kepnes, *You* (New York City: Emily Bestler Books, 2014; repr. London: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

that both individuals occupy the same world. *Papercut* provides an example, in which instances of the second person pronouns 'you' and 'us' contract the proximity between reader and character, which is perhaps at its most noticeable in the epilogue to the text due to its positioning within the faux-real world. The epilogue concerns Eve's identification as the 'real' writer of the text and is written as if she is providing the reader with contextual information surrounding the 'real' events that inspired the text, including her awareness that 'the world kept bringing [Morgan] back to us'. This sentence not only relates to Morgan's repeated return to the lives of Eve's family, whereby 'us' refers to Eve, Jay and their mother, but also exemplifies what Sandrine Sorlin identifies as an 'ambiguity of the grammatical form as far as its reference is concerned',[189] as 'us' can be perceived as a more collective instance of the pronoun that can be extended to the reader too, whose inferred situatedness within the faux-real world implicates her own inability in keeping Lottie safe. The illusion of a shared world is further enhanced by the use of spatial deixis, as Eve opts for the determiner 'the' when referring to her world instead of

[189] Sandrine Sorlin, 'Breaking the fourth wall: The pragmatic functions of the second person pronoun in *House of Cards'*, in *The Pragmatics of Personal Pronouns*, ed. by Laure Gardelle and Sandrine Sorlin (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2005), pp. 125-46, (p. 126).

pronouns such as 'my' and 'your' that enforce distance, in which her positioning as deictic centre enables her use of language to contribute towards the implication that her world is 'real'.

As well as situating the reader as an inhabitant of the fictional universe, direct address can be used to forge an affective relationship between reader and character. This can be achieved through the positioning of the reader as the character's confidante, creating the illusion that the character is aware of the reader's existence in a similar way to how direct address in visual media involves the character giving the viewer a knowing look through the camera, as demonstrated by the television series *Fleabag,*[190] in which its eponymous protagonist often turns to the camera to share her internal thoughts with the viewer. *Papercut* similarly strives to generate a sense of intimacy between Eve and the reader, which is at its most notable during instances when Eve uses the second person pronoun to project her personal anxieties and emotions onto the reader, enhancing the wider themes of the text in which characters without their emotions and are rarely honest with each other. Examples are evident in the suggestion of shared insecurities when Eve likens Morgan to 'the popular girl at school who could make you shrink with a single word', or when

[190] *Fleabag,* BBC One (2016-2019).

she describes the beginning of a relationship as being 'still firmly locked in that honeymoon period where all you see is perfection and lust and happy ever afters'. Both examples illustrate how 'you' can refer simultaneously to the reader herself, as Eve is assuming that the reader can relate to her anxieties, as well as being a more generalised instance of the pronoun with a non-specific referent, which enables the reader to perceive Eve as both a 'real' person who is relating a non-fiction story set in a shared world, whilst maintaining an awareness of her actual fictionality as a character in a text. Andrea Macrae discusses the disparity between the referent of 'you', noting that the second person pronoun 'evokes the reader's conceptual identification with the addressee designated as *you* and also alienation, with the awareness that *you* functions both generally and specifically, and can and does refer to almost infinite others',[191] in which a sense of ambiguity is sustained over the specific referent of the second person pronoun, enabling the reader's immersion to be maintained.

As well as enhancing an affective relationship between reader and character, direct address can be used to foreground

[191] Andrea Macrae, 'Positioning the Reader in Post-Apartheid Literature of Trauma: *I* and *You* in Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story',* in *Pronouns in Literature: Positions and Perspectives in Language,* ed. by Alison Gibbons and Andrea Macrae (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 55-74, (p. 68).

moments when the narrator is discussing societal concerns that are reflective of the actual world, thus encouraging the reader to consider her own positionality and awareness of specific issues and themes. An example is provided in *Papercut* when Eve likens the dread she experiences upon returning to Lottie's home to how she feels when she witnesses a terrorist attack on the news, describing it as 'The kind of feeling you get when you watch an awful tragedy unfold on the news – fear and dread, as well as relief that you're at home, safe from it all, separated from the world by a pane of glass'. Not only does this example use spatial deixis to unify the fictional world and actual world into a single entity, but the use of the second person pronoun 'you' demonstrates Eve's implication of a shared understanding with the reader, who is encouraged to draw upon instances when she experienced a similar emotional response to the sentiment Eve is attempting to evoke. Jeremy Scott identifies the significance of personal experience when interpreting a text, stating 'any text constructed from language is not simply 'received' in a passive sense by its reader [...] but is interpreted according to individual cultural contexts and lived experience'.[192] As such, the vagueness of the referent attached

[192] Jeremy Scott, 'Worlds from Words: Theories of World-building as Creative Writing Toolbox', in *World Building: Discourse in the Mind,* ed. by

to 'tragedy', alongside the foregrounding of this instance through direct address, encourages the reader to attribute her own experiences to provide depth to the description offered within the text, whereby the reader's knowledge of tragic events she has witnessed on the news are inferred to be the same events that have impacted upon Eve.

The duality of the referent attached to instances of the second person pronoun is an integral element of conscious immersion, as the inference that reader and character are situated alongside one another provides the basis for the formation of the faux-real world. Although this simultaneous positioning of 'you' as direct address and as a generalised reference can appear to complicate the reader's immersion within the text, David Herman's notion of 'double deixis' identifies that the second person pronoun often 'functions as a cue for superimposing two or more deictic roles, one internal to the storyworld represented in or through the diegesis and the other(s) external to that storyworld'.[193] Double deixis enables an ambiguity to arise over whether the reader is being addressed, similarly to spatial deixis regarding the fictional

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Joanna Gavins and Ernestine Lahey (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), pp. 127-46, (p. 131).

[193] David Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2004), pp. 342-43.

world itself, in which phrases such as 'the world' refer instantaneously to the actual world of the reader, the fictional world of the text and the faux-real world formed through conscious immersion. Grant Stirling's notion of 'splitting' highlights the reader's ability to comprehend the attachment of opposing referents to the same sign, claiming 'the psyche maintains, simultaneously and consciously, two incompatible relationships with the same object',[194] or, indeed, the same word. Contemporary metafiction thus utilises the ambiguity of double deixis and the reader's subconscious splitting to maintain immersion in spite of the foregrounding of the text's composition, creating a consciously immersed reading experience that enhances our understanding of metamodernism through revealing how writers are able to redirect postmodern self-referentiality towards modernist immersion, depth and affect.

10:04 demonstrates a more sustained use of direct address than *Papercut,* in which Ben's pursuit of devising an affective style of writing is evident in his repeated consideration of the function of the second person pronoun, which he uses to integrate his readership into his writing. Lerner fluctuates between the generalised collective use of 'you' with instances

[194] Grant Stirling, 'Neurotic Narrative: Metafiction and Object-Relations Theory', *College Literature*, 27 (2000), 80-102, (pp. 86-87).

that appear more specific, such as when Ben states 'You claimed they were – for reasons you sympathized with, reasons that weren't really their fault, compromised by the food and drink they ingested'[195] upon overhearing a woman complaining about hyperactive children. Ben's interpretation of the woman's words as representing a new form of 'racial and class anxiety'[196] is foregrounded to the reader through the repeated use of direct address, which not only draws the reader's attention to societal concerns that are reflective of those that exist within the actual world, but also creates the effect that Ben assumes the reader possesses the same discriminatory beliefs as the woman he is listening to. Svend Erik Larsen considers how linguistic metareferences can impact upon the reader's positionality on specific issues, stating 'the metafictional features of literature constitute one of the means by which literature reaches out to its context and also engages its readers',[197] as Lerner's accusatory use of direct address not only alerts the reader to the prominence of discrimination and subconscious bias across each diegetic level, but also encourages her to consider the way she perceives equality in the actual world.

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[195] Lerner, p. 97.

[196] Lerner, p. 97.

[197] Svend Erik Larsen, 'Self-Reference: Theory and Didactics Between Language and Literature', *Journal of Aesthetic Education,* 39 (2005), 13-30, (p. 13).

In spite of the directness of Lerner's use of 'you', immersion is maintained due to the ambiguous nature of the second person pronoun, as identified by Jarmila Mildorf who states that 'even in conversation contexts the referent of the second-person pronoun is not always clearly defined and unambiguous',[198] as 'you' can refer to both the reader and to an (un)named in-text character. This ambiguity becomes more complex during instances of direct address in which the referent is directly specified, however, such as when the reader is referred to using the word 'Reader' itself. An example is provided in *10:04* when Ben states 'Reader, we walked on'[199] whilst walking through New York following a blackout caused by Hurricane Sandy, which not only uses direct address to highlight societal concerns that are evident in the actual world, such as climate change and equality, but also uses the word 'Reader' to make it more explicit that she is the one to whom the sign corresponds. Although this instance appears to foreground the artificiality of the text, and therefore disrupts the reader's immersion, Alison Gibbons argues that autofiction texts demonstrate 'autonarrational doubling', in which 'the

[198] Jarmila Mildorf, 'Second-Person Narration in Literary and Conversational Storytelling', *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies,* 4 (2012), 75-98, (p. 76).

[199] Lerner, p. 234.

apostrophically addressed "you" is not the real reader, but an implied reader'.[200] The positioning of Ben as the fictional version of Lerner, who is writing a fictional version of *10:04,* infers the existence of a fictional readership that live alongside him in the faux-real world, enabling conscious immersion to redirect Lerner's instances of direct address away from his actual readers towards the faux-real readers of Ben's text instead. Indeed, the realism of the faux-real world is enhanced by Ben's subsequent 'maybe you saw me'[201] after he waves into the camera of a nearby news crew, creating the illusion that the reader could have witnessed this moment on her television in the actual world, thereby ensuring that even the most explicit instances of direct address can still maintain immersion.

The abstract nature of a fictional readership, compared to the corporeal existence of Lerner's actual readers, is explored within *10:04* through Lerner's metaphorical discussion of the second person pronoun, such as when Ben compares the multitude of windows on the New York skyline to 'a collective person who didn't exist yet, a still-uninhabited second person plural'.[202] Ben's consideration of how individual windows

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[200] Alison Gibbons, 'Autonarration, *I,* and Odd Address in Ben Lerner's Autofictional Novel *10:04*', in *Pronouns in Literature,* ed. by Gibbons and Macrae (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 75-96, (p. 90).

[201] Lerner, p. 235.

[202] Lerner, p. 108.

combine to create a collective is not only reflective of Lerner's inclusive use of the second person pronoun, considering the individuality and collectiveness of his readership, but also contributes towards his attempt to capture the subjective and shared sentiments and feelings of living under twenty-first century conditions. Ben repeatedly considers himself through the use of different pronouns, perceiving the world through the third person when he feels detached from his current moment or the first person when he is aware of his subjectivity, but often returns to the second person in order to unify his thoughts, anxieties and experiences with that of the reader, creating a text that Gibbons describes as a 'mixture of fiction and reality – at its very edges – [that] is the closest we can get to authentic truth'[203] in its exploration of contemporary moods and concerns. Indeed, Lerner's use of autofiction, in which the actual world is represented through fiction, alongside his inclusion of prosodic language and direct address, results in a text that Gibbons believes demonstrates an ability to 'thematise the sociological and phenomenological dimensions of personal life',[204] oscillating between individuality and collectiveness to form a text that concludes with the line 'I know it's hard to

[203] Gibbons, *Pronouns in Literature*, p. 91.

[204] Gibbons, 'Contemporary Autofiction and Metamodern Affect', p. 130.

understand / I am with you, and I know how it is'[205] to reiterate Lerner's comprehension of the shared complexities of contemporary life.

[205] Lerner, p. 240.

Conclusion
A Metamodern Metafiction?

No doubt, endings are hard. But then again...nothing ever really ends, does it?

- *Chuck Shurley, Swan Song*[206]

Contemporary metafiction recalls and redirects its historicity to become a system of thematic, structural and linguistic techniques that generate depth and affect whilst maintaining the reader's immersion, foregrounding the artifice of the text to present its fictional world as 'real'. This consciously immersed reading experience results in the formation of the faux-real world, in which the reader's affective response is heightened through the inference that the text's characters and plotlines are inspired by 'real' people and events, whilst her positionality on specific personal and societal issues can be challenged through the creation of individuals and societies that are reflective of those of the actual world. With *Papercut,* metafiction is used to enhance the text's primary themes of trauma, guilt and grief, whereby Eve's conversion of painful memories into fiction enables her to process what she has

[206] 'Swan Song', *Supernatural: The Complete Fifth Season* (Warner Home Video/The CW, 2010) [on DVD].

experienced and reflect upon how to represent those events affectively and authentically through her writing, encouraging the reader to consider the discrepancies that can arise between actuality and fictionality, as well as the way in which memories and truth can be manipulated. My use of metafiction also contributes towards the themes of identity and mental health, not only reinforcing parallels between the construction of characters and fictional worlds with how individuals perceive the self and the notion of reality in the actual world, but through foregrounding how the influence of external issues such as peer pressure and the artificial portrayal of body image in the media can impact upon an individual's self-perception and awareness of the world around her. Through situating these themes within the faux-real world, conscious immersion encourages the reader to consider the way her own identity and perception of reality can be influenced by her subjective experiences and emotions, whilst offering a commentary on the external pressures faced by many young people in the twenty-first century.

The oscillation of contemporary metafiction between the sensibilities and applications of modernism, postmodernism and, indeed, realism, is reflective of the wider shift in twenty-first century literature, in which a new cultural dominant has formed that requires its own heuristic label. This thesis has

considered a range of proposed terminologies that aim to define and describe the artistic movements and wider ideologies of the new millennium, including performatism, digimodernism, new sincerity and postirony, although perhaps the most suitable contender is that of metamodernism, of which its notion of metaxy is coherent with the reconstructive tendencies of contemporary texts. Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen's identification that the metamodern structure of feeling produces 'literatures that both incorporate and move beyond postmodern authorial strategies by harking back, paradoxically, to modernist, realist or even earlier forms'[207] highlights one of the most convincing features of metamodernism, in which the among-between-after paradigm constitutes a sense of both moving beyond and redirecting established styles and techniques to create texts that are simultaneously familiar and innovative. Metafiction demonstrates a similar sense of metaxy, exemplifying a resurgence of the affective and immersive motives of modernist metafiction, alongside a nostalgia for its former disruptive applications in postmodern texts. Metamodernism is also

[207] Robin van den Akker and Timotheus Vermeulen, 'Periodising the 2000s, or, the Emergence of Metamodernism', in *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect and Depth After Postmodernism*, ed. by Robin van den Akker, Alison Gibbons and Timotheus Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 1-19, (p. 9).

convincing in terms of its scope, both in regards to its relevance to different art forms and media, as well as its extensive consideration of the political, economic and ecological factors that have shaped Western societies, thus constituting a thorough contextualisation of the contemporary conditions that have impacted upon twenty-first century writers and their texts.

In spite of the breadth of metamodernism's applicability, and its notable correlation with the metaxy of contemporary metafiction, metamodernism is still an emerging concept, with even van den Akker and Vermeulen admitting that their structure of feeling 'is, in some ways, a confusing concept'.[208] The emphasis of metamodern theory is often on its contextualisation of the post-millennial period, and how the oscillatory nature of contemporary literature generates depth and affect, instead of providing a textual-level consideration of how seemingly opposing modern and postmodern techniques and sensibilities successfully function alongside each other, although the immersive and metafictional quality of autofiction does provide one integral exception. Metamodern theory is instead enhanced by ideas derived from alternative cultural emergents and ideological concepts, such as the positioning of Irmtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk's literature of

[208] van den Akker and Vermeulen, p. 6.

reconstruction as a 'more specifically formal approach to understanding the encouraging in-betweenness (metaxy) of the metamodern paradigm',[209] as well as Lee Konstantinou's argument that 'no theory of the new cultural dominant can proceed without first addressing the difficult problem of irony'[210] in his discussion of postironic literature. There is also a notable lack of awareness of the applicability of metamodernism to genre texts, instead focusing primarily on literary fiction, thus failing to consider the suitability of the metamodern structure of feeling within contemporary literature more widely.

This thesis uses a critical analysis of contemporary metafiction to expand upon our tentative understanding of metamodernism, illustrating how the modern and postmodern applications of metafiction are combined and elevated to produce a system of techniques that generate depth, affect, immersion and realism. The internalisation of writer-characters, in-world texts and textual extracts enable writers to explore writerly processes and practices without impacting upon the reader's immersion, whilst the self-referential nature of

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[209] Imtraud Huber and Wolfgang Funk, 'Reconstructing Depth', in *Metamodernism*, ed. by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 151-66, (p. 152).

[210] Lee Konstantinou, 'Four Faces of Postirony', in *Metamodernism*, ed. by van den Akker, Gibbons and Vermeulen (London: Rowman & Littlefield International Ltd, 2017), pp. 87-102, (p. 88).

(illusory) autofiction, direct address and layered narratives contribute towards the wider fictional universe of conscious immersion, in which a faux-real world is prominently positioned. Not only does this analysis constitute a thorough consideration of the function of the thematic, structural and linguistic techniques that are evident in contemporary texts, thereby consolidating existing theory surrounding metafiction into a clear and coherent framework, but it also positions conscious immersion as a solution to the seeming paradox of a text that is both immersive and self-referential, using examples sourced from my work and from the texts of Gilbert Adair, David Mitchell and Ben Lerner. Indeed, conscious immersion identifies how the reading process has evolved to accommodate the oscillatory nature of contemporary texts, whereby the formation of the faux-real world, and the continuous relocation of the reader between the fictional worlds of the wider fictional universe, enables the reader to perceive a text simultaneously as an authentic 'real' world and as a textual composition of themes, structure and language. As such, the reader's role begins to split, in which she becomes both reader of the text and an inhabitant of the faux-real world, at the same time as being encouraged to consider her own role within the actual world in which she exists.

Of course, the immersive quality of contemporary metafiction is not just evident within the literature of the twenty-first century, as its applicability extends to other media, including film, art and photography, as is evident in the visual media that I have alluded to within this thesis. One medium of particular relevance to my personal experiences as a writer, however, is that of television, as it would be impossible for me to write this thesis without acknowledging the US television series *Supernatural*[211] (2005-2020) as the instigator for my interest in the field of metafiction. *Supernatural* is a fantasy horror series that relates the story of monster-hunting brothers Sam and Dean Winchester, in which its 327 episodes explore themes of life, death, family and religion, whilst reflecting the ever-changing socio-political landscape of twenty-first century America. The narrative of *Supernatural* is also highly metafictional, incorporating thematic, structural and linguistic metareferences regarding its characters, plotlines and fictional world, as well as contextual elements surrounding its production and fanbase, alongside metareferences that reflect the medium-specific properties of television, such as a form of direct address in which characters appear to glance at the viewer through the camera. Alberto N. Garcia describes the

[211] *Supernatural,* The CW (2005-2020).

metafictional aspect of *Supernatural* as 'reveal[ing] the fictional illusion and the conventions of artistic realism, audiovisually capturing the tension between representation and reality and transforming the story itself into one more stop in the fascinating journey of the Winchester brothers',[212] whereby conscious immersion and the wider fictional universe ensure that an immersive viewing experience is sustained. Examples are provided by the faux-real world that features in an episode where Sam and Dean are relocated to an alternate reality where their lives have been turned into a television series,[213] as well as through the duality between series' creator Eric Kripke and the illusory autofiction nature of writer-character Chuck Shurley, whose later revelation as being God enables him to manipulate the lives of the other characters in a way that is reminiscent of authorial control.[214] As such, *Supernatural* alludes to the wider potential application of my thesis, demonstrating how metafiction and immersion can coexist beyond the medium of literature.

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[212] Alberto N. Garcia, 'Breaking the Mirror: Metafictional Strategies in *Supernatural*', in *TV Goes to Hell: An Unofficial Road Map of Supernatural,* ed. by Stacey Abbott and David Lavery (Toronto, Ont.: ECW Press, 2011), pp. 146-60, (p. 160).

[213] The French Mistake', *Supernatural: The Complete Sixth Season* (Warner Home Video/The CW, 2010) [on DVD].

[214] 'The Monster at the End of this Book', *Supernatural: The Complete Fourth Season* (Warner Home Video/The CW, 2009) [on DVD].

The metaxy of sentiments and styles that are reconstructed and redirected in contemporary literature are what give metamodernism its 'meta-' prefix, although it is a prefix that also reinforces the oscillatory nature of metafiction, which alternates between textual commentary and a critique of the actual world in which the text was written. This fluctuation between the 'real' and the fictional is evident in modernist metafiction, which establishes parallels between the formation of immersive, affective fictional worlds and the consideration of how fiction can be used to reflect the construction of the self and reality, as well as postmodern metafiction, which uses a disruptive foregrounding of the artifice of the text to enhance an often cynical and parodic commentary on the artificiality of identity and reality within an increasingly commodified society. A potential metamodern metafiction would thus be aware of its own metaxy, actively redirecting its historicity to become a system of techniques that foreground the fictionality of the text to contribute towards the realism of the text's fictional world. Indeed, in a period of geopolitical instability and ecological catastrophe, the metaxy of contemporary metafiction, and of metamodernism more generally, forges texts that oscillate between the modern and the postmodern in pursuit of connectivity and individuality, of sincerity and scepticism, of familiarity and innovation, resulting in fictional worlds that

enable the reader to escape from the anxieties and uncertainties of the actual world, whilst maintaining a conscious awareness that she must return once she concludes reading.

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Appendix

Creative Writing Sample

"Evelyn, are you awake?"

Evelyn opened her eyes and sighed. She had spent the past hour trying to convince herself that she was anywhere other than halfway into the traffic-riddled journey along the M5, only for Simon to shatter the illusion with four soft words. She used to adore the long drive to Devon, drawn home for elaborate parties in the oak kitchen, smoky barbecues in the manicured garden, and cosy chats on the snug sofa.

Her mother's phone call had changed everything.

- Chapter One, *Rewritten*

ONE

It started on a cool morning in the depths of October, long before the sun had painted the sky with tinges of honey and gold. I knew it was early – too early. My phone hadn't yet rumbled across the bedside table, accompanied by its rousing jingle, and the curtains were still drawn, preventing the last dregs of moonlight from flooding the bedroom. But the game was up. I had seconds, a minute at most, before the silence would drain away. I didn't need to open my eyes to know our Sunday routine was already in full swing.

A rush of icy air licked at my exposed limbs, forcing me to burrow beneath the duvet, curling my body into a ball. The illusion that it was only four am, midnight if I was lucky, decayed into dust. The breeze could only have come from one source – the open bathroom window across the landing, which meant Nathan was already up, showered and dressed, whilst I was still pressed against my pillow, inhaling warm, recycled breaths. Nathan would be back any second, clutching two steaming mugs, and then we'd curl up together, sharing body heat, wrestling for the remote. Another debate about central heating and climate change was imminent. Another hour sipping decaf tea and watching the news on loop was inevitable. Everything seemed normal.

Only it wasn't. That Sunday was one of myth and milestones. A day I'd been expecting, dreading, ever since I'd taken that unspontaneous test after that spontaneous Wednesday morning when the pill had lain buried at the bottom of my makeup bag, ignored and forgotten by chance, coincidence and a little fate. Even though the two pink lines had flashed up, even though my period had gone missing in action, I'd still been waiting for further proof that something was happening inside me. My bump was yet to make an appearance, hidden beneath a snug layer of comfort eating, whilst the baby itself was too dainty, too polite, to kick me in the ribs. I'd had no hormone spikes or swinging moods. No cravings. Nothing.

The baby was just a word on a page.

Nathan's familiar footsteps shuffled up the stairs. Each step was subtle, delicately placed, as if he was trying to sneak across the floorboards without being detected. But the world was against him. Secrets were rarely secret. The intoxicating aroma of milky hot chocolate had already seeped through the bedsheets, along with another scent beneath it – the sweet, buttery tones of a croissant drenched in margarine or a pain au chocolat dripping chocolate pools onto a plate. A predictable surprise was on its way.

The bed dipped down behind me, followed by a long, soft sigh. Nathan's arms delved under the duvet to wrap around my

body, prompting me to attempt a sluggish pirouette, flopping onto my back and then my other side, until my nose brushed against his. He looked flawless, all angular features, tousled black hair and warm brown skin, even if tiredness had glued itself to his face, contradicting endless nights of impenetrable sleep. A medley of overtime and lavish gestures had taken its toll.

He greeted me with a damp kiss on my forehead. The certainty that he'd hidden something from me was evident in the cautious curve of his smile. It was like the time he forgot to remove the discount sticker from the bouquet of roses or when he spilt magnolia wax over our candlelit dinner. Nathan's pursuit of romantic spontaneity was a never-ending saga. It was always kinder to play along.

I peered out from beneath the duvet at his crowded bedside table, conjuring my naivest of faces, and noticed the subtle steam rising from the matching mugs. Behind them, two croissants lay slumped against each other, glistening with melted margarine. Everything was as I'd pictured.

I parted my lips to thank him, to gush, and took in a heavy drag of aromatic air. That's when it struck – a swift, sharp flush of nausea. Beneath the soothing tones of milky hot chocolate and warm pastries was an uninvited scent. Strong, earthy coffee.

I spent the next ten minutes heaving into the toilet. Nathan fussed around in the bedroom the whole time, opening the window to let in more of October's icy breath, relocating the dishes to the landing – out of sight, out of mind. He was one of those people who found sickness contagious, as if his own stomach was at risk of spilling over any second. But eventually he nodded to himself, took a deep breath and decided comforting me was the appropriate response.

He perched on the side of the bath and began the unhelpful motion of running his hand along my back. "Is this morning sickness?"

I scowled, expecting a sarcastic smirk on his face, only to find his features were serious and still. His innocence was endearing, even if his timing was poor.

I managed a weak nod. Nathan sighed. "Remind me to avoid romantic gestures in the future."

His soft tone implied it was a joke, but his pained eyes were impossible to ignore. "It wasn't the breakfast, it was-" The thought of the oozing black liquid caused my stomach to stir again, provoking another round of heavy heaves.

Nathan grimaced, before resuming the nauseating sensation of running his palm across my spine. "I'm sure your mum's morning sickness started with coffee."

I smiled, relieved the similarity was a physical one. “Stuck on a train to London with a bunch of caffeine addicts-”

Nathan laughed. “With everyone glaring at her each time she heaved! She said it was the worst three hours of her life.”

I stared at him, surprised he’d paid attention to the details that had left her lips. Mum used to approach her analogies as if she was writing one of her tiresome novels – she had the ability, the flair, to make the uninspiring sound fantastical, but was often hindered by deviations into the most tedious of segues.

I wiped away an inevitable tear. Mum would’ve loved all this. I had the same invisible bump, the same overdue morning sickness, that she’d experienced during her pregnancies, which made me fear matching cravings would be next. Raw broccoli, cheese spread, warm milk. The thought of them made me gag.

Nathan gave me a weak smile. He cupped my stomach with a warm hand and began running his thumb over my bellybutton. The baby was an infinite distraction. “At least we know she’s doing okay.”

I frowned. We’d stuck to the highly impersonal ‘it’ or the imposing ‘The Baby’ so far. “Since when did you think it was a girl?”

Nathan looked away, awkward and restless, like a shy child being picked to answer a question in class. “I had this dream-”

I bit my lip to prevent myself from laughing. Breakfast in bed and dreams about babies were just the latest twists and turns in Nathan's sentimental journey. I leant back against the bath, grateful for the momentary lapse in my body's anarchy, and gestured for him to elaborate.

Nathan sat down in the doorway, legs outstretched, and folded his arms in his lap. His pose was that of a storyteller – evocative of Mum. Time to gather around and listen to every detail. "We were at one of your mum's awful barbecues-" He paused for a moment, scanning my face for flickers of emotion. My eyes stayed dry and my lips didn't tremble. Permission to proceed. "I was introducing her to everyone. Dad, Isabelle, your mum-" A warm, delicate smile. "She was perfect, Eve."

I nodded along at every word, striving to imagine the baby in Nathan's arms, gazing up into his soft eyes. But I was unable to shake the missing name. The missing face. "And Jay?"

Nathan flinched. A physical reaction to the three curved letters, pronounced as one. He gave me a subtle nod. "Only chance he'll get to play the doting uncle."

I frowned, surprised by his shot of venom. "That's unfair and you know it."

I stared at him and he stared back. It was the first time Jay's name had been mentioned for months, but already it was

seeping tension into the air. “Why are you still sticking up for him?”

I paused, unsure what to say. Denial. Tradition. I’d spent my entire life defending him, averse to anyone offering a negative critique, unless those criticisms had come from my own lips. But it was naive to feel that pull after everything he’d said. After everything he’d done.

So I whispered the words I always said when Jay messed up. The words Mum had been sick of hearing. The words Nathan was tiring of too.

“He’s my brother.”

Nathan glared at me, shaking his head, before he thudded down the stairs to scrape our untouched breakfast into the bin, drowning out his inevitable mumbles with a childish torrent from the kitchen taps. I closed my eyes and sighed, trying to convince myself I was anywhere other than the damp floor tiles.

My thoughts ebbed and eased towards a selfish reimagining of Nathan’s dream, where I was stood in the same sunny garden, looking out at the same emerald field on the other side of the fence, with the same mismatched group of attendees fighting over the sliver of shade beneath the apple trees. But in my version, Jay was beside me, swigging beer with Mum on the patio chairs, conjuring the youthful smile only he could bring to her face. Nathan was bickering with his dad over

the barbecue, with Isabelle fretting beside them, hiding her pursed lips behind a glass of white wine. And then there was the baby, curled up in my arms instead of Nathan's, staring up at me with her sapphire eyes.

It all felt so real, so obtainable, as if it was a scene from my former life or a premonition of the future, even if that future no longer existed. I could almost smell the charcoal air, mixed with the fresh scent of cut grass. I could almost see the cloudless summer sky and the sweeping shades of the surrounding woodland. And behind me was home. No – the façade of home. The angular cottage nestled in Exmoor National Park, a far cry from our modest terraced house in Beeston, with period beams, wooden window frames and a neatly thatched roof. But that archaic charm had always felt tainted, perhaps because Mum had inherited the cottage after her parents died, making its origin story one of tragedy. Of grief. It didn't matter that she'd tried to rewrite the building into a love nest with Richard. Into a family home. Those deep, dark emotions had remained trapped within the bricks.

Ten months had crawled by since I'd last inhaled the cottage's musky air, on that cruel December day when Mum passed away, but already the house felt so distant, so detached, as if I'd never really been there. I could visualise the house in flawless detail, but I could no longer feel it – the cold, the

warmth, the lonely nights, the family dinners. It had become nothing more than a photograph. A drawing. A faded, persistent memory. But that disillusion was a temporary one. Mum had left the lonely building to Jay and me, having made the rose-tinted decision to give every other penny to Charlie Collins, a man we'd never heard of and had no idea how to find, leaving her last-minute will trapped in sluggish probate. It meant that one day we'd have to venture back there to rummage through every drawer, every cupboard, every shelf, to decide what needed to be treasured, sold or binned. An unwanted sprint along memory lane.

A floorboard creaked on the landing. I opened my eyes to find Nathan watching me from the doorway, running his hands up and down his arms. He sighed. So did I. Mum's death had changed everything.

"I shouldn't have mentioned your brother." He took a step towards me. Toes on the threshold. "I shouldn't have mentioned any of it-"

I gave him a weak smile, uninterested in apologies, uninterested in stirring round two. All I wanted was to close my eyes and wander back to that impossible dream.

Nathan stooped down in front of me, as if he was recreating his rushed proposal. He pressed his dry lips against

my cheek, dragging sandpaper stubble across my skin. “Fresh air. That’s what you need.”

I let out an audible sigh. I longed to spend the day beneath a blanket, bingeing boxsets on Netflix, with a hot water bottle under my feet, even if the opportunity to leave the house was a shooting star I needed to chase.

Nathan rolled his eyes. My thoughts were public domain. “There’s more to life than that TV.” I winced, anticipating his favoured lecture about how busy my life used to be, about how wild my enthusiasm once was, only for him to settle on more desperate words. “What about that novel you were working on?”

I let out an animated laugh. The thought of *Eternal Light and Shadow* conjured embarrassment and disappointment in equal measure.

He shook his head. “You can’t spend every day on that sofa.”

A shrug. “You wanted me to work from home.”

Nathan’s eyes lingered on mine. Those deep, distrusting eyes. “Everything I’ve done is for you and the baby. You know that, right?” I glanced at my engagement ring, at the invisible bump beneath my pyjamas, before looking up at his frowned face. His smile shifted, contorted, until it became recognisable again. “You’ll feel better after a walk.”

I let him pull me to my feet. Into another rigid Sunday. Long walk. Pub lunch. An afternoon shaking the dust from the house. Just once, I wanted to feel real spontaneity. Real surprise. Just once, I wanted to look in the mirror and see my own face frowning back.