

Growth, confusion,
and the loss of
innocence: the
differing roles of
childlike na...



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One, a story about culture, class, family, and love laws, follows the lives of a pair of twins in Kerala, India as they learn one fateful December day how drastically “ Things Can Change in a Day.” The other, a story about suicide and incestual desire, tells of the fall of the Compson family from four different perspectives. How can these two seemingly different novels – *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner and *The God of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy – possibly be related? In both novels, the reader finds himself reading a childlike account of the events that come to pass through the course of the novels. The lack of insight, limited use of modifiers, and simplistic sentence structure of Benjy’s section and the phonetic spelling, whimsical adjectives, and interspersed lines of children’s songs of *The God of Small Things* both serve to present the reader with childlike descriptions of the stories. However, they differ not only in the level of insight reached by each of the narrators by the conclusion of the novels, but also in the purpose of the childlike descriptions. In contrast to Benjy’s childlike narration that creates a sense of confusion within the reader that parallels his confusion, the childlike quality of Roy’s narration sophisticatedly creates a lightheartedness that starkly contrasts against the heavy tone and serious nature of the material, thus representing the gap between innocence and corruption. While Roy and Faulkner both present the reader with childlike renditions of the events, they approach and accomplish this task through differing methods. Faulkner chooses to tell the section “ April Seventh, 1928” from the viewpoint of a mentally-challenged thirty-three-year-old-man. He writes simplistically: “ Luster had some spools and he and Quentin fought and Quentin had the spools. Luster cried and Frony came and gave Luster a

tin can to play with, and then I had the spools and Quentin fought me and I cried" (Faulkner 19). Within the span of two sentences, Benjy repeats the word spools three times, the verb fought two times, and the verb cried twice. There is no variation; he simply reuses the same word repeatedly when there are a plethora of synonyms that could easily have been substituted in its place. In addition, he only provides the reader with the bare essential facts necessary to formulate an understanding of the event. He gives the subject and the verb, but there are no adverbs and only a few adjectives. What color are the spools? What are they made of? These questions could easily be answered with the addition of a few adjectives, but adjectives are scarce in Benjy's section. The limited vocabulary, virtual absence of modifiers, and simplistic sentence structure of Benjy categorizes his writing style as being characteristic of a child, for it lacks the sophistication usually associated with the more mature writing of an adult. Consisting mostly of nouns and verbs, his account of the events that pass does not extend beyond the mere reporting of the actions he witnesses and experiences. The lack of proper punctuation serves to portray his narration as a report. Luster asks Benjy: "Ain't you going to help me find that quarter so I can go to the show tonight" (Faulkner 3). While the proper punctuation here should be a question mark, the end of the statement is punctuated with a period; this substitution flattens the speech so that there is no evidence of voice inflection or emotion. This flattening of speech shows that Benjy cannot distinguish between a question and normal speech – it is all the same to him. Thus, he is only able to report what he hears. Similarly, although he describes what he sees, he does not possess the capability to interpret the actions. For

example, the novel opens with a scene in which the children are playing. Benjy describes: “ Then they put the flag back and they went to the table and he hit and the other hit” (Faulkner 3). Although the word hit is a transitive verb, he uses it intransitively. Never does he mention what “ they” are hitting – the direct object – or what the game is. It is only when Luster says ““ Here, caddie'” does the reader know that “ they” are playing golf (Faulkner 3). Because of Faulkner’s decision to tell the story from the viewpoint of a mentally-challenged individual, the reader experiences the events as if he were looking through the eyes of a child. In contrast to Faulkner’s choice of simplicity, Roy incorporates phonetic spelling, whimsical adjectives, and interspersed lines of song into the narration to give it a childlike quality. Phrases such as “ Their Prer NUN sea ayshun was perfect” and “ cheerful chop-chop-chopping” cue the reader that the narrator is a child (Roy 147, 121). But it is interesting that the childlike quality conveys the message more effectively than if it had been absent. For example, in “ Their Prer NUN sea ayshun was perfect,” the phonetic spelling of the word pronunciation emphasizes the pronunciation of the word, for it is only by saying “ Prer NUN sea ayshun” aloud that the reader is able to realize that the broken group of syllables refers to the word pronunciation. By the time the reader finishes reading the word aloud, she has been forced to pause from the normal act of reading and finds herself engaged in a study of pronunciation of the word pronunciation, much like the manner in which they study pronunciation. Thus, the form in which the word is presented to the reader reinforces the content. And in “ cheerful chop-chop-chopping,” the lengthening of the word chopping into “ chop-chop-chopping” creates a sing-

song quality that portrays the act of chopping as being cheerful, thus reiterating the adjective that precedes it; in other words, the style reinforces the content. Roy also uses whimsical adjectives as well. When the narrator describes a tune that Mammachi plays on her violin, she describes it as “ A cloying, chocolate melody. Stickysweet, and meltybrown. Chocolate waves on a chocolate shore” (Roy 174). This metaphor may seem like nonsense at first, for what can chocolate possibly have in common with a melody? But it is not nonsensical, for both are rich; one is rich in taste while the other is rich in sound. Furthermore, it is fitting to describe the sound as a chocolate “ wave” not only because sound resonates when the perfect pitch is attained, but also because sounds physically are waves that travel through the air. And to further elaborate upon the metaphor, as chocolate melts in one’s mouth, one can “ melt” into the music as one relaxes and surrenders oneself to the swirling melodies that envelop its listeners. In addition, the interspersed lines of children’s songs throughout the work contribute to the childlike quality of the writing. As Rahel climbs up the stairs with Baby Kochamma, she sings the song “ Popeye the Sailor” and fills in “ Dum Dums” whenever there are pauses. The interspersed lines of children’s songs, cheerful alliteration, and phonetic spelling that can be found throughout the narration all contribute to the formation of a playful, lighthearted, relaxed tone that portrays the innocence of childhood. However, while both narrations are childlike in their own manner, the childlike qualities serve different purposes in each novel. Faulkner’s decision to write Benjy’s section in the form of stream of consciousness and the lack of transitions between the rapid switching of scenes creates a sense of

confusion within the reader. As the reader tackles the first page of the novel, he encounters the following passage: “‘ Can’t you never crawl through here without snagging on that nail.’ Caddy uncaught me and we crawled through” (Faulkner 3). The two statements are obviously connected, for both are about Benjy being snagged on a nail, but the characters have changed. Where is Luster, and where does Caddy come from? The change in characters is the only clue that there has been a switching of scenes. That both scenes address the common topic of Benjy being snagged on a nail makes it difficult to notice that one sentence belongs to the narration of one scene while the other is related to an entirely different one – the switching of scenes is cleverly disguised. In reality, the first sentence takes place in the present, but the second takes place on December 25th, a day when Caddy and Benjy delivered a letter to Mrs. Patterson. Thus, the free association among the past and present experiences that Benjy makes confuses the reader so that the reader can properly focalize through the narrator by identifying with Benjy’s confusion. Benjy’s retardation prevents him from perceiving his surroundings as normal people do. Benjy blurs the boundaries between present reality and the past, so it is only fitting that the reader has difficulty distinguishing between the past and present, as Benjy does. Constantly throughout the novel, he lacks an awareness of his surroundings and of himself. Repeatedly, he doesn’t realize that it’s cold and has to have others tell him to put his hands in his pockets. The reader finds out about Benjy from cues of those around him. For example, through the phrase “What are you moaning about, Luster said,” the reader finds out that Benjy has been moaning (Faulkner 5). The reader is not provided with any

information that Benjy himself does not have; she learns as Benjy learns. Since Benjy's understanding of the events around him is minimal, the reader is provided merely with disordered fragments of information with which he has to struggle to piece together to form an understanding of the situation. Thus, the writing style of Benjy's section creates confusion within the reader that parallels Benjy's confusion that results from his diminished mental abilities. Unlike Faulkner, Roy uses the childlike narration not to parallel a particular character, but to create a stark contrast between the playful lightheartedness of the tone and the seriousness of the material under discussion. The day that the Orangedrink Lemondrink Man molests Estha, Estha has difficulty sleeping at night because he feels nauseous. Roy describes: "Estha Alone walked wearily to the bathroom. He vomited a clear, bitter, lemony, sparkly, fizzy liquid. The acrid aftertaste of a Little Man's first encounter with Fear. Dum Dum" (Roy 113). Taken by itself, the phrase "Dum Dum" conveys a feeling of finality and portrays the seriousness of the situation. However, looking at the phrase in the context of the novel, the reader is forced to acknowledge that it is the same phrase that is in Rahel's version of "Popeye the Sailor man." Because of its origins in the song, the phrase carries with it a lightheartedness that starkly contrasts against the seriousness of Estha's situation. That this phrase that adds humor to the children's song is found at the end of this passage is unacceptable and cruel. It is a deliberate defiance, for its placement dramatically portrays the loss of a child's innocence after he has been exposed to the cruel world. Estha had gone outside of the theatre so that he could joyfully sing a song from "The Sound of Music" in peace without disturbing anyone, but instead of

experiencing the expected joy and delight from singing, he encounters Fear. What was lost that day can never be recovered. Thus, it is a statement about the cruel, corrupt world that steals away the innocence of its children. It is in this word that Estha suffers, an unsympathetic world in which while a child vomits out of disgust and fear, his mother ironically is smiling from pleasant dreams a few doors down the hall. The two narrators also differ in that while one grows in maturity and knowledge of the world, the other remains stagnant. The last paragraph of Benjy's section begins as follows: " Father went to the door and looked at us again. Then the dark came back and he stood black in the door, and the door turned black again" (Faulkner 48). The simple structure, limited use of modifiers, and limited vocabulary characteristic of the style of Benjy's section at the onset of the novel are still present in his narration at the end of his section in the novel. That his writing style has not changed shows that his level of maturity and knowledge of the world have not increased in any way. In contrast, the changing use of language and depth of insight of the narrator in *The God of Small Things* signal to the reader that the narrator has matured as a result of the events of the novel. An example of the changing use of language and development of insight is in the use of the phrase " Dum Dum" to signal that a lesson has been learned. The first time the narrator uses the phrase outside the context of the Popeye song is when the narrator responds to Ammu's question of whether Rahel had learned her lesson yet. The narrator answers: " Rahel had: Excitement Always Leads to Tears. Dum Dum" (Roy 94). The first lesson learned is one of books, but as the story progresses, the " Dum Dum" phrases are encountered after life lessons are learned. For example, when

the twins discover Sophie Mol is dead and come to the realization that they might go to jail, that realization is followed by a “Dum Dum.” And again when they witness the bloody death of Velutha, they learn two lessons: one, that “Blood barely shows on a Black Man (Dum Dum),” and two, “It smells though, sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze (Dum Dum)” (Roy 293). The shift in placement of the “Dum Dum” phrases from after book lessons to after life lessons shows that they are acquiring more knowledge of the world and are becoming more mature. Moreover, this growth can also be seen through a comparison of the interpretations offered by the narrator of the same scene at different points in the novel. Towards the beginning of the novel, the twins witness a scene where a policeman taps the breasts of Ammu with his baton. The narrator responds by saying that “Inspector Thomas Mathew seemed to know whom he could pick on and whom he couldn’t. Policemen have that instinct” (Roy 10). The twins only see that the Inspector is humiliating their beloved mother, and so they think that the policeman is mean. However, when this scene is revisited later on in the novel, the narrator states: Later, when the real story reached Inspector Thomas Mathew, the fact that what the Paravan had taken from the Touchable Kingdom had not been snatched, but given, concerned him deeply. So after Sophie Mol’s funeral, when Ammu went to him with the twins to tell him that a mistake had been made and he tapped her breasts with his baton, it was not a policeman’s spontaneous brutishness on his part. He knew exactly what he was doing. It was a premeditated gesture, calculated to humiliate and terrorize her. An attempt to instill order into a world gone wrong (Roy 246). The later explanation conveys an understanding of

society's views and rules concerning the relationship between the Untouchables and Touchables and how their mother had broken those rules, whereas before they had only seen the cruelty of the policeman's action. They are now able to see the action from the policeman's and society's point of view. This level of thought and insight are evidence that the narrator is more mature and knowledgeable of the way that society works. Thus, the narrator has changed from a naive, ignorant child to a person with a more mature mind and an understanding of society. Trying to find the similarities and differences between these two seemingly different works reminds me of the following quote by Virginia Woolf: "It would be a thousand pities if women wrote like men... for if two sexes are quite inadequate, considering the vastness and variety of the world, how should we manage with one only? Ought not education to bring out and fortify the differences rather than the similarities? For we have too much likeness as it is..." Although this comment refers to the differences between the writing styles of men and women, its message can also be applied to the different cultural writing styles that exist as well. The ability of both authors to utilize the unique qualities of their writing styles to create distinctly different childlike narratives serving different purposes are evidence of their creativity and innovation. As we study the characteristics, purpose, and effectiveness of one writing style versus another, we should also take the time to celebrate the rich diversity and variety in the different language styles that exist around the world.

Works Cited
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