

# Gender in jackie kay's trumpet

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## **Abstract**

The overall impact of the role of gender and prejudice have an influence in every society in every nation around the world. This study examines the literature that has the potential to illustrate many of the controversial subjects emerging in society today. Beginning with a base assessment of Kay's work allows a far greater depth of understanding and appreciation to be created. This piece critically defines the aspects of the Trumpet in order to illuminate a vital point of needed evolution. With a lasting story line, this analysis can be applied to a wide variety of studies in order to add fundamental quality and understanding.

The issues of gender and empathy in the realm of literature have consistently been an area of discussion, with a wide range of interpretation. This study examines the role of gender in Brewer's theory of structural affect as well as assessing how Jackie Kay's Trumpet establishes empathy through its portrayal of gender. Alongside this assessment will be a discussion on how Trumpet fits within the categories of queer and postmodern writing in relation to the continuum of Scottish literature at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century. This view is necessary in order to grasp the relevance of a transgendered lead character in an award-winning literary novel. It is through the utilization of symbolism that Kay illustrates a relatable link enabling her view to emerge clearly. Establishing key points of the plot through metaphor enables Kay to create a tale that is both easy to assimilate and interesting to explore for the reader.

From the onset, the information in *Trumpet* is designed to drive the reader to empathize with Millie's pain at the intrusion of media after the death of her beloved husband. This emotion is evident in the opening sentence as the author invokes the image of a widow that is afraid to fully open the curtains because of what lies beyond (1998, p. 1). This approach is designed lead the reader to sympathize with Millie by describing her anxiety and pain at the paparazzi surrounding her home in a manner that allows them to readily associate with the situation. " Even here now the sound of cameras, like the assault of a machine gun, is playing inside my head. I can't get the noise to go no matter what I do," (p. 2). Sharing Millie's misery at the hounding by the media, Kay draws the reader deep into the plot before ever revealing that this is a queer story. The use of gender, and societal prejudice, provides a critical background upon which to build the overall storyline. The ability to define the character prior to revealing potentially perception changing information adds depth and associable elements to the plotline. This is a prime example of Brewer's theory of affect accurately determining the direction of the literature.

Using structural affect, Kay is careful in her initial descriptions of Joss in order to describe him as Millie observed him (1998 p. 3). This ensures that that the reader, although sympathizing with Millie, also identifies her as a reliable narrator. This is a vital point that must be emphasized as the plot line relies on the strength of the narration to progress. The story evolves in such a manner that the reader never believes that Millie is lying about her mistaken certainty that Joss had been born male until their first sexual encounter. By

that time a critical point has passed, Millie is in love and the reader has come to know Joss as she saw him during that time (p. 3).

Before revealing the deep dark secret that has led to the media scrutiny and the enmity of Millie's son, Kay takes the tale back in time to introduce Millie's love story with Joss (1998, p. 4). This creates a form of empathy with the reader that allows them to remember what it feels like to fall in love.

Creating a mechanism that invokes a real sense of companionship serves to highlight the tender aspect of the story. This is an illustration of her effective implementation of the structural affect theory.

...the emotions of the reader are systematically determined by the configuration of the plot and the knowledge states of various agents. For example, consider what happens when the reader has the emotion of surprise. The author withholds critical information at the beginning of the story, information that is necessary for a correct interpretation of the story. Later on, the critical information is revealed, which triggers surprise in the reader.

(Graesser and Klettke, n. d., p. 2)

The writer manipulates the reader's reaction to specific points of the story by choosing what is revealed and when. This tool is utilized to draw out the main events and bring the entire plot into focus. Even when Millie has her first sexual encounter with Joss, as he/she removes the binding on her breasts, the revelation of Joss' secret is hinted at rather than announced (p. 20-21). Throughout the story, Kay manipulates the emotional and intellectual

response of the reader in order to ensure that the overarching theme remains firmly in the reader's mind. To accomplish this, the author utilizes the method of introducing Joss as Millie sees him: as the person she loved, the adoring father, the respected member of the community as well as the sensitive musician (p. 5).

Brewer's structural affect theory focuses on the influencing the psychology of the reader through the literature.

...Brewer tested his model by (a) manipulating features of the text and knowledge states of the reader and (b) observing whether these manipulations systematically predicted readers' self-reports of particular emotions and how much they liked the story. The structural affect theory fared quite well in accounting for the psychological data.

(Graesser and Klettke, n. d., p. 3).

Millie's early reminiscing is one of the methods that Kay uses throughout this story, this serves to set the stage for the narration to a point. Writing in the first person, Kay relates the tale through Millie's perception and allows a real sense of personal emotion to reach the story. This included the idea that perhaps she had "hurt his manhood," (p. 39) when she expressed her desire to have a baby.

Kay employs the affect principle to allow the reader to sympathize with Colman over what he views as his parents' betrayal (1998, p. 40). She accomplishes this by interjecting a chapter in the third person as a means to make it absolutely clear that Joss had been born and died a female. By

moving back and forth between narrators, the author enables a wide range of views to emerge. This instrument is effective and enables the author to transition back into a first person narrative, this time with Colman as the narrator. Like his mother before him, Colman begins thinking of his father as he reflects on the elements that made Joss a good father (p. 41). The loathing that the reader subsequently develops for Colman is his own doing, based in part on his self-description. “ It was all right, it was, being Joss Moody’s son. Only when I became Colman Moody did everything start to become a total fucking drag. It’s a tall order when you expected to be somebody just because your father is somebody,” (p. 45). Through Colman’s narration, we see Kay explore the feelings of being the adopted child. This is a critical point, as much of the story hinges on these negative emotional feelings. This is a direct association to the desire to look like one’s adoptive parents as well as the child’s efforts to have a normal life with unconventional parents. She even helps the reader to understand why Colman is angry, embarrassed even, that not knowing his father’s secret made him look stupid (p. 46).

Overall, the structure of the novel is meant to make Colman appear more callous than sympathetic. This is an attempt by the author to ensure that the plot progresses in a manner that benefits the underlying story. In the early chapters, we learn that Colman refuses to take his mother’s calls and then later that he has sided with a tabloid reporter who wants to write a biography of Joss (1998, p. 15). The reader feels his betrayal of his parents in the action because of the way Kay structured the story. If Kay had led with Colman’s narrative, focussing on the son’s negative memories of his parents

and that they failed to provide the child with what he viewed as a 'normal' home life, Colman might have been a more sympathetic character to the reader. Instead, Kay uses her structure of the novel to manipulate the reader's reaction to the character in a manner that adds to the underlying plot. This adds readability and long term credibility to the story.

Kay utilizes structural affect to create a postmodern novel in that the tale embraces popular culture and accessibility. In the introduction to her book *Postmodernism and Pop Culture* (1994), Angela McRobbie argues that one of the defining characteristics of postmodern texts, whether art or literature, is accessibility:

Not only was meaning in art or in culture all there, for all to see, stripped of its old hidden elitist difficulty, but it also, again as Jameson pointed out, seemed already familiar, like the faint memory of an old pop song, a refrain, a chorus, a tune, a 'cover version' of an original which never was. (2005, p. 3)

In essence, McRobbie (1994, p. 1) argues that postmodern works would tell us the meaning behind Mona Lisa's smile, rather than forcing art critics to speculate on it for 400 years.

Kay does not go so far as to spell out the entire intent of the novel in her narrative, she employs the story itself to provide a means of motivation to progress. This is illustrated in the fact that the lesson to his son is about choosing one's own identity. "The pictures called Mumbo Jumbo which has made me angrier than anything I can remember. He's not given a name.

Even the name he was given, John Moore, was not his original name,” (p. 276). Joss’ letter for his son discusses the idea that the name other people give us is perhaps less important than the name we give ourselves. This theme adds to the personal value experienced by reader. He, for example, might have been born Josephine Moore, but that was not who he was (p. 276). As Joss explains these things to his son, he makes it clear that no matter what label or name a person is given, they choose for themselves who they will be. “ That’s the thing with us: we keep changing names. We’ve all got that in common. We’ve all changed names, you, me, my father. All for different reasons. Maybe one day you’ll understand mine,” (p. 276).

McRobbie argues that postmodernism is also intended to “ force us to think seriously about the trivial” (p. 3). While it is incorrect to label the issues that Kay raises as “ trivial”, there is an aspect of the novel that does seemingly grasp at this approach. Intertwining these elements lends depth and charm to the story, which in turn increases the final impact. In the chapter written in the third person, describing the doctor who comes to make out Joss’ death certificate, the physician finds it necessary to cross out “ male” and “ write” in female and then write it again, more distinctively (Kay p. 276). The author makes it clear that this seems trivial. This is a purposeful effort to guide the reader to make assumptions that are essential to the story. The question, implied by the text and the remainder of the novel, is how does it matter? Did the sex assigned to Joss by birth affect the core of who he was, how he loved his family or the music that he made? The intent then of the work is to make the reader ask if the sex we are assigned at birth is important to whom we are.



Or, is gender a trivial matter than can be changed to reflect who we are as human beings?

Kay's writing has had a positive impact on the development of Scottish literature at the end of the 20th century. One of the major factors identified by some scholars is that Kay's work, and others like it, help move Scottish literature away from the concept that there is a homogeneity in the writing there (Shirey p. 5). Kay's plot line creates an inclusive perception that enables a wide range of acceptance on the part of the author. This translates directly into an international perception of tolerance outside of the traditional norms.

The second case, the loss of population, is of course related to the pervasive anxiety in modern Scotland over emigration—the recurring sense that many of the potential architects of the Renaissance were contributing their energies towards diasporic communities around the world or towards the continued, futile administration of British imperial power at precisely the moment of that power's decline.

(Shirey, p. 6)

There had been an perception that the rebirth of Scottish literature was not progressing due to the fact that the writers were either writing about their histories and cultures from before settling in Scotland or that they were so concerned with British approval that they were not distinctively Scottish (p. 7). The ability for Kay to reach out and touch a sensitive portion of the population through the shared experiences of her characters adds to the

recognition of Scottish credibility. Her ability to tie in the gender issues of her characters in such a relatable manner illustrates a fundamental knowledge of the issues, which in turn adds gravitas to her entire effort.

Where Kay (p. 15) differentiates *Trumpet* from these trends is that her characters think of themselves as definitively Scottish. This strong national identity adds strength to the notion that the region remains strong in poignant literature. Joss, for example, knows that his father was from somewhere in Africa, but he teaches his son to think of Scotland as his home (Kay p. 276). This allows them to remain Scottish, even though much of their life and experience lies outside of the nation. Kay also takes her characters beyond the stereotype of the Scotsman in her further contribution to Scottish literature. There is a real sense of progression and development on a cultural and national level throughout the entire story.

Kay's contribution to Scottish literature is that she refuses to mould her Scottish nationalism to a white heterosexual history. This is an important point that she makes no apologies for. She makes it clear that not only are the authors of Scottish literature no longer "straight" white men, neither are the characters. A reflection of modern life creates a real window for the reader to experience the travails of the characters. This allows her writing to carry not only a decisive and relatable story line about a delicate topic, but a real perception of strength and inclusive nature that illustrates the potential of an evolving culture. In the end, Kay's work has built a solid foundation upon which to continue to build new and more enticing works.

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