

# [Spies. describe the means frayn uses to tell stephen’s story essay](https://assignbuster.com/spies-describe-the-means-frayn-uses-to-tell-stephens-story-essay/)

The Second World War broke out in September 1939 under the direction of Adolf Hitler, the British mainland was never invaded, but was subject to bombings during the blitz. At the centre of this was ‘ the Close’ in which two inquisitive boys sought understanding into the adult world, with terrifying consequences. This bildungsroman tells the story of protagonist Stephen, a painfully shy boy who is aware of what he considers his own social inferiority, and is in awe of his domineering friend Keith, through a variety of means, typical of modernism, about a summer in which six words “ changed everything. As words do”. Frayn presents Spies in a conversational, informal style to tell Stephens story in which the sequence of the narrative is often interrupted with frequent and sometimes abrupt interjections and intrusions by the first person narrator. This is reflected in the way that the reader is invited to accompany Stephan down “ Memory Lane”, particularly “ Amnesia Avenue” in a way that he often talks directly to himself, rather than to the reading audience, as he struggles to remember what happened.

Therefore his stream of consciousness is often presented instead of Frayn using meticulous prose “ No wait. I’ve got that wrong”. The use of this conceit, in which Frayn is purposely giving the narrator a hesitant voice, partnered with the use of a two word monosyllabic sentence to reinforce the idea that the narrator is struggling to recall details of the past, as he is now senile. This helps the reader relate to Stephens character as memory loss happens to everyone with time, evoking a sense of empathy. Spies is told through first person split narrative between the elderly Stefan Weitzler and the younger, incredibly naive “ Stephen Wheatley..

. Or just plain Stephen…On his school reports S. J.

Wheatley…”. By using this narrative technique, Frayn is effectively conveying to the reader the hindsight and experience of an older man who in chapter 1 creates a biased and restrictive perspective through his vagueness of “ liguster” and “ those six words” compared to the innocence and misunderstandings of an inquisitive child. Through the retrospect of the story Stephens confusion and misinterpretations are reinforced as we discover in the novel that an adults world is as sad, lonely and confusing as child’s.

The significance of this can be seen through the narrator’s profession, of a translator, a profession that conjures up an image of a humble, self pedantic individual. Perhaps, metaphysically, he is a translator between the past and the present as he unveils his mysterious story. However it could be said that this is just a reflection of Frayn himself, who also works as a translator of literary texts from Russian to English. The single, repeated noun “ liguster” is very predominant to the main characters plot. Described by the monosyllabic oxymoron “ sweet reek”, this shows that to Stephen he gets a feelings of both pleasure and discomfort from the plant.

The pleasure could be in a sexual form as the scent has a “ sexual urgency” to it, which could be seen as a humorous juxtaposition as it is rather strange that an ordinary shrub could relate to sex. However the reader discovers later in the book, that Stephen indeed goes through a phase of sexual confusion surrounding Mrs Haywood and Barbarra Berrill, two characters often shown in binary opposition . Perhaps this can be conveyed in the symbolism in the objects that these characters are often associated with. Stephen is on the verge of puberty, on the edge of adolescence, and the bayonet he obsesses over could be said to be representative of his coming manhood or his desire for manhood. The reader is told that bayonet has been sharpened to “ a point like a rapier”.

This simile gives a contorted image that the knife is rather phallus shaped, which is depictive of their gender, but also runs with the recurring theme, in the novel, of a struggle for sexual identity. Others may say that the knife is a true symbol of masculinity as it relates to the context of all the soldiers in the war and their weaponry, this could make the story slightly microcosmic of the violence going on throughout the world. Similarly, underlying sexual themes are shown behind Mrs Haywood, who he feels an inappropriate attraction to and Barbarra Berill, who he gradually develops an attraction to too. Mrs Haywood is rarely seen without her shopping basket whilst the thing Stephen finds “ most girlish and irritating of all” about Barbarra “ is the purse slung around her neck”. Both of these articles are used to put items in, which gives connotations of female genitals and the sexual desires Stephen is beginning to feel about females. The discomfort is made obvious about the plant through Stefans description, in the present, which is grim with a mirthless tone using severe sounding, monosyllabic words, “ harsh”, “ course” and “ reeks”.

These sharp sounding words, combined with use of very short, concise sentences and the oxymoronic phrases such as “ heartbreaking, tender sweetness” convey that the Stefan has been unpleasantly snapped back to reality. This evokes the audience to sympathise with this self-effacing story teller as the majority of readers will have experienced the cruel reminiscence cued by a sense in their lifetime. Furthermore, the use of the repeated adjective “ reeks” is very impressionable to the reader, as the use of the double vowel sound and assonance “ ee” creates a very dissonant semblance towards said smell, and really emphasises to audience how ungodly the fragrance is and the protagonists displeasure towards the shrub. Even the translation of the plant has sexual undertones ‘ privet’ often confused with ‘ private’.

However it could be said that the confusion surrounding privet is purposely humorous as the misinterpretations ‘ privet’, ‘ private’ and ‘ privey’ give the novel a source of comedy. His joke of privet and privies being mixed up is the kind of ‘ toilet humor’ that young boys enjoy and adds an extra dimension to frayn turning the joke on Stephen. Frayn uses humor as a technique of presenting the childish perspective in sophisticated language to highlight their naivety but in a way that doesn’t undermine the novels seriousness of its events and concerns particularly the war. The last chapter, of 11-a feature of post modernism literature-, repeats the phrase, from the begining “ everything in the Close was as it was; and everything has changed” and the scent of the privet returns showing connotations that the narrators story, journey, pilgrimage is still unresolved, and no peace of mind has been achieved.

On the journey Frayn captures the naivety of childhood, and the strange mix of knowingness and ignorance that characterised children of the Second World War in England. Through Stephens’s epistemological considerations, we learn of his unseemly tale in which the young boy grows up through the events of one memorable summer during those “ years of madness”.