Masters of Creative Writing

Exegesis and Novel

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Abstract

In this novel, the Slipstream genre and tragicomedy are used to explore and convey the psychological damage and coping mechanisms that the protagonist, Sheryl Chateaupon, uses to firstly bury the traumas of her past, and then confront and resolve them.

Sheryl is a middle-aged woman living alone on a run-down tower block complex in East London. Her story is told in both the first person and the third person subjective. The veracity of her narrative is questionable. Are the events real or figments of her imagination? The over-arching theme is coming to terms with repressed guilt and grief.

The exegesis will explore the Slipstream genre as a postmodern artefact and its relevance in today's World.

Exegesis

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Introduction

My Name is Sheryl with an S is a 60,000-word novel in the Slipstream fiction genre. It's a tragicomedic melding of fantasy, myth, and edgy realism.

Christopher Priest (1967), in his foreword to Anna Kavan's slipstream novel '*Ice*' writes '*the best way to understand Slipstream is to think of it as a state of mind …it imparts a sense that reality might not be quite as certain as we think.*'

A genre that was a '*state of mind*', seemed a fitting choice to explore the emotional and mental state of my damaged protagonist Sheryl Chateaupon.

Peter Grandbois' (2011) essay *Navigating the Slipstream,* speaks of '*great fiction doing violence to the known*'. He quotes Kafka, '*A book must be like an ice-axe to break the sea frozen inside us*', and e e cummings, '*The symbol of all art is the prism. The goal is unrealism. The method is destructive ….*'. This uncompromising and passionate perspective cemented Slipstream as my genre choice.

The checklist for the novel included:

- creating a page turner:
- taking the willing suspension of disbelief to the extreme:
- creating a complex character who it is difficult to like:
- writing a tragic story which at times is funny, and
- crafting a novel the reader would remember.

Synopsis

My Name is Sheryl with an S is set in the present-day and written in East London

vernacular.

Imagine you're in the Lamp & Crossroads, the pub where Sheryl Chateaupon works, she's leaning across the bar and bending your ear with her life story.

'You see, I've got these holes in my memory and they needed filling in, so I created these fantasies and now I can't tell the difference between truth and reality which is ironic really as I'm the earthly incarnation of the Greek Goddess of Memory, she's got this bloody unpronounceable name Mnemosyne, so I prefer to be called Sheryl with an S.

But that's only the start, these fantasies which are nine modern day muses have taken on a life of their own, with a little help from yours truly, and have become mega on the Internet and also the Collective Unconscious.

Ernie, he's the Landlord of the Pub and also the guardian of my sub-conscious mind, said *'You have created a massive cluster fuck that's having catastrophic repercussions for everyone.'* I'd like to say that was an exaggeration but it's pretty en pointe. You see my muses have gone missing and I'm on a mission to find them.

So, this is where Shirl, my best friend and alter ego, comes in. If she hadn't put on the TV while we were on tidy up in the pub after closing, I would never've known about the celebrity kidnappings. Someone is collecting my Muses and I want them back.

I know it's getting complicated but it is a Slipstream novel, so just go with it. In my stable of fantasy characters there's Zeus, Apollo, the nine muses, Hades and the Kindly Ones.

Now when Ernie was talking about the 'cluster', earlier on, he was referring to some plot lines like the Sun disappearing at the Winter Solstice, the destruction of Stonehenge and Hades, who inhabits my unconscious mind, making a bid to terraform London and take over the World. Then there's the Kindly Ones - three groupies-cum-assassins who've shacked up with Hades. They're seeking retribution for a crime they've put me in the frame for. Last but not least, there's Zeus who's a dirty rotten bastard and his son Apollo who in Shirl's words is '*bloody gorgeous*', but I'm not so sure.

BUT you have to understand, Sheryl Chateaupon's a broken thing, middle aged and a victim of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, well that's what the psychologist told me, years after the car accident that killed my Mum and Dad. You see I was in the car and watched them die and I was only five years' old. Do y'know, I've been carrying around survivor guilt deep inside me for all these years which was made worse by the disappearance of Baby Sharon, who was kidnapped or adopted – either way she was taken from me without my consent.

That's my back story, not bad for woman who lives on a shitty council state in East London. I mean I know it's not Felicity Mimsy-Smyth with a degree in 'something absolutely fabulous', who finds her true self in Provence or some other poncey place, but where I come from, you have to take what you can get and be grateful for it.

So, we've covered the inciting incident, conflict, a couple of turning points and a cast of characters, so what's left, well it's really how I, Sheryl Chateaupon solve the mystery and put things right – it's called the three Rs "Resolution, Redemption and Recovery".

And you thought it was easy being a barmaid.

That'll be £10.50 please and yes, I will keep the change!'

Slipstream (A literary Affect)

The Slipstream genre inhabits a liminal space on the boundaries of science fiction, fantasy, magical realism, horror and literary fiction. It mashes these genres together and produces something bizarre, dreamlike and sometimes creepy. Anything is possible.

Slipstream fiction, unlike science fiction which is defined in concrete terms according to its subject matter, such as time travel, space exploration and technology, is defined in psychological terms. Phrases such as '*state of mind*' (Priest 1967), '*mental discomfort*' (Kelly, Kessell 2006), and the '*fiction of strangeness*' (Stirling 1989) create the mood of the genre.

Doug Davis (2012) in his essay *Understanding Slipstream Fiction* sees the genre as a product of the Postmodernist movement which started in the 1960s. However, a number of novels that are regarded as Slipstream predate Postmodernism by many years. For example, *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne (1759) is an eccentric, avant-garde biography of the eponymous character detailing his conception, birth, christening and accidental circumcision, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll (1865) is the story of a young girl who falls down a rabbit hole into a fantasy land, and *Orlando* by Virginia Wolf (1928), chronicles the adventures of a poet who changes sex from man to woman and lives for centuries. This suggests that Slipstream fiction may have roots in older literary traditions such as proverbs, fairy tales, folklore,

fables, myths and legends.

Grandbois (2011) believes the common thread that links all Slipstream literature is a disruption, disturbance and reconfiguration of the accepted world view. These are like ripples on a pond, not only do they distort the reader's sense of plot and character, but travel outwards and warp the story-world as well.

For example, in Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go,* Cathy, the protagonist, describes her work as a carer. From her description, the reader assumes that Cathy's 'caring' is an unskilled job in a public hospital. It is only as the plot progresses that the true nature of Cathy's work is revealed. She is a carer for an underclass of humans who have been cloned and raised for the specific purpose of organ harvesting. '*Completion'* is the term used when the organ donor dies, usually around the third operation. Cathy is a clone too and the same inescapable fate awaits her.

Ishiguro, cleverly upends the notion that the public health system is free and available to everyone and reconstructs it in a familiar, yet menacing way, leaving the reader with the problem of reconciling two opposing perspectives.

Rudy Rucker's *A Transrealist Manifesto* (1983) discusses the role of Transrealism, a literary style which is often included under the umbrella of Slipstream fiction (Steble, 2015). Rucker argues that transrealist novels should primarily be grounded in reality. Sheryl's story of a working class, middle aged woman, who works in a pub and lives on a run-down council estate fits the bill.

Through this realist backdrop, Damien Walter (2014) proposes *'the author threads a singular impossibly fantastic idea.'* Sheryl believes she is the earthly incarnation of Mnemosyne the Greek Goddess of Memory. It is the jarring of the mundane and ordinary (the rundown council estate and Sheryl's dead-end job) against

the fantastic (a bizarre plot involving the Gods and Goddesses of Greek Mythology) that challenges the reader to believe in the existence of something beyond their realm of understanding.

Jonathan Swords-Holdsworth (2017) asserts that Slipstream fiction requires two things, a mystery which has to be solved and an '*ordinary, everyday reality ... that is totally bent out of shape by one or two parameters going out of whack.*' The mystery, in this instance, is the secret Sheryl carries deep inside her unconscious mind. And the whacky parameters which distort Sheryl's everyday reality are her very first encounters with Joyce, June, and Joan (the Kindly Ones). These individual meetings which become increasingly more bizarre and dangerous, set Sheryl up for everything else that is to follow.

John Kelly and John Kessel (2006) in their Slipstream anthology '*Feeling Very Strange*' speculate that cognitive dissonance is at the heart of Slipstream fiction. Leon Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance proposes that holding two or more contradictory ideas, emotions, or beliefs simultaneously causes a feeling of '*mental discomfort*' or psychological stress in the individual.

Sheryl's friend and alter ego, Shirl defines cognitive dissonance by using a quote from F. Scott Fitzgerald.

'*Actually, Sheryl that's not true, the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function. One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise.*'

'*That's not you talking Shirl.*'

'Of course not, it's F Scott Fitzgerald 1936, it was today's quote on my Affirmations calendar.'

Steble (2015) refers to Slipstream fiction not as a genre, but as a *'literary affect'*. By using the above tools from the Slipstream toolbox (disruption, disturbance and reconfiguration: reality versus the fantastic: a mystery, and cognitive dissonance), I was able to experiment and manipulate my plot while maintaining reader engagement. In this way my second motivation in the Introduction 'taking the willing suspension of disbelief to the extreme' was possible.

Character – Sheryl - A Tart with a Heart

My third motivation in the Introduction was to create a complex character who is difficult to like.

Rucker (1983), believed the protagonist of a Transreal/Slipstream novel must appear authentic and make decisions according to their personality traits as opposed to being *'puppets of the author's will'*. Rucker also argues that *'characters be in some sense out of control.'* I believe Rucker is describing the anti-hero character type/persona which has become a prevalent trope in post-modern literature and contemporary story telling.

The anti-hero is usually unorthodox and can be conflicted, flawed and imperfect. By operating under their own agenda, they flaunt laws and act contrary to societal norms. They simultaneously attract and repel the reader by blurring the moral lines between right and wrong.

There are many anti-heroes in postmodern literature. An early example is James Bond (seductive, sexy, assassin and risk taker) from Ian Fleming's collection of novels

and short stories. A present-day example is Walter White (chemist, teacher, reluctant meth cook and drug dealer) from the TV Series '*Breaking Bad*'.

Sheryl is abrasive, acts according to her own rules and speaks her mind to the point of hurting people, yet she can be courageous and determined. Her sense of humour and her vulnerability, glimpsed beneath her brash exterior, make her genuine. She is a '*Tart with a Heart*'. You are on Sheryl's side, but you wouldn't want to be her best friend. Sheryl is an anti-hero, but do not be fooled, there are Trickster elements to her personality. As an unreliable narrator she is out to manipulate the reader who is forced to question the veracity of Sheryl's story.

Sheryl's damaged personality is the result of repressed guilt and grief. Psychologist Carl Rogers (1961) said '*What is most personal is most universal*'. Guilt is an emotion experienced by most people and to make the feeling go away, we often justify and rationalise our actions. In Sheryl's case her self-deception is taken to the extreme, but the reader having experienced the same emotion can empathise with her motives for concealing the truth.

Slipstream's Psychological Dimension

When I created Sheryl's exterior world I was able to fall back on my own memories and experiences of growing up in London. However, constructing Sheryl's internal world was a challenge, so I worked with some of the ideas and concepts contained in the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung and used them to explore Sheryl's psychological mind-set.

Freud's Model of the Human Mind

In *The Unconscious* (1915), Sigmund Freud partitions the mind into three distinct compartments – the conscious, sub-conscious and unconscious (Figure 1). I used this concept in the novel to allow Sheryl to visit her unconscious mind and exorcize the traumas hidden there.

Conscious Mind
Speech, Writing, Movement,
Conscious Thought, Decision Making

Sub-Conscious Mind
Filter and Messenger. Feelings,
Emotions, Imagination, Sensation and
Dreams

Unconscious Mind
Memories, Past experiences
Collective Unconscious
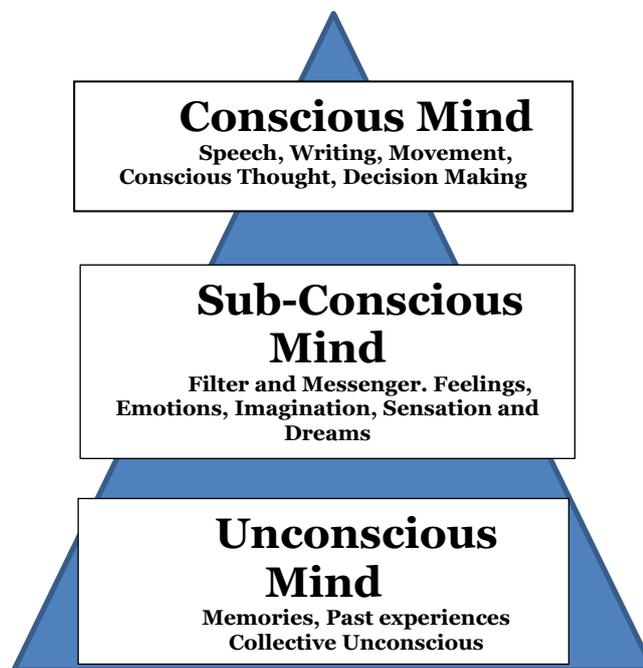
Figure 1: Freud's Model of the Human Mind

The conscious mind's ability to communicate with the outside world through speech, writing, and movement, as well as conscious thinking and decision making, is something Zeus and the Muses wish to acquire. However, if Zeus and the Muses do take control of Sheryl's consciousness as a set of individual personalities, it would result in extreme psychosis.

To prevent this happening, I have used the Lamp & Crossroads as a physical manifestation of Sheryl's subconscious and Ernie the pub landlord as its guardian. The

subconscious is like a listening post, and will only pass on information from the unconscious mind to the conscious mind, if it is deemed to be relevant and non-threatening. As Ernie says to Sheryl:-

'... I'm here to save you from your biggest enemy – yourself.'

The unconscious mind can be thought of as a library where memories and past experiences are stored, including those repressed through trauma. These influence the beliefs, habits, and behaviours of an individual. Sheryl's unconscious mind is home to Hades and the Kindly Ones. It is accessed through a cupboard located in the cellar at the Lamp & Crossroads.

The Uncanny

Freud published his essay *Das Unheimliche* (the Uncanny) in 1919.

Das Unheimliche discusses themes found in literature that make the reader uneasy. Freud's definition of uncanny is of something that is frightening, yet familiar. He uses the German word *unheimlich (Unfamiliar/Unconcealed)* and its opposite, *heimlich (familiar/concealed),* to illustrate his point. The word *unheimlich has many definitions and* reaches a point where it means its exact opposite, without the word itself changing. *Unheimlich* means both 'familiar' and 'unfamiliar' and translates into English as 'uncanny' (Freud 1919).

Uncanny feelings can occur when the distinction between imagination and reality is blurred. The themes of the familiar and unfamiliar create cognitive dissonance in the reader; an uneasiness that has to be rationalised. My discussion earlier in the exegesis about Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *Never Let Me Go* is an example of '*Das*

Unheimliche'.

Freud (1919) regarded the following as uncanny. I have inserted quotes from my thesis to highlight the points.

1. *'When an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one' (Freud 1919).*

   'The spaghetti strands of plasma I'd seen earlier were coalescing into a solid state and gathering into larger clumps. They aimlessly drifted through the fog, but when their tentacles brushed up against anything solid they attached themselves.'

2. *'The uncanny is that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar.' (Freud 1919).*

   'Gretel walks towards her, they're almost touching. Sheryl can smell babies. Gretel stands on tiptoe and whispers in Sheryl's ear. What Sheryl hears makes her want to scream, she feels sick and unsteady on her feet. She closes her eyes for a few seconds until the waves of nausea pass, when she opens them Gretel has vanished.

   Sheryl slumps onto a stone bench, finds her cigarettes in her evening bag and lights one with a shaking hand. What she wants to know is how that little bitch knew the registration of her father's Zephyr Zodiac?'

3. *'the connections the 'double' has with reflections in mirrors, with shadows, guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death.' (Freud 1919).*

   'I'm your moral compass, Sheryl – that reflection in the mirror. I keep you on the straight and narrow and try to balance things, but you've always been stronger than me and you never let me out, but from now on things are gonna change.'

Uncanniness is an integral part of Slipstream fiction and strikes a chord with

readers as it blends the familiar with the unexpected, it makes '*the hairs on the back of your neck stand up*' and '*sends shivers down your spine*' which interestingly are both 'flight-or-fight' responses to fear (Takeda 2011).

Jung's Collective Unconscious and Archetypes

In *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1954), Jung uses the term the '*collective unconscious*' to describe a layer of the unconscious mind which is a repository for universal symbols and archetypes. We subliminally recognise and respond to these images because they have arcane and primitive origins present in all human cultures. (Jung 1964).

Jung (1954) characterises four key archetypes which are discussed below.

The Shadow archetype is composed of repressed instincts and impulses; it represents chaos, turmoil and the unknown. The Shadow can be seductive and fascinating and is often seen in other people but seldom in oneself.

Sheryl's Shadow manifests itself in Zeus and Hades. Ernie call them '*a couple of smarmy gits who wanna take you down. Take it from me, they know more about you, than you know about yourself.*'

Character archetypes closely related to the Shadow are the Anti Hero and the Trickster both of which, I have incorporated into Sheryl's personality. Forlenza and Thomassen (2016) describe the Trickster in the following terms.

'[The trickster] *will act like your best friend, when all the time he is a thief, a liar and an imposter. He will flatter you telling you what you want to hear but he holds no real knowledge only a feral intelligence. The trickster gets what he wants, not because of his genuine qualities or by rallying the people around him, but by blurring*

the difference between truth and lies, the trickster thrives in ambivalence. The Trickster promises to solve all problems and resolve all crises, in reality his modus operandi thrives on perpetuating insecurity and confusion.'

Interestingly, the subject of their comparison was President Donald Trump as Trickster and his rise to power.

Blum's (2017) more controversial perspective of Trump as the Shadow archetype sees his Presidency resulting from the suppression of the collective shadow of American society through political correctness and moral policing.

The Anima and Animus archetype as a concept is widely regarded as outdated, but is still worth discussing from a literary perspective. The Animus is a contra sexuality which is masculine and governs rational thinking in females; while the Anima is a contra sexuality which is feminine and governs irrational feeling in males. The Anima and the Animus constitute the Soul of a person, they commune with the collective unconscious and are the wellspring of creativity (Jung 1954). Archetypes in this category are heroes, kings, queens, mothers and fathers.

Combined together the Anima and Animus are known as Syzygy (the divine couple) and represent wholeness and completion.

The ultimate integration of Sheryl and Shirl's personalities can be seen as Syzygy. Sheryl says

'Shirl was my best friend at school, she was like my twin, my other half, my soft vulnerable underbelly that I'd left behind in the wreckage of my Dad's Zephyr Zodiac.'

The ultimate goal in Jungian psychology is the attainment of a unified Self through the

integration of the conscious with the unconscious. Jung (1964) symbolised the Self in the form of a mandala or a circle and called it *'the archetype of wholeness'*. *'Individuation'* is the journey undertaken to achieve unification. Jung (1964) saw this process as a re-birth or a returning to the oneness of birth, before the psyche split into many parts.

When Sheryl enters the Labyrinth for the second time she says to Shirl: -

'It's changed,' I said stepping inside, 'it's … I rubbed my temples 'it's.

'It's what Sheryl?' Shirl said beginning to get impatient.

'It's either the longest vagina in the world or we're inside my brain, probably the corpus callosum heading for the neo cortex!'

Although I did not consciously create the vagina/labyrinth metaphor, Sheryl's rebirth when she returns from the labyrinth as Shirl fits nicely into the image.

The Wise Old Man archetype is associated with the Self. In literature and film, he is often depicted as a mentor who offers guidance and assistance to the protagonist and helps them visualise their own potential. He represents the fully integrated Self and shows the Hero that they too can heal their shattered psyche. (Busch 2012). As well as dispensing words of wisdom, the Wise Old Man as a mentor, gives the hero items that will help them on their quest. Ernie represents the Wise Old Man archetype. As well as offering sage advice, he gives Sheryl the Celestial Energy Transmitter (CET) which lights her way in the Underworld and the Glock 22 Gen 4 .40 Calibre 15 shot semi-automatic pistol.

The fourth Jungian archetype is the Persona which is like our external shell. It's the way we present ourselves to the world and it represents all the different social

masks we wear, for example work colleague, wife, and mother. The Persona has two functions; firstly to make a memorable impression on others and secondly to conceal our basic impulses and emotions that may not be considered appropriate (Cherry 2018). The word Persona is derived from the Latin word for mask.

A mask to conceal who we really are is an important accessory in the technological postmodern world and will be discussed later in exegesis.

When Sheryl creates online personas for the Muses, she is unaware of the implications this will have for the collective unconscious as the Muses enter it as archetypal memes.

'A meme is a unit of a culture or a system of behaviour which is "hosted" in the minds of one or more individuals and passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means' (Oztan 2017). Examples are fashion, tunes, and catch-phrases.

Orztan sees archetypes as universal patterns of information retained in the collective unconscious as *'psychic potential'*. However, the moment they enter the conscious mind and actualize themselves they are able to be imitated and passed on to others in the form of memes.

Sheryl's Muse personas have huge followings on the internet, they become so popular and real to their followers that people start to see them in public. These sightings cause a ripple effect and the Muses' meme archetypes take route in the collective unconscious.

Seeing people who aren't really there is not as unusual as it sounds; even though Elvis Presley died over forty years' ago, Elvis sightings are still reported in the media

today (Lusher, 2017).

The Slipstream, Postmodernism and Post-truth

The Slipstream genre is a writing style especially relevant to the 21st Century. Social media and its influence on how we think, and act, and Post-truth politics, where debate is framed around appeals to emotion rather than testable and falsifiable fact, blur the boundaries of reality and make us question what we know. Cognitive dissonance rears its head and asks us to juggle many conflicting arguments. Indeed, when Sterling called Slipstream the '*fiction of strangeness*' in 1989 he could well be describing the current world we live in.

Russell and Maloney (2015) speculate that Slipstream is no longer a genre on the fringes of literary fiction. Book sales back up their claim, for example, David Mitchell's '*Cloud Atlas'* published in 2004 has sold over a million copies and has been made into a successful movie.

Why are more and more people reading Slipstream fiction? Oscar Wilde wrote in 1889 that '*Life imitates art far more than art imitates life.*' (Gompertz 2015). I think Wilde was right, Slipstream fiction helps us navigate and comprehend the world we live in. Through its defamiliarization of what we hold to be absolute, Slipstream allows us to view the world with a critical eye and see and question the things that we thought were given truths.

So how did a fantastical avant-garde fiction genre become a manual for living in the 21st Century?

Jean-François Lyotard and Metanarratives

The French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard in his book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) defines postmodernism as an '*incredulity toward metanarratives.*'

A metanarrative can be seen as a world view that unites smaller themes and individual stories. It explains historical and contemporary events through a particular lens and heralds that perspective to be the one true perspective. There are many forms of metanarrative, for example: political (communism), religious (Christianity), economic (free market capitalism) and social (patriarchy).

Lyotard *(1979)* casts doubt on all metanarratives, as no one overarching belief system can capture all truths and give meaning to all lives. Instead, postmodern theorists focus on small, individual narratives that give meaning to their own lives.

Postmodernism can also be critiqued as a metanarrative, as it allows us to cherry pick the truths that give meaning to our lives and brush other, less palatable truths under the carpet. This selective 'truth sampling' has heralded the Post-truth era where people are more likely to accept an argument based on their emotions and beliefs rather than one grounded in facts and reality (See Figure 2).

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Figure 2 – Post-truth Cartoon

Groucho Marx said: '*Who are you going to believe, me or your own eyes?*' (Wedge 2017).

Newspeak was a language created by the totalitarian government (Big Brother) in George Orwell's novel *1984*. The political purpose of Newspeak was to reduce the English language to simple sound bites that reinforced the dominance of the State and suppressed free thought. Words like 'bad' with negative meanings became 'ungood' (Wedge 2017)

Kellyanne Conway's infamous remarks defending Sean Spicer's comments regarding the size of the crowds at Donald Trump's inauguration ceremony were not falsehoods but '*alternative facts*'. Conway's remarks are a prime example of Life imitating Art when you look at them in the context of *1984*.

By using '*alternative facts*' instead of '*lies*' and '*falsehoods*', the negative connotation is removed. '*Newspeak'* is alive and well in American politics.

Jean Baudrillard – Simulacra and Hyperreality

Newspeak, Alternative Facts, Truth Sampling – where does reality fit in to all this, or

does it have to at all?

Jean Baudrillard, a contemporary of Lyotard, theorized that postmodern society can no longer distinguish between what is a real and a constructed representation of reality – a simulacrum. In his essay *The Precession of Simulacra* (1981), Baudrillard describes four '*orders of simulacra'*. In the first order, which he associates with the pre-modern period, the simulacrum is a clear copy of the original and is perceived as such, for example a portrait of Queen Victoria. The second order Baudrillard associates with the industrial revolution. Here the distinction between the original and the copy begins to break down because of mass production and the abundance of copies - imagine a mass-produced photograph of Queen Victoria hanging in everyone's home. The third order of simulacra, is more associated with the postmodern era, here the image is more important than the reality, this where the 'precession' comes in as the simulacra precede and determine the real. The TV Series *Victoria* which is a dramatization of Queen Victoria's life would be an example. Finally, there is the fourth order of simulacra, where the image has no relation to any reality whatsoever – imagine taking the TV Series *Victoria* and turning it into a virtual reality experience.

The third order of simulacra has become ubiquitous in modern life, on TV, in magazines, at the movies, and online. Many images in the media are enhanced but we mistake the enhancement for the real. In Figure 3, the left pre-photoshopped Madonna, is the real Madonna, but she looks unfamiliar. Conversely, the right one even though a post-photoshopped image - a simulacrum, is more familiar. The augmented Madonna is what the public accepts as the real Madonna (Cho 2013).

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Figure 3: Madonna – Pre and Post Photoshop

It is not only celebrities who have embraced the third order of simulacra. The Instagram Face has become a social media phenomenon among young women in their late teens and early twenties (Figure 4). It has reduced the uniqueness and diversity of the human face to a 'one size fits all' face. Alexandra Jones (2018) describes the look below: -

'perfect skin and sculpted contoured cheekbones, wide almond- shaped eyes which taper up into a feline point and that full, inescapable mouth.' (Jones 2018)

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Figure 4: The Instagram Face (left) and a photo from the late 1920's demonstrating contouring techniques for black and white and colour film (right)

It can take up to 90 minutes to apply The Instagram Face using over 25 different

products and uses contouring and shading techniques originally designed to accentuate the bone structure of actors and actresses in the early movies. It was never intended to be used as an everyday makeup routine (Figure 4) (Jones 2018).

This homogenised ideal of beauty is a disturbing online simulacrum for young women to ape. Using this mask, you don't even have to make the effort to physically interact with others. Reality has been sacrificed for popularity and the number of 'likes' you can generate.

One can only speculate on the ramifications this new mask will have on Jung's Persona Archetype in the collective unconscious.

According to Baudrillard (1981) massed collections of simulacra over time become simulations '*the active process of replacement of the real*' (Trieu, 2011). These simulations take on a reality of their own which is totally divorced from the original reality depicted by the simulacra. He called this Hyperreality because those observing the simulations mistake the fakery for authenticity.

The abundance of reality TV shows today, with their scripted dialogue and agenda driven, premeditated casting of individuals who will either thrive or wither in the hot house environment, make the shows vehicles for hyperreality. Baudrillard predicted this when writing about the first reality TV show that aired in America in 1973. It was called *An American Family* and documented the daily life of the Louds family from Santa Barbara in California. The documentary ended with the break-up of the family via the separation and divorce of the parents, Bill and Pat Loud. Baudrillard argued that the Louds family (as an image of perfect family life) were selected for their hyperreal qualities and were doomed to failure and implosion.

'Besides this family were already hyperreal by the very nature of its selection: a typical ideal American family, California home, three garages, five children, assured professional and social status, decorative housewife, upper middle class standing. In a way it is this statistical perfection that dooms it to death ...' (Baudrillard 1981).

Baudrillard also saw the intrusion of the camera in the Louds daily life as a factor in the family's disintegration. *'You no longer watch TV, it is TV that watches you (live)'* (1981).

A trip to Disney World is another way to experience the hyperreal. Without leaving the confines of the park, it is possible to 'virtually' travel around the world in one day and visit places from the past - Frontier Land which depicts a constructed reality of what 'The Wild West' could have been like, but was not, and the future - Tomorrowland which is best described in the words of Walt Disney himself:

'The Tomorrowland attractions have been designed to give you an opportunity to participate in adventures that are a living blueprint of our future.' (Wikipedia 2018).

In Baudrillard words, *'utopia becomes reality'* (1981).

Hyperreality is important in Slipstream fiction as it allows for the disruption, disturbance and reconfiguration of the everyday world (discussed earlier). It gives the author permission to manipulate reality and create a world which is more hyperbolic, colourful and vibrant than the one we live in.

Alex the protagonist in *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess (1962) says

'It's funny how the colours of the real world only seem really real when you viddy them on the screen.'

The Theme

Guilt is one of the oldest themes in literature, Aeschylus was writing about it in 458 BC in his trilogy of Greek tragedies the *Oresteia* and Sophocles soon after with *Oedipus Rex* in 429BC.

It is a solitary emotion, accompanied by feelings of loneliness and isolation. Ultimately, guilt is personal, we judge and punish ourselves. Crossen (1979) in his New York Times article described it as '*a singular drama enacted in the soul of each person.*'

Sheryl's guilt stems from two events in her life; firstly surviving her parents in the fatal car crash that took their lives, and secondly giving up her baby for adoption. She has buried these incidents deep within her unconscious mind and constructs elaborate fantasies to compensate for her loss.

Sheryl is both the victim and perpetrator of abandonment for the reasons mentioned above. This is why her quest to find her children in the guise of the Muses is so important to her.

Saint John of the Cross, a 16th Century Spanish monk and mystic wrote about the *Dark Night of the Soul* - a mystical journey culminating in a spiritual transformation. According to Sol (2018) '*A true Dark Night of the Soul leaves a long-lasting impact on you – it changes you completely. When you exit a Dark Night, you will discover that something is always taken away from you (for the better) ...*' Sheryl's story can be viewed as a *Dark Night of the Soul*. By coming to terms with her guilt, she unburdens herself and moves on.

Structure

The novel has a five-act structure with the emotional and plot climax in the last two chapters. An invaluable structure session with my mentor enabled me to step away from the writing and visualise the shape of my novel (see Figure 5 below). By doing this I was able to address issues of plot and pace.
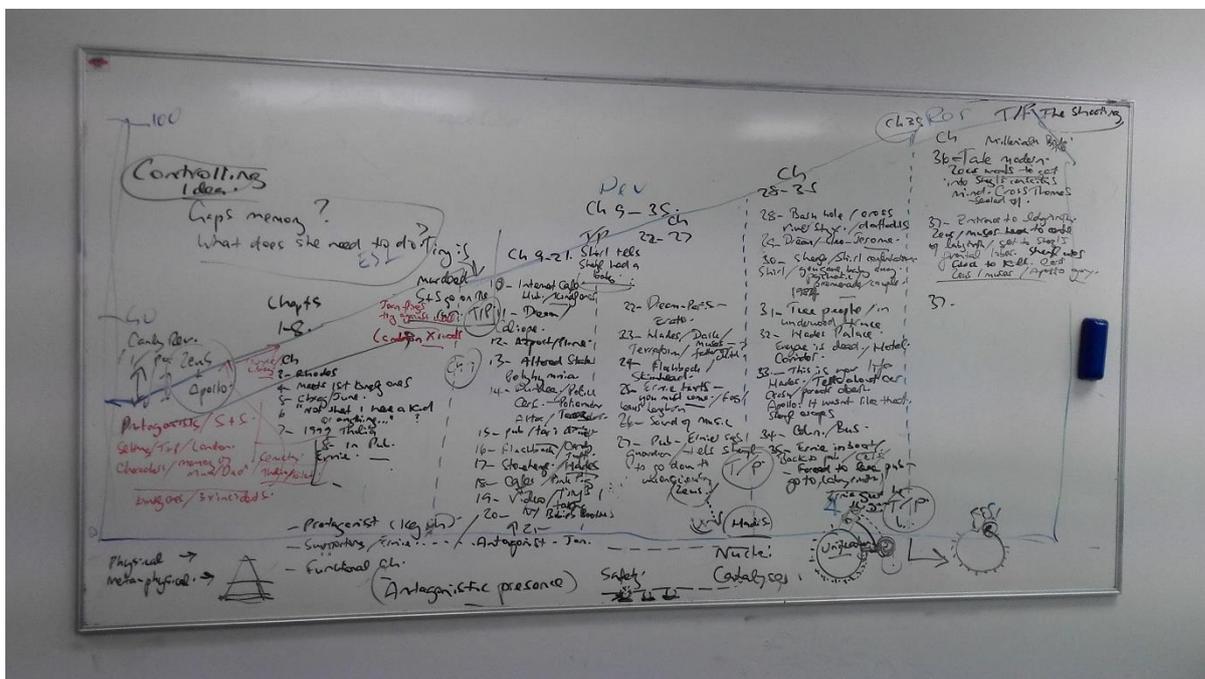

Figure 5 Visual representation of the five-act structure in 'My Name is Sheryl with an S'

The first motivation in the Introduction was to create a novel that was a page turner. The story had to be in the reader's face. I looked to achieve this by using the first-person narrative; trapped inside Sheryl's head, you really do see everything through her eyes.

In a way this legitimizes the surrealism of the plot, for example, it's okay to have

terraforming fog descend on London because Sheryl is experiencing and describing it. And as Shirl says frequently throughout the novel. *'Why is it always about you Sheryl?'*

The cliff-hangers and hooks at the end of each chapter give the novel and urgency and energy, and propel the plot to its conclusion.

The flashback chapters in the novel are written from the third-person subjective point of view. These chapters describe Sheryl's first encounters with the Muses. Observing Sheryl from the third person instead of witnessing everything from her perspective, gives the reader the opportunity to see her vulnerability, brittleness and also her compassion. When Sheryl meets Candy Tuft for the first time, Candy is the same age Sheryl was when her parents died - only five years' old. Sheryl becomes emotional and starts to cry when she confronts Candy's neglectful mother.

The flashback chapters are the puzzle pieces Sheryl claims are missing from her memory, however the authenticity of these memories is debatable. Are they real experiences she has embellished over time, or are they recent fantasy figures she has created? This brings into question the timespan of the novel. If the memories are legitimate it encompasses the whole of Sheryl's life, but if the fantasy figures are recent creations, it could take place over a period of weeks or months. The possibility of expanding and compressing time was another one of my drivers for using the Slipstream genre.

My intention was to keep the writing style economical with minimal description, relying more on the dialogue to carry the colloquial feel of the story-world and keep the narrative housed in Sheryl's direct experience. I had to work on giving the characters space on the page; too much dialogue with not enough beats (small

gestures, body language, snatches of physical movement) in between the spoken lines, made the characters two dimensional. It was surprising how little, but evocative description, gave them more depth and authenticity. In this instance, the maxim *'less is more'* held true.

Dark Humour and Tragicomedy

The comedian Steve Coogan sums up the dichotomy between comedy and tragedy in the following quote.

'I've always been drawn to discomfort and that limbo of unease you get between comedy and tragedy. Making people laugh one moment and the next making them feel really uncomfortable.' (Coogan 2016)

The fourth motivation in the Introduction was to make the reader laugh when they shouldn't. Dark humour is a great vehicle for this as it takes tragic topics such as death, suicide and poverty and uses satire to humourize them while still portraying them as negative subjects. Take the following statement as an example.

'Dark Humour is like food, not everyone gets it.'

Tragicomedic elements in a narrative highlight the dual nature of our everyday lives, and create cognitive dissonance in the mind of the reader, especially where both themes coexist simultaneously. Should they laugh or cry? For example, Sheryl's best friend Shirl carries her dead dog around in a pink chilly bin.

The description of the Longbourn Council Estate at the beginning of the novel, uses black humour to contrast the reality of life on the estate with its aesthetic name.

'The knob who built the Longbourn must have been a big fan of Jane Austen as each Tower bears the eponymous name of one of her characters. The Dashwood, Willoughby, Bennet, Darcy and Collins Towers sound incredibly upmarket, but they're basically shit holes for London's unwanted and unloved.'

A recent study by Willinger, et al (2017) revealed that intelligence, as well as mood and aggression levels, play a key role in the appreciation of dark humour,. Participants were asked to rate their understanding and enjoyment of twelve darkly humorous cartoons. The group with the highest appreciation and comprehension of the cartoons scored the highest in verbal and non-verbal IQ tests, were better educated, and scored lower for aggression and bad mood. The results from this one study indicated that appreciating black humour is a 'complex information-processing task' in which negative mood and high aggression levels may cloud people's ability to get the joke.

Could dark humour be a way of allowing the reader's Shadow to let off steam in a contained environment? As discussed earlier, the Shadow should not be ignored or repressed (Blum 2017).

Research undertaken by Charman (2013) found that dark humour can help alleviate the stress of traumatic situations. Charman found emergency workers, specifically police and ambulance crews, who faced morbid and gruesome situations use dark humour as a coping mechanism.

'By normalising a situation through humour, a stressful encounter can be made more manageable - humour allows people to control feelings of fear or vulnerability,'

'For these people, it is often a case of if you didn't laugh, you'd cry. Both have a tension-reducing effect but it's not socially acceptable for professionals doing their

job to cry.' (Charman 2013)

Charman sees dark humour as a social glue and requires a degree of shared experience and camaraderie to succeed.

Interestingly, laughing and crying are closely related, they engage the same set of muscles, only with different contractions: laughing is faster, and crying is slower (Gendry 2018).

Sheryl uses her humour as a shield and a coping strategy to disguise the true nature of her unhappiness. Her acerbic put-downs and one-liners are warnings not to get too close.

The Author's Journey

Working Class Heroine

In her doctoral thesis, *Working-class women and contemporary British literature* (2009), Sue Petty discusses the rise of working-class women writers in the 1980s. Up until this time, working class writing had mostly been in the domain of men writing about their lives, their jobs, and their aspirations. Women were cast in a supporting role, keeping the home fires burning and raising children. According to Petty, working class literature has a political bias resulting from a reaction to a shared experience. The 1980s was the era of Thatcherism - a time of high inflation, mass unemployment and privatisation of state-owned industries, these all had a detrimental impact on the working class and '*spawned a renaissance of working-class literature.*' (Petty, 2009)

Born from the political and social turmoil of the 1980s, the working-class heroine

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is a relatively new protagonist in the stable of English literature. According to Hawthorn (1984) the working-class heroine, may have a long road ahead of her. He argues that working-class fiction, because it is measured by middle-class conventions, will always be the subject of discrimination. The literary novel is a middle-class artefact, written by middle class-writers, published by middle class professionals and read by a middle-class readership.

In 1929 Virginia Woolf published an essay entitled *A Room of One's Own*, in which she says *'A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.'* I'd agree with those sentiments which resonate today - writing is still a middle-class occupation

Loose Ends

The Longbourn Housing Estate is based on the Oliver Close Housing Estate in Leyton, London (Figure 6). The high rises were built on the remains of a palisaded late Bronze Age settlement (Bishop 2006). The Oliver Close Housing Estate comprised of five tower blocks, twenty two stories high with one hundred homes in each - a total of five hundred homes on a very small footprint. In 2002 all five towers were demolished and 330 new homes were built.

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Figure 6: The Oliver Close Council Estate, Leyton, London. (Photos courtesy of Prof. Miles Glendinning, Tower Block UK Archive, ©The University of Edinburgh 2016)

The fictitious London Borough of Stowford is a compound of Walthamstow and Chingford - two boroughs in north-east London.

Among the fantastical elements in the novel, there really were street lamps powered by methane from the sewers in Victorian London. The Webb Patent Sewer Gas Lamp was invented in the late 19th century by the Birmingham inventor Joseph Webb. The lamps' uses were twofold; firstly, to burn off the smells and germs from London's sewer system, and secondly as a low cost, low maintenance way to keep London lit up at night. The only remaining sewer lamp is located in Carting Lane, just off The Strand and close to the Savoy Hotel. The lamp is now protected by Westminster council after an unfortunate accident when it was knocked over by a reversing lorry, however Thames Gas came to the rescue and restored it to working order (Jones 2018).

The epigraphs at the beginning of each chapter are of the labyrinth Sheryl sees at Conimbriga, Portugal (Figure 7). The settlement was first inhabited during the Bronze and Iron Age periods (making its origins as old as the Oliver Close Estate in Leyton). It was a thriving settlement throughout the Roman era when Portugal was the Roman

province of Lusitania. When Portugal was invaded by the Visigoths and Swabians it was eventually abandoned.

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Figure 7: Third Century Roman Mosaic Labyrinth 2 with Minotaur, Conimbriga, Portugal

Inspiration

Writing a novel is like a journey into a labyrinth. Jerome LeStrange meets Sheryl for the first time, he says:

'A labyrinth takes you on a journey – an inward journey to the heart of the labyrinth.' He points at the Devil. 'And an outward journey back to where you started, but it never really takes you back to the same place because what you find at the centre of the labyrinth changes you for ever.'

All writers are affected by what they write, it would be impossible to write something without being emotionally involved, even a shopping list expresses your needs and desires.

Mark Twain is credited with saying '*write what you know*'. Having been born and

bred in East London, I was confident I could create a setting that was authentic and use dialogue and humour that didn't sound contrived.

The plot was more of a challenge as I needed to draw on my creative imagination. Moshin Hamid (2014) in his New York Times article writes,

'It may be that the DNA of fiction is, like our own DNA, a double helix, a two stranded beast. One strand is born of what writers have experienced. The other is born of what writers wish to experience, of the impulse to write in order to know. Fiction comes into existence when these two strands are knitted together.'

I think this is a great visual image, the double helix and the code. There is only one story the blueprint but every reading of that story is like a mutation as the reader interprets it according to their own world view and in the natural world mutations are essential to evolution and survival.

Rudy Rucker (2004) said *'the transrealist artist cannot predict the finished form of his or her work'*. He saw the novel as a living thing, growing organically like life itself. However, for something to grow it has to be nurtured and that is down to the author who must create authentic characters, plot and story world.

London and the Slipstream

London with its history, traditions, and folklore is a great place to set a Slipstream novel, film or song. Jack the Ripper, the Great Plague and Fire, the Blitz, the Underground, the Thames, London smogs, dark alleys and ancient buildings are great creative seams to mine for inspiration.

Charles Dickens' novel *A Christmas Carol* (1843) was set in London and Scrooge's hallucinations of Christmas Past, Present and Future, have Slipstream connotations.

Peter Greenaway's film *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) is a political parable of Thatcherite Britain in the 1980's in the guise of a surreal crime drama set in London. Ebert (1999) sees The Cook representing '*civil servants, dutiful citizens*': The Thief portraying 'Thatcher's '*arrogance and support of the greedy*'; The Wife representing '*Britannia*' while the The Lover is the '*Ineffectual opposition by leftists and intellectuals.*'

There are plenty of songs written about London, but the following two have a surreal edge to them. Warren Zevron's *Werewolves of London* (1978), according to the song's producer Jackson Browne, is about "*the ne'er do-well who devotes his life to pleasure: the debauched Victorian gentleman in gambling clubs, consorting with prostitutes, the aristocrat who squanders the family fortune.*" While Lily Allen's *LDN* (2006) depicts the pretence and superficiality of a big city and the cynical reality that lies beneath the veneer. '*When you look with your eyes. Everything seems nice. But if you look twice. You can see its all lies*'.

I see my thesis aligning with the following Slipstream novels, also set in the capital city.

High Rise in *The Complete Stories of J G Ballard* (1975) chronicles the social disintegration of a 40 storey tower block housing two thousand tenants on the outskirts of London. The residents descend from civilisation to savagery in a mass psychosis. *High Rise* has Freudian elements with three of its main protagonists representing the id, ego and superego (Hall 2015).

Mother London (1988) by Michael Moorcock follows three mental-hospital outpatients who experience the history of London from the Blitz to the 1980's in an episodic non-linear structure. The voice of ordinary Londoners is experienced by the

outpatients as auditory hallucinations.

The Shadow Police Trilogy by Paul Cornell, *London Falling* (2012), *The Severed Streets* (2014) and *Who Killed Sherlock Holmes?* (2016) are urban gothic mystery novels. They are police procedurals set in the present day with a supernatural twist.

Lessons Learnt

Research is an important part of any novel. I underestimated the amount of work I would have to do researching topics that formed the fabula of my story. In future, I would spend more time in the planning stage, working on my plot, characterisation and theme. I think it is important to have good scaffolding in place before you begin writing, otherwise a plot can become unstable – maybe in this instance Slipstream was a good choice.

Whether the author should resolve the plot in its entirety, or allow the reader to come to their own conclusions at the end of a novel, is a debatable issue. As my final motivation was to write a story the reader would remember I went for the latter option.

Ending and Denouement

It would be unlikely for the author of a Slipstream novel not to suffer cognitive dissonance along with the reader. The biggest dilemma for me was the ending. For Sheryl's story to finish with her spending the rest of her days on Mt Olympus enjoying the good life, felt trite and clichéd. So, I looked to Joseph Campbell (1949) and his monomyth for inspiration. In *The Hero's Journey*, the final reward the hero obtains represents three things: change, success and proof of his journey. To do justice to Sheryl and her story, I felt she should return to the Longbourn Estate transformed and redeemed. The gift she brings back to the real world is Shirl. With Shirl as a fully integrated part of Sheryl's personality, Sheryl will be whole again. Sheryl's intellect

combined with Shirl's emotional intelligence will make them a formidable team. Maybe there is another story there yet to be told.

As the denouement is the final piece of a novel's puzzle, I revised mine several times until I felt satisfied it left the reader with a sense of surprise and disorientation true to the Slipstream tradition.

My plan for the future is to write a series of Slipstream novels featuring a tenant from each of the tower blocks on the Longbourn Estate. I think there is something very sinister and strange about the Longbourn that I have yet to discover.

Looking back, I believe I achieved all my goals set out in the Introduction, however with regard to Sheryl's state of mind, I think the novel raises more questions than it answers.

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