



# On Cliché: Expression, Cognition and Understanding

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Harper, in *On Creative Writing* (2010) claims that we should “correctly view Creative Writing as acts and actions” (76), arguing that “completed works do not constitute Creative Writing” (8). Whatever the ultimate validity of this position, in comparison to traditional post-facto criticism it does emphasise the processes and considerations creative writers might engage with when they write. In consideration of any particular literary technique or narrative device, we might then not only ask what the likely effect would be on a reader or readers, we might also ask about the knowledge and competencies the writer might have to possess (or lack) in order for them to engage in the use of that technique or device.

The effect or technique that this paper will consider is cliché. It will argue that cliché is not simply symptomatic of unimaginative and overly standardised writing, rather that it is an inhibitor to thinking in our reading and writing and that cliché, from an informational as well as an ‘aesthetic’ point of view, presents logical and ethical challenges that are relevant to creative writers and those who teach creative writing. In the first section I discuss what cliché is, why it is a problem and what kind of a problem it is. Here I am indebted to Schultz’s (2014) paper which argues that cliché is not simply an expressive problem, but is suggestive of cognitive processes and habits of thought which present creative and ethical challenges. In the second section I focus on what I argue is an important characteristic aspect of cliché: That they are superficial, or informationally impoverished. I show this in a positive way by giving examples of how logically altering a cliché offers a proliferation of information. In the third section I build on this account by delineating two kinds of cliché found in creative writing: ‘external’ clichés and ‘internal’ clichés. The latter are of particular relevance for the creative writer because they are less obvious than external clichés, though still possesses the same characteristic features and problems.

The purpose of this paper is to contribute to creative writers’ understanding of a (by definition) frequent feature of literary art and also to raise awareness of a topic that, despite its frequency in creative practice and in the products of those practices, is underrepresented in CW pedagogy and theory. This paper attempts to show how cliché is a more important and complex phenomenon than it might first

appear and one that reflects some of linguistic and cognitive features of the acts and actions of reading and writing.

### UNDERSTANDING CLICHÉ

To understand how cliché can be considered a problem, one should, in line with good intellectual etiquette, first attempt to define it. Merriam-Webster defines cliché as “[1] a phrase or expression that has been used so often that it is no longer original or interesting [2] something that is so commonly used in books, stories, etc., that it is no longer effective” (online).

Such a definition should be rather familiar. As teachers of creative writing, we advise writers to avoid clichés, we castigate writers who use clichés, but we less often consider what the problems of cliché are, aside from the fact that it obscures the writer’s ‘style’, ‘voice’ or lacks that signature Renaissance quality of ‘originality’. This is attested to by the fact that many CW textbooks mention the concept of cliché only in passing or not at all (Harper 2012, Morley 2011, Neale 2009, Anderson 2005). This may be due to the fact that clichés are not meant to be a significant formal feature of our writing as opposed, say, to character development, generic recognition and reflection, structural integrity or the development of imagery. This is understandable, for like advising writers to avoid logical contradictions or write sentences with a subject and an object, it can appear as something too obvious to give much attention to.

This lack of attention though is itself suggestive of an attitude towards cliché which is questionable, i.e. that it is a simple problem with a simple remedy. In his article ‘Cliché as Reification: Nurturing Criticality in the Undergraduate Creative Writing classroom’, Schultz argues for a distinction in the consideration of cliché. He claims that when considering cliché, “the underlying thought itself, not the words used to express it, is what is at issue” (85). That is, we can either see cliché as primarily an expressive problem or as a primarily cognitive problem.

An account of cliché as an expressive problem considers the issue as one of ‘freshness’ of language. As Schultz puts it, in “[t]hinking this way, the cliché is conceived of as ‘bad writing’ specifically because the thought at issue has not been expressed in a creative enough or imaginative enough way” (79). Such an understanding is reflected in the dictionary definition given above, as it addresses cliché only at the level of linguistic expression. If this is the dominant understanding of cliché, it may plausibly explain why it is given sparse attention in CW textbooks, because in considering cliché as an expressive problem, one sees it as a relatively simple problem with a relatively simple remedy, a problem whose remedy would lie in the identification and then removal of the offending phrase or phrases. In response to this problem, one could deal with cliché by offering suggestions of less hackneyed language in its place. So, we might offer a remedy of ‘there’s a lot more life in the ocean’ to replace ‘plenty more fish in the sea’.

In contrast to this, Schultz offers an account of cliché as a cognitive problem. Seeing cliché as a cognitive problem emphasises that cliché repeats an idea, not simply an expression, which is lacking in meaning or at least sufficiently obvious so as to be otiose in repetition. Whereas the expressive problem understanding concerns “finding a new way to phrase the old thought” (80), the cognitive problem understanding concerns critique of that ‘old thought’ because, “the problem is that the thought [represented by the cliché] never rose to the level of expression in the first place” (ibid). Here then, there is a suggestion that cliché is not a simple problem and any remedy to it should pay more attention to how it functions on the level of ideas and cognition. Such an account casts cliché, as Redfern somewhat blithely put it, as the “Musak of the mind” (57).

If we are to see cliché as a primarily cognitive issue, we then need to consider how they are likely processed and understood by speakers. Non-formalist approaches to linguistics, notably cognitive linguistics, has given some useful attention to cliché which can help us to understand how it functions at the level of cognition. Hamawand claims that:

It is an expression which is apparently compositional, but in reality it is not...Because clichés are too often used, they are stored as complete units in the minds of speech participants. They are easy to retrieve for the speaker and easy to decode for the hearer. Like an idiom, a cliché is stored in a mental lexicon in ready-made form (115).

Hamawand makes a couple of important points here, namely that clichés are non-compositional linguistic objects and in being so, are mentally stored in a different manner to compositional objects. Clichés are non-compositional because the individual lexical items that compose the phrase do not predictably contribute to the meaning of the sentence (quite different from clichés themselves being predictable phrases). Closely related to their non-compositionality, clichés, along with idioms and proverbs display partial analysability. Langaker defines analysability as “[t]he extent to which symbolic components are discernible within a complex expression” (13). For example, the word ‘teacher’ is fully analysable because firstly it is discernible at the phonological level and secondly because speakers are aware of two elements, namely the verb ‘teach’ and the morphological suffix ‘er,’ and the contribution they make to the meaning of the word ‘teacher’ (one who teaches).

Clichés tend to display only partial analysability because, while they are discernible on the phonological level, it is not clear to the speaker how their components contribute to the overall expression. It should be clear then that sentences that display a high degree of compositionality also have a high degree of analysability. Whereas compositionality refers more abstractly to the grammatical and semantic function of items within a given linguistic context (i.e. a sentence), analysability refers to speakers’ ability to perceive the function of those items.

Hamawand’s understanding of clichés is held by others such as Cruse, who claims that “it seems highly likely that such phrases [clichés] are stored as complete units in the brains of both speaker and hearer” (74). In the context of this paper, what is most important to note is that clichés require relatively

little effort to retrieve, produce and understand. Indeed, we might explore these issues more practically by considering the following phrases, all of which have been elided:

1. Add [...] to injury.
2. As [...] would have it.
3. Cool, calm and [...].
4. Don't count your chickens before they've [...].
5. Fate worse than [...].
6. How [...] flies.
7. Plenty more [...] in the sea.
8. [...] wasn't built in a day.
9. You're breaking my [...].
10. Everything happens for a [...].

I would conjecture that filling in the blanks of the above phrases required little time, a conjecture supported by long experience of setting this as a classroom exercise where the student response has been near-automatic. All of the above are of course well-known clichés and that the response is near-automatic plausibly reflects the fact that clichés are typically non-compositional and display partial analysability. That is, as they are stored as complete units in the minds of speakers and hearers alike, they require relatively little effort to retrieve and decode.

To highlight this further, we can compare our clichés with the following sentence:

11. I'm going to [...] for Easter.

Unlike a cliché, this sentence is unlikely to be met with such a rapid response, even though there are, ostensibly, shared features between 11 and 1-10. The significant difference is that 11 is compositional and relies on the meaning of each word to contribute to its overall meaning. This is suggested by the fact we do not have a ready-made 'filler' and the elision could be filled in any number of ways: 'Dublin', 'Asia', 'the North Pole', 'my Mum's house', 'eat chocolate', 'wear my embarrassing jumper', etc. The point is that speakers struggle to understand incomplete compositional sentences whereas this is less the case with clichés and other collocational linguistic phenomena, because they are stored as complete units.

If creative writers understand cliché as primarily a cognitive as opposed to an expressive issue, then cliché becomes of considerable concern. If a cognitive problem, one cannot simply take a phrase like ‘her heart broke into a thousand pieces’ and ‘refresh’ it, as it would make little difference if the heart broke, cracked or shattered into a thousand, ten thousand or six pieces, parts or bits. When considered as a cognitive problem, cliché not only touches on how readers read, but what ideas and presuppositions may or may not be present when we write and read clichés. To return to Harper’s distinction, the issue of cliché is relevant to the ‘acts and actions’ of creative writing, as well as ‘completed works’.

Up to this point, I have labeled cliché as a ‘problem’, which considering its frequency in literature (and daily conversation), requires further examination. Having now characterised what kind of issue cliché is (a cognitive one), in the following section I aim to justify what is problematic about cliché, namely that they are characteristically superficial in that they are informationally impoverished and do not give writers and readers the means to understand what they purport to explain or give an account of.

### THE SUPERFICIALITY OF CLICHÉ

As Cruse notes, it is “a commonplace observation that words prefer some partners to others” (229). In the previous section, we saw that this is the case with clichés, which typically lack the compositionality and analysability of non-clichéd language. Clichés are mentally stored as complete units and this plausibly accounts for their rapid recognition, even in contexts where lexico-grammatical elements are elided, something which I hope was suggested by the (albeit modest) exercise in the last section.

This is important for creative writers because clichés typically do not require, let alone encourage consideration of the ideas they represent, for both writer and reader (about which I have more to say in the final section). That is, they are characteristically superficial. By ‘superficial’, I mean that they have relatively low informational content and do not provide the means to generate a more complex or adequate understanding of an idea, two features I will argue are linked. I stress that I am attempting to establish a characteristic feature of cliché, and I do not intend the following arguments to cover all possible instances of cliché use.

The idea that clichés are informationally impoverished is not new. David Crystal for example claims that “[i]n clichés we see fragments of language apparently dying, yet unable to die. Clichés emerge when expressions outlive their usefulness as conveyors of information” (186). Crystal’s personification of language ‘dying’ calls for comment here, as it is not immediately clear, if usage keeps language ‘alive’, how clichés reflect ‘dying’ language. Indeed, if judged in terms of use, one would find it difficult to refuse the conclusion that clichés are alive and kicking! If not a comment on lack of usage then, a plausible way of understanding the linguistic moribundity of clichés is that they are non-generative, i.e. they lack the kind of features that requires percipients to make sense of them, features such as compositionality and analysability. The reason I return to this point is that Crystal is claiming that there is

a link between the apparent moribundity of clichés and their ability to convey information. But what might that link be?

I think we can gain an insight to this link if we briefly consider the visual arts. Ernst Gombrich in his masterful *Art and Illusion* claims that, “the greater the probability of a symbol’s occurrence in any given situation, the smaller will be its information content. Where we can anticipate, we need not listen” (171-172). There is an analogy between expected visual content and cliché here, for symbols with a high probability of occurrence within a context (a crucifix in a church, a crown in a picture of a monarch) are expected by a percipient, who will need only minimal cueing to ‘fill in’ the blanks or recognise the whole (visual or phrasal). Indeed, whether we use it literally or not, we sometimes refer to pictures of halcyon sunsets or basking odalisques as ‘clichéd’.

It is this tendency to ‘fill-in’, or recognise the whole from the part that leads Gombrich to suggest that the predictability of symbols contribute to their low information content. The key idea is that anticipation makes reflection unnecessary and makes it unnecessary because the image or idea is mentally ‘ready-made’ rather than needing to be constructed by active consideration or more time to perception of the object. The reason that clichés are superficial is because they are functionally geared towards being perceived without much reflection or attention. Indeed, if they were altered so as to frustrate the anticipations of percipients, they would no longer be clichés.

However, on this point, one might defend cliché on the grounds that such automatic or unreflective responses are valuable over a wide range of human activity. While I am arguing that the linguistic features of cliché and the way they are stored makes them poor carriers of information, a defender might respond by pointing out that the cricketer, pianist, chess player or actor all in their various ways train themselves to perform cognitive and/or muscular actions which are performed unreflectingly, but are the ground for more complex and varied activity. For example, a cricketer might spend many hours honing their forward defensive stroke, where ‘honing’ constitutes the extent to which such a movement is easily repeatable and quickly responsive to deliveries by a bowler. Such a ‘honed’ response would allow the batsperson to focus on other aspects of the game, such as the positions of fielders; an important consideration when trying to compromise the opposition’s defences. Likewise, a stage actor will learn their lines sufficiently well to ‘speed-run’, or quickly regurgitate them before a performance. Having the lines off-book is important in ensuring the actor can pay attention to the unfolding drama, the gestural and facial responses of their fellow players, opportunities for impromptu divergences from the script, blocking and the timing of action and speech.

If one applied such observations to clichés, they would constitute a kind of interlocutory ‘muscle memory’, providing a quick and easy way of transmitting and receiving an idea. It may then be that labelling them ‘superficial’ would be like calling the speed-running of lines superficial: An intelligible but wrong-headed claim that would fail to appreciate the extent to which conscious activity (the timing of lines in a play, considering whether to take a pawn en passant in chess) is based on a barrage of

unconscious or unreflecting acts and processes.

While it is certainly true that reliance on unconscious processes and actions are essential for the development of skill and competence in many fields of activity and knowledge, there are some important differences between clichés and the kind of unreflective responses mentioned above. The most obvious difference is that in the cases of our actor, chess player etc., the unreflective responses were brought about by serious and prolonged effort, involving a characteristically arduous process of correction, reflection and rehearsal to maintain the level automation. One's forward defensive stroke or memorization of the Canterbury Tales prologue can always 'go rusty', but clichés require no such arduous practice. As Redfern states:

Whereas we have the capacity for second thoughts – adaptation, twists, questions- clichés are first thoughts, unexamined, in fact often non-thoughts or automatisms. This common knowledge represented by cliché sustains the status quo' (7).

Clichés then are common property, unlike a pianist's mastery of complex contrapuntal textures. A corollary of this is that unlike practicing counterpoint, one cannot build on clichés to achieve more complex or varied insights or information, for if one did then the cliché itself would become otiose, because such a process of 'building' would cut against the way clichés are functionally geared towards being perceived without much reflection or attention.

If clichés are characteristically superficial, then one should expect that non-clichéd phrases (being compositional and highly analysable) would require more time, reflection and, crucially, more inference and suggestion about character, belief and context. To refer back to Gombrich, language which refuses the anticipations of readers and speakers would have to be 'listened' to.

I suggest that this is the case with a positive account of how non-clichéd language can provide richer and more complex information than clichéd language. Let us imagine that an unfortunate couple, Bob and Clara, have broken up after a long and emotionally fraught relationship. A little after the breakup, Bob arrives at Clara's flat to pick up his books, vinyls and other bits of cultural detritus. Before he leaves, Clara says this to Bob: "You've broken my heart and I'll never forgive you."

This is a fairly standard response, particularly with the inclusion of the 'broken heart' cliché. What this reflects is that Clara has been emotionally damaged by Bob and dislikes him because of this. This psychological process is closely related to the idea of vengeance, that motivating factor which sent Edmund Dantes around the world in the guise of the Count of Monte Cristo and sent Charles Bronson on murderous rampages in the Death Wish franchise. Now, let us disrupt the anticipation of readers and imagine that Clara said this to Bob instead: "You haven't broken my heart, and I'll never forgive you."

The first thing to note is that unlike its predecessor, this is a marked response where negative polarity has been employed to invert the cliché. What is important about this is that the cliché still exists at the

level of the lexico-grammatical elements in the phrase, but has been disrupted. Such disruption calls for more active interpretation by the reader, at least if one wishes (pace the Principle of Charity) to make sense of Clara's statement. To do this, one would have to consider Clara's beliefs, past and predilections.

From a single statement with a relatively undeveloped context, it would be obtuse to pretend we could confidently ascribe a particular set of beliefs to Clara. Nevertheless, the phrase is marked enough to be open to febrile interpretation and here is one story we could tell: Clara is a woman highly influenced by Hollywood romances and these have, to a significant degree, informed her expectations of love, relationships and breakups. When she began seeing Bob, she expected her experience to replicate the highfaluting romances she admires. This, however, was never the case. While she tried to like Bob so that her expectations of romance might be matched by reality, this never happened. When the breakup occurs, Clara's overarching feeling is that there is a gap between what she expected to feel (a sense of loss reflected in the 'broken heart' cliché) and what she does feel (anti-climax). This failure of the situation to reflect Clara's expectations leads her to blame Bob for his underwhelming performance as a partner and leads her therefore to say: "You haven't broken my heart, and I'll never forgive you".

In the first example, the cliché gives one little suggestion of anything particular about her relationship with Bob, her relationship to herself, or what belief systems may inform her. In latest example however, we have a significantly more complex suggestion for Clara's valedictory outburst. The suggestion not only concerns the influence of art on consciousness and social expectations, but linked to this, we see a challenge to Clara's belief system, as she is being forced to confront a distinction between what she thinks is the case (romance in Hollywood) and what is the case (Bob is an uninspiring partner and Hollywood lies). Clara's own expectations of heartbreak are being challenged to become more complex and her statement seems to recognise that the 'broken heart' cliché is in fact, a cliché. In contrast to the first example, this scenario gives us reason to consider Clara a round character (as opposed to flat) and reflective one too.

While I would accept that other interpretations of Clara might explain the facts equally well, the point is that by defying the cliché and frustrating the anticipations of readers, more information is generated, as readers are encouraged to make meaning. Gombrich again makes a germane point in discussion of the 1st Century BCE mosaic, Alexander's Victory Over Darius, which features a complex series of overlapping forms with the use of foreshortening and dynamic perspective. Gombrich states that, "[w]e are forced to sort out the puzzling shapes to build up the image of events in our mind, and thus in lingering on the situation we come to share the experience of those involved" (116). Like the example just given, Gombrich's point suggests how cognitive difficulty can engender greater information. When we have 'puzzling shapes', our engagement as readers and writers must be heightened and in being heightened, we are more likely to 'linger' on the ideas, scenes, characters and textures of the fictional world. The oddity of 'you haven't broken my heart, and I'll never forgive you' is just such a 'puzzling shape' and one that further confirms cliché as primarily a cognitive problem.

I finished the last section by stating I would give an answer as to why cliché should be considered a problem at all, for one might think otherwise, considering how much art abounds in clichés (soaps, superhero comics, pot-boilers, videogame characters and Medieval poetry comparing young women to the month of May). The problem of cliché for creative writing is twofold. The first problem is a pedagogic one for CW as a discipline. If the study of CW is meant, as the QAA (2016) benchmark states, to question “constraints and conventions [of writing] ...in order to produce innovative solutions to artistic problems” and to allow students to “expand their thinking about the possibilities and challenges of writing” (5), then cliché, as a characteristically superficial feature is likely to inhibit those aims. I stress again that the issue is not simply one of ‘freshness’ of expression, but one which involves how we connote meaning and process information. Arguably then, cliché is a subject that should feature more prominently in university teaching, about which I will have more to say later.

The other issue is at once ethical and aesthetic and concerns what writers expect of themselves and their readers. As Schultz, Redfern and others have noted, cliché is ‘common knowledge’ and in this sense reflects and plausibly reinforces the status quo. Now, there is nothing inherently wrong with common knowledge or a status quo, rather the problem is that clichés refuse the writer and reader (which can be one and the same), the opportunity to imagine and develop their scope of empathy (both cognitive and affective). This is because at the linguistic level clichés lack compositionality and are stored as units, which makes them superficial and resistant to imaginative development and meaning-making. Moreover, clichés are not candid with readers and writers, because they ostensibly look unmarked and in their familiarity maintain the redolence of a well-tested maxim. Like a ritual whose words are said too often so as to become less meaningful, clichés are disingenuous and frustrate rather than aid our efforts to understand. I would disagree with Amossy then when she claims that “in identifying cliché as common property and, consequently, as the sign of dizzying expropriation, he [the reader] combines recognition with critical evaluation” (34). Contrary to Amossy, I would argue that cliché appears to stifle critical evaluation or as Schultz puts it, when readers are presented with clichés, “un-thought thinking [is used] to describe an un-experienced experience...in other words, thought and experience themselves to become fully reified” (79).

### INTERNALISED CLICHÉ

We have seen so far that clichés constitute a kind of automated common knowledge within a linguistic community. When considering them within creative writing, they are a more complex problem than they might first appear, something belied by the attention given to them within the literature. In this section I wish to expand my account of cliché by arguing that within literary works, clichés are not confined to the phases we already recognise and know: I am proposing a distinction between what can be called ‘external’ and ‘internal’ cliché.

By ‘external cliché’, I mean the objects we have already considered: Those tired phrases we find in conversations, advertisements and literature. Up to this point, this paper has been concerned only with external clichés. In contrast, by ‘internal cliché’, I mean expressions which become superficial because they are used continuously within a single work or series. We might not think it clichéd that a character massages their left temple with their thumb, but given many examples of a character doing this within a single work, we may come to recognise and even expect it. In such a case, the action of temple-rubbing may crystallise into shorthand for stress, deep thought or whatnot. Internal clichés then are not recognised as clichés generally because they only become so within an individual work or series and so while I will be arguing they are similar, they are not ‘common knowledge’ in the way external clichés are.

To explore internal clichés and show their similarity to external clichés, I wish to consider two well-known novels: Alexander Dumas’ swashbuckling epic adventure *The Count of Monte Cristo* ([1844] 2009) and Tracy Chevalier’s historical coming of age novel *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1999). Both of these, I claim, display the use of internal cliché in different and useful ways. To begin, here are a number of examples of internal clichés from *The Count of Monte Cristo*:

12. “What, no wine?” said Dantes, turning pale (5).
13. “In an hour?” inquired Dangles, turning pale (16).
14. “How dreadful!” explained Renee, turning pale (23).
15. “So then” he exclaimed, turning pale with anger (36).
16. “It is he!” said Villefort, turning pale (38).
17. [H]e fell back, moaning and turning pale (82).
18. “Oh, oh!” cried Morrel, turning pale (104).
19. “Father,” he exclaimed, turning pale as death (109).
20. “I agree with you, Monsieur,” said the young man, turning pale (237).
21. [He was]...shaking her head and turning pale at the mere remembrance of the scene (320).

From this list I’ve excluded many examples of ‘turning pale’ and excluded variations such as ‘going pale’, ‘becoming pale’, ‘becoming paler’, ‘pale and trembling’ or simply ‘pale’ found within mildly different linguistic contexts e.g. “Ferdinand became deadly pale” (9), “[he] was pale and abstracted” (15).

Indeed, neither the thrust of my argument nor space would permit me to include all such variations within the novel's approximately eight hundred pages!

What should be clear is that our hero Edmond Dantes and his associates often go pale. More important than this, they go pale in many varied circumstances: Disappointment, anger, sickness, embarrassment, grief and fear (the list could go on). It would not be unfair to say that Dumas relies on the adjective 'pale' as a kind of panacea for describing almost any negative physical or emotional state. It is in this sense that Dumas' writing is clichéd: Not because we would all recognise 'turning pale' as a cliché, but because it is overused in the work and in being overused, becomes superficial. Where we can anticipate, we need not listen. 'Going pale' fails, in being used for so much, to be particularly useful for anything and so obfuscates rather than assists the reader in coming to know characters and the potential granularity of their experiences.

To further the point, we can next consider Chevalier's *Girl with a Pearl Earring*:

22. There was a tang of blood in the air that always made me shiver (26).
23. I thought of my master's hand over mine as he showed me how to grind bone, and shivered (118).
24. I shivered, thinking of the painting that had hung over my bed in the cellar (140).
25. Van Ruijven's smile made me shiver (168).
26. I shivered, though I was not cold (169).
27. When I saw what was needed—that point of brightness he had used to catch the eye in other paintings—I shivered (191).
28. The man was smiling at the young woman as if he were squeezing pears in the market to see if they were ripe. I shivered (206).
29. When her eyes fell on the palette knife a shiver ran through me (, 215).

Another set of examples revolve around the 'jaw tightening' of the main character, Griet:

30. Only my mother would note the tightness along my jaw, the widening of my already wide eyes (3).
31. I continued what I was doing as if it were natural for her to sit with me, but my jaw tightened (54).
32. I was annoying him again. My jaw tightened (101).

33. I could feel my jaw tightening and my eyes widening (169).
34. Stupid girl, I thought, my jaw tightening (195).
35. My jaw tightened but I managed to hold my head steady (208).

Girl with the Pearl Earring possesses less obvious and more useful examples of internal clichés than *The Count of Monte Cristo*. This is because while Dumas displays a near-monomania around the use of ‘pale’ for very many situations and characters, Chevalier employs a more developed stock of phrases she associates with a single character, the limited first-person narrator, Griet.

To show how these examples constitute internal clichés, let’s consider some more closely. The phrase ‘I shivered’ within the context of the novel comes to mean roughly that Griet suffers from a feeling of discomfort. However, the shivering in example 23 appears tinged with the erotic and in example 25 with repulsion, which are (usually) quite different states. If this is the case, then the contrast between example 23 and 25 demonstrates how the phrase fails to reflect an important distinction between repulsion and attraction, a distinction masked by the repeated use of ‘I shivered’. It is this obfuscation due to overuse that makes what are dissimilar situations incongruously similar.

The situation is much the same for Griet’s ‘jaw tightening’. As the examples reflect, this phrase tells the reader that Griet is feeling a mental pressure she is endeavouring to control. As Griffiths has rightly pointed out, “even writing that is dedicated to telling us things can be made to show as well, depending on how creative we wish to be. Perhaps, then, the question of readerly engagement is what we should be addressing” (28). This is a useful comment in this context because the reverse is also the case: Showing can be used to tell when the ‘showing’ becomes formalised, as in the case of Griet’s tightening jaw. This is because the ‘showing’ offers little opportunity for readerly engagement as the phrase, in being used for many different situations, does not require, but resists reflection on and understanding of Griet’s state.

At this point, one may raise objections. Firstly, it might be objected that picking out the shivering and jaw-tightening of Griet is unfair, as while they happen several times throughout the novel, these are idiosyncrasies of Griet and as idiosyncrasies, they need to be articulated several times to stimulate reader recognition. After all, an idiosyncrasy that happens once isn’t an idiosyncrasy at all. On this account, the examples given above would be akin to the leitmotif of an operatic character, rather than a cliché. This is an understandable response, but it fails to address the fact that the examples are used to indicate much the same thing and what they indicate is superficial. In other words, jaw-tightening and shivering come to be expected of Griet, they require little effort to recognise and are uninformative, all of which are characteristic qualities of cliché.

Another objection might be that my arguments require a high degree of familiarity with the texts in question and the presentation of quotes is ultimately insufficient to establish my interpretation. One

could be worried that I am asking the reader to take my word for it. On this point, I would be sanguine if a reader rejected my interpretations of *The Count of Monte Cristo* and *Girl with the Pearl Earring*, as I am trying to establish a more modest point. All I am trying to establish is that internal clichés can be a feature of some writing and are a reasonable extension of what creative writers should refer to as ‘cliché’. One can, I hope, accept this without necessarily accepting my interpretations of the texts I have selected.

On a final note, it is important to be clear about what my criticisms of Dumas and Chevalier are not. They are not a requirement that variation be used, so that ‘pale’ is stamped out and replaced with ‘wan’, ‘bloodless’, ‘white’ or ‘snowy’. Such a requirement would characterise a solution to the problem as being at the level of expression, rather than at the level of cognition and understanding. Neither are my criticisms meant to single out Dumas and Chevalier, for internal clichés (as well as external clichés) are found in many genres and with many writers. In looking at Dumas and Chevalier, we have two examples that are well-known and suggest internal clichés are not a recent historical development, but are relevant for students and scholars of CW today.

## CONCLUSION

I would like to finish with some reflections on what my arguments may mean for CW both as a taught subject and as a theoretical and scholarly endeavour aimed at understanding literature and literary processes better.

In a previous section I argued that cliché was a pedagogic problem as it inhibits some of the aims of the study of CW, at least according to official national bodies such as NAWE and QAA. We might consider though that it is not uncommon for CW courses to promote themselves as akin to training programmes for becoming a commercially successful author. As Johnson claims, “writing [in the university] is too often now driven by a desire for fame more than a desire to write, and this is affecting the experience of teaching and learning writing” (53). This indeed marks a well-noted shift in the perceived function of CW in the university, which Myers recognises when he states that “[o]riginally the teaching of creative writing...was an experiment in education...it was not a scheme for turning out official writers” (4).

With this in mind, we might also consider that commercially successful art often features clichés. One could argue that if CW is a training course for writers whose aim is to successfully respond to the marketplace (Goss 2015, Hook 1963), then cliché is a non-issue, because commercially successful literary art features it. Such a position would be undeniably consistent. However, if CW seeks to encourage a rounding of character that is not immediately reducible to the economic productivity of students, then cliché deserves more attention, both in the classroom and in the academic literature. Like so much within our field, how we perceive the status of the author, the ontology of fictional worlds or the role of cliché suggests a deeper, if sometimes unarticulated and/or unelucidated attitude to CW as an

intellectual project (Jordan-Baker 2015, Donnelly 2012).

As well as being a pedagogical problem, I also argued that cliché presented an ethical and aesthetic problem as it reflects and reinforces a status quo which insulates itself from questioning. Abbs claims that, “[i]f, say, a person only hears clichés during the formative period of his development, he will inevitably speak in clichés and while he speaks in clichés, his mind will never be able to penetrate beyond the trite and commonplace” (57). This may sound alarmist, though if clichés are characteristically superficial and have low-information content, then even if the adjective ‘never’ is too absolute, the claim is plausible. It is then not that clichés (external and internal) are a pesky blot on our writing we must remedy with linguistic reformulation. The matter is more interesting and complex. It is that clichés are the enemies of thought as they obfuscate clearer understanding and imagination, inhibiting fruitful creative engagement with the world (of which fictional worlds are a part). For the writer and her readers then, this is not only a stylistic reason to avoid clichés, but also a reason to see that clichés of both kinds can make the acts and actions of writing lack creative agency.

Like many problems, I believe these two issues are deeply interconnected and in considering cliché, we may not only become clearer about a significant feature of literature and our teaching of it, but also about how, more fundamentally, we may understand the function(s) or literary art and the subject of CW itself.

Before, during and after the acts and actions of creative writing, there is thought. Or lack of it.

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