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"What do you want me to tell?" The inferential texture of Alice Munro's 'Postcard'

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1. Introduction

In this paper, this paper, I discuss Alice Munro's story 'Postcard'. The repetition of the noun phrase *this paper* here is deliberate. It echoes the repetition of the word *yesterday* in the opening sentence of 'Postcard', a salient feature of the text which is discussed again below. If current pragmatic theories are right, then the repetition here should have caused you to consider what effects it was intended to give rise to which would not have arisen if you had read the sentence with no repetition ('In this paper, I discuss. . .'). I am expecting that most readers struggled to see why I would have repeated this noun phrase and possibly decided that it must be a mistake. By contrast, there are relatively accessible possible explanations for the repetition in the story and some readers might even struggle to remember later that the repetition was there.

One aim of this paper is to consider how helpful ideas from pragmatic stylistics can be in developing understanding of the production, interpretation and evaluation of this story and of other texts. Naturally, we expect pragmatic theories to account for the interpretation of local phenomena such as repetitions. Discussions of pragmatic phenomena tend to focus on how hearers and readers understand them. This paper suggests that pragmatic theories also have something to say about the production and evaluation of spoken and written utterances. It considers what is likely to be a central focus of inferential activity for many readers: attempting to understand the narrator of this story and her relationships with others in the story. Finally, it considers whether a focus on inferential processes can

help to account for what Stockwell calls 'texture', i.e. 'the experienced quality of textuality' (Stockwell 2009: 1).

Section 2 of the paper offers some general thoughts about pragmatic stylistics, understood here as work in stylistics which focuses on inferential processes. Section 3 summarises the plot of the story 'Postcard' and discusses some features of the story which we would expect a pragmatic stylistic approach to account for, starting from the repetition at the beginning and moving on to consider other inferences about the narrator and her relationships with others. Section 4 focuses specifically on the notion of 'texture' (in Stockwell's sense) and considers how work on inference can contribute to accounts of it.

2. Pragmatic Stylistics: Exploring Inferences

Since the focus here is on a literary text, this work falls within the realm of 'pragmatic literary stylistics' as discussed by Chapman and Clark (2014; see particularly the introduction, pp. 1-15). The particular variety of post-Gricean pragmatics applied here is based on relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1986; Clark 2013; for discussion of relevance-theoretic pragmatic stylistics in particular, see Clark 2014a, 2014b; MacMahon 2006).

There is space here only for the briefest mention of some of the key points of the relevance-theoretic approach adopted in the discussion below. It is a post-Gricean approach in that it follows from and is influenced by the work of Paul Grice (1989). It does not, however, fall within the group of approaches termed 'neo-Gricean' since the pragmatic principles it assumes are not similar to Gricean 'maxims'. Rather, pragmatic inference is seen as being governed by two law-like generalisations. One of these is a generalisation about human cognition:

(1) First, or Cognitive, Principle of Relevance:
Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance.

The other is a generalisation about communication:

(2) Second, or Communicative, Principle of Relevance
Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

To understand these, we need to know what the technical term 'relevance' refers to within this approach. Keeping things simple, a stimulus or other phenomenon is relevant to an individual to the extent that it gives rise to positive cognitive effects (roughly, changes in that individual's cognitive environment which are worth having) and to the extent that the effort involved in arriving at these is small. If I become aware now that:

(3) The current draft of the paper I am working on is 1,000 words over the word limit.

this is relevant to me since it enables me to become aware of things it is worth my while to know, such as that I will need to reduce the length, that I can modify assumptions about how long it will take to finish the article, and so on. Suppose, by contrast, that I notice that:

(4) The current draft of the paper I am working on is 10,000 words over the word limit.

Assuming that (4) refers to the same paper as that referred to by (3), this will be more relevant as it has a greater number of effects. It will be much harder for me to reduce its length. Finishing the article will take me lots of time. I might not manage it in time. And so on. In other words, (4) is more relevant than (3) because it has more cognitive effects for me ('positive' in that they are worth having, despite many of these being 'negative' in other ways!)

Now suppose I consider two ways of informing you of (3), either by uttering (3) itself or by uttering (5):

(5) If I wrote 6,000 more words, the current draft of the paper I am working on would be 7,000 words over the limit.

If nothing follows for you from (5) that would not follow from (3), then (5) is less relevant to you than (3), since it puts you to greater effort than (3) without this effort resulting in increased effects.

This characterisation of 'relevance' is used in each of the two principles mentioned above. The Cognitive Principle claims that our cognitive system tends to be geared towards 'maximising' relevance, i.e. deriving as many cognitive effects as possible for as little effort as possible.

The Communicative Principle says that communication gives rise to expectations of 'optimal' relevance, i.e. (roughly) to finding an interpretation which leads to enough effects to justify the effort involved in deriving them and without putting us to effort which could have been avoided. In work since 2004 (see, for example, Wilson and Sperber 2004; Sperber and Wilson 2005) claims about how interpretation processes work which follow from the general principles of the theory have been presented with reference to a 'Relevance-Guided Comprehension Heuristic' (stated simply here):

(6) Relevance-Guided Comprehension Heuristic
a. Follow a path of least effort in deriving cognitive effects
b. Stop when your expectations of relevance are satisfied.

This leads to surprisingly precise predictions about how we will understand particular utterances. One way to see this is to compare utterances which are minimally different, e.g. (7) and (8):

(7) He will.
(8) I'm saying he will.

Suppose someone asks you whether I will cut the number of words in my article to the required length and so be ready to submit by the deadline. If you reply by uttering (7), you will be taken to be saying that I will succeed. There is, then, no need to include the words *I'm saying* at the start of your utterance. However, relevance theory predicts that the extra effort involved in processing the two words in utterance (8) must lead to more effects and so you must arrive at an interpretation which is different from what you would have arrived at on hearing (7). A likely interpretation here is that not everyone would say that I will succeed and so it is relevant to indicate explicitly who is saying it here. This suggests that there is some doubt about whether I will manage and that others would give a different answer. Relevance theory accounts for examples like this with reference to the Communicative Principle of Relevance and the comprehension heuristic which follows from it. Other approaches use different kinds of principles. 'Neo-Gricean' approaches such as those developed by Horn (1984, 1987, 2004, 2007) and Levinson (1987, 2000) use principles which have more in common with Grice's maxims (for introductions to

various neo-Gricean and other approaches to pragmatics, see Birner, 2012; Chapman 2011).

Relevance theory and other approaches to pragmatics have been applied in a number of ways in work on stylistics. The majority of work has focused on accounting for how audiences develop interpretations of texts. More recently, there has been increased interest in how texts are produced and evaluated. Clark (2012), for example, considers the effects of editorial interventions in a short story by Raymond Carver and so considers inferences authors and editors make about what readers will infer. Clark and Owtram (2012) consider techniques used with writers to encourage them to think explicitly about how different formulations of texts will be likely to give rise to different kinds of inferences in readers. Clark (2014c) makes some suggestions about how inferential processes before, during and after reading a text can make it more or less likely that an individual will come to value a text. However, pragmatic stylistic work on production and evaluation is at an early stage and the vast majority of work from this perspective continues to focus on interpretation (work in literary criticism, by contrast, has often focused on questions about evaluation). The rest of this paper also focuses mainly on interpretation but it includes some remarks about production and evaluation as well as about how inferences involved in production, interpretation and evaluation are connected.

3. 'Postcard' and Pragmatics

There is, of course, far too much to be said about 'Postcard' and about inferential processes involved in producing and responding to it, for this paper to come close to covering it all. Instead, the aim here is to give a flavour of what a pragmatic stylistic approach could say about the story, identifying just a few key features of the story and saying something about a few things which a pragmatic stylistic account might develop.

Like other stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, 'Postcard' shares features common to many examples of Alice Munro's writing. It presents events from what we might think of as 'ordinary' life in a small town (called Jubilee) in Canada, gives readers a sense of having a fairly rich and full sense of what the world it presents is like and how it feels to its characters. A key feature of this story is that it encourages us to think about the emotional life of the first person narrator, Helen, and of the

people she interacts with. It encourages us to consider not only what happens in the story but why it has happened and how we feel about this. This section begins with a brief summary and then says a little more about key features of the story (identified here simply from my own intuitions, backed up with reference to discussion by others) which we might expect a stylistic analysis, and a pragmatic stylistic analysis in particular, to say something about.

3.1 What's in 'Postcard'

The story begins one morning in late winter when the first-person narrator, Helen, goes to the post office and collects a postcard from Florida from her lover, Clare MacQuarrie. We learn that he has been gone for three weeks and will be back in a few days. This is the only card he has sent. It features 'a motel with a sign out front in the shape of a big husky blonde creature' with a speech balloon saying 'Sleep at my place'. Clare's message contains a jokey remark about not taking up this offer and some comments on the weather. It closes: 'Be a good girl. Clare'. We follow Helen home from the Post Office, learn more about her life at work in 'King's Department Store' and with her mother, about her relationships with Clare, her mother, and an earlier lover, Ted Forgie, and her friend Alma. The most significant event in the story comes when Helen's mother discovers from the local paper, and her friend Alma confirms, that Clare is returning a married man. Alma then informs Helen that Clare and his new bride have already returned to Jubilee. We see Helen, her mother and Alma reacting to the news, culminating in Helen driving to Clare's house that night, honking her horn repeatedly and calling out to Clare. A local policeman, Buddy Shields, comes to calm Helen down and take her home. While he is there, Clare comes out of the house and advises Helen to go home. She describes him as 'an unexplaining man'. Buddy Shields drives Helen home, advising her that she just has to accept things and telling her a story to illustrate his point. The story is about two local people caught in a place where 'they had no business being . . . together'. The woman's husband had reported her missing and of course they are embarrassed. But the next day Buddy sees them shopping together, showing that they had decided to carry on with their life together despite how unhappy they were about the situation. In the final paragraph of the story, Helen begins by acknowledging that things will continue but says that she can't understand why seeing Clare there 'as an unexplaining man' made her want to reach out and touch him.

3.2 Inferences in production, interpretation and evaluation

As mentioned above, pragmatic stylistics should be able to say something about the inferential processes involved in production and evaluation as well as interpretation. The discussion here does not go into great detail on any of these areas and focuses mainly on interpretation. However, each of the inferences discussed could be described with reference to Munro's inferences (and those of any editors involved) about what readers would be likely to infer before, during and after reading, and about how these inferences might contribute to evaluation of the story. In other words, this discussion assumes that all three of these processes interact to some extent.

A key feature of this story is that it encourages us to make inferences about the main character Helen, about the other characters she tells us about, and about her relationships with them. The key other characters are: her mother, Alma, Clare, Buddy Shields and, more indirectly, Clare's sister Porky (Isabelle), Porky's husband, and Clare's new bride. Arguably, one reason for the sense of richness and of our involvement in a fairly realistic work is that we discover quite a lot about these characters in a short space of reading time and that these inferences are 'sticky' (in that we keep returning to think about them) and open-ended (to the extent that we cannot say we have ever finished thinking about them and that we can continue to derive more conclusions over an extended period). This could be a key feature in accounting for how the story is evaluated. Clark (2014c) suggests a number of factors which might contribute to positive evaluations. These include ease of representing the text or aspects of it as a whole, the extent to which relevant inferences follow from the text, and the extent to which relatively complex inferential processes lead to relatively rich cognitive effects. The possibility of thinking about the central event in the story, what we can infer from it, and our ongoing consideration of the nature of Helen, her situation, and her relationships, are likely to lead to relatively positive evaluations of the story.

It is of course a key feature of many texts which are positively valued that they leave questions unanswered. We cannot decide for certain what we think about Helen and her relationships and the inferences we make about these are complex and ongoing. Part of my own early response to the story was to focus on the sadness of how things had turned out for Helen and to think about why things had turned out this way. I had a fairly negative view of Clare and thought that in some ways he had 'used'

and misled her. I then thought about Helen's attitude to him and others. As discussed below, some of Helen's comments suggest an element of superiority and possibly a lack of warmth. I then began to think more fully about this central relationship and a lack of warmth in both directions. This led me to think further about Helen's relationship with her mother and others. There is not enough in the story to provide definitive answers to these questions and so readers can continue to make inferences about them after having read the story. Some of the pleasure from this story surely comes after reading as new ideas occur to readers developing their interpretation. Using relevance-theoretic terminology, the story warrants the derivation of a relatively wide range of weak implicatures (for discussion of the application of the notion of weak implicatures in accounting for literary, or aesthetic, effects, see Pilkington 2000).

A very striking example of this complexity and open-endedness comes at the very end of the story. The final paragraph is:

> Oh, Buddy Shields, you can just go on talking, and Clare will tell jokes, and Momma will cry, till she gets over it, but what I'll never understand is why, right now, seeing Clare MacQuarrie as an unexplaining man, I felt for the first time that I wanted to reach out my hands and *touch* him.
> (Munro 1968: 146 [italics in original])

The key question this raises, of course, is why exactly Helen felt that she wanted to reach out and touch Clare. Readers might think of fairly clichéd explanations such as that she wants him more now that she can't have him. They will, of course, notice that she felt this 'for the first time', suggesting that she had little or no interest in him physically before this moment. Perhaps readers will think about the phrase 'as an unexplaining man'. Does the fact that he is 'unexplaining' make him more attractive? This is also likely to confirm the sense of coldness in Helen's attitude to Clare. Perhaps we will think she has indeed been, as she wondered about herself earlier, 'a heartless person, just to lie there and let him grab me and love me and moan around my neck and say the things he did, and never say one loving word back to him?' (Munro 1968: 135). We are hardly likely to be convinced that she is not heartless because 'I was never mean to Clare, and I did let him, didn't I, nine times out of ten?'

One intriguing thing about this final paragraph is that at least once Munro omitted it when reading the story in public. Douglas Kneale (2013) reports Munro reading the story when visiting his class at Western University. He reports that she announced that she was going to read it

'the way she would have written it if she were writing it today.' She then read the story exactly as published until, at the end, she did not include the final published paragraph. She gave a reason for omitting it, saying: '"A good short story should say everything it has to say before the final paragraph." (As one reviewer commented, this idea is one that 'presumably cannot apply recursively'!) This raises another possible way of finding out more about the story and how it works, namely to consider how interpretations would be likely to change if the final paragraph were not there and the story simply ended after Buddy Shields has delivered his mini-sermon, advising Helen at the end to 'just be a good girl' (echoing the comment near the end of Clare's postcard message), to 'go along like the rest of us' and concluding that 'pretty soon we'll see spring' (Munro 1968: 146). (Susan Lohafer has carried out a significant body of research exploring questions about how and why stories end where they do. See, for example, Lohafer, 1983, 2003)

My intuition is that the omission leaves things more open for readers to make inferences about the story, and its ending, with less guidance than is provided by the final paragraph. While Helen's reported desire to touch Clare is puzzling and raises unanswered questions, this paragraph nevertheless creates a focus on Helen's mind at this precise moment and raises questions about this one line of thinking she is experiencing. Without this paragraph, a wider range of possible directions are open for reader inferences. Whether or not the final paragraph is included also has implications for the balance between the extent to which the story can be understood as involving 'showing' and 'telling'. While Helen as narrator tells us things, we can understand the story as a case of showing since it shows us this character telling us what she chooses to tell. At the same time, her report of Buddy Shields is telling us what he did and said, leaving us to make inferences about what Helen is feeling and revealing about herself by telling us this. Her telling is simultaneously a case of Munro showing. There is a significant difference, even within this complexity, between readers making inferences about what Helen is feeling based on what is shown by the rest of the story and making those inferences based on what she chooses to tell us about her mental state. The complex relationships among various ways of thinking about showing and telling in the story are mentioned again in section 4 below.

3.3 Inferences about Helen

This subsection considers some of the inferences we make as we work through the story, and think about it afterwards, beginning by considering the repetition in the first sentence. This is just one of a number of individual, and in some cases quite local, features of the text which give rise to interesting inferences. There is no space to do justice to these here so instead this subsection considers just a small number of inferences which the text suggests. Each of these contributes to broader aspects of interpretation, including the characterisation of Helen and our developing understanding of her and her relationships.

Starting at the beginning, then, we have already mentioned the repetition of *yesterday* in the first sentence:

> Yesterday afternoon, yesterday, I was going along the street to the Post Office, thinking how sick I was of snow, sore throats, the whole dragged-out tail-end of winter, and I wished I could pack off to Florida, like Clare. (Munro 1968: 128)

What is a reader likely to make of this? Pragmatic theories predict that the repetition will give rise to a pragmatic effect. For relevance theory, the extra effort involved in processing the repetition gives rise to an expectation of further effects which would not have followed without the repetition (for discussion of the stylistic effects of different kinds of repetition, and relevance-theoretic predictions about them, see Sperber and Wilson 1995: 217-224). A likely hypothesis here is that the author is representing a narrator as if talking to someone. Conventions of prose fiction writing mean that we do not need to decide who they are speaking to. We might not make a decision between, for example, the thought that the narrator could be talking to herself, talking to a friend, or that this is just a novelistic/prose fiction device not reflecting any real conversations the narrator might have had. Still, without resolving this, we can make inferences about why a narrator might repeat the word *yesterday* here. A likely one is that the narrator is checking we have fixed the intended time reference (this hypothesis is arguably supported by the repetition occurring as a parenthesis here rather than the arguably more fluent repetition *yesterday, yesterday afternoon*). Another is that the narrator thinks their addressee is not very attentive and needs repetition to make sure they understand. Another is that there is something significant or surprising about the fact that it was yesterday when these events happened. Sperber and Wilson (1995: 219) suggest that repetition can give rise to inferences

about the speaker's attitude illustrating with an utterance of *There's a fox, a fox, in the garden* indicating excitement; we can imagine different prosodic cues when reading the story aloud which would support various assumptions to varying degrees. A reader is likely to make some tentative hypotheses along these lines and then confirm or disconfirm them as they read further. My own assumption having read and thought about the story is that the interpretation most consistent with my other assumptions about Helen is that the repetition suggests that she is confident in her own ability to understand things but less so in that of her mother and other people. For Helen, the repetition largely functions to help a less insightful addressee to keep track. For Alice Munro, it functions to help us understand what kind of person Helen is.

This is part of the beginning of the complex process of developing a sense of this character. Reading on, the reader will find various kinds of evidence which support particular hypotheses more strongly than others. Helen seems to think she understands the world better than other people and can see through things which other people can't. Later on the first page she points out that 'King's Department Store', where she works, 'is nothing but a ready-to-wear and dry goods, in spite of the name.' This, and the omission of a noun phrase such as *store* after *dry goods*, might reinforce the idea that she thinks she understands things better than other people.

Carrying on, we see that Mr. King used to make a fuss of her when she was young. Giving her raisins, he would say that 'I only give them to the pretty girls'. We infer that she enjoyed receiving this compliment and perhaps felt special because of it.

She thinks of herself as a strong and special person pointing out that the manager 'doesn't pick on me, knowing I wouldn't take it if he did'. (Munro 1968: 128)

A key theme running through the story, contributing significantly to the characterisation of Helen, concerns her attitudes to class and her own social status. While Clare's family are not members of one of the highest classes in Canadian society at the time, they have higher social status than Helen and her mother. Helen's attitude to this shares properties with other attitudes. She seems to be resentful that others have higher status than her, to suggest that the higher status is not meaningful or deserved, but also to want to move up to that status. Feeling like 'a thief' as she looks at the linen, china and silver in the MacQuarrie dining room, she says, 'But ... why shouldn't I have the enjoyment of this and the name MacQuarrie

since I wouldn't have to do anything I'm not doing anyway?' (Munro 1968: 133).

We see that Helen is intimidated by the higher social status of the MacQuarries when she says that she 'thought about it afterwards and burned' whenever she made a mistake such as producing *irrevelant* rather than *irrelevant* when talking to Clare's sister Porky. She goes on:

> 'I know it serves me right for trying to talk the way I never talk in Jubilee. Trying to impress her because she's a MacQuarrie, after all my lecturing Momma that *we're* as good as *them*.'
> (Munro 1968: 130)

Questions about class and Helen's attitude to her own and other people's social position run in parallel and also interweave with questions about her relationships, in particular those with Ted Forgie and Clare MacQuarrie. The parallelism and the connections add to the complexity and also the interest of the inferential processes which the story gives rise to.

Putting just these few things together, we are beginning to develop a sense of Helen's character. She is strong and sees herself as special and, in some ways, superior. She resents others being seen as belonging to a higher class, or having higher social status, than herself and she does not see why she should not be entitled to the same things as other people. At the same time, she is to some extent intimidated by the higher social status of others.

In her relationships with men, we see Helen as potentially being in a victim role but refusing to accept this and retaining a sense of superiority to her lovers. Her knees went hollow when she went to look for mail from her earlier lover, Ted Forgie, and she wonders whether being in 'a stupor' over him affected her relationship with Clare. Before she has heard about Clare's marriage, she tears up the final letter she had received from him, one which has had a powerful effect on her every time she has looked at it ('a feeling of love, if that is what you want to call it' – a phrase which is telling, revealing her ability both to be moved and to disparage that feeling at the same time). Tearing up the letter suggests that Helen is moving through a process of getting over her relationship with Ted Forgie, perhaps moving towards a more positive stage in her relationship with Clare as she comes out of her 'stupor'. Of course, this turns out to be too late when we discover that Clare is married and, later, are presented with her view of him as an 'unexplaining man'.

Also contributing to our understanding of how Helen responds to what might be seen as her victimhood, there is a recurring sense that Helen is at home in her environment (using phrases like 'It being Wednesday' which suggest a calm sureness in her everyday life) and that she remains confident despite what she has gone through. She responds to what we assume must be emotional turmoil by doing something, even if this can be seen as ineffective with regard to her social standing or her relationship with Clare. She drives to Clare's house, honks her car horn repeatedly and calls out to Clare. The final paragraph of the story suggests that she is strong and resolved even after this embarrassment.

Despite her air of being aware and having a sophisticated understanding of things, we see that Helen has been most unobservant in some aspects of her relationship with Clare. He sends her just one postcard in three weeks away. He goes to Florida every year but never invites Helen. He refuses to tell her much about his time away (aggravating Helen by asking her 'What do you want me to tell?') Readers will assume that Helen has misunderstood the nature of her relationship with Clare in some fundamental ways.

The discussion so far has not involved any technical notions from pragmatic theory. Instead, it has indicated some of the kinds of inferences which readers are likely to make when reading. It has not explored the complexity of these inferences but the fact that this discussion has only scratched the surface suggests the complexity of the inferential processes involved in reading a story (or any other text). The next section considers some ways in which thinking about this complexity can help us to understand the 'texture' (in one sense) of the reading experience.

4. Inferential 'Texture'

The discussion above, while very partial, suggests how reader inferences contribute to an emerging understanding of a text, developing and revising hypotheses as they go, during and after reading. This section suggests that exploring inferential processes which happen before, during and after reading can contribute to an account of 'texture' in the sense used by Stockwell (2009).

Traditionally (since the beginning of the twentieth century), the term 'texture has been used to describe how various linguistic elements are interconnected ('woven' together, metaphorically). Nørgaard, Busse and

Montoro (2010: 157-158) discuss this sense and explain its etymology. On this view, they say, a text is 'a stretch of sentences . . . linked together by various means to form a unified whole' (Nørgaard, Busse and Montoro 2010: 157).

Stockwell (2009) explores 'texture' in a different sense which he describes as 'the experienced quality of textuality' (2009: 1). In fact, the history of both terms ('texture' and 'textuality') is slightly confusing and different authors have used them in different ways. Stockwell uses 'textuality' to refer to the property of being a text ('woven together', as suggested above) and 'texture' to refer to what it feels like to experience a text. Stockwell is not the first to discuss this topic but his books applies ideas from cognitive poetics to this topic in an extended discussion which has not been attempted in this way before.

Stockwell discusses how we can account for this experienced quality (or qualities) from a number of perspectives, including the application of a range of ideas from cognitive linguistics and cognitive science more generally. He considers aspects of meaning but does not apply ideas from the post-Gricean pragmatic perspective adopted here. The previous discussion here suggests that accounts of pragmatic inference can play an important role in accounting for the 'experienced quality' of this story and other works. This section begins to address this more explicitly by considering two aspects of relevance-theoretic pragmatics: the notion that implicatures can vary in strength; the showing-meaning continuum, and the notion that interpretative processes can be more or less spontaneous. The aim here is not to suggest that these are the only relevant ideas or that they are privileged in some way. The more modest aim is simply to make a start in thinking about inferential texture by considering these.

4.1 Strength of implicatures

Relevance theory assumes that implicatures can vary in strength. Put simply, the more confident an addressee can be that a particular inferential conclusion was intended, the more strongly it is implicated. Consider, for example, (9), Clare's habitual response when Helen asks him to send letters when he's away to describe what things are like on his travels:

(9) I can tell you just as well when I get back.

This provides some evidence (to Helen from Clare's utterance and to us from Alice Munro showing us Clare's utterance) for each of (10a)-(10f):

(10)
a. Clare will not write Helen a letter.
b. Clare does not see the point in writing letters.
c. Clare's relationship with Helen is not strong.
d. Clare's relationship with Helen will not last.
e. Clare does not want to tell Helen about his travels.
f. Clare does not find what he encounters on his travels very interesting.

We would not think that Helen had understood Clare or that we had understood Munro unless she and we understood that his utterance was communicating (10a). This means that (10a) is strongly implicated. We can be much less sure of (10f). Clare's utterance provides some evidence for this but we cannot be sure that it follows. Perhaps, for example, he finds what he sees very interesting but does not want to tell Helen about it for other reasons. In fact, (a)-(f) are roughly ordered with regard to strength of implicatures.

We could, of course, have come up with a longer list of potential conclusions from Clare's utterance and we could have included some which are so weakly implicated that we might not want to describe them as implicatures. Clare's utterance, for example, shows that his lungs are working (since the utterance requires movement of air caused by them) but we would not suggest that the utterance communicates this.

It is typical of utterances, in general as well as in fiction, that they provide evidence which supports to greater or lesser degrees a range of possible conclusions. It is also typical of both utterances in general and, arguably more strongly, of fictional utterances, that we continue to assess evidence as we go so that the strength of evidence for particular conclusions is continually adjusted. We are less likely to think that Clare finds little of interest or worth reporting on his travels once we discover that he is married. The news of his marriage also, of course, provides evidence to support or disconfirm to varying degrees a range of other conclusions we might have been tentatively considering. This pattern of constantly emerging ranges of potential inferential conclusions and their ongoing adjustment is typical of inferential processing, is arguably more marked in many cases of reading prose fiction, and is surely an important feature of what readers experience in their encounters with a text.

Related to this, we can consider the well-known observation that there are different communicative relationships involved in a work of prose fiction. Authors produce their utterances to communicate with readers. Authors show characters producing utterances. The utterances and other behaviours of the characters convey meanings to other characters. The author gives rise to meanings for readers by showing the communicative and other behaviour of characters. When Helen tells her mother that 'It's understood' that Clare and Helen will marry after his mother dies, her mother infers that Helen thinks she and Clare have an agreement. This is an implicature of Helen's utterance for her mother. If we assume that her mother thinks of herself as worldly-wise and believes that Helen is no more than an easily-available mistress for Clare, she might also infer that Helen has not understood properly and that Clare and Helen will not get married. This is a non-communicated implication for Helen's mother but Alice Munro is providing evidence for this to us and so this is an implicature of the story for us.

The relationships among various parts of the text and the status of various conclusions as implicatures of varying strengths, as non-communicated implications, as cases of showing or meaning, add to the complexity of our experience of reading and to its texture in the sense used by Stockwell (2009).

4.2 (Non-)Spontaneousness

Furlong (1996, 2001, 2007, 2011, 2012) has developed an account of literary interpretation which sees non-spontaneousness as playing a key role. Furlong suggests that interpretations can vary in how spontaneous (in a specific sense) they are. A relatively spontaneous interpretation is one which, in relevance-theoretic terms, follows the general comprehension heuristic mentioned above until it finds an interpretation consistent with the communicative principle of relevance. A relatively non-spontaneous interpretation is one which involves devoting more time to exploring possibilities, considering a range of evidence for and against particular conclusions, perhaps never deciding that enough evidence has been considered and so never considering that the interpretation process is complete.

Certain texts are more likely to be the objects of fairly spontaneous interpretations, e.g. an everyday utterance such as (11) uttered in response to a question about when the speaker finishes work:

(11) I'll be home in time for tea.

The addressee will be likely to conclude that the speaker will not be held up for a long time at work, that the speaker and addressee can eat together, perhaps that the speaker won't be too tired this evening, and not much else.

Literary texts are likely to be the object of relatively non-spontaneous interpretations. Shakespeare's works, for example, have been the object of extended interpretation processes by many people over many years. Other texts lie at various places along the continuum from fairly spontaneous to fairly non-spontaneous.

Some texts encourage interpretations which are less spontaneous than might have been expected. A filmgoer who has just seen a David Lynch movie might well be seriously puzzled by what they have seen. They might spend considerable time thinking about it. They might ask friends what they thought, or consult websites. To the extent that they do this, they are developing fairly nonspontaneous interpretations. On the other hand, some viewers might just 'give up' and decide that they can't make sense of what they have just seen.

What about 'Postcard'? Again, the option is there for readers to decide how spontaneous or not they will be. Consider the repetition of *yesterday* discussed above. Some readers might barely register this repetition, carry on reading and focus mainly on what the story reveals, developing an understanding of the events narrated, the characters, and what they think of the story. Others might notice the repetition and think about its effects more fully. Professional writers might well focus on details of particular texts far more closely than other readers. No doubt stylisticians also have different reading practices from other readers.

We might also map out the story with regard to how likely particular parts are to give rise to spontaneous or non-spontaneous interpretations. Readers will vary in the extent to which they think about what kinds of evidence various parts of the story provide about Helen, her life and her relationships. Some parts of the text, however, are likely to encourage more inferencing. The final paragraph, for example, is likely to encourage readers to think about why Helen felt she wanted to touch Clare and perhaps to think back to the rest of the story looking for more evidence.

Exploring the puzzle of why Helen now wants to touch Clare is a good example of an open-ended interpretation process which we can think about without ever being sure we have come to a conclusion about it.

There are notions of 'texture' involved here in the non-technical sense of what it feels like to touch something as well as what it feels like to have an emotional response to something. We can think about what it would feel like for Helen to touch Clare and for Clare to be touched by Helen. We can think about why people touch each other in general (love? more general empathy? to convey emotions?) And of course there is a poignancy in thinking about this while knowing that Helen will not now be touching Clare. The feeling that she wants to touch him has emerged too late for it to be realised. Helen has gone through an emotional process which includes the moment when she becomes able to destroy Ted Forgie's letter and which leads her to an emotional state where she feels something like love or empathy (with a physical aspect) for Clare. The process was happening while Clare was away getting married and is possibly entangled in complex ways with Helen's coming to terms with the fact of his marriage.

We can explore these questions more or less spontaneously and feel that we are developing our understanding of the story while never becoming confident that we have reached the end of this process. Variations in spontaneousness of interpretative processes contribute to the texture of the story and accounting for this will help us to understand how the story is experienced by various readers.

5. Conclusion

The above discussion has only scratched the surface of what we might achieve by considering the inferential processes involved in producing, interpreting and evaluating a text, and of what we can discover about 'Postcard' in particular. Clearly, pragmatic stylistic approaches have a role to play in the stylistic analysis of texts. This paper has argued that they also have an important role to play in accounting for 'texture'.

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