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THE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF  
Marshall University Graduate College  
May 1, 2001

The Narratology of Jennifer Johnston's Novels

Robert N. Hutton

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Humanities Program of the  
Marshall University Graduate College in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Humanities

Spring 2001

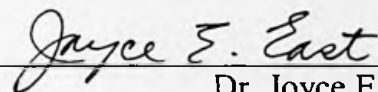
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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Joyce East

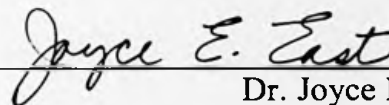
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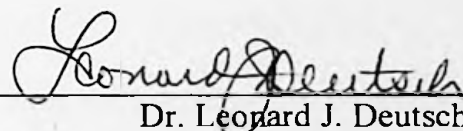
We hereby recommend that the thesis prepared under our supervision by  
**Robert N. Hutton** entitled "**The Narratology of Jennifer Johnston's Novels**"  
be accepted in partial fulfillment of the degree of MASTER OF ARTS IN  
HUMANITIES.



Dr. Joyce E. East  
Thesis Advisor

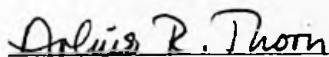


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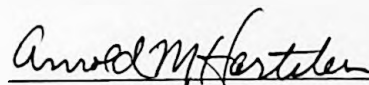


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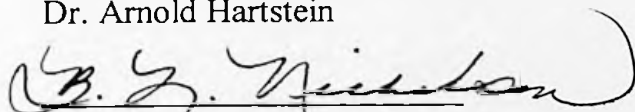
Thesis Committee:



Dr. Arline Thorn



Dr. Arnold Hartstein



Dr. Bobbi Nicholson

**Dedication**

This work is dedicated, with love and gratitude, to my wife

Ruth Thompson Hutton

who was there for my first master's thesis in 1952, and with whom

I have since shared a lifetime of appreciation for, and occasional

participation in, the arts.

### Acknowledgments

In a vast ocean of scholarship, an individual master's thesis is a tiny fish indeed – except in the eyes of its author. And I am aware from my own faculty experience that service on a committee to evaluate and advise on such a thesis comes as a substantial intrusion into a crowded schedule at the busiest time of the year. For both those reasons I acknowledge with appreciation and respect the work of the members of my thesis committee: Dr. Arnold Hartstein, Dr. Bobbi Nicholson, and Dr. Arline Thorn.

And of course a very special acknowledgment is due Dr. Joyce East, who throughout the entire Humanities program has acted well beyond the call of duty as my mentor, my consultant, and – far more important – my friend.

Finally, reflecting that any written work must be a product of the author's cumulative experience, I feel called upon to quote Julia Roberts's gushing Academy Award acceptance speech and acknowledge "everybody I've ever known in my entire life!"

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## Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Irish novelist Jennifer Johnston has published twelve novels to date, from *The Captains and the Kings* in 1972 to *The Gingerbread Woman* in 2000. Eileen Battersby's recent *Irish Times* article "Making Sense of Life" called her "the quiet woman of Irish fiction," referring to her understated, sophisticated writing style. All of her novels are short (Joseph Connelly and others have called them "novellas"), and she has become known for her ability to describe a complex situation in a direct, compact way.

This discussion is intended to investigate the narratology of several Johnston novels: to explore narrative voice, narrative chronology, influence of the implied author on the reader, and other narratological characteristics. Specifically, there will be discussions of two earlier novels which use few specialized narrative "tricks" and two later ones in which specific narrative devices play significant roles. Finally, Johnston's latest novel will be examined with respect to the observations made on earlier ones.

Since she is little known in this country, a brief biography might be appropriate:<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Prudence Johnston was born in Dublin in 1930, the daughter of playwright Denis Johnston and actress Shelah Richards, and was educated there at a Protestant school, where she wrote a number of plays for student production. In childhood she was apparently sheltered and neglected at the same time, as might be expected of the daughter of two busy, self-absorbed, hugely talented people. In an interview, she told John Quinn that she learned to read at age three in order to be able to take eye tests; her vision has been very poor all her life. She also told him that she wasn't clearly aware of her parents' divorce, since her father was a BBC war correspondent and was generally away:

Because of the pattern my life had taken up to then, I didn't feel a sense of

loss. I had not been really involved in actual day-to-day living with my parents. I had led a very protected life and I was therefore protected from the pain that they must have been feeling. It wasn't until very much later that I was aware how terrible a time it must have been for all concerned and that I should have felt much more pain than I actually did. (Quinn 56)

She entered Trinity College Dublin in 1947 but left in 1951 without taking a degree, married fellow student Ian Smyth and spent much of the next decade in London rearing her children. It was not until she was in her mid-thirties that she began writing again. Her first novel, *The Gates*, was rejected for publication by fourteen publishers ("charming, but too short"), but was eventually published in 1973 following the success of *The Captains and the Kings*, an equally "short" novel. Her work is often concerned with the Anglo-Irish experience and with other issues particular to the Irish situation. She also deals with more universal themes, such as death and dying – exploring the responses of individuals to their own impending death or that of a loved one. Due in part to her extensive use of dialogue, many of her novels have been adapted for television.

Asked in an interview about her political inclinations, she replied: "I am a republican, but am also concerned about the Protestant faith. I find it hard that, in the north, Protestants are unable to address their heritage and refuse to stand up and say 'We are still here because we want to be here and we are not going to put up with this shit'" (McManus 37).

In 1998 she was appointed to the Board of Patrons of The Council for Integrated Education in Northern Ireland, an organization whose purpose is "integration of Catholic and Protestant young people in the schools of Northern Ireland." Other appointees included actor Kenneth Branagh, pianist Barry Douglas, playwright Brian Friel, flutist James Galway, Presbyterian official the Most Rev. John Dunlop, broadcaster Sean



Rafferty, and other prominent citizens of Northern Ireland (Breen).

The first of her published novels, *The Captains and the Kings*, won three awards, including the *Yorkshire Post* Fiction Award for Best First Book. Another of her novels, *Shadows on our Skin* (1992), was nominated for the Booker Prize, while *The Old Jest* won the 1979 Whitbread Award and *The Invisible Worm* was *Daily Express* best book of the year 1992. Other awards include the Giles Cooper Award for Best Radio play and the Robert Pitman Award.

In 2000 she donated to Trinity College the manuscript of her most recent novel, *The Gingerbread Woman*, adding it to an archive containing drafts of several of her other novels, plays, screenplays and minor works, along with a small cache of personal correspondence.

She has remarried, to David Gilliland, and currently lives in Derry in an old Georgian 'Big House', one not unlike those in many of her novels.

In the United States, Battersby's designation of Johnston as "the quiet woman of Irish fiction" appears to be true in the sense of popular acceptance: she is almost unknown here except among literary critics, typically Irish or feminist. Her name is not found, for example, in *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1996), a reference work which includes articles on Elizabeth Bowen, Edna O'Brien, and numerous male Irish novelists. In major encyclopedias, e.g. *Britannica* and *Americana*, her name appears only in survey articles, although several other Irish writers are subjects of individual entries. In recent on-line retail book searches, Barnes & Noble listed her only as a contributor to two collections of short pieces; Amazon listed eleven of her twelve novels, but *every one* was designated "out of print." In contrast, W. H. Smith's Internet Bookshop (London) listed

the same eleven novels with prices and delivery times, while the Read Ireland Book Database (Dublin) showed all twelve, including the just-released *The Gingerbread Woman* (2000). It seems apparent that Johnston is receiving much less attention in the United States than in Europe.

Johnston recognizes this: "I'm taught in American universities but I'm not published in the States," she says with some irony (Battersby review). And in an interview with Rosa Gonzáles published in 1998 she assigned a very specific reason to this lack of publication. When asked about her reaction to criticism, she recalled one unpleasant experience:

I really don't mind. I mean, the one time when I really did mind was when *The Christmas Tree* came out in the United States, and the man in *The New York Times* tore it into shreds in the most unkind, and extraordinarily personal fashion. He was a critic called Anatole Boyer. [. . .] I was absolutely devastated by it. It was as if this man was punching me about the face, and it had a catastrophic effect in the USA on my career there, which just stopped like that. It doesn't matter how good any other reviews have been since, my publisher refused to publish my next book, and just everything went "shhhh."

The review in question appeared in the *New York Times* in March 1982. The reviewer (Anatole *Broyard* rather than Anatole Boyer) begins his review with:

"Profoundly moving," "magnificent," "totally absorbing," "marvelous," "noble" – I read these quotes from British reviews of *The Christmas Tree* and I thought well, perhaps it won't be so bad. And I was right. Jennifer Johnston is a polished and talented writer, but in her latest novel she hasn't shown us a surprise, a quirk, a style all her own, a moment that sticks in the mind, or anything else that deserves those encomiums.

He continues his rather long review in the style which appears to be obligatory for a critic in a prestigious publication – aloof, amused, a little condescending: "Without Jacob's knowledge, Constance gets herself pregnant – an idea that is no better in a novel than in

life. [. . .] It won't do any harm for me to give away some of the plot of *The Christmas Tree*, because there are no surprises in it anyway,” and so on. In general, he expresses the opinion that the characters are stereotypes and that Johnston took on a task which turned out to be too big for her: “Though we can't expect everyone in real life to die with powerful imagery, we do expect it in a novel. Death is the strongest image we've got, even stronger than love or hate, and if an author can't conjure with it, she ought to leave it alone. Please do not litter death” (29).

It seems extreme to attribute Johnston's low readership in the United States – over the entire country, for all time – to a single critic, even one who writes for the *New York Times*; just the same, it is apparent that she is indeed little read in this country. Her reaction to his review may reflect her own opinion of *others'* opinions of her literary worth. Karen McManus found her very self-deprecating, probably too much so: “It is a surprise [. . .] to find her shy and modest about her work. ‘By and large, there are very few people who actually read or like my books. I know, I get the royalty cheques’” (36).

The literary critics who discuss Johnston have a tendency to *classify* her – place her work in various categories which differ among critics but are not mutually exclusive. For example, many reviewers consider her a “Big House” novelist – a worker in the peculiarly Irish genre created by Maria Edgeworth when she wrote *Castle Rackrent* in 1800,<sup>2</sup> and which is centered on the “Ascendancy” or Anglo-Irish population. Kreilkamp gives an excellent brief description of the literary form:

Big House novels represent a major tradition in Irish fiction. Set on isolated country estates, they dramatize the tensions between several social groups: the landed proprietors of a Protestant ascendancy gentry; a growing, usually Catholic, middle class; and the mass of indigenous, rural Catholic tenantry. In the course of two centuries, these novels reveal

recurring themes and conventions, most notably the setting of a beleaguered and decaying country house collapsing under the forces of Anglo-Irish improvidence and the rising nationalism of the Irish society outside the walls of the demesne. (6-7)<sup>3</sup>

Illustrating the relation of fiction to history, Kreilkamp also describes the fate of actual Big Houses in the twentieth century: "During the struggle for independence from 1919 to 1921 and the subsequent civil war, nearly two hundred Irish country houses were destroyed as the symbols of a colonizing force, sometimes without consideration for the politics of their owners" (5-6).

Dennis William McFadden's 1999 doctoral dissertation explores the Big House genre and discusses Johnston along with Somerville and Ross, Elizabeth Bowen, Aidan Higgins, and William Trevor. The latest Johnston novel he considers is *Fool's Sanctuary*, published in 1987. Vera Kreilkamp's large work considers this as well as other Johnston novels in a chapter titled "Revisionism in Fiction," which treats both Johnston and William Trevor. In this chapter Kreilkamp acknowledges that Johnston's and Trevor's novels depart from the Elizabeth Bowen orientation, but still considers them part of the tradition: "Reading Jennifer Johnston's and William Trevor's novels within a long tradition of Big House literature reveals both the cultural continuities and the significant changes that their fiction embodies" (197).<sup>4</sup> It may be significant that Kreilkamp, though writing in 1998, considers no Johnston novels later than *The Invisible Worm* (1991). *The Illusionist* (1995), *Two Moons* (1998), and *The Gingerbread Woman* (2000) are all rather far removed from the Big House pattern.

The "Big House novelist" label seems to appear most often in essays which examine Johnston's earlier works – particularly the first three, published almost as a group

in 1972-74. Though this characterization of Johnston's work is the most popular, her style has evolved in her later works so that the label is no longer suitable. It also appears, even with regard to her earlier works, that this is a somewhat superficial viewpoint, that of critics who may be more concerned with Irish literary history than with actual plot content. Some other critics apparently agree: Christina Hunt Mahoney observes that "Johnston's world is not confined to the Big House" (201), implying a wider historical and emotional range. James M. Cahalan says much the same (291-93), and Rüdiger Imhof feels that "the thematic import of the big house remains rather spurious, to say the least" (120). In an interview Johnston herself said, "All these academics have written their critical works [. . .] and this is the category they put me into, and I don't like this, I find it very limiting, and it annoys me" (González 10).

While many of her novels have Big House characteristics – the decaying big Anglo-Irish house occupied by the decaying Anglo-Irish family, assaulted both externally and internally – their focus is generally more on the development of the protagonist, typically a precocious young girl, than on the degeneration of the house and family. Even *The Gates*, which conforms most closely to the traditional Big House formula (as in *Castle Rackrent*, *The Big House of Inver*, *The Last September*), is more a study of Minnie McMahon's intellectual and social growth than of the decline of her Uncle Proinnseas and his way of life. In several other Johnston novels, the Big House features are peripheral (e.g. *The Captains and the Kings*, *The Old Jest*, *The Invisible Worm*) or entirely absent (*Shadows on Our Skin*, *The Illusionist*, *The Railway Station Man*, *The Gingerbread Woman*). Johnston certainly has roots in the Big House tradition – in view of her background and her own big house in Derry, it would be hard to avoid – but considering

her whole body of work, it appears short-sighted to call her a Big House novelist.

Other critics feel that her novels are about Irish conflict. Though born in Dublin, she has lived for many years in Derry, near the epicenter of Northern Ireland's violence and political turmoil. Before starting her writing career, she had lived in London for almost twenty years, until the latest round of the "Troubles" flared up in the late 60s. She then returned because she felt that the history of her own people was passing her by. And indeed the Troubles form the plot backbone in many of her novels, notably *The Railway Station Man*, *Shadows on Our Skin*, *Fool's Sanctuary*, and especially *The Old Jest*. In fact Nancy, the young protagonist of *The Old Jest* who becomes involved with an IRA gunman, is the Johnston character most often discussed by critics. Several others, however, consider *Shadows on Our Skin* most typical of Johnston's "troubles" writing, even though it departs from her usual style by presenting a working-class Catholic, Republican boy as the protagonist. Ann Rea's 1996 dissertation combines national politics with gender politics by using Johnston's work, among others, to expose "how narratives about the nation – whether 'British' or 'Irish'-- are simultaneously narratives about gender and the home" (abstract).

But the Troubles are in the background in *The Captains and the Kings* and even more so in her later works, such as *The Invisible Worm*, *The Illusionist*, *Two Moons*, and *The Gingerbread Woman*.<sup>5</sup> The "Irish conflict" categorization is justifiable, but captures only one aspect of Johnston's body of work.

Johnston is often seen and applauded as "a woman writing about women." In reality, three of her first four novels, written between 1972 and 1977, have male protagonists: *The Captains and the Kings*, *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, and *Shadows on Our*

*Skin*. This may have influenced Benstock, writing before 1982, to use the title "The Masculine World of Jennifer Johnston," and to say that Johnston's earlier novels "all focus on the effort to survive the peculiarly masculine claims of worldly responsibilities and each defines the feminine in terms of the masculine" (191), a statement clearly untrue of her later novels; in fact it was patently untrue of *The Christmas Tree*, published in 1981. Of the first four novels, only *The Gates* (1973) is "about" a female. It may be significant that this was the first-written of her published novels, though it was the second to see actual publication. After 1977 the rest of her novels, without exception, are written primarily or wholly in a feminine voice. This has prompted several critics to comment on her "switch" to female-centered writing and to view it as evidence of her own maturation as a self-conscious woman. Some critics see this change in perspective as a powerful blow for feminism: Barbara Ellen McLaughlin's 1996 dissertation includes a discussion of the "reductive" scholarly attention paid to Johnston's work, and points out that "Johnston's fiction demonstrates complicated layers of narrative disruption and is motivated by political and intellectual concerns" (Abstract 1544). The latter part of this statement is emphatically true, as will be illustrated. And "narrative disruption" (in *disruption*'s second dictionary sense of "the interruption or suspension of normal activity or progress") will be a principal talking point.

In a similar vein, three researchers – Van den Heuvel, Watson, and Weekes – cite the work of Johnston and of other female authors in studies which are intended to account for the small number of Irish women writers through examples of the small role women have played in perceived Irish history. Many others – Craig, Hargreaves, Fauset, St. Peter – have written about Johnston from this feminist point of view, though Johnston herself

has stated that she doesn't consider herself a feminist. She elaborated further in an interview with Eleanor Wachtel on *The Illusionist*, when she said about women: "Their voice is a valid voice, and they must be heard. I think basically what I am trying to write about now is the pain of women. And that does not mean writing great tracts against men. I am trying to depict the pain of women and show how this pain can be turned into some sort of creativity" (325). She also stated in the same interview that she feels that her writing about women is "every bit as political" as her writing about the Troubles. However its significance is interpreted, the woman-centered aspect of her writing offers yet another view of the "kind of writer" she is.

Other reviewers consider Johnston a *Bildungsroman* author. Relatively few critics concentrate on this aspect; in fact, Joanne Church's 1992 Master's thesis is the only work so far uncovered with the term in its title. There is reason to feel, however, that this is really the most consistent characterization of Johnston's work. It is possible (though sometimes with a stretch) to view almost any one of her novels as a *Bildungsroman*. A Johnston novel usually depicts the growth of a woman, most characteristically an artist, usually but not always a writer. The most common Johnston situation is that of a girl or woman whose circumstances and life events contribute to her development both as an artist (writer, painter, actress) and as a person. Though only Church has included the word in her title, other critics, notably Imhof, mention the *Bildungsroman* and *Künstlerroman* aspects of Johnston's novels. Weekes, in *Irish Women Writers*, considered *The Old Jest* "the first Johnston *bildungsroman*"<sup>6</sup> (202).

Still another characteristic of Johnston's writing, unremarked by most critics, has caught the attention of several scholars, including Connelly and Lanter: the inclusion of



numerous excerpts from Irish legends, songs, and ancient literature in practically all her works. References to “The Shan Van Vocht” appear in at least two novels, and the song “The Croppy Boy, a Ballad of ‘98” is featured in *How Many Miles to Babylon?*. In *The Old Jest*, Major Barry identifies Nancy’s seagull with the mythical Hag of Beare, while Joe Logan, the young protagonist of *Shadows on Our Skin*, opens the novel with the old Irish lyric “The Scholar and His Cat”. Many more such references can be found.

Given all the literature on her choices of subjects, discussions of Johnston’s writing *technique* are relatively infrequent, although she uses several recognizable narrative strategies to make her novels more readable, more compelling, and more suspenseful: shifts in narrative voice (first/third person), non-chronological narration, and insertion of non-real characters (ghosts, angels, etc.).<sup>7</sup> In her discussion of *The Old Jest*, Benstock mentions the “subtle and constant shifts between the first-person commentary of Nancy and a more objective third-person narrative which assumes a distanced and formal stance to the events being recalled” (208). Eileen Battersby wrote, “Johnston has always moved between the first and third person voices and has continually played with tense. It is her way of creating texture and voices within voices” (“Making Sense,” N. pag.). And Rhona Richman Kenneally wrote, “Perhaps the most masterful aspect of *The Invisible Worm* is how deftly Johnston manipulates the novel’s narration – shifting back and forth from first- to third-person – and weaves past and present into an a-chronologic yet inherently logical sequence” (19). Rüdiger Imhof, in a less-than-complimentary 1985 critique, refers to “Johnston’s reliance, for purposes of structure, on framing devices and circular plot-patterns”; he finds this reliance “obsessionally overriding” (135). And Ann Owens Weeks writes, “The structure in Johnston’s work – in particular, the echoes, the frames, and the

double-voiced narratives [. . .] deserves comment because it so clearly serves a thematic function” (*Irish Women Writers* 208-9).

A very compact but comprehensive description of Johnston’s work appears in an article by Caitriona Moloney, and seems to encapsulate both subject choice and narrative style:

Johnston’s work is important for the very reasons critics find it confusing. Her novels refuse any simple or monolithic representation of either revolutionary nationalism or Anglo-Irish ascendancy. Johnston’s unremitting postmodernism refuses binary opposition; her surrealist style, with its multiple narrative voices and overlapping time periods, allows her to convey the ambiguity at the heart of Irish identity. (139)

In discussing narrative techniques, this study is intended to point out in Johnston’s novels examples of techniques which have been named and described in the expanding literature of narratology and to analyze Johnston’s reasons for using them.

One of these is variation in narrative voice. On this subject Richter points out, a little unnecessarily, that “[f]irst-person narrators can only tell us what they know or can find out.” then continues to explain that authors using third-person narrators may have a wide range of choices as to how much “privilege” (knowledge of characters’ inner lives) they may enjoy (100). But regardless of how much he/she may not know about an external situation, a first-person narrator is the final authority on his/her *own* situation: a first-person narrative can reveal not only the character’s inner knowledge, but also the way the character *feels* about this knowledge – a characteristic which Johnston exploits to the fullest.

Wallace Martin discusses the relative “reliability” of third- and first-person narration: “We cannot question the reliability of third-person narrators, who posit beyond

doubt or credulity the characters and situations they create. [. . .] Any first-person narrative, on the other hand, may prove unreliable because it issues from a speaking or writing self addressing someone" (142). This characteristic works together with the fact that the reader of a first-person narrative can see the characters and events of the story *only* through the narrator's eyes: realizing this, he/she may either "buy into" the narrator's account completely or call it into question, based perhaps on personal experience in similar situations. An unreliable (or merely biased) narrator can enrich a narrative by showing the reader as much about himself/herself as about the characters and events being described.

Exploring another discourse technique – non-chronological narration – Genette develops a concept which he calls "order," concerned with the *sequence* in which events appear in the narrative as compared to the "real" story sequence (94). Chatman, discussing "story-time" vs. "discourse-time," elaborates further: "The discourse can rearrange the events of the story as much as it pleases, provided the story-sequence remains discernible" (63). Johnston exploits this principle also, in a variety of ways, none more complex than the pattern used in *The Invisible Worm*.

Both of the techniques described above belong to the *discourse*, as opposed to the *story*, division of narratology,<sup>8</sup> but the *existents* and *events* (see Chatman) of the story are also sources of insight into the author's technique. Johnston's novels contain some vividly-drawn and memorable characters, among them Jerry Crowe and Alicia Moore, Alexander Moore's friend and mother in *How Many Miles to Babylon?*; Martyn, the title character in *The Illusionist*; Bonifaccio, the angel in *Two Moons* (along with Mimi, his elderly hostess); and Roger Hawthorne, the one-armed restorer of railway stations in *The Railway Station Man*. Johnston's techniques of describing characters and their interrela-

tionships will be discussed along with the techniques she applies to discourse.

Keeping in mind the various critical labels that have been applied to Johnston as a writer, the following chapters will explore Johnston's story and discourse techniques in selected novels. The study will focus on four of these, chosen to be as illustrative as possible of the characteristics discussed above.

*How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974) is typical of Johnston's first three closely-spaced novels. It has definite Big House characteristics, a male central character, and undertones of Irish/Anglo-Irish conflict.<sup>9</sup> In 1982 it was made into a film in the UK, with Daniel Day-Lewis and Christopher Fairbank.

*The Old Jest* (1979), the most-discussed of all Johnston's novels, includes *all* of the characteristics which critics have seized on to classify Johnston's writing, with its Big House setting and an 18-year-old heroine (a hopeful writer) who is launched suddenly into maturity through her involvement with an IRA assassin. It was also filmed in the UK: Renamed *The Dawning*, the film appeared in 1988 and starred Rebecca Pidgeon as Nancy and Anthony Hopkins as the IRA gunman.

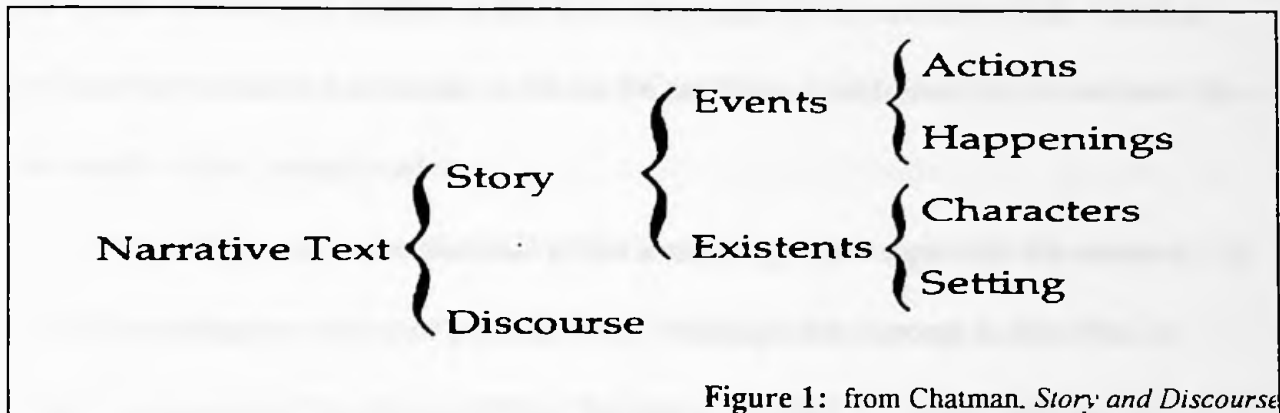
To read *The Invisible Worm* (1991) as one's first Johnston novel is to start swimming in the deep water. Influences of the Big House tradition and of Irish Troubles are minimal in this novel. In flashes, glimmers, and explosions it traces the psychological effects on a 15-year-old girl of an abusive father and a dismissive mother and describes the way she, as a fortyish recluse, manages to exorcize her own demons. In this work, written in the past decade, Johnston uses narrative devices which include shifts in narrative voice (first- and third-person), an unreal being (the "running woman"), and temporal sequencing of the most complex – seemingly chaotic – nature.

*The Illusionist* (1995) is another of the later novels, immediately following *The Invisible Worm*. Stella Macnamara falls in love with an amateur stage performer, Martyn Glover, when he produces an egg from her ear at their first meeting – and their relationship is all downhill from there. The discourse involves two principal time frames, alternating between the present, as Stella confronts her estranged daughter after Martyn's death, and the past, where Stella endures her baffling, infuriating life with Martyn. Johnston's painfully vivid description of Martyn's incredible behavior, as seen through Stella's eyes, is an artistic feat.

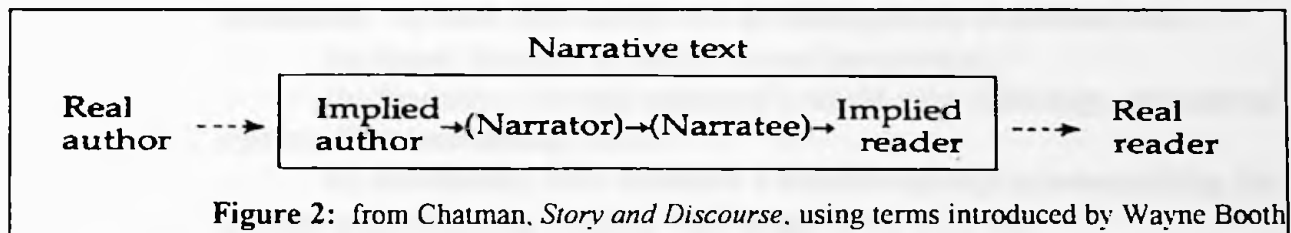
The next chapter will go into more detail on various narrative devices, particularly as applied to *How Many Miles to Babylon?* and *The Old Jest*. Chapter 3 will include similar discussions of *The Invisible Worm* and *The Illusionist*, and highlight their differences from the first pair. The final chapter is intended to provide a summation of Johnston's methods and her success in applying them, followed by a review of the findings as they apply to the most recent Johnston novel, *The Gingerbread Woman*.

Chapter 2: Early Novels

Narrative devices in fiction may sometimes affect the *story* (e.g., choice of characters or settings), but are typically thought of as part of the *discourse* (e.g., shifts in narrative voice or use of a narrator). The tree diagram below illustrates the dichotomy between story and discourse, in their usual narratological sense, and shows the components of *story*.



Note that the *discourse* branch of the tree is left unfilled here. A discussion of discourse can begin with the terms in the diagram below:



Here the narrative text, involving the contents of the inner box, is originated by the *real author* and transmitted to the *real reader*.<sup>10</sup> Inside this box are represented the *implied author* (the real author's *persona* adopted for the purposes of this work, who is assumed to create the discourse), and the *implied reader* (to whom the discourse is addressed).

The implied author and implied reader may be, and often are, quite different in character

from the real author and real reader: the real author may adopt different implied authors, and address different implied readers, from one work to another – or even switch within the same work. Between the implied author and implied reader may appear a *narrator*, who may overtly relate events and descriptions (either from within, as a character, or from outside), or who may simply allow them to appear. Although a work may be written in the third person, there often is a *covert narrator*, through whose mindset the characters and events are seen. Or (rather rarely) there may really be no narrator at all. Another optional participant is a *narratee*, to whom the narration is addressed by the narrator for the benefit of the implied reader.

Superimposed on the elements of the above diagram – especially the narrator – is the rather ambiguous notion of *point of view*. Although this concept is described in greatly varying ways by various critics, Chatman's description – influenced by Genette and others – appears most useful for the purposes of this study:

[. . .] “point of view,” one of the most troublesome of critical terms. Its plurisignification must give pause to anyone who wishes to use it in precise discussion. At least three senses can be distinguished in ordinary use:

- (a) literal: through someone's eyes (perception);
- (b) figurative: through someone's world view (ideology, conceptual system, *Weltanschauung*, etc.);
- (c) transferred: from someone's interest-vantage (characterizing his general interest, profit, welfare, well-being, etc.). (151-52)

In further discussion, Chatman refers to these three senses as *perceptual*, *conceptual*, and *interest* points of view. The perceptual and conceptual points of view are commonly noticeable in fiction; the interest point of view is less common.

One reason for the emphasis on the definition of point of view is to avoid confusing it with *narrative voice*. Quoting Chatman again:

Voice [ . . . ] refers to the speech or other overt means through which events and existents are communicated to the audience. Point of view does *not* mean expression; it only means the perspective in terms of which the expression is made. *The perspective and the expression need not be lodged in the same person.* (153, emphasis his)

That is, a narrator of whatever type can relate a story from the point of view of a character who is not the narrator. Additionally, narrative voice may change without a change in point of view, as often happens in Johnston's novels.

A narratological device of which Johnston makes frequent and effective use is manipulation of what Martin calls *narrative temporality*. Most of the ground-breaking on this subject appears to have been done by Genette, but useful explanations are given by Martin, Chatman, and others. Noteworthy characteristics of narrative temporality and additional terms associated with it, as summarized by Martin, include

*Duration:* In *scene* the time period described and reading time are about equal; detailed description may make reading time longer than the time of the event (*stretch*). In *summary*, reading time may be much shorter than chronological time (e.g., "a year passed"). Some temporal periods may be left out (*ellipsis*) [ . . . ].

*Order:* Narrator/character can describe the past (*flashback, analepsis*) or future events (characters may guess about them – *premonition, anticipation*; or narrator may know about them – *flashforward, prolepsis*). [ . . . ]

*Frequency:* A single event may be described once (*singulative narrative*) or several times (*repetitive narrative*). Repeated occurrence of the same event may be described once (*iterative* – e.g., "he saw her every day").

(124)

Prince defines these terms and several related ones under the general heading *anachrony*.

Examples of all the effects – with the possible exception of flashforward – can be found in Johnston's novels.

My own way of visualizing narrative temporality in Johnston's novels – at least the mechanism behind the "order" concept – is graphical. The pattern of flashbacks and other



shifts in time viewpoint can be conveniently shown in the form of a graph, using discourse time (measured by, say, page number) on the horizontal axis and story time (e.g., year or protagonist's age) on the vertical.

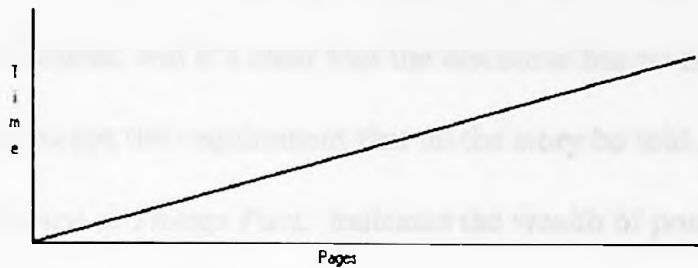


Figure 3: Chronological Narration

For example, a story which is told in strict chronological sequence, such as a classic folk tale, can be drawn like Figure 3. That is, the narration

takes the Lewis Carroll path: "Begin at the beginning, and go on till you come to the end, then stop."

Actually, not many novels have this structure; most use flashbacks in some form. In an extremely common pattern often used as a rudimentary framing device, the narration begins in the present, drops

back to the past, then continues monotonically until it reaches the present again, as

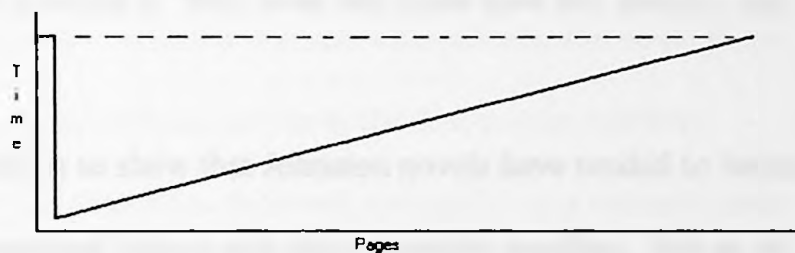


Figure 4: Chronological after flashback

in Figure 4. This pattern

can make the reader wonder "how did things get to be *that* way?" and then reveal the answer, gradually or suddenly, as the flashback plays out.

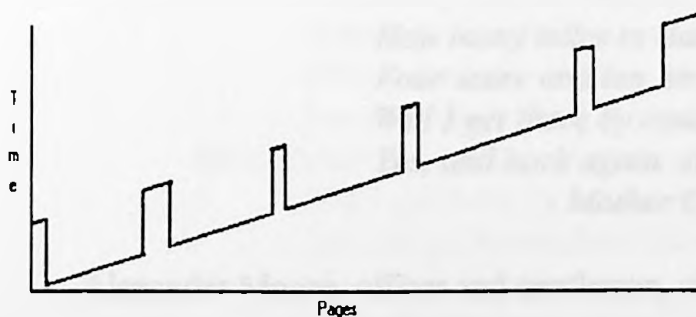


Figure 5: Alternating Time Frames.

Another rather common pattern, used by Johnston in *The Illusionist* and *The Gingerbread Woman*, alternates between two time frames: some of the "present"

narrative will unfold, then there will be a flashback to a past time, followed by another segment of “present,” then one of “past,” and so on (Figure 5).

The temporal pattern of a novel’s narrative can take an infinite number of shapes, of course, and it’s clear that the discourse has no necessary connection with the “real” story except the requirement that all the story be told. Genette, discussing Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, indicates the wealth of possibilities when, after describing *announcements* and *recalls*, he continues with more complex forms of anachronisms:

anticipations within retrospections, as when Marcel remembers what used to be his projects with respect to the moment that he is now experiencing; retrospections within anticipations, as when the narrator indicates how he will later find out about the episode he is now in the process of telling; “announcements” of events that have already been told anticipatively or “recalls” of events that took place earlier in the story but have not yet been told, retrospections that merge seamlessly with the main narrative and make it impossible to identify the exact status of a given section, etc.

But through all this, the central question is “Why does *this* novel have *this* pattern, and not some other?”

The intention of this study is to show that Johnston novels have tended to become increasingly more complex in temporal pattern and other narrative qualities, that is, in general her later novels exhibit a more complex narrative structure than her earlier ones. The remainder of this chapter presents two of Johnston’s early novels.

### *How Many Miles to Babylon?*

*How many miles to Babylon?  
Four score and ten, sir.  
Will I get there by candlelight?  
Yes, and back again, sir.  
- Mother Goose Rhyme<sup>11</sup>*

Alexander Moore, officer and gentleman, sings this childish song to avoid the

chaplain's question "Have you faith?" as he waits to face his firing squad. Then he observes, "He left soon after. I was sorry that I had distressed him" (7).

Without preamble, the opening lines of *How Many Miles to Babylon?* present Alexander to the reader in this situation. The narrative pattern of this novel is a forthright example of the "chronological after flashback" temporal style diagramed in Figure 4 (p. 19), and the opening scene has the desired effect on the reader: Who is this person, and why is he in this mess?

Immediately following this short scene the discourse drops back in time to Alexander's privileged childhood in an Anglo-Irish "big house" near Dublin, then progresses until it reaches opening-scene time again: It may also be mentioned that this novel exhibits none of the other narrative "tricks" used by Johnston in later novels – no shifts in narrative person, no movements to other time periods, no conversations with ghosts, etc. Except for the initial flashback and progressive return to the narrative present, the novel presents a perfectly straightforward discourse, with Alexander as the first-person narrator.

We learn that the "Babylon" rhyme has followed Alexander, at a distance, since early childhood. In fact, as he leaves his comfortable life to join the British Army in World War I – at his mother's bidding and over his father's and his own objections – he finds

[. . .] that I could smell the turf smoke and catch a glimpse of the two swans rocking gently on the lake.

How many miles to Babylon?

A strange thought for such a moment.

Four score and ten, sir.

It was the only thing in my head. The strange bumpy rhyme that I hadn't heard for years.

Will I get there by candle light?

The orange leaves from the chestnut trees danced in front of us all the way down the avenue.

Yes and back again, sir. (74)

Joseph Connelly discusses the implications of this rhyme with respect to Johnston's novel, suggesting that it evokes the motif of "journey" but moves toward death, as does the novel itself. He further suggests that the word "Babylon" may be a corruption of "Babyland, which has particular significance in Celtic consciousness as the land of youth or nether world" (119-120).

In early life, Alexander had little or no companionship: "I was isolated from the surrounding children of my own age by the traditional barriers of class and education" (7)<sup>12</sup>. As he progresses into boyhood he becomes conscious of Jerry, one of the local village boys, who "was around always." Their first actual meeting is at a lake near the house, where they threaten, scuffle, swim, and become fast friends in the manner of boys everywhere:

"I'll teach you to fight. You teach me to ride." [. . .]  
He held out his hand towards me and I clasped it.

Jerry has now become Alexander's "[. . .] private and secret friend. I never went to his house nor he to mine" (17). They spend their youth together: swimming, riding, talking about what they'll do when they grow up. They have their first drink of poteen together.

As political problems intensify in Europe, they discuss the possibility of war. Alexander scoffs at the notion, in the manner of his parents; Jerry accepts it – almost embraces it – in the manner of his:

"War? What war? You do have the strangest notions sometimes."  
"It's spoken of. The Germans are going to fix all those eejits in Europe, the British are going to fix the Germans, and we . . ." He paused for a moment and fumbled in his top pocket for a cigarette butt.  
"We . . . ?"  
"Oh. We are going to fix the British." (26)

When asked, Jerry declares himself to be a Republican, of course. He is sure of his own

politics at a time when Alexander is uncertain even of the issues involved, much less his own opinion.

Jerry's father has already enlisted by this time, less from British patriotism than Irish wanderlust. In their home, Mrs. Crowe finds his military allotment at least as useful as his presence.

Alexander's mother warns him away from Jerry – "It just won't do, darling. It's not . . . well, *comme il faut*. I forbid it. Absolutely" (30) – and arranges a trip to Greece for them both as the approach of war becomes ever more apparent. As actual fighting begins, many of the neighbors' sons volunteer for the British army. Frederick, Alexander's father, is furiously opposed (in his own ineffective way) to this involvement, and Alexander himself thinks it a very silly thing to do. But his mother comes to see having a son in service as a social asset and gradually increases pressure on Alexander to enlist.

According to O'Toole and others, a selfish dominating mother is one of the stock characters in a Big House novel. *Babylon* is considered such a novel by most critics of Johnston's work, as is its predecessor *The Captains and the Kings* – which features an almost identical mother. But Big House environment or not, domineering or merely concerned, a protagonist's mother figures prominently in many Johnston novels.

Under pressure from his mother, Alexander gains more appreciation of his father's defeated, trapped-animal feeling toward his wife. One evening Frederick, a little drunk and in pain, suddenly says to Alexander, "I hope you never experience the humiliation of living with someone who is completely indifferent to you. Humiliation" (46).

On the heels of this pathetic utterance, Alexander encounters his mother:

"You will go, won't you?"

"Mother, I . . ."

"It means a lot to me."

". . . don't want to. I really don't feel I have any right to go and shoot people. I mean, for a cause I neither understand nor care about."

"I care. I understand. Isn't that enough?"

I hadn't the nerve to tell her that I didn't believe her.

Then Alicia casually drops her bomb: Suppose he were not your father?" (50).

We never learn unequivocally whether this is true. Alicia refuses to discuss her purported lover ("Dead, Alexander. N'en parlons plus"), and retires with a parting shot: "I do want you to go for all the right reasons as well as a few of the wrong ones" (52).

Alexander leaves the house confused and upset ("I needed God or a friend."), and walks toward the village. Suddenly Jerry is there, holding a bottle and announcing that he intends to enlist tomorrow and take the cash award. They drink and talk about war, life, women:

Ever been with a girl?"

I blushed. "No."

"No more have I. I have a great curiosity along those lines. And fright." (58-9)

By the end of their drinking session, Alexander has made up his mind to enlist.

In the morning Alexander manages to get through breakfast in spite of a heroic hangover, insists on taking the train rather than being driven, engages in the obligatory stiff-upper-lip farewell with his father, then is unable to avoid his mother as he leaves:

Her eyes were the most triumphant blue.

"You'll come to see us in your uniform, won't you?" (73)

During the next six weeks Alexander trains on the shores of Belfast Lough,<sup>13</sup> grows a moustache to look more authoritative, and tries without enthusiasm to assume an air of command: "Jerry had been right, it never entered their heads that I should be

anything but an officer" (74).

Alexander immediately acquires a thorough fear of, and dislike for, his commanding officer Major Glendinning, a Regular Army veteran who doesn't even try to conceal his contempt for his entire command, "the biggest bunch of incompetents I have ever come across in my life." He makes them a promise which sounds more like a threat: "However, I intend to make soldiers of you" (74).

Alexander's unit takes a position near Bailleul, in extreme northern France, where they occupy a derelict farm near the front. Shabby as the farm is, it becomes attractive when Alexander's group is sent to the trenches to serve their first front-line rotation. Johnston sums up the conditions at the front in a compact but graphic way:

The trenches had been built originally by the French and had obviously seen a lot of hard fighting at one time. They had been allowed to deteriorate into little more than drains thick with mud and rubbish and sewerage. The mud made it almost impossible to move as when it dried on your boots it became hard and heavy like cement.

It would be pointless to say that I wasn't frightened. [. . .] It wasn't the thought of my death that made me sweat [. . .]. I was afraid that one day I might wake up and find that I had come to accept the grotesque obscenity of the way we lived. (88)

Alexander tries to maintain contact with Jerry, but his efforts meet with unpleasant results. At one time, he finds Jerry in one of the trenches, standing in knee-deep water. Alexander offers him a drink of rum, and Jerry talks about home: "Do you mind the swans? On the lake. You know" (95). Major Glendinning sees them together and gives Alexander a tongue-lashing: "Let it be understood once and for all that I will have no talking between the men and the officers. [. . .] In my company I will have it no other way" (96).

With all his stern rigidity, Glendinning shows great courage and his own brand of compassion one night when he takes Alexander out across the barbed wire to a severely

wounded man who has been screaming for four days. After a careful examination by torchlight – “I must be sure. Oh, Jesus Christ” – the Major expertly dispatches the wounded man with his knife. Alexander murmurs a sort of prayer, a line or two from Yeats: “Far off most secret and inviolate Rose . . .”(123). Back in the trench later, as they try to wash off the blood and mud, Glendinning excoriates Alexander for his softness: “You are a dismal creature, Moore. [ . . . ] If nothing else, Moore, if nothing else, I will make a man of you” (125).

Soon after this, Jerry receives a letter from his mother and shows it to Alexander. Jerry’s father has been reported missing in action; his mother has asked Jerry to try to find him. Both Alexander and Jerry know that this is a completely outrageous request, but Jerry says, “No matter. She wants me to” (134). At Jerry’s request, and in the face of his own powerful disinclination, Alexander goes to Major Glendinning to explain the circumstances and ask for a few days’ compassionate leave for Jerry. The result is humiliating, but not unexpected:

“The answer is no. Crowe goes to the front again tomorrow with the rest of his squalid friends.”

“I don’t think . . .”

“I know you don’t, Mr. Moore. That will be all.” (136)

But Jerry disappears during the confusion at the front, and Glendinning calls him a traitor, or at best a deserter, and launches a search for him.

Back at the farm, in the middle of the night, Alexander wakes suddenly to find that Jerry is in the room – tired, wet through, and blue with cold. He gets him undressed and into bed and gives him brandy. Jerry understands the peril of his situation, but also knows there’s nowhere else to go. He has learned that his father is dead, killed by a land mine, so



at least that doubt is removed.

Alexander gets into bed with Jerry, and Jerry slowly stops shivering. They talk of the swans back home, and what they'll do when they get back. Then Alexander asks "Did you ever go with a girl in the end? Like you said you wanted," and Jerry replies, "Time enough for that. Think of all the girls there'll be after the war and not near enough men to go round" (146).

They decide that the best plan would be for Jerry to go to Glendinning and turn himself in, but of course he's discovered before he can leave Alexander's bed. As he is dragged away the sergeant in charge mutters "Bloody Fenian bastards, [. . .] they think they can get away with murder" (150).

A day or so later, when Alexander is marching his tired, dispirited men, two swans fly over just above the tree tops: "As I raised my hand in greeting the sound of a shot reached me. The front bird's neck swung for a moment from left to right and then drooped. An ugly mass of flesh and feathers fell to the ground" (154). Alexander is shocked, heartsick, furious – but the men break ranks, laugh, congratulate the sharpshooter, and sing all the way back to the farm.

Then Major Glendinning sends for Alexander: "Private Crowe has been sentenced to death. You will command the firing squad at eight o'clock tomorrow morning" (155). This is Glendinning's way, apparently, of "making a man" of Alexander. The words are so shattering, so final and really so unexpected that Alexander cannot react; he remains outwardly calm.

"I say no."

"It won't save Private Crowe. [. . .] I shall have you shot by a firing squad and then I shall have your body shipped home to your parents. Let

them give it a hero's grave."

"Where did you learn to be so evil?" [. . .]

"In the interests of humanity, a word of advice. Tell your men to shoot straight. It's over quicker if they do. I know they do the other from the best of motives, but . . ."

I nodded.

"Good chap. You know you'll see things quite differently after a while." (156)

Alexander's mind is now clear, and he knows what he must do. He goes to the detention camp and browbeats the guard into letting him see Jerry. They talk about nothing, and everything, the lake, the swans, the horses, all the races they would have won. Then Alexander reaches under his coat and grasps his revolver: "The butt was warming in my hand" (159). He asks Jerry to play him a tune on his mouth harp, but the guards have taken it away. "Sing then." Jerry starts to sing "The Croppy Boy."

I took the damn gun out from under my coat and looked at it. It seemed in good working order. There was a slight click as I cocked it. I looked at him, but he sang on. [. . .]

"I bear no hate against living thing,

But I love my country above my King."

His eyes opened suddenly. They were very blue. He smiled at me.

"Now Father bless me and let me go . . ."

I shut my own eyes and pulled with my finger. (159)

The novel ends here, except for an echo of its opening words: "Because I am an officer and a gentleman they have not taken away my bootlaces or my pen, so I sit and wait and write" (159-60). This completes the return to the narrative "Now" with which the novel begins and gives the reader a feeling of closure, albeit under sad circumstances.

The story has a powerful emotional effect on the reader – certainly on this reader – on several levels and for several reasons: Alexander's loneliness, with his poisonous mother and pathetic father; his friendship with Jerry and the youthful joy they experienced together; the realistic view of the mud, cold, filth, and paralyzing fear in the trenches; his

frustration and helplessness with Major Glendinning, even worse than with his parents because more was at stake; the recurring image of the swans as a symbol of home and freedom; and, most of all, his final agonized action in Jerry's cell. Chatman points out that "[a] killing may not be a murder but an act of mercy, or a sacrifice, or a patriotic deed, or an accident, or one or more of a dozen other things" (94): this killing is presented as nothing more nor less than an act of love.

According to the Moloney interview, this novel has been adopted as a school textbook in Northern Ireland. Asked about this, Johnston gave a deeper insight into Irish society: "It's a school text in the North, not in the Republic." She feels that World War I has been "airbrushed from history" in the Republic:

In the North it is different. It has become an iconic part of the Protestant history and culture. Frank McGuinness in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* was one of the first people to give us back that important part of our history. (147)

It can be pointed out here that *Observe the Sons* iconizes not simply World War I itself, but the Protestant experience in World War I, right up to the point of the soldiers donning their orange sashes and going over the top. McGuinness is Catholic, but many people viewing the play might assume he is a Northern Irish Protestant because of his ability to give authentic voice to the Protestant soldiers. And though his dramatic style differs greatly from Johnston's, they share an ability to cause the fiercest action to occur *in the minds* of the audience, rather than being presented directly.

This novel hints at, but doesn't develop, the polarized political situation which was developing in Ireland during World War I. The Easter Rebellion in 1916, in which armed insurgents took over the Dublin Post Office and a large part of the city, had been in the

making since 1914. It failed at that time for lack of popular support, but the Republican movement continued until (and actually after) the formal end of the revolution in 1921. Many of Johnston's novels, particularly the earlier ones, are preoccupied with this conflict.

Though both *How Many Miles to Babylon?* and *The Illusionist* are written in the first person and have "I-as-protagonist" narrators (Martin's term, distinguished from "I-as-witness"), the narrator's role in *Babylon* appears much more straightforward. Alexander relates a continuous story with consecutive events, while *The Illusionist* alternates between two time periods and two verb tenses, even though it too maintains a single point of view.

The mention of first-person narration brings to mind Wallace Martin's statement that "any first-person narrative [. . .] may prove unreliable" (142), and leads to the question "Is Alexander a reliable narrator?" The easy answer is yes, since his values appear to agree, in general, with those of the implied author.<sup>14</sup> But a question of unintentional bias can still creep in, based on the relative luxury of his early life, his obvious acquired cynicism toward his mother's motives, or his even more obvious disgust with military life.<sup>15</sup> When his mother approached him on the morning he left for the army, would a less jaundiced narrator have reported the "most triumphant blue" of her eyes? Earlier in the book, in a less confrontational situation, he commented that she appeared kind and beautiful when she fed the swans. And would a seasoned military man share Alexander's loathing of Major Glendinning ("Where did you learn to be so evil?")? A war veteran might say that Glendinning was hard because he had to be, but he was fair; after all, he was trying in his way to be merciful to Jerry when he told Alexander to have the firing squad shoot straight. For that matter, would a veteran have considered trench life such a

“grotesque obscenity”? He might simply sigh and say “War is sure hell” with no particular feeling, in the manner in which General Sherman is sometimes reported to have expressed it.

The impression which remains with the reader is that Johnston herself – or perhaps her implied author, if that entity can be distinguished from the narrator in this case – has made a vigorous effort to present an accurate picture of the war and the interactions of the people involved, though her horror at the situations she was depicting often became apparent behind the words. It is also possible that this impression, in fact, is the result of one of the most subtle of literary techniques, that of allowing the reader to detect a philosophical statement rather than making the statement outright. Since this is the essential strategy of unreliable narration, there may be speculation as to how straightforward the discourse actually is.

Considering the richness of its characterizations and the vividness of its descriptions, both expressed with great economy of words (a Johnston trademark), it would be incorrect to call *How Many Miles to Babylon?* a simple novel. But its straightforward temporality, single point of view, and unvarying narrative voice make it an excellent example of the early work of Jennifer Johnston, even though – or really because – it does not make use of the various advanced narrative techniques that she developed later.

Johnston wrote *How Many Miles to Babylon?* in 1974. To make the point that “early Johnston novel” can really be considered an identifiable literary type, a 1979 novel exhibiting similar characteristics is examined below. This second novel also provides an early example of Johnston’s female protagonist.

*The Old Jest*

Nancy Gulliver is celebrating her eighteenth birthday as *The Old Jest* begins, in the late summer of 1920 on the east coast of Ireland a little south of Dublin: "If you climb up the hill at the back of the house, you can see Wales on a clear day. It's not really very exciting" (5). She lives, with her maiden Aunt Mary and her near-senile grandfather, General (Ret.) Dwyer, in a Big House dating back to 1698 – only a few years after the Battle of the Boyne, which cemented the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland. Aunt Mary runs the house, cares for her father the General, tries to be a mother substitute for Nancy; the General sits in his wheelchair singing hymns and scanning the railroad line through his binoculars. There is an occasional visit from Harry, a family friend who is older than Nancy but still rather young. Harry likes Nancy, but he is in love with Maeve, who lives next door.

Nancy never knew her parents. Her father is assumed to be dead, but the family doesn't discuss him. She indulges herself in sentimental fantasies: "Where is his grave then?" [. . .] Where is there a bit of paper saying he's dead? Something legal. Mr. Robert Gulliver is dead. That sort of thing" (47). As for her mother, "She gave me life eighteen years ago and I killed her. There's gratitude for you" (8).

We learn most of these facts from Nancy's first entry in her new journal: "Today I want to start to become a person. My new year. My life is ahead of me, empty like the pages of this book" (6). She intends to use the book to record her life experiences; later in the novel she says she'd like to write, "but I'm afraid I'll never find anything to write about" (129).

The narrative voice of the novel alternates between Nancy's first-person journal

entries and ordinary third-person narration, still from Nancy's point of view. This is essentially the same scheme used by Johnston in her first novel, *The Gates*, in which the protagonist Minnie McMahon is about the same age as Nancy, with more definite ambitions to become a writer. In *The Old Jest*, as in *The Gates*, the third-person narrative dominates, but the first-person journal entries give the reader a direct view of her feelings. We can compare her external behavior with what she envisioned while writing in her journal.

With this work Johnston returns after three male-centered novels – *The Captains and the Kings*, *How Many Miles to Babylon?* and *Shadows on Our Skin* – to the female-centered story with a *bildungsroman* quality which ultimately built her reputation. Following *The Old Jest*, she wrote six straight novels with a female protagonist; these were followed finally by *The Gingerbread Woman*, which still is dominated by a female voice though it includes an important male presence.

Also like *The Gates*, the temporality of *The Old Jest* progresses chronologically, as in Figure 3 (p. 19), without flashbacks or other time shifts. This is not to say that in this mode all events depicted must take place directly in the narrative present. Memories may be described or even relived, and future events may be predicted or speculated on, but the “narrative Now” is not shifted as it is in Figure 4 or Figure 5. With simple narrative voicing and no shifts in narrative time, *The Old Jest* represents another of what can be considered an “early” Johnston novel.

As the story develops, we soon see that Nancy is a precocious woman-child: spontaneous, apt to burst into song or dream vivid romantic dreams or take off her shoes and run, but she is also intelligent, well-read, thoughtful, and comfortable with her own

company.

Three days after her birthday, Nancy walks up the beach to her private place, an old hut in an isolated spot which she has furnished with books and writing materials; she likes to swim and read here, away from others. But this time she finds a cigarette butt near the door. Angry and a little frightened, she leaves a note: "Dear sir, I would be grateful if you didn't come here again. This is a very private and personal property. Yours sincerely Nancy Gulliver" (35).

The next day she finds a reply to her note: "Dear Miss Gulliver, thank you for your note. I can assure you that I am a great respecter of privacy and I regret that I have in any way impinged on yours" (37). The writer, though he must realize that Nancy is young, obviously is mature enough to take her seriously. She calls out to empty space, receives no reply, and lies down in the sun to read. As she expected, he appears without a sound, a smallish man of about fifty with a worn look.

Both afraid and intrigued, she asks why he chose her hut. "I don't suppose you'll believe me, but it was my hut long before you were even born" (39). He tells her that his boyhood home was nearby and that the seagull she sees on every visit may be the same one he knew as a boy. They like each other and talk until time for her to go:

"Goodbye, Nancy."

"Is there anything you want?"

"I'm quite good at fending for myself. Just discretion."

"I don't blab."

"I'm sure you don't." (41)

The passage above is a good sample of Johnston's terse writing style. It demonstrates both the reason her novels are short (a lot in a few words) and the reason they have been frequently adapted for television (tight dialogue with minimal descriptions). From



these five short lines of dialogue, considering both the spoken and unspoken words, the reader understands that the visitor is charmed by Nancy's youth and openness; that Nancy is concerned for the visitor's welfare; that he has been on his own in these circumstances before, probably many times; that Nancy is confident enough of her own discretion to make an implied promise, and that he believes and trusts her, based simply on a few minutes' conversation. And, in fact, she does not blab.

The next day at the hut, Nancy summons up courage to ask the stranger if his name is Robert, adding "My father was called Robert."

He roared with laughter. [. . .]

"Ah now, ah come on now, Nancy! You're not blaming me for that?"

"Why not? Why not you?" (54-55)

She resigns herself again to disappointment, but can't completely shake the feeling which prompted the question.

As they continue talking, he begins to speak more freely about himself: "I'm not what you might call old, and yet . . . all the time now [. . .] the past impinges on me." As he continues, we see a middle-aged man beginning to doubt the strength and sureness that have served him so well, contemplating his own mortality with some apprehension: "It might be compared with the loss of Faith." She wonders if faith in God makes "life easier? Less . . . well . . . full of dark corners?" He admits that he's "not really a God man myself [. . .]. I can say with conviction, though, that it's very important to feel you have a reason for being alive" (57).

Quietly, without warning, he shows her that he carries a gun. He tells her of his four years in a Field Artillery brigade, rising to major. "I thought at first we might be

striking a million blows for justice [. . .]. Of course i was wrong.” Then he says gently, “My war will never end” (59-60). We see that he probably had a “gentle” upbringing, since he was an officer, and that disillusionment during his military experience has led him to become a Republican activist – and we wonder whether Alexander might have gone the same way under other circumstances. Working out these observations from a few lines of dialogue allows the reader to appreciate Johnston’s ability to compress an involved history.

But Nancy is upset and angered to learn that this gentle, cultured man is a fanatic and probably a killer. She orders him away from her hut and charges out into the rain.

With this scene we are reintroduced to another of the preoccupations which have been remarked on by Johnston’s critics; that is, the tearing apart of Ireland and its people by opposing political ideologies. The stranger’s words have made his relationship with Nancy much more complex, forcing her to face directly the conflict with which she and her family have lived uneasily for years. The novel’s setting is no accident: in late 1920 the Irish Revolution was approaching a climax, and shortly after Nancy’s next birthday it was to be ended – officially – with the formation of the Irish Free State in December of 1921. Johnston’s acknowledgment of the deeply-held convictions of those on both sides of the conflict, and her acceptance of these competing perspectives in her treatment, are consistent with Moloney’s characterization of her writing as postmodern (139). This choice of universal over binary thinking lies at the root of her choices of narrative styles in this and future novels

After her first shock and outrage, Nancy tries to settle the turmoil in her mind and to decide how she now feels about the stranger. On her way next door for dinner, she

suddenly decides, and runs back to the hut in her black crepe dinner dress.

“Please don’t go.”

“Do you understand what that means?”

“I will try.”

He nodded.

“I think we might have a drink. I take it you’re not too young to have a drink?:

“I’d love a drink.” (68)

She decides to call him Cassius, because of his lean and hungry look. And as they become closer it comes to Nancy that, however much she hates killing, she believes in this man.

On her next visit Cassius is friendly, but preoccupied. She learns that he knows the area even better than he had indicated earlier and that he remembers Aunt Mary when she was about Nancy’s age. More significantly, he asks Nancy to take a message into Dublin for him.

Back at home, she tells Harry her newly-developed life plan: “I’m not going to be immature for long. I’ve made up my mind. I think . . . well . . . first of all I’ll lose my virginity, that’s a terrible liability, and then I’ll join the Republicans” (114-15). This sounds naive and refreshing now, but turns out to be darkly prophetic in a way she hasn’t envisioned.

The next morning, on Cassius’s instructions, she takes an envelope to Bewley’s Café in Grafton Street and gives it to the young man sitting there. The young man, whose name she finds to be Joe Mulhare, is reading *Hamlet*. He wants to be a writer, and they like each other instantly. After her letter is tucked away safely in his pocket, he invites her to go with him for a ride on a tram, and they run across the street like schoolchildren to catch the next one. They have a wonderful time, but as they part Joe suddenly becomes sober: “Tell him [. . .] that Broy says he must move on” (131).

That evening in her bedroom, while Aunt Mary talks with Harry, “She took her notebook from the drawer and opened it at a clean page. Joe Mulhare, she wrote. Full stop. Joe Mulhare. joe mulhare. JOE MULHARE. Joe. joe. joe. Joe Mulhare” (136).

As Joe had asked, she goes to the hut early the following afternoon to meet Cassius and pass along the message. They have a drink – she has learned to like Scotch whiskey, and he appears to need it – and he agrees that he should be leaving soon.

She made a hollow in the sand for her mug.  
 “May a daughter kiss her father goodbye?”  
 She crept right up beside him. He put his arms around her and held her close to him. One heart seemed to beat in both their bodies. (142)

Nancy plans to stay away from that part of the beach for several days, as Cassius had asked. On Saturday morning, however, Aunt Mary goes to the races with her friends the Misses Brabazon and they return late for dinner, very pale and shaken. At the races there was a sudden volley of gunshots: “Twelve soldiers dead. They must have been following each one of them. No one was caught” (151).

As they continue to gasp and exclaim, Bridie the maid speaks: “That’s twelve less English soldiers to torture our poor boys.”

“That’s a point of view, Bridie. Just one point of view.”  
 “It’s my point of view.”  
 “And it’s my point of view,” said Nancy to her own surprise.  
 “My dear Nancy, you know nothing about it at all.”  
 “I’m learning.” (149-151)

The incident invades their home as a British Army captain disperses his men around the house and asks courteous questions of everyone. He passes around a picture which Nancy immediately recognizes as Cassius, but no one volunteers information.

A few minutes later: “Her head ached with fear. I suppose I’ve helped to kill

twelve men, she thought. God forgive me for that”(158). Aunt Mary knows that Nancy hasn’t told the whole truth – and lets Nancy see this – but wisely doesn’t pursue the matter. When Nancy asks her about the man in the picture, Aunt Mary tells her of faintly remembering a nearby family named Barry: “Angus was his name. We used to call him Angoose” (159).

Nancy doesn’t – can’t possibly – sleep. She waits as calmly as she can until the house is quiet, then creeps downstairs and races for the beach. She finds Cassius, whom she now knows as Angus Barry, resting in the hut and tells him about the day’s events:

“Those twelve . . .”  
 “I’m sorry, Nancy. They were dangerous [ . . . ] We have to win, Nancy. In the end of all the people have to win. (160-61)

When she asks “Are you Angus Barry?” he tacitly assents – and his assent is reinforced by a voice from the dark: “Major Barry, we know you are armed. Throw your bag and your gun on to the sand. Don’t do anything foolish. We won’t hesitate to shoot both you and the girl if you do anything stupid”(163). Barry bargains with the soldiers to let Nancy leave, then drops his bag and gun.

And is immediately shot seven times.

The soldiers stop Nancy as she runs toward Barry’s body, and a corporal is assigned to take her home. Trembling and sick with horror, she asks the corporal *Why?*

“They make the decisions, we do what we’re told. That’s the way of life.”  
 “I don’t think he saw it like that.”  
 “That’s why they wanted him dead. There’s your answer. Go on home now, Miss, and keep your face shut.” (165)

In one way, these words could serve as a summary of the novel.

As the story ends, we remember Nancy’s defiant words to Harry a few days

earlier: "I'll lose my virginity [. . .] and then I'll join the Republicans," and we realize that, in a manner of speaking, she has already accomplished both goals, though in the reverse order. She "joined the Republicans" when she changed her mind and asked the stranger not to leave her hut. Then she was involved, albeit unknowingly, in the murder of twelve soldiers, and has just witnessed the murder of the man she thought of as her father. These events have taken, not her physical virginity, but her innocence. The Nancy we first met on her eighteenth birthday has become, at eighteen years and nine days, a very different person – older and wiser in ways that most of us have never experienced.

Nancy's experiences relate to the novel's title, which is taken from a quotation Nancy attributes to Turgenev: "Death is an old jest, but it comes to everyone." This is mentioned by her grandfather in one of his more lucid moments, as he recalls killing an enemy soldier and taking his field glasses. The phrase "old jest" can be taken to mean a tiresomely well-known joke, an "old chestnut," which we recognize at the first words but have to endure anyway. Turgenev may have applied the term to death because death is ubiquitous, all too familiar, and inevitable. The saying may have been recalled by General Dwyer when he killed the enemy soldier – the equivalent of rationalizing that "everyone has to die sometime." Major Barry killed many people, twelve that we know of, and has finally met death himself under circumstances which made him fully aware of its approach. The idea of death is old, and a jest doesn't have to be funny to be a jest.

This is the second of the two early Johnston novels chosen to demonstrate their more straightforward narrative devices. The chronology of narration in *The Old Jest*, as mentioned earlier, is quite regular, and the point of view is always Nancy's with almost trivial exceptions, such as one occasion on which Barry studies her: "He watched her

carefully as she unfolded herself from her rather crouched position on the floor. [. . .] He was alarmed to find that he was touched by her inexperience" (107).

The majority of the novel is written as indirect discourse, using Nancy's point of view but not her thoughts. But Nancy's journal entries are important exceptions, allowing insight into her feelings as well as a greater potential for unreliable narration. Though revealing – particularly of Nancy's feeling toward her family – these inward first-person passages form only a minor part of *The Old Jest*. In Johnston's later novels, however, we can expect to see them increase in length and importance: their role is significant in *The Invisible Worm*, more frequent in *The Illusionist*, and dominant in *The Gingerbread Woman*.

Nancy matures before our eyes in the best *bildungsroman* tradition: we see her first as a charming girl-almost-woman, with both her childish and womanly features fully outlined. We watch as she acquires social consciousness, or at least rudimentary political opinions (probably tinged by romantic ones), through her contact with Barry. And finally we see her in the presence of violent death, trying to understand and achieving the most mature understanding of all – that there is no understanding.

Barry's character is a little less sharply defined than Nancy's, but there is still a wealth of detail. We see his gentlemanly background from his reply to Nancy's note; we understand his fanatic devotion to his cause through his conversations with her and through his actions, and finally – in another brief passage from his viewpoint – we see the depth of his feeling for her. Just after she has asked for, and received, a goodbye kiss:

He let go of her and looked carefully at her face.

"I must be getting old."

"Why do you say that?"

“Because for the first time for many years I regret having to say  
goodbye.”

The radiance of the smile she gave him made him tremble (142).

Although *The Old Jest* shares important features of the Big House novels, it is the combination of its young female protagonist, its *Bildungsroman* character, and its warts-and-all presentation of the ramifications of Ireland’s struggle that has made it the Johnston novel most often discussed by critics. It epitomizes the reason Johnston returned to Ireland to write.



### Chapter 3: Late Novels

Something of a turning point in Johnston's writing, vaguely defined but real, occurred between *Fool's Sanctuary* (1987) and *The Invisible Worm* (1991). Her subject matter began a slow shift, as pointed out by Julia O'Faolain in her review of *The Illusionist*, from political to personal: the Big House and Irish conflict began to give way to concerns with women's struggles and women's fulfillment. At the same time, whether related or not, it appears that her narrative style became more complex, using more "advanced" narratological techniques: shifting narrative voice, fluctuating time frames, varying point of view. The two novels described below are good examples.

#### *The Invisible Worm*

The title is taken from William Blake's poem "The Sick Rose," which is so apt that one feels Johnston must have read the poem and then immediately written the novel. In the poem the Rose is afflicted with a disease which is not apparent from outside but which attacks its core, and we soon see that the novel's protagonist Laura, despite her beautiful and capable exterior, is a very sick lady indeed.

The emotional battering she has undergone, of which she still feels the effects, is reflected also in the narrative style of the novel. There are unexpected shifts in narrative voice so that we first see Laura from outside and then find that we are "in her head," or vice versa. There are sudden changes in time frame: at one point, Laura is thirty-seven in one line of the text and fifteen in the next (155). The narrative mechanism, discussed more fully following a synopsis of the story, can readily be seen to echo Laura's shifting emotional state.

Laura Quinlan is of the Protestant Ascendancy class, well-to-do if not wealthy, the

owner – through the female line for three generations – of an estate on which is set a very large, very old, very beautiful, only slightly decaying house with a magnificent view across the hills to the sea. Since her mother died, she is almost the only Protestant in sight. Her father was Catholic, as is Maurice, her successful trade-expert husband, and almost everyone else she sees. But then she sees relatively few people, usually only those who come to the house, because Laura leaves her house only for special occasions, such as her father's funeral.

It is just before her father's funeral that the story opens. Laura, at her upstairs window, watches "the woman running. Is it Laura?" She realizes "I am Laura" (1). Thus, we begin to see the dark state of her mind. Then at the funeral we glimpse the hardened hatred which is also there: "The hole that they dig for you won't be deep enough, dear Father" (8).

Later in the story, we find that Laura's father was an important, honored man, a Senator and a friend of statesmen and heroes. The ten-year-old Laura adored him and wondered whether to take her mother – whom she admired but felt uncomfortable with – seriously: "Daddy fought for freedom," said Laura, and her mother replied "Daddy fought for Daddy" (31). But then several years later, when Laura married Maurice and brought him into the house, she insisted over Maurice's objections that her father move to quarters of his own. He lived apart from them until his final illness and returned to the big house shortly before his death.

When Laura was fifteen, her mother died in a boating accident: "They never found her body. A spar, some timbers, a rope washed up on the beach" (49). Later we learn that she has always believed her mother went out into the storm *intending* not to come

back, and that she, Laura, had caused her death: "I burdened her with demands she felt she couldn't handle. I thought she had such strength, such power" (53).

We find Laura, at 37, intelligent, beautiful, cultured, and — strange. She entertains elegantly within her home, but prefers not to leave it: "I don't go out. Not like other people go out. I don't . . . feel the need" (24). And although she has enormous bursts of energy ("I think I'll clear the corner down by the stream . . . Rediscover the old summerhouse" [42] ), she is also subject to long periods of despondency that seem to qualify as genuine clinical depression.

Her most notable bout of depression lasts six weeks, during which she stays in her bedroom in a sort of waking coma. Maurice comes and goes and the housemaids change the sheets and bring food: "I try to eat what they bring me." When she does get up to go to the bathroom, "It is like going on a voyage around the world." Sometimes she fills the bath with water and "then I will sit there until someone comes and brings me back to my bed" (127). As her condition slowly improves, she finds Maurice there to talk cheerfully and encourage her to get out into the beautiful summer weather: "'First step, dote. That's great, isn't it?' . . . I was right to marry him, she thought, even though it was all for the wrong reasons" (129).

The reasons were wrong, we've found, in two ways: first, because Laura married Maurice primarily as a way to force her father out of her house and, second, because of Maurice's feeling (or lack of it) toward Laura. He knows nothing of Laura's struggles against her father and is more in love with his own image as a sort of successor to him than he is with Laura. In a way, he's paying his dues for being accepted into the family. Superficially, he dotes on her (hence the silly nickname he uses), but he also travels abroad

often, brings important clients to tea without notice, and oh-so-discreetly slips away to visit one or more girl friends, all in the name of Business: "Don't wait up, dote. I may have to have a few jars afterwards. You know the way it is" (34). Laura feels both wistful and amused at this: She isn't deceived in the slightest and feels little or no jealousy or physical desire for Maurice. After several failed attempts, they have agreed that there will be no children. As a husband Maurice is affable and – well, harmless – and Laura is now content to leave matters as they are.

She shows more of her inner self to Dominic O'Hara, a teacher and former priest – "I am a recusant. [. . .] Someone who defies the authority of the Church" – whom Maurice brings home to tea one day almost absent-mindedly. Or perhaps he has some subconscious motivation: Laura remembers her father "bringing young, handsome priests home" in an attempt to persuade her mother to "turn and of course bring me with her" (64-65). To Laura, Dominic seems "an unfinished man [. . .] as if he were made from unfired clay" (15), and at first she is a little cool toward him, perhaps uncertain of his motivations. But on his second visit (Maurice is away as usual) she finds herself telling him things she has never told Maurice – or herself:

"I am afraid of my father."

"Isn't your father dead?"

"Yes."

"Ghost . . . spirit?"

She shook her head. "There are times," she said, "I feel his hands around my neck." (24-25)

And later she says to him, "I'll tell you something no one knows. [. . .] I killed my mother" (48).

Far from being put off by Laura's pseudo-confessions, Dominic continues to visit,

always in Maurice's absence, and follows her around like a puppy. Maurice, talking with Laura, treats Dominic with a careless mild contempt, referring to him as "the priesteen" (129) and asking, "Do you think your man's a pouf?" (98). When Laura launches her project to clear two decades of accumulated brush away from the old summerhouse, Maurice quickly offers, "If you want a summerhouse I'll get some of the men to build you one next winter," but Laura thinks of it as "Penance," and "disinterring the past" (42). Later as she slashes and rakes weeds, piling them up for burning, Dominic drops out of the sky as usual and pitches in eagerly: "I don't know what you're up to, but you look as if you could do with some help" (44).

During this time of dirty, tiring effort, Laura is barraged with vivid memories involving her father, her mother, and herself. She shares some of them with Dominic, but turns more and more inward until Dominic tries to rouse her: "You keep going away" (83). As the work proceeds, she relives one of her experiences with her father:

He caught me in his arms and held me tight against him.  
 "Little pet," he murmured.  
 I couldn't fight.  
 I was drowning in my tears and in the warmth of his body. [. . .]  
 "You must believe me, Laura. I know what is best for us all."  
 Everything will be all right."  
 I felt his tongue on the right side of my face, lapping like a cat at  
 the tears.  
 From my chin to the bone beneath the socket of my eye I felt the  
 browsing of his thirsty tongue.  
 I punched him in the stomach with my fist and pushed past him  
 through the door into my room. (92)

That time she had managed to retain some control of the situation, but the reader feels a powerful sense of worse trouble to come.

Laura's most severe bout with depression, the one which lasts six weeks, begins

the day after she and Dominic have cleared all the brush away from the summerhouse, but before she actually enters. The trigger (if a trigger other than her own memory is needed) is a simple, fairly common occurrence: “One of the beasts was found dead in the field this morning.” As she looks from her window to the men crouched around the dwindled corpse, she remembers her father on his deathbed – his dwindled form – and hears him ask, “Forgive me.” But her mind turns to a vision of her mother, paraphrasing from *The Tempest*: “Of her bones are coral made. / Those are pearls that were her eyes” (124). She is unable to let the feeling go, and realizes that

Tomorrow I know I will want to die.

It’s as if there were a stopper somewhere in my body, and when it is pulled out I become slowly drained of hope, love, confidence, even the ability to feel pain; I become an empty skin; I do not even have the energy to kill myself. I long for the safe, lapping waters of the womb, darkness.

Tomorrow. It will be like that tomorrow. (125)

Maurice remains steadfast during her illness, but as she begins to return to life, he shows his relief by rushing off to Dublin: “Have to, dote, I’ve meetings, appointments, a thousand things to do” (135). (Presumably his associate Sandra Mooney will be involved in one – or more – of his “meetings.”) Dominic, of course, is there. He tells her that he has taken the decision to leave his school – and to Laura’s utter surprise, he asks her to go with him: “[. . .] come away with me. Away from here. We could both start again” (140). She refuses, not at all unkindly but quite definitely. She cannot leave her home and “abandon” her dead mother and grandmother.

But a couple of days later, after Maurice has left for Europe – “now the Brits are being difficult again about subsidies” (153) – she finds that Dominic has finished clearing around the summerhouse, and that Shamie Doyle, from her father’s mill, has mended

window frames and replaced panes. She goes out with Dominic to look, suggesting that they walk around it first, then “She finished the sentence as they approached the steps. ‘I have to go in.’ [. . .] She stepped inside” (155).

And by stepping through the door she steps into the mind of her fifteen-year-old self, and the event which has defined her present life begins to play out.

He had been sitting on the sofa and stood up as she stepped in through the door. [. . .] “I am your father. I would never hurt you.” [. . .] As he spoke he pushed her down on the sofa. [. . .], the weight of his body imprisoning her. His face was hot, his lips hot, tongue hot.

Hot tears from their eyes mixed on their cheeks.

“I am your father,” he screamed into her ear. [. . .] With his left hand he took her hair [. . .] and winding it into a long, dark rope, he pulled it around her neck.[. . .] He jerked ferociously into her body and beat and beat and beat . [. . .] We are now destroyed, she thought.

The next sound was a question: “Why did you do this to me?” But then we see that it was *his* question, not hers. “Think of your mother. [. . .] This will have to be our secret” (156-57). She broke away and ran.

She ran to the sea.

I threw myself forward into the waves and the sea punished me and scourged me. My clothes and hair were heavy with water and I knew it would be so easy to die . . . and that bloody dog barked on the shore . . . and I felt cold and my eyes were stinging with the salt and the little stones cut at my legs and arms. (164-5)

Later, when she wrenchingly told her mother what had happened – she didn’t know the words, really, but finally came out uncertainly with “rape” – her mother at first disbelieved her. That night, however, she came to her and told her, “I promise you it will never happen again. [. . .] Please don’t hate him, Laura. Think how frightened he must be.” She then went out in her sailboat, in a storm: “I never saw her again” (178). This was a deadly triple blow, all within a few hours: her own violation by her father, the

violation of her mother's promise to protect her, and the loss of the mother herself.

This shattering narrative is spread over many pages of the novel, sometimes as Laura's internal experiences told in first or third person, sometimes as her account to Dominic. As the story emerges in bursts and stutters, we suddenly understand the twisted meaning of a scene-fragment which has appeared, isolated, very early in the novel: "He held me by the shoulders and shook me. [. . .] 'You killed your mother,' he had said. 'I warned you. Warned you, warned you'" (36-37).

Before she finishes telling Dominic her story, Laura commandeers his help for what she now knows she needs to do. They pour gasoline over the summerhouse, light it, watch it burn it to the ground, then go back to the main house: "She closed the door and locked it. 'I'd no idea it was so easy to destroy something like that . . . and so exhilarating. [. . .] You will stay the night, won't you?'" (169). Laura tells Dominic the rest of her story here, as they spend the night eating, talking, drinking uncounted bottles of wine, and growing in trust and intimacy.

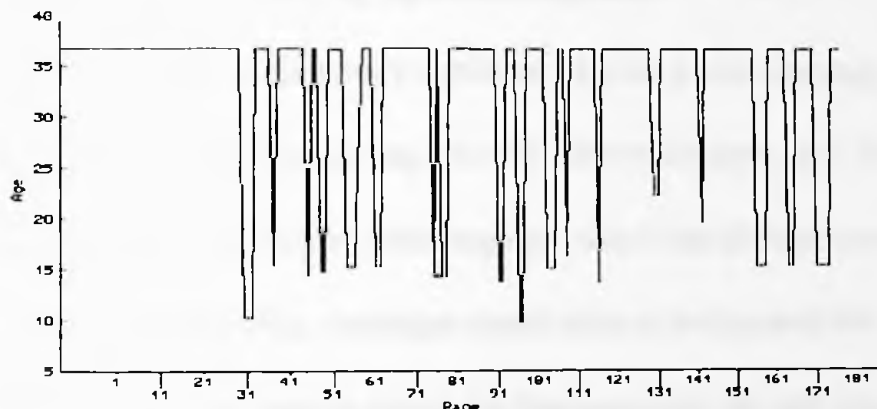
And making love? We don't know, but when we remember Laura's devastating first exposure to sex, and her years of Maurice's "doting" disregard, it would be good to feel that on this occasion, with this partner, she discovered gentle, caring sex.

In the morning, Dominic again begs Laura to come away with him, and she again refuses. This is her home, and she literally could not live anywhere else.<sup>16</sup> And now she's content to stay and enjoy her home because she feels that the running woman will never run again – (using a childhood word of Dominic's) – *perhaps*.

This novel is not an easy one to read, not only because of sympathy for Laura, but



also because the discourse can be difficult to follow. Without doubt, the most significant narrative technique used in *The Invisible Worm* is the choice of its temporal pattern, which is so complex and intriguing that it earned a semi-scientific investigation. The basic temporal facts are these: Laura is 37 when she meets Dominic O'Hara; this is about a month after her father's funeral, as related at the opening of the novel. She was 15 when the rape and her mother's death occurred, and she had felt some premonitory rumblings from her father a little before that, perhaps about age 13(!) or 14. But at age 10 she adored her father and had no qualms about his intentions toward her: we learn this in a very short flashback. So the time period of concern extends from about Laura's age 10 to the "now" at age 37. After going through the novel page by page, tabulating Laura's age and



**Figure 6:** Narrative Chronology of *The Invisible Worm*

the pertinent events for each time segment, I have derived the "temporal graph" shown in Figure 6.

Although most

of the action takes place

in the "narrative Now" (at the top) the flashbacks are many and various: one or two to age 10, ten or more to around age 15 – the time of the rape and the mother's death – and one or two to later times, such as Laura's trip to France and her marriage. The flashbacks are so frequent, and generally so short, that the novel reminds one of a screen play. The graph, however, reminds one of a seismograph trace, or perhaps that of a polygraph. Considering Laura's roller-coaster emotional experiences, the comparison may be apt.

The big question, of course, is *why* all this shuffling of events? And the answer, basically, is the same as for *The Illusionist* and the straight framing flashback, e.g. *Babylon*: to build suspense and present the climax near the end. But this time the narrative constructs many mysteries around Laura's fundamental trauma. Each flashback reveals a little more of the texture of the "present," and sometimes also poses other mysteries to be explained later. One particularly notable example is the sudden scene, like a lightning flash, in which Laura's father blames her for her mother's death (37) very early in the novel. When we first encounter this passage, we don't know what to make of it, but we'll certainly remember it until it's explained. There are others like this (e.g., Maurice's first visit as a young man) which may be less demanding of the reader's perseverance, yet build up significant suspense.

The temporal pattern combines with the poetic language and imagery of the novel to keep the reader wondering not only what will happen next, but also what *has* happened. It's a tribute to Johnston's thoroughness that it has all fallen into place at the end. Some sort of story-boarding technique would seem to be required for this work, but when asked what method she used to put all the fragments into the right places, Johnston replied:

*The Invisible Worm* wrote itself. I had no grand plan, just an insistent voice in my head, like a bird trapped in a room hoping that someone would let it out before it battered itself to death beating against the window. I know this is unhelpful, but it is true. I had intended to write a different book but was not allowed to. (letter to the author)<sup>17</sup>

As for narrative voice, the entire novel is written from Laura's point of view, but alternates between Laura's first person and the more standard third-person, covert-narrator form. Marilyn Throne called this technique "that seeming Irish convention of shifting a narrative voice between first and third persons, as practiced by [Jennifer] Johns-

ton" (109). Shifts between first and third person appear at first sight to be random, but the first-person passages are noticeably more personal, more inward, to Laura. The funeral scene ("The hole that they dig for you won't be deep enough, dear Father" [8]). is all first-person narration.

On the other hand, the climactic rape scene in the summerhouse uses third person: "He had been sitting on the sofa and stood up as she stepped in through the door" (156). In this scene, Laura's interior voice appears in what Chatman calls "direct free" style:

He put his arm around her shoulders and walked her back [. . .] to the sofa where he had been sitting waiting for her.

"Laura!"

Please save me.

"I am your father [. . .]." (156)

These changes in mode refocus the reader's attention and give the narrative different flavors at different times. The effect which Johnston apparently was working toward – and which she achieved – was a novel which was more "about" Laura's emotional experiences than about physical events.

Johnston's propensity for inserting unreal beings into her novels is also seen here. The first two sentences of the novel are "I stand by the window and watch the woman running. Is it Laura?" (1). But the fourth sentence is "I am Laura," and we gather as the narrative continues that the running woman is somehow an expression of Laura's inner turmoil, a narrative device rather than a character. At the novel's end, Laura has reason to hope that the running woman will never again run – or need to.

While *The Invisible Worm* shares many features found in the two early novels – the terse, vivid characterizations, the perceptive descriptions of character relationships, the world seen through the protagonist's eyes – it is dramatically different in the form of its

presentation. The other “late” novel, though different in structure from *The Invisible Worm*, bears a far closer resemblance to it than it does to the earlier works.

### *The Illusionist*

One of Johnston’s kindred spirits, Julia O’Faolain, reviewed *The Illusionist* in 1995: “In this dancing novel – her tenth – Jennifer Johnston narrows her focus to complete her recent slow shift from the political to the personal, and from history to the home front” (5). Like *The Invisible Worm*, it is the story of a woman who finally takes direct action to release herself from a psychological prison, but with a different outcome: Laura destroys her summerhouse and thereby frees her spirit; Stella, the protagonist of *The Illusionist*, leaves her already-failed marriage with the same goal, but then must face a life alone and her daughter’s bitter hatred. As Johnston described it to Caitriona Moloney, “A door opens, and they are able to walk through. [. . .] Laura stays with her husband and Stella leaves hers, but the important thing is the doors are opened” (143).

At the opening of the novel Stella is in her Dublin home, waiting for someone’s arrival: “I dream of her entrance” (1). As she waits, she introduces herself to — her audience? In narratological terms, she writes as a first-person narrator addressing a narratee or implied reader, probably the latter since she attributes no personal characteristics to the entity being addressed.

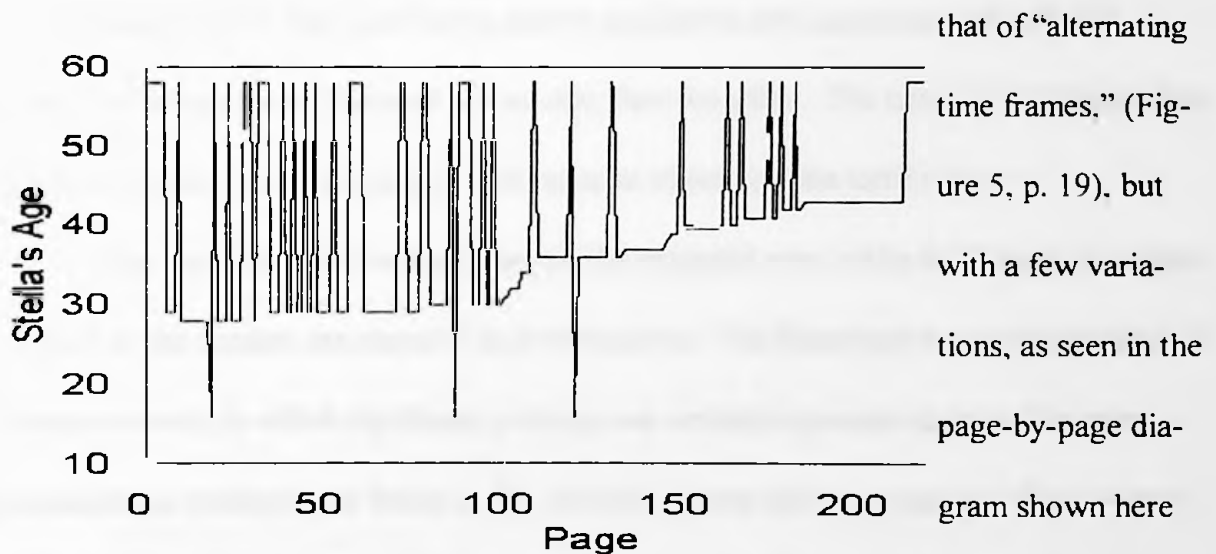
We learn that she is 58 years old and has been a writer for some fifteen years. She lives alone by choice, and she is awaiting the arrival of her daughter Robin. Later, in the second and last passage in which she appears conscious of a reader, Stella the writer tells us, “I am attempting to tell a story. Starting at the tail end is part of my writer’s bag of tricks. I suppose I could call myself an illusionist also, except for the fact that he has

already bagged that title” (9).

After this introduction, we are told that “he” is Stella’s ex-husband Martyn, whom she left some fifteen years back, and who was killed a few days ago by “[a]n IRA bomb in a London street and Martyn in his station wagon with a hundred and fifty white doves neatly caged in the back. [. . .] This morning he was buried in London and I am waiting for our daughter to arrive” (9).

Stella’s most persistent image of Martyn appears in a recurring dream in which she sees him standing, his arms outstretched, covered with white doves. He begins to move his arms: “Deep, sweeping strokes, and the man is transformed into an angel with heavy, white wings beating as he hovers above the darkness of the world. I hope I will never have this dream again” (5).

A second feature *The Illusionist* shares with *The Invisible Worm* is its rather extreme treatment of narrative time; the temporal style of the novel is generally



**Figure 7:** Narrative Chronology of *The Illusionist*

introduction sketched out above takes place at the extreme left side in the “Present” (the upper ends of the spikes). Later discourse alternates between Present (Stella’s confronta-

tion with Robin) and Past (Stella's life with Martyn). All times are shown in terms of Stella's age during the passage being considered. The times of the Past passages (on the lower ends of the spikes) can be seen generally to proceed in chronological order except for the three deepest spikes, which represent brief intrusions by Stella's childhood memories.

The Present scenes are chronological and take place over a period of a few days: they all appear at the same level on the graph (age 58). A given Past scene generally continues from the previous Past scene's ending point. Because of this, the line formed by the lower end of the spikes is fairly smooth, rather flat at first (since more pages are devoted to the early part of Stella's story), then sloping upward toward the final breakup at Stella's age 43. In this respect *The Illusionist* differs markedly from *The Invisible Worm* in which the excursions into the past are unpredictable in both depth and extent. With the rapid shifts between time frames there is an effect of Present and Past playing out simultaneously, as if they were being shown on side-by-side movie screens with the reader's attention being directed first to one, then the other. The timing is such that often we see a Present condition and its Past cause at effectively the same time.

The Past passages use past tense in the expected way, while the Present passages (of help to the reader) are narrated in *present* tense. *The Illusionist* is one of a handful of Johnston novels in which significant portions are written in present tense (a few short present-tense passages are found in *The Invisible Worm* and many more in *The Gingerbread Woman*). All of *The Illusionist*, Present and Past, is narrated by Stella. In an early Past passage, Stella Macnamara meets Martyn Glover on the train from Liverpool to London's Euston Station when he interrupts her reading by plucking the book from her

hands, then suddenly and smoothly takes an egg from her ear. She bursts out laughing and asks if he is a conjurer. He clarifies firmly: "Illusionist is the word, for future reference" (16).

Stella is working in London – she is an editor in a moderate-sized publishing firm – because she prefers to be somewhat removed from her mother, who has a way of looking at the unpleasant practical side of questions, tacitly implying that Stella is flighty and immature. And in this we see again the looming Mother-presence which we often find in Johnston novels. Mrs. Macnamara is far from the haughty, supremely selfish mother in *How Many Miles to Babylon* – for one thing, she genuinely cares for Stella. And she certainly is not like Laura's capable but remote mother, who apparently abandoned her in a crisis. But she does have a way of making snap judgments, usually derogatory, which prove to be accurate: "'I know what you're thinking,' my mother used to say to me and I would say, 'Tell me then if you're so clever' and she would" (120). In the first Past scene she readily extends her scrutiny to Martyn, asking why he spells his name with a Y – this is very suspicious – and ending with "I hope you know what you're doing" (7). As the story develops, we see that Stella *didn't* know what she was doing, and her mother's caution was more than justified; Stella sooner or later recognizes both facts, reflecting bitterly on her mother's very early comment that "He doesn't tell you anything, does he?" (25).

In the Past, Stella's life with Martyn is a parade of surprises. Actually, there are a few good ones: Martyn at first is attentive and solicitous, making use of both his sleight-of-hand skills and his comfortable income (from unknown sources) to produce flowers, jewelry and other unexpected gifts, and making extravagant declarations of love. But the good surprises are very soon outweighed by the bad: he flies into a sputtering, trembling

rage if Stella “pries” into his affairs, whether looking in his trouser pockets for cab fare or coming too close to the locked room in which he works on his illusions. He lives his life without regard to hers – missing meals or demanding food at unexpected times, sometimes staying away all night without warning. Through their entire married life – and after, for that matter – she never learns anything else about his business, not even its name or the location of his office. She has seen his secretary Angela, who arranged their honeymoon travel and cried at their wedding, but the rest of the business may as well not exist.<sup>18</sup>

A year or so after their marriage, Bill Freeman, the senior partner in Stella’s publishing firm, asks her to become a partner. But Martyn – without consulting or even warning her – buys a house in Suffolk, far from her work in London. He wants its large, modern barn to develop his bird act, he tells her. She knows nothing of his bird act, is afraid of birds, and is furious that he has taken this important step without her knowledge. But he apologizes at length, even weeping, and persuades her that she must give up her job and live in the country. Relenting, she calls her mother to give her the news:

“I think I’ll be domestic for a couple of years and then . . .”

She was laughing.

“There’s a fool born every minute. Lovely news, dear.” [. . .]

Damn. (77)

Two notable events occur during the summer after they move to Suffolk. The first is that a fox kills some of Martyn’s doves. He blames Stella, of course: “Why didn’t you tell me about foxes?”(94). The second is that Robin is born.

Martyn buys twenty-four more doves. Robin grows. Stella sees the fox again: Phobic about birds, she secretly admires him. Later she tells Robin stories about “Guy Fox,” but Robin is really more interested in the doves because Martyn introduces her to



them and teaches her to handle them as he does. As Robin grows up, it becomes apparent that she enjoys Martyn's company more than Stella's: she likes his doves and he brings her presents – silver-wrapped candies, glove puppets, fluffy dogs – which he causes to tumble out of her damp hair after her bath. Stella's rules about bedtimes and meals tend to be ignored.

One day Stella, walking in the field, finds a small clearing where a family of baby foxes are playing. She takes Robin, very quietly, to see them, but Robin seems unimpressed. Later, however, we learn that Robin has told Martyn about them and Martyn has had them killed. He gives Robin one of the tails as a toy. Stella is hurt and infuriated.

Seven years after leaving the publishing house, Stella answers the door: "Bill Freeman stood outside glaring at me over a huge cardboard box. 'God, I hate the country.' [. . .] We hugged, great crushing bear hugs" (122). He has thought of her often over the years and decided finally to visit her, even at the cost of going to the country. He has brought food, champagne – and a portable typewriter.

They drink, eat, talk. She takes him to see the aviary, and tries to explain why she knows so little about the doves: "He won't tell me and then I will feel humiliated. I've learnt not to ask him questions." She thanks Bill for the typewriter, which she names QWERTYUIOP. But later she hides it in her closet and watches Martyn and Robin feeding the doves and laughing: "I suddenly felt very lonely" (133).

Several weeks later Robin suddenly tells Martyn, "Mummy has a typewriter." Stella felt "heat rushing up, covering my neck and face. 'Bill gave it to me . . .'" (140). She tells Martyn that Bill thinks she could be a writer and that she wants to try. Martyn guffaws: "You? [. . .] What do you have to write about? [. . .] Pardon me if I laugh." Her

reply is, "No, I won't." He leaves the room, still laughing. Robin, who has been listening attentively, asks, "Why wouldn't you pardon him if he laughed?" (141).

This is the beginning of – or rather the next phase in – a dramatic change in their relationship. Stella's acquisition of the typewriter has made Martyn realize that she can have a life outside his control, and he "won't have that" (149). And his mood isn't improved by a strange telephone call in which Stella is addressed as "Angela"; it throws him into a fury, which again he takes out on Stella.

The gulf between them grows as each experiences success. Martyn and his co-workers Dr. Rhodes and Peter Magill have worked to perfect their bird show. It is a spectacular success and they take it on the road. Postcards come often for Robin – none for Stella. Martyn now seems to count Stella among his enemies, and seems equally determined to keep Robin to himself. Through this time Stella is discovering that she can write, and then that she *needs* to write. She begins her first novel; Martyn shows no interest in her writing, but resents any inattention to his wants and any questions about his activities. But Stella completes her first novel, and Bill's company accepts it. When she tells Martyn the happy news: "Ah. Your old pal. Jobs for the boys and all that" (156-57).

Stella and Martyn continue to live in mutual courtesy of sorts, but she feels uneasy with him, "guilty that I haven't lived up to his expectations," as she once says to Bill. And Bill tells her, rather reluctantly, "I see him from time to time, you know, [. . .] just around the corner from our flat. [. . .] he is never alone when I see him" (168-69). Remembering Angela's name on the phone, she accepts the news without surprise.

While his disregard for Stella increases. Martyn can't do enough for Robin, and

she becomes still more attached to him. He takes her skiing, continues bringing gifts, and lets her help him with the doves. Watching this seduction of affection, Stella feels helpless to counter it.

One morning when Martyn is in the barn, there is another “Angela” caller, who reluctantly identifies himself as Dr. Rhodes:<sup>19</sup> When Stella tells Martyn, he explodes at Stella’s “constant lack of trust. Your ridiculous desire for irrelevant information. It’s like an obsession with you. [. . .] It’s ruining our lives” (191-92). He continues to deny knowing anyone named Angela – his secretary Angela left years ago, he says – until Stella reaches her own breaking point: “Because in ten years you’ve never told me the truth. Because I’m sick and tired of pretending I believe every word you say to me. [. . .] Now go to hell, or Dr. Rhodes or Angela, I don’t care which.” And as he leaves, she sits down to cry. “I just felt the enormous grief of failure” (193-94).

In the final blowup, Martyn picks a fight over Stella’s goulash. Robin – sullen as only a thirteen-year-old girl can be – joins in with a will and refuses to eat; they both charge out “to the hotel for a meal” (199).

Martyn returns drunk, sends Robin to bed, pulls Stella from her chair, and shakes and mauls her viciously, hissing at her all the while not to call out and disturb Robin. Commanding her not to leave the room, he runs to the bedroom, tears her manuscript into shreds, and “picked up QWERTYUIOP and slung it out of the window” (200-07). He has destroyed nearly two years of her work – and their marriage as well: “Tomorrow, I am going home. I will take the child and go home.” She drives him from her room, foolishly collects the bits of paper, and collapses into sleep.

The next morning, groggy and disheveled, she finds her way to the kitchen and

sees a note from Robin propped against the salad bowl.

Dear Mummy,

I have gone with Daddy.

He says you are going away. He says you want to take me with you. I don't want to go with you. I want to stay here with Daddy and the birds and go to boarding-school in September. I love Daddy very much. Please don't think that you can make me change my mind, because you can't. Robin Glover. (209-10)

And fifteen years later, after Martyn's funeral, a grown-up Robin stands in Stella's living room and says, "I think you are the only person in the world I really hate" (29).

The story above, through the finding of Robin's note, comes from the continuous narrative formed by the Past episodes. The action in the Present is also continuous, and the manner in which its episodes relate to the Past episodes is revealing. Often some situation in the Present appears to trigger Stella's memory and evoke a Past event: for example, a Present segment ends with Robin, wet and cold from Martyn's funeral, sitting by the fire (19); the Past segment which follows begins with "The scent of smoke drifted from the piles of smoldering leaves" (20), introducing a scene before Stella and Martyn were married, as they walk and plan a trip to Ireland.

In some Present scenes Stella's memories are triggered without a Past scene. At one point Robin hears Stella's gate hinges squeal and says, "You should oil that." Stella, who cares little for "domestic imperfections" of this type, remembers how Martyn was bothered by "the dripping tap," "the drawer that sticks," "Such foolish things" (38). The phrase "foolish things" is part of the popular song "These Foolish Things (Remind Me of You)" which echoes in Stella's mind as a sort of mantra as she faces Robin and the events of her past life (Johnston uses a great number of musical references in this and other novels). This Present scene ends with Robin speaking of "that act of his with the birds,"

leading in to the subsequent Past scene which begins with Stella's description of Martyn's locked room which she was never allowed to enter.

In the Present scene when Robin is bathing, Stella feels wistful that she hasn't, since Robin's childhood, seen her in the bath – hasn't had “that moment of recollection or recognition of my own younger body” (41). The Past scene immediately following begins with Martyn entering when Stella is in the bath, starting a train of events which culminates in their first fight and gives the reader an early view of Martyn's obsessive secrecy.

In another Present scene Robin is on the telephone speaking to Stella's mother; the next Past scene begins, “I rang Mother one sunny evening” (47), leading to Stella's telling her mother about her partnership offer.

Although further along in the novel some of the Present scenes appear to be merely interludes between Past scenes, a connection is usually made. It sometimes takes the form of effect (Present) followed immediately by cause (Past): Robin in Present says that Martyn liked to “carry no baggage,” and Stella (whose mordant sense of humor sometimes prevails over her good sense) replies, “He carried two hundred white doves.” Robin is incensed at this mockery of her dead father and calls Stella “a bitter old harridan” (72). This scene leads into the Past scene in which Stella realizes that Martyn has already purchased the house and barn he had taken her to see on their “holiday” in Suffolk, and where he later kept his hundreds of white doves.

And imprisoned Stella. It's no coincidence that the Past passage in which Stella learns about the Suffolk house is introduced by Stella's memory that “My mother had never taken me to the zoo” because Mother was sympathetic toward the caged animals (60). In a later Past segment Stella, walking by the sea alone, has a sudden inexplicable

vision: "Save me . . . I saw with my eyes those two words written on the wall of my scoured head. Graffiti. In red" (115). At this time she is unable to admit that she feels confined and laughs it off, but later the feeling becomes more insistent.

A Present-to-Past connection may not be effected immediately: Stella is planning dinner in one Present scene:

"Soup, steak and a salad. I hope that's OK."

"Divine. You can always trust old Momma to come up with the right food at the right time."

I feel my face going red. (44)

In a manner very like some of the flashbacks in *The Invisible Worm*, the reader is left to wonder about the significance of this exchange. But much later we come to the Past scene in which the final family rupture occurs, nominally over Stella's cooking. Stella tells the 13-year-old Robin, "Now, for the last time, eat your food or go to bed" (198).

At one point in the Present Stella suddenly asks Robin:

"Do you remember the fox?"

She stands for a moment in the doorway, her back to me, her head bent slightly.

"No, I can't say I do."

In the accompanying Past segment Stella shows Robin the baby foxes, Robin tells Martyn, and Martyn has them killed. It is clearly a poignant memory for Stella, and very probably for Robin too: her manner when she answers Stella's question indicates strongly that she knows exactly what Stella is saying, even as she denies the memory.

The end of the story takes place in the Present, as it should. Robin returns from a phone call, badly shaken: "That was Dad's solicitor. Mr. Warner. [. . .] Have you ever heard of Angela . . . Brambell?" She has learned that Angela has a daughter called Hazel Angela. She continues with great difficulty:

“Hazel Angela Brambell, known as Dove. [. . .] She is my sister.  
 He is her father. We are his children” [. . .]  
 “Well . . . I suppose after I left . . .”  
 Here I go, making excuses for the fucker.  
 “She is six months younger than I am, Star.”  
 I have the most appalling desire to laugh. (214-15)

To give him some credit, Mr. Warner had known nothing about Dove until he opened Martyn’s instructions (why should he be different?). We learn that Martyn has left all his money – no one seems to know how much – to Dove, along with a flat in Kensington. Robin is bequeathed the house in Suffolk. All the birds are left to Dr. Rhodes. Stella hears all this and says, “I think I’ll get us a drink. Strong.”

She doesn’t know what else to say to Robin at this point, but when Robin again addresses her as “Star,” she speaks up:

“Stella. My name is Stella, Robin, once and for all. Do please stop calling me a name I hate.”  
 “He didn’t even leave me a letter of explanation.”  
 “He wouldn’t. My dear child, even if you’d attended his deathbed he wouldn’t have explained anything [. . .] but I’m sure he loved you, if that’s any help.” (217)

At the end, Robin is going home, to London. Stella calls a cab and sees her out: “‘I love you,’ I call after her, but I don’t suppose she hears” (219).

In addition to its systematic shifts in the narrative Now, *The Illusionist* gives us one of the most – probably *the* most – bizarre of Johnston’s characters. Martyn is almost literally unbelievable; as Johnston describes him to Caitriona Moloney, “I had to make Martyn over the top in order for people to accept what I was saying. I have received letters and calls from all sorts of people, women call me up and say “that was me . . . you were writing about me” (143). Although Moloney calls him “an extreme misogynist,” it seems also that he should be thought of as the height of egocentrism, the ultimate spoiled

brat: he wants to know everything, reveal nothing. He thinks it his right (divine right?) to lie, but he *must* have the complete trust of those he lies to – and he sees no contradiction in this.<sup>20</sup> His extreme secretiveness, along with some of the revelations in his outbursts to Stella, show his deep insecurity – even actual paranoia. At several points he weeps: on at least two of these occasions – their first fight (42-44) and the purchase of the Suffolk house (73) – he is obviously putting on a show, like a child who cries to obtain sympathy and have his way. But in other cases, such as their final fight, his emotion appears genuine, given his unique mindset. In his mind Stella *owes* him her complete unwavering trust, *owes* him her devotion, her loyalty, her whole being – and she has withheld it. It breaks his heart. And of course it must be punished.

Martyn sees his harsh physical treatment of Stella as a partial righting of the unspeakable wrongs she has committed against him. Over the subsequent years he transfuses this attitude into Robin, so that Robin hates Stella for the hurt she has inflicted on Martyn.

Stella's character could be considered more interesting in some ways than Martyn's: he can be depended on, like the villain in a melodrama, to play the bad guy; but Stella is simultaneously cowed by love for (and/or fear of) Martyn and determined to take her place in society as an individual. She lives in large measure inside her own head – singing, listening to music, dancing – and cares little for the orderly life. In this respect she defies her mother's old-fashioned genteel ways, such as the twenty pairs of gloves of all materials and colors she once found in a drawer: "Palm to palm. A drawer full of praying gloves. Or, I suppose, kissing" (18).

She also fails to measure up to Martyn's compulsive sense of order, in large part



because Martyn never communicates his life plan to her. Oddly – or really not so oddly at all – these two people who are disappointed by Stella’s disorder despise each other, in the strictest sense of that word. Stella’s mother “never thought Martyn was good quality” (18); Martyn asks, “How long is she going to stay?” (98) and growls, “I don’t like being despised in my own house” (100).

Robin, whose world view was derived directly from Martyn’s, makes Stella bite back her words at times (not an easy feat for Stella). She is sometimes condescending, as was Martyn, sometimes full of cold fury -- as was Martyn. When Stella asks her to help solve some of the mystery about Martyn:

“It’s a bit late to be asking these questions now. Why didn’t you ask him when he was alive?”

“I did. Over and over again. He said it didn’t matter.”

“He was right.” (71)

Robin is successful in business. She travels first class in airplanes and wears very expensive clothes. “To have a shining life, he said to me once, you have to know how to make money, and how to spend money and then make more money” (109). The reader finishes the novel with the feeling that though they (especially Stella) may try, Robin and Stella will never really love each other.

*The Illusionist* was not an easy novel for Johnston to write. According to her interview with Eleanor Wachtel, she once stopped writing completely and put it away: “It was a very difficult and painful book to write because I was writing out of the inside of my own head. I was writing very obliquely about my own experience” (326). Johnston’s history as a writer bears a remarkable resemblance to Stella’s: She began writing in her late thirties (as Stella did) when her first husband gave her a typewriter. She had written

as a girl, but then had devoted about twenty years to raising her children. She published her first novel at forty – Stella's age at her first publication is estimated at forty-one. Some of her confessed personal attributes are similar to Stella's, such as preferring the creative life to the orderly life. She denies that any effort was made to prevent her writing, but says that the fact that she became a writer changed her life by giving her something that she wanted to keep for herself: "So your closest relationships are never the same again, because you have a secret [. . .] Your relationships with people close to you can become a bit damaged by this – mine did" (328).

Asked in the same interview about her shift from men to women protagonists she answered, "I think basically what I am trying to write about now is the pain of women. And that does not mean writing great tracts against men" (326). But in writing *The Illusionist*, it appears that she *has* written a great tract against men – or rather has created a man that her readers, male and female, must hate.

The novel involves no shifts in point of view (although Stella Present could be considered different from Stella Past, by virtue of the School of Hard Knocks) and no ghosts or spirits; presumably Martyn is unreal enough. But with its rapid alternation of time frames and its complex characters, including the over-the-top Martyn, it earns its place as a "late" Johnston novel. The character of its discourse is quite noticeably different from that of *How Many Miles to Babylon?*.

## Chapter 4: Conclusions

The foregoing chapters have suggested that in general the narrative structure of Johnston's novels has tended to become more complex as she continues to write. If this hypothesis is valid, it should be possible to demonstrate that the narrative structure of her latest novel is at least as complex as that of those which have preceded it. It is the object of this chapter to make that test: to present a summary and analysis of her most recent novel, published last year, and draw conclusions about that novel and Johnston's work in general.

### *The Gingerbread Woman*

The first sentence of *The Gingerbread Woman* is "My mother makes jam" (1), and we immediately wonder if this is still another protagonist, like three in the four preceding novels, who is obsessive about her mother. This actually turns out to be true, but not in the same way. Mrs. Barry is far less judgmental toward Clara, but she is concerned for Clara's welfare, and as the story develops, we see that there is good reason. Clara and her siblings like their mother and think she is "hale and hearty and fully in control of her life, and she thinks, of ours" (2).

Clara begins her story by introducing herself much as Stella did, but less specifically and in less detail. She is 35 years old and "the cosmopolitan one in the family" (4), having lived and worked in London, Paris, and New York and looking toward Sydney sometime in the future. She is not really a writer, although she has written book reviews, interviews with famous people, and the like:

My main source of income though is lecturing. I am by profession a lecturer in Modern Irish Literature. Not Synge, Yeats or Joyce. That's a mug's game. [. . .] I discovered that the world is full of universities delighted to give me a year's work talking to their students about Elizabeth

Bowen, John McGahern, Edna O'Brien, Francis Stewart, Aidan Higgins, John Banville, Sean O'Faolain . . . the list is endless and growing every day. (4-5)<sup>21</sup>

Her home is just around the corner from her mother's in the village of Dalkey, on the southern edge of Dublin. C. L. Dallat, in a review of the novel, describes Clara's middle-class world as "a milieu equally distant from the author's earlier Ascendancy mansions and from William Trevor's poorer rural Protestants" (25).

At this time Clara walks gently every day, while watching others walking vigorously: "Soon i will be fit enough to do that too and then I won't want to do it; i will want to go to Sydney or Ascension Island [. . .]." The lower-case *i*'s in that sentence turn out to be not typing errors<sup>22</sup> but a result of her feeling that she is not a complete person. And the doctor has told her not to laugh "or my stomach may burst open and all sorts of horrible things fall out" (5). Thus, the reader learns in the first few pages that Clara is recovering from recent surgery, probably involving a hysterectomy since she feels less than a woman. But the why-when-how of her situation emerges very slowly and is completed only at the end of the novel.

There is a subject break after Clara's self-introduction, with only a cursory warning consisting of three centered asterisks, after which the narrative shifts from Clara's point of view to that of a man walking with his dog near the sea. Over the following pages we learn that his name is Laurence McGrane, called Lar, from Glens of Antrim, near Ballycastle in the North. He is 36, staying for a time at a nearby hotel ("On holiday?" "I don't know." "What an odd thing to say" [38]). We also learn that he has been an emotional basket case for almost two years. Troubled by occasional fits of trembling and shortness of breath, he can't collect his thoughts and often can't keep up his side of a conversation.

He has left without informing his worried parents and come to Dublin on a dark impulse he doesn't understand – he thinks he might as well be in Dublin as anywhere. We learn later that he is mourning the loss of his wife Caitlin and their baby daughter Moya, almost to the point of derangement, but the rest of his story is also played out later in the novel.

So *The Gingerbread Woman* tells two people's stories, connected over only a few days, told from two different points of view. Altogether, there are *five* stories: Clara's current and past, Lar's current and past, and their joint story. Clara's current story is narrated in first person, usually present tense, somewhat like Stella's; her past story is first person, past tense. Lar's current story is in third person, but the reader is "inside his head" over long passages. Some of Lar's thoughts ("I will stay here two days" [75]) are written in first person, but are clearly internal monologue (Chatman's "direct free thought") rather than narration. Lar also experiences frequent detailed memories of his life with Caitlin, and these passages appear in italics. This is one of very few Johnston novels featuring multiple points of view (i.e., viewpoints of multiple characters) to any extent and is the first to include a significant male protagonist since *Shadows on Our Skin* in 1977. In the numerous passages involving both Clara and Lar, the viewpoint may be sometimes Clara's, sometimes Lar's, often both, switching in mid-passage; often it can't be identified at all. For the statistically-minded, Clara's story is given substantially more space, though Lar's is still quite significant.

In the course of the novel their relationship becomes quite close, and each furnishes emotional support for the other, but contrary to fiction readers' usual expectations, they are never lovers. The site of their first meeting is on Killiney Hill, at a place where the land drops away steeply. Clara stands very close to the edge – she enjoys the

feeling it gives her, and often stands there – listening to music in her head. Lar recognizes her as the woman he has seen there before, standing far too close to the edge – he suffers from vertigo – and it occurs to him that she may be planning to jump.

Typographically, the transition from Clara's point of view to Lar's appears thus:

*“je heller sie mir wiederklingt von unten . . .”*

“Miss, ah . . . excuse me. Hello?”

I ignore such invasive voices.

*Und Singe.*

\* \* \*

He hadn't thought to bring his coat.

The sun and the blue sky had beckoned him [. . .]

He calls to her, but she shrugs off his concern, making him feel foolish; as he leaves, however: “‘Thank you,’ the woman called after him” (13). They meet again a little later in the pub, when Lar's dog Pansy (Caitlin's name) recognizes Clara. They discuss North/South differences in accent and attitude – uncommonly, Clara is a Southern Protestant and Lar is a Northern Catholic – and Clara understands that Lar is somewhat at loose ends, much as she is. Suddenly, on impulse, she blurts out, “Why don't you come home and watch Morse with me?” (40).<sup>23</sup>

This doubly-unexpected invitation leads ultimately to a healing relationship for both. When Lar falls asleep during the program because he hasn't been able to sleep in the hotel, Clara thinks of her little spare room upstairs: “Perhaps you might sleep better there. Hotels are so, I don't know. Horribly empty”(66).

Lar tries to decide whether he can face the proximity of another human being, especially this peculiar woman. Earlier, when he called home to reassure his parents, he told his father:

“There is nothing wrong with me.”

“You’re not yourself.”

“I am myself. I am Laurence McGrane. I am a schoolteacher. I know who I am. I know my wife and child were murdered. [. . .] I want to be allowed to scream and burn and hate, until I am sickened by my self-indulgence. [. . .]. So fuck off Dad and stop trying to heal me.” (27-28)

While Lar is battling his own nature, Clara is fighting another battle. She has decided that she must make an effort to preserve (resurrect?) her personhood. And her plan involves writing what she calls a novel, though it will actually turn out to be a straightforward detailed account of the disastrously unwise love affair which left her crippled and empty:

Switch on.

cccllmmmm.

Your friendly Mac is now at your service. [. . .]

Put the first mark on that endless page, a page that isn’t a page but a door, opening into mysterious space. [. . .] [T]his may be the road of pain that you don’t want to travel along. [. . .]

I must now try to create my children on the endless page, or live barren. [. . .]

OK?

OK Clara.

*The Gingerbread Woman*

(notes, only notes)

(68-69)

At the beginning of her “novel,” she attended <sup>24</sup> a reception and met a New York stock-broker named James Cavan, pronounced K`van, as she spelled it to distinguish it from Ireland’s County CA-van. He wore an Italian suit and a gold watch which “looked like it might weigh several pounds. It looked like it cost several hundred” (70).

Clara’s writing is interrupted at this point by the arrival of Lar and Pansy, who have decided to accept her offer. And here we see another nice example of a transition from Clara’s voice to Lar’s:

“Bring your things upstairs and then come down and make us a cup of tea. I’m exhausted. [. . .] Too many things are happening to me today.”

Without a word he turns and plods up the short flight of stairs. I bet he’s regretting the decision he’s made. I think I am too. Pansy seems happy enough though.

\* \* \*

Two days.

I will stay here two days.

No more. [. . .]

Laurence stared out the window [. . .] at the distant bay. (75)

We learn more of Lar’s history while Clara’s is being transcribed. Clara takes Lar to dinner at her mother’s. The next day Mrs. Barry meets him again on the street and invites him into a restaurant for a cup of coffee and some conversation. Later Clara says to Lar, “I bet she winkled your entire life history out of you, the half-hour version” (134).

This turns out to be almost correct. She learns that his wife and child have died and asks what happened to them: “I don’t think I can tell you” (121-23).

He sips some more coffee. “‘They were blown up.’ He spoke very fast because he hated to say the words [. . .] faster and faster [. . .] so that he could finish the recitation in double-quick time.” Caitlin, a painter, was driving to Belfast to deliver some pictures. Lar was invigilating at his school that day and couldn’t go with her and couldn’t mind the baby, so Caitlin took her along, strapped into the back seat, and played children’s tapes:

“Caitlin must have zipped past this army truck and got to the bridge just as they blew it up. [. . .] One man said the tape was still playing, ‘Old Macdonald had a farm’ [. . .]”

“Laurence . . .”

“There’s no point in saying you’re sorry. [. . .] I hate. I have hated now for two years and I can’t rid myself of that burden. [. . .] He looked up at her and gave her an angry grin. “See what happens when you invite unknown men to have coffee with you?”

“It’s risky,” she agreed. [. . .]

“My wife and child died for Ireland.”

“Laurence . . .”

“So that Ireland should be free from the centre to the sea and hurrah for liberty says the Shan Van Vocht.”<sup>25</sup>(124-127)



Lar's story of his tragic loss is balanced by the relationship developing in Clara's novel. She was enormously impressed with James Cavan, and it showed on their first date. Instead of taking her out, he appeared at her door loaded with parcels, including champagne, and announced that he would prepare the meal and all she had to do was deal with the candles. Everything looked wonderful, including James Cavan. After several toasts, even before the meal, he said, "Clara, [. . .] I am forty-two. I no longer like to make love on the floor, or up against a wall, I prefer a bed. Have you a bed?" (116).

It just so happened that she had.

They had little time for pillow talk: about eleven o'clock, he suddenly began to dress: "Darling, I am so sorry. There is nothing I can do. My mother is staying with me. [. . .] I promised her that I would be back by eleven-thirty" (118).

Their evenings together continued this pattern for some time. James explained that his father had recently died and his mother was very clinging and demanding. Three evenings a week he visited her: "My week by then went something like this: Jamesday, Tuesday, Jamesday, Jamesday, Friday." All her efforts to "broaden their horizons" by going out into the world were smoothly, skillfully turned aside. As she later said, trying to account for her lack of suspicion, "my faculties were closing down" (131).

In a passage which involves both Lar and Clara, we see that Lar has spoken a little with Clara about Caitlin, but hasn't said much about the manner of her death. He has been feeling panicky, afraid that after two years he is beginning to lose his memory of her: "She is escaping. Little by little. I feel every time I mention her name or talk about her in any way that a little bit more of her slips away. [. . .] I thought I could keep her locked in my mind. Bright. Quite unchanging." But Clara replies, "I really don't think anyone should

want to do such a thing. It's a bit like imprisoning a spirit. 'To the elements be free, and fare thou well . . .' That's what Prospero said to Ariel" (136-37).

Lar's struggle to keep his wife's memory "bright and unchanging" reaches a climax as he walks on the beach. Suddenly he hears Caitlin laugh behind him, knows she's with him: "She touched his hair and his face. Maybe she even kissed him, brushing her lips across his cheek. [. . .] She was going. He felt her moving away. [. . .] *'To the elements be free, and fare thou well.'*" (154).

He returns from the beach and begins to wash dishes in Clara's kitchen, wondering what his experience on the beach really meant. "He heard her voice quite clearly: *'Dead. We are a long time dead, Lar. Oh Lar, for heaven's sake get on.'*" He lets the sink overflow and burns his hand trying to find the plug. "*Do get on, Lar, and give me a bit of peace*" (160).

When Clara comes in fussing about the water spilled on the kitchen floor, he says "It's all over," and tells her what Caitlin said. Clara is at first puzzled and alarmed for him, but then relaxes: "Well, that's OK then, isn't it? [. . .]" She smiled at him. "I'd pay attention to that if I were you" (163).

In her novel, Clara continued besotted with James Cavan in spite of irregularities in his conduct. Once she put enormous pressure on him to stay overnight with her, and he promised he would. But she woke about two AM to see him dressing: "Something came up last night – I'm sorry. It's all part of the money game" (187). When he called the next morning to apologize again and say he wanted to see her that evening, she told him she wanted to see *Les Enfants du Paradis* at the local cinema. After a long hesitation, he agreed to attend the film with her. And afterwards, of course, his name was called on the

street – an old friend. They exchanged the usual glad words, and then came the inevitable: “How are Carla and the kids? [. . .] I’ll get Betsy to give Carla a call” (190).

No fiction reader would be surprised at this turn of events. After a few seconds Clara also was unsurprised, although she felt monumentally stupid. She stalked to an Irish pub she knew, James following with expostulations; she ordered a pint of Guinness and a large Jameson. She learned that James’s mother lived in Connecticut; she heard all about James’s wife and three children, one born since she had met James. There was little else she could say except “I am her anagram. Carla – Clara. Isn’t that delightful?” And she slowly poured the pint of Guinness over his head and walked out (195-96).

Clara’s novel contains only one more chapter: After some loud and unpleasant renunciation scenes, she had no further contact with James. Instead, she was concerned with the savage pain in her back which suddenly assaulted her during his last phone call. She took four Neurofen tablets and lay down. “I wanted my mother” (197).

She returned home in July with her illness progressing frighteningly, but still put off going to the doctor until the pain, blood and mucus became too much to ignore. When she said, “Please don’t tell Mother,” the doctor was forthright:

“My dear Clara, I will have to tell your mother that you’re going into hospital. I will have to tell her that you are having a hysterectomy. What I don’t have to tell your mother is that you have been infected by sleeping with a man suffering from gonorrhoea, and that you stupidly neglected to see a doctor until it was too late to save your womb. That information is no one’s business but your own.” (210)

The last paragraphs of *The Gingerbread Woman* are Clara’s. They may be a continuation of her novel, switching to present tense, or may represent an unmarked return to the “Clara” mode, but now the writing is first person, present tense. She sums up the current status of both herself and Lar, then simply stops:

"I am not dead. I do not hate anyone. [. . .] I am tired, but I am well. I can laugh again. [. . .] I will go and make a huge breakfast for that man. [. . .] and I will kiss him goodbye and wave by the gate until his car is down the road and around the corner. He too is his own man. He may not know it yet, but that is his fate. Cccccllmmm. cccllmm.

*It is safe to switch off your Macintosh.*

Go to dark. (212-13)

The last sentence could refer to the darkening of the computer screen, but also has very much the appearance of a stage direction.<sup>26</sup> In either case, it serves as a fitting signal that the novel has ended.

The title may seem at first to relate somehow to Mrs. Barry's facility in preparing goodies for the children, but this is not followed up in the novel. The phrase "The Gingerbread Woman" appears to be a reference to Clara's affair with James when her "faculties were closing down." Blindly in love, she ignored all the warning signs and went ahead in the belief that real life would not catch up with her. According to Pauline Ferrie's online review of the novel, Clara "is confident she can escape the pitfalls of love." But in the end she was "eaten," as was the overconfident Gingerbread Man in the nursery story.<sup>27</sup>

To restate, *The Gingerbread Woman* is written from multiple points of view, sometimes two at once, e.g. the scene in the pub in which Clara invites Lar to "come home and watch Morse with me" (40). It uses multiple narrative voices: first- and third-person for Clara at various times, third-person and direct free thought for Lar, as seen in the passages quoted above. And it involves the ghostly presence of Caitlin in italicized passages. Its handling of narrative time is straightforward with two significant exceptions: the transitions into Clara's novel, set off by asterisks, and Lar's memories of Caitlin, written in italics. In addition, this novel has a metafictional element: an author writing a

novel about an author writing a novel. This attribute is shared by *The Illusionist*.

It is quite fair to say that this most recent of Johnston's novels is at least as structurally intricate as either of the "late" novels discussed above. In fact, it seems the most intricate of all.

*The Gingerbread Woman* isn't the first Johnston novel to exploit different points of view, of course. Her earlier novels exhibit similar tendencies, though in simpler ways. Klaus Lubbers, writing before 1992 on *Fool's Sanctuary*, commented on Johnston's "viewpoint problem which involved mediation not only between interior and exterior perspectives but also between time past and time present" (236). In that novel, he considered the problems solved by having the protagonist remember the key events thirty years later. The complex, shifting points of view in the most recent novels can be traced back through *The Old Jest* all the way to *The Gates*, Johnston's first novel. In some, the difference in perspective is more accurately described as a change in narrative voice rather than in point of view, although in others both change at the same time. Almost exactly the same observation can be made for temporal shifting. The mixing of past and present events which we see in *The Illusionist* can also be seen in *The Christmas Tree* (1981), though in a more rudimentary form. In fact, in the *most* rudimentary form -- ordinary flashback and frame -- it goes all the way back to *The Captains and the Kings* and *How Many Miles to Babylon?*.

All this reinforces the observation that Johnston's novels have become ever richer in both temporal and point-of-view variability. In fact, a case can be made for thinking of a temporal shift as simply another kind of shift in point of view: temporal point of view, so to speak. If this is done, Johnston's treatment of discourse can be considered to

include variation in only one dimension instead of two: she could be thought of simply as working from “the point of view of point of view.”

More important than the fact of this increased complexity is the *purpose* of it. Johnston has already proved through her twelve novels that she is a superior inventor of *story*, but what does she gain by making the *discourse* continually more elaborate in structure?

The beginning of the answer appears in the discussion of *The Illusionist*, with the appearance of Present and Past being played out on parallel movie screens. By switching back and forth rapidly, it is almost as if both domains are available to the reader at once – presenting cause and corresponding effect almost at a glance. If this same technique can be applied to shifting points of view, the effect can be almost as if events were being viewed through the eyes of all characters at the same time.

So we have the feeling that Jennifer Johnston is approaching the ambitious literary goal of presenting her readers with a story in such a way that they experience it from the viewpoints of all the pertinent characters, and in all pertinent time frames, all at once. Using the most current example, *The Gingerbread Woman* is written from Clara’s point of view, from Lar’s point of view, and from both at once; it presents events from her past, from his past, and from *their* present.

The result of this all-at-once presentation could be compared to a medieval tapestry – perhaps the Bayeux, which is arranged in panels something like a comic strip, or better, one in which the same individual may be pictured in several times and places on different parts of the cloth, without formal boundaries. By scanning such a tapestry, the viewer has at least the potential of seeing all actions, over the full time span and from all

directions, at the same time.

Many workers, with perhaps a more "orderly" mindset than Johnston's, would hesitate to approach such a project without a complete action plan. But the use of detailed mechanical intricacies cannot realistically be attributed to a writer who operates intuitively, as Johnston does: an author for whom *The Invisible Worm* "writes itself" has no need for guidelines. Nevertheless it appears that she sets out, especially with her later novels, to describe cause and effect, beginning and end, front and back of her story, *all at once*, as accurately as the physical limitations of paper, ink, and eyesight permit.

In her novels, Jennifer Johnston has examined her native Anglo-Irish culture, has recorded with competent impartiality Ireland's turbulent political history with its mixture of tragedy and farce, and has depicted the psychological development of her protagonists as they react to forces both political and personal. And the narrative style in which she has addressed these tasks now tests the limits of literary convention. She has joined other modern and postmodern Irish novelists in redesigning the form of the contemporary novel and has made a notable contribution to modern fiction.

## Notes

1. The biographical information was assembled from several sources shown under Works Cited: "Jennifer Johnston (b. 1930)." *Dublin Live*; "Jennifer Johnston: Life and Background." Leavingcert.net; Kenneally, Michael; and other sources cited within the text.
2. A one-sentence entry in *Benet's Reader's Encyclopedia* tells the story: "Watched by their ineffectual tenantry, a succession of irresponsible members of the [Anglo-Irish] Rackrent family dissipate their fortunes until they reach the verge of destitution" (177).
3. The epitome of Big House novels is usually considered to be Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929).
4. Other critics who take the Big House view include Bridget O'Toole, Mark Mortimer, David Burleigh, and Andrew Parkin.
5. Actually, IRA bombs cause deaths in both *The Illusionist* (Martyn) and *The Gingerbread Woman* (Laurence's wife and child). These are accidental – matters of "the wrong place at the wrong time" – and the IRA involvement is incidental to the main plots. However their inclusion in both novels may be indicative of Johnston's -- indeed all of Ireland's -- preoccupation with the Troubles.
6. Weekes apparently does not consider Minnie, in *The Gates*, as "fully awakened to [. . .] the constraints of national and gender traditions"(202) as Nancy.
7. There may be a question as to whether a ghost or angel is part of the *story* – an additional character – rather than of the *discourse*. In Johnston's novels, it appears that these beings are inserted as a way to modify the narrative *voice*, and so must be considered discourse devices. The exception is Bonifaccio, the quixotic Italian angel in *Two Moons*, who stands out as a very definite character.
8. A basic distinction in narratology is that between Chatman's "Story and Discourse": the "What and How," "content plane and expression plane," "fabula and sjužet," and a variety of other pairs of terms created by various scholars. Most of these are described in Church's Dictionary of Narratology. Wherever applicable, Chatman's terminology is used in this work.
9. The other two novels in this group are *The Captains and the Kings* (male-centered and Big House-influenced) and *The Gates*, which shares the same environment though the protagonist is a young girl.
10. This terminological summary is taken primarily from Chatman, with assistance from Booth and Miller.
11. This rhyme is found in many forms, but the most common appears to be:  
How many miles to Babylon?



Three score and ten.  
 Can I get there by candlelight?  
 Aye, and back again.  
 If your feet are nimble and light,  
 You'll get there by candlelight. (Zelo.com)

12. This statement is questioned by some researchers, who have observed that Johnston wrote two successive novels which featured a World War I officer named Alexander, with practically identical parents and backgrounds. Christina Hunt Mahoney refers to “Alexander, the late brother of the protagonist, Charles Prendergast, in *The Captains and the Kings* (and arguably the same character as the doomed hero of *How Many Miles to Babylon*)” (201). The explanation from Johnston herself is that in starting *Babylon* she had originally intended to write about the hero Alexander of *Captains*, “but quite quickly only the name was left of my original intentions and I began to worry about what was a hero? Or a coward? Or a traitor?” (letter to the author).

13. From information found later in the novel – “Royal Irish Rifles, Sir” (85) – we learn that Alexander and Jerry have joined one of the three Irish regiments based in Ulster:

These battalions were clothed and administered by their raisers in the same way as the locally raised New Army battalions in Great Britain, although the UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force - rnh] was at a high state of readiness in August 1914 as a result of heightened tensions in connection with the Home Rule debate that had occurred earlier in the year. [. . .]  
 3rd to 6th October 1915 : [The Royal Irish Rifles] moved to France, and served with distinction on the Western Front throughout the war (Baker).

14. This criterion comes from the work of Wayne Booth: “I have called a narrator *reliable* when he speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work (which is to say, the implied author’s norms), *unreliable* when he does not” (158).

15. In “analyzing” Alexander in this way, a critic acts as if he were a real human being, rather than a character in a novel, a collection of words on paper. Chatman discusses this propensity at some length, quoting critics who attack such behavior as detracting from the poetic value of the written work – Iago acts in an evil way toward Othello because that’s the way Shakespeare wrote it, not because he is psychologically twisted – and others who defend it. His conclusion is that characters are indeed literary constructs, “But characters as constructs do require terms for description, and there is no point in rejecting those out of the general vocabulary of psychology, morality, and any other area of human experience” (138). That is, a psychological analysis of a character is as valid as an analysis of the author’s descriptive technique.

16. Johnston addressed Laura’s umbilical connection to her home in her interview with Caitriona Moloney: “To keep her house. And of course her own integrity and little bit of new found courage. It is impossible for the snail to leave the shell.”

17. Johnston writes her novels on a “dinosaur of an Apple Mac, which I refuse to bin in spite of advice from millions.” Apparently she uses her computer only for writing: no E-

mail or other Internet access. Her hand-written answer to the first letter was received 45 days after it was mailed. Both letters went by air mail. At her invitation, a second letter was sent, but at this writing no answer has been received.

18. There is a vague implication that he may have been a weapons smuggler, or something else illegal and dangerous. Stella's friend Bill facetiously made this suggestion, and the manner of Martyn's death would seem to support it. But this is never fleshed out or followed up.

19. This seems strangely careless on Dr. Rhodes's part. Although there is no verification within the novel, one feels that Rhodes and Magill know little more about Martyn's life than does Stella.

20. There is an old show business joke in which an agent is giving a producer a hard sell. The producer suddenly realizes, "You're lying to me!" and the agent shoots back, "Yes, but hear me out!"

21. It is tempting to wonder why Clara's list of Irish writers doesn't include Jennifer Johnston – her opinions might be interesting. But Johnston, unlike Banville or Flann O'Brien, does not engage in self-referential narrative.

22. Dallat, in his review, says that this device "fails; this would have been self-corrected by any up-to-date word-processor" (25). Not necessarily: this self-correction is a user option in most word processors.

23. Presumably "Morse" refers to *Inspector Morse*, the durable BBC television series starring the equally durable John Thaw, which ran for 13 years – ending only last year – and is said to have set many of the standards for the modern TV detective.

24. In the passages which summarize Clara's novel, the choice was made to write in past tense as Johnston's implied author does, to distinguish them from Johnston's "Clara" mode, which is normally first person present tense.

25. This is the second reference among these novels to the Shan Van Vocht ("tight old hag"), a personification of Catholic Ireland (Gammon, n.pag.). In *How Many Miles to Babylon?*, Alexander quotes a line or two while discussing Jerry with his mother.

26. Johnston has a strong theatrical background, of course, and has published several plays. As a girl she decided against acting as a career because her mother discouraged it. And, as she told Eleanor Wachtel, "I'm a much better writer than I was an actress. Apart from anything else, I'm as blind as a bat and would have bumped into the furniture" (322).

27. Accepting the sly fox's offer of a ride across the river, the Gingerbread Man first rode on the fox's tail, then in deeper water moved to the fox's back, then his head, then his nose. A flick of the fox's head, and . . . ("The Gingerbread Man Story").

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