

DENT DE LION : REFLECTION STATEMENT

‘Moral justification is a powerful disengagement mechanism. Destructive conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of moral ends.’

Albert Bandura ¹

Psychologist Albert Bandura’s comment on the rationalisation of immoral behaviour goes to the heart of my Major Work, a short story entitled *Dent de Lion*, which examines the way self-justification can be used to absolve oneself of unethical acts. This concept warranted my choice to use a hybrid genre. Inspired by works like *The Fall*², aspects of psychological fiction allow me to accentuate the confessional rationalisations of my protagonist, while the meta-story genre makes a story about a corporation and a rural community recognisably human. *Dent de Lion* manifests this concept through a first-person narrative told in eight vignettes, following an amiable industrial tycoon as he attempts to justify his complicity in the leukaemia diagnosis of an employee.

My fascination with the American industrialist ‘home-grown oligarch’³ brothers Charles and David Koch inspired my story. This interest, triggered by Jane Mayer’s investigative non-fiction work *Dark Money*, lead me to explore what I considered to be

¹ A. Bandura, 'Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement in the Exercise of Moral Agency.' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. 71 (1996) in JSTOR [online database] DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.71.2.364, accessed 14 March 2017

² A. Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Vintage Books Random House, 1996)

³ T. Dickinson, 'Inside The Koch Brothers' Toxic Empire' *Rolling Stone*, (24 September 2004) <<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/inside-the-koch-brothers-toxic-empire-20140924>> accessed 3 February 2017 para. 3.

unjustifiable corporate malpractice within Koch Industries. After reading *Sons of Wichita*⁴ and listening to the radio podcast *Why Hate the Koch Brothers*⁵, I observed that most content about the brothers was investigative non-fiction and condemnatory in tone. In the absence of a moral examination of the brothers in fiction, I recognised the scope for my original Major Work.

The short story form allowed me to fulfil a personal goal: processing my *own* moral judgement of the Koch brothers by fictionalising them, which required me to employ empathy to find motives for what they had done. Once I understood that most writers looked down at the brothers from above, morally speaking, and assumed that they would not act in the same way were they in the position of the Koch brothers, I realised that my wider purpose was to do the opposite: to humanise and treat them as equals rather than as morally inferior. Avoiding simplistic connections between a person and an unethical action, I aimed to trace factors usually ignored in the haste to morally judge: motives, insecurities and childhood.

For this reason, my narrative opens with a vulnerable portrait of the protagonist as a child, engrossed in a task ‘too gruelling for a boy of (his) size,’⁶ a ramification of the paternal relationships that are ‘too loveless for a boy of (his) age.’⁷ After analysis of the Boarding House scene in *Citizen Kane*⁸ in English Advanced: Module B, I recognised the difficulty in judging an adult once the adverse circumstances of their childhood are known. From the outset, I wanted the reader to be sympathetic towards the protagonist.

⁴ D. Schulman, *Sons of Wichita: How The Koch Brothers Became America's Most Powerful and Private Dynasty* (New York: Grand Central Publishing 2014).

⁵ S.J. Dubner, 'Why Hate the Koch Brothers?' *Freakonomics Radio* [podcast] (WNYC Studios)

⁶ *Dent de Lion*, (2017). [Major Work]

⁷ *Dent de Lion*, (2017). [Major Work]

⁸ O. Welles, dir. *Citizen Kane* (RKO Radio Pictures, 1941)

This opening, allowed me to examine the influence of Fred Koch, the brothers' austere father. After reading *The Loveless Family*⁹ and researching Baumrind's analysis of authoritarian parenting, namely, 'the will of authoritarian parents to keep the child in his place and assign household responsibilities in order to inculcate respect,'¹⁰ I concluded that both 'insecurity and callous treatment of others'¹¹ were often consequences of a cold childhood. Thus I could attribute part of my protagonist's character and unethical actions to his formative development.

My intended audience is readers of fiction with an existing interest in the influence of American tycoons, as the story works to dispel assumptions these readers may have drawn from other judgmental writing about such individuals. My story's revelation of a magnate's exploitation of a poor town is also relevant to an audience interested in American rural sociology and corporate practice.

Creating a sense of intimacy between reader and narrator was crucial in encouraging the audience to understand my protagonist's seemingly abhorrent conduct. Independent study of *The Fall*¹² in English Extension 1 reintroduced me to authorial intrusion, prompting me to make my narrator self-aware and directly address the audience. Friendly authorial intrusion became an important aspect of my narrative voice, eroding the barriers between reader and

⁹ J.P. Bloch, *The Loveless Family: Getting Past Estrangement and Learning How to Love* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO 2011) Available from Google Books, accessed 23 May 2017

¹⁰ D. Baumrind, 'Effects of Authoritative Parental Control on Child Behaviour' *Child Development* 37/4 (1966) in JSTOR DOI: 10.2307/1126611 accessed 14 March 2017

¹¹ A.S Honig, 'What Happens When You Did Not Feel Loved as A Child? A Review of the *Loveless Family: Getting Past Estrangement and Learning How to Love*' (2012) 57 *PsycCRITIQUES*.

¹² A. Camus, *The Fall* (New York: Vintage Books Random House 1996)

narrator. My use of the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ and the second person pronoun ‘you,’ erode these barriers, for instance the opening vignette title ‘We could be talking for a while, so I’ll start by telling you about myself.’¹³ This also reveals my protagonist’s need for approval; characteristic of those with a harsh childhood, he seeks the reader’s attention as a paternal stand-in.

This structural device of vignettes emerged from my examination of Andrew O’Hagan’s short story *Gordon*¹⁴. O’Hagan uses vignettes to fictionalise the life of Gordon Brown in ‘eight staccato takes,’¹⁵ allowing him to trace character over a long period without sacrificing momentum. *Dent de Lion* draws on this device to construct a fictionalised Charles Koch through a series of moments over decades, enabling my narrator to develop his self-justification, using carefully selected moments where he seems blameless.

My desire to maintain intensity draws on characteristics key to my form. I drew upon Edgar Allen Poe’s theory of ‘unity of effect’¹⁶ as well as William Boyd’s notion of ‘beguiling resonance,’¹⁷ which informed my Major Work’s scope. The form was crucial the difficult task of fictionalising a real person convincingly, of blurring fact and fiction. As Boyd asserts: the short story can ‘colonise some of the territory...deluged by documentary and

¹³ *Dent de Lion*, (2017). [Major Work]

¹⁴ A. O’Hagan, ‘Gordon,’ in Z. Smith, ed., *The Book of Other People* (London, Penguin Books 2008).

¹⁵ A. Cummins, ‘Gordon Who?’ (17 January 2009) *The Guardian* <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2008/jan/17/gordonwho>> accessed 4 April 2017, para. 2.

¹⁶ E.A. Poe, ‘Edgar Allan Poe: The Importance of the Single Effect in a Prose Tale’ [1946] *Graham's Magazine*

¹⁷ W. Boyd, ‘A Short History of the Short Story’ *Prospect Magazine*. (July 10 2006), <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/william-boyd-short-history-of-the-short-story> accessed 15 December 2016

journalism'¹⁸ offering a 'snapshot of human nature.'¹⁹

Drawing from my study of *Artist of the Floating World*²⁰ in English Extension 1, I learnt how a first-person unreliable narrator might be used to accentuate a character's guilt. Ono's 'self-justification'²¹ and 'self-denial'²² lead me to mirror Ishiguro's slow reveal of his protagonist's unreliability. This confessional voice suggests that one motivation for my protagonist's account is absolution of guilt. My narrative voice was shaped by my study of *The Great Gatsby*²³, in English Advanced. This, along with other canonical American texts such as *Catcher in the Rye*²⁴ and *The Sun Also Rises*²⁵, lead me to use individualist elements of American narrative tradition in which 'the persona seems strongly autobiographical'²⁶ - appropriate for my American context. In *The Great Gatsby*²⁷, a formal voice reflects Nick's austere upbringing and his emotional insecurity. I identified a similar narrative voice in the formal prose of *The Remains of the Day*²⁸ and used such a voice to mirror my own protagonist's fragile ego.

Aspects of my protagonist's ego manifest in the characterisation of J.T. Ellis, a projection of the narrator. The character of J.T. emerged from my interest in the American white working class' instrumental role in Donald Trump's victory. My characterisation of my

¹⁸ Boyd, *Prospect Magazine*, para. 4.

¹⁹ Boyd, para. 8.

²⁰ K. Ishiguro, *An Artist of the Floating World* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986).

²¹ D. Guo, 'Trauma, Memory and History in Kazuo Ishiguro's Fiction' (2012) 2/12 *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*.

²² Guo, *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*.

²³ F.S. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 2008).

²⁴ J.D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye* (London: Penguin Books, 1994).

²⁵ E. Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

²⁶ L. Buell, "Transcendentalist Self-Examination and Autobiographical Tradition" *Literary Transcendentalism: Style and Vision in the American Renaissance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017).

²⁷ Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*

²⁸ K. Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989).

deuteragonist was informed by J.D. Vance's recent memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*²⁹ and, more notably, by the 'mutual contempt and increasing division,'³⁰ between 'hillbillies' and the rest of America. My narrator fetishises J.T. Ellis, deeming him worthy of attention by distinguishing him from the stereotypical characteristics of others 'drinking Mountain Dew in the place of water.'³¹ We see an idealised portrait of a tireless American worker aligned with the protagonist's own values. This allows me to reveal my protagonist's social pretensions as subconscious reasoning; he values the lives of some people over others, which justifies his complicity in exposing working class workers to hazardous waste.

*The Little Red Writing Book*³² inspired me to use setting to mirror my protagonist's psychology and the turning points of my plot. My protagonist's idealism emerges in his descriptions of the town, 'a place that feels like fall even when it's winter everywhere else.'³³ This idealised description becomes haunting when the town becomes affected by toxic waste because of the protagonist's actions, making the 'prized river smell different.'³⁴ The initial descriptions reveal the protagonist's seeming attachment to the town, highlighting his complex reasoning and negating his direct accountability.

The title emerged from investigating the etymology of the word dandelion and the botany of the plant itself, both pertinent motifs in my work. Hearing Charles Koch recall digging dandelions as instructed by his father in an interview³⁵, I realised the origin of the word, coming from the French *dent de lion* was emblematic. The 'lion's tooth,' edged leaves

²⁹ J.D. Vance, 'Hillbilly Elegy' (New York: Harper Press, 2016)

³⁰ J. Rothman, 'The Lives of Poor White People' (24 September 2016) *The New Yorker* <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-lives-of-poor-white-people>

³¹ Dent de Lion, (2017). [Major Work]

³² M. Tredinnick, *The Little Red Writing Book* (Sydney: NewSouth Publishing, 2006)

³³ *Dent de Lion*, (2017). [Major Work]

³⁴ *Dent de Lion*, (2017). [Major Work]

³⁵ C. Koch, *Good Profit*, interviewed by Peter Robinson, (March 18 2016) [Video Interview]

of the plant symbolise the father's expectations of ruthlessness. However, the protagonist really values not the leaves but the unadorned roots, emblematic of his penchant for simplicity and hard work. Thus, the moment where the narrator imagines J.T.'s daughter as she 'blow(s) out the fluffy seeds of a dandelion,'³⁶ is symbolic, revealing how he recognises her world-view differs from his own at the same age. Her appreciation of the part of the plant that the narrator disregards reflects her loving childhood, a contrast to his own.

The process of composing creative fiction has allowed me to fulfil my initial goal: I've processed my moral judgement of Charles Koch by analysing his actions and, more importantly, the factors behind them. Beyond that, I've learnt to use the creative process as a means to understand the parts of the world and of human nature that fascinate and terrify me. The project has therefore been deeply rewarding.

WORD COUNT: 1484

³⁶ *Dent de Lion*, (2017). [Major Work]

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