

The texture of emotionally-immersive passages in short stories: steps towards a tentative local grammar.

Michael Toolan

University of Birmingham

[To appear in published proceedings (2011) of the 3<sup>rd</sup> International Stylistics Conference of the Chinese Association for Stylistics, held at Ningbo University, October 2010]

In a recent fine defence of the comic novel (*Guardian*, 2 Oct 2010), the writer Howard Jacobson turned from celebrating its greatest exponent, Dickens, to recognizing the gifts of the other great Victorian novelist, George Eliot. Jacobson especially saluted Eliot's ability not merely to catch us up in a complex net of ideas (as all her novels do) but also to make us *feel*:

"We are all of us born in moral stupidity," [Eliot] writes in *Middlemarch*, à propos Dorothea's failure to imagine how being Mr Casaubon feels to Mr Casaubon. It is the beginning of a marvellous passage of writing, at once homiletic and imagistic. What Dorothea lacks is the capacity "to conceive with that distinctness which is no longer reflection but feeling – an idea wrought back to the directness of sense, like the solidity of objects – that he had an equivalent centre of self . . .".

Here, you could argue, is the very justification of the novel itself – the education of our imaginations not by precept but through the inconsequent palpability of art, what Henry James called its "irresponsible plasticity". And in the chapters that follow, we accompany Dorothea in this education of the feelings and the senses as Casaubon becomes a creature of flesh and blood. Why do we read? This is why we read. How is a novel different from what isn't a novel? In a novel, ideas are wrought back to the directness of sense. *Middlemarch* isn't only one of the greatest novels ever written, it makes the most irresistible case for why the novel must exist.

Although it is far from the only reason why we read and value literature, reading texts for the emotional experience they prompt in us (and the close connections, too, between emotional, ethical, and intellectual responses) is a main one. In a literary narrative for example (novel or story), I will simply here assume, a reader may be especially immersed and moved because they believe they understand what is to be understood, feel what is to be felt, by one participant or another, in a highly-particularised textually-depicted situation. As much is implied in the observations of another contemporary British novelist who has recently written about *Middlemarch*, Zadie Smith. In an essay collected in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, Smith discusses one of the 'second-tier' characters in the novel, Fred Vincy (for an interesting reading that is much more critical of both Fred and his author, see Martin 1994). Fred has been in love with Mary Garth since childhood, but chiefly owing to his immaturity their progress to marriage involves severe trials, albeit eventually overcome. Smith observes:

If Fred didn't love Mary, he would have no reason to exercise his imagination on her family. It's love that makes him realise that two women without their savings are a real thing in the world and not merely incidental to his own sense of dishonour. It's love that enables him to feel another's pain as if it were his own. For Eliot, in the absence of God, all our moral tests must take place on this earth and have their rewards and punishments here. We are one another's lesson, one another's duty. (Smith 2009: 37)

Smith goes on to remark that "Under the influence of [the philosopher] Spinoza, via an understanding of Fred, [Eliot] thought with her heart and felt with her head" (39). The idea is even better expressed, as Smith notes, in the words of another character, Will Ladislaw:

To be a poet is to have a soul so quick to discern, that no shade of quality escapes it, and so quick to feel, that discernment is but a hand playing with finely-ordered variety on the chords of emotion--a soul in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling, and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge.

Ladislaw adds that "one may have that condition by fits only", and—to return to my particular interests in this essay—it is equally my assumption that in our reading of literature,

narrative or otherwise, the reader's or addressee's experiences of something like the Eliot/Fred/Ladislav intensity of fused knowledge-feeling are only occasional if not rare, rather than continual.

In brief, as contemporary British novelists attest, a crucial effect of great literature seems (still) to be that, 'by fits' at least, it causes the reader not merely to know or recognize but also to feel--and ideally to know and feel as one powerfully immersing or engaging experience. The question for a stylistician like me is: how, with particular reference to the *language* of the narrative in which these spots or epiphanies of heightened knowing-and-feeling occur, is this done? Here I will discuss briefly two short stories, rather than something of the awful length of a novel, and I will treat it as assumed (reasonable, but of course challengeable) that only a few points in the story—not each and every paragraph—is perceived by most readers as especially moving (thus reading such a story is, in terms of emotional effects, more akin to travel on a roller-coaster than making a level and uniform journey). So my specifically stylistic response to observations like that of Smith or the character Ladislav is:

But what is it in the *text* or *texture* of the story, in its use of certain kinds of language and not other kinds, that is instrumental in the reader's sense of emotional immersion? Can we hazard a stylistic description (a tentative local grammar) of the typical linguistic characteristics of those passages of literary stories which are regularly identified (at least implicitly) as the most moving, telling, memorable, or disturbing passages?

With some help from corpus analytic evidence, I will attempt to pinpoint some of the language features of the most moving moments in two indicative stories (John McGahern's "All Sorts of Impossible Things" and Alice Munro's "Passion"). For such interests, "Passion" is I think an interesting case, since in my opinion it is a relatively emotionally-subdued narrative, with few if any moments of high emotional charge (but my interest is less in high emotion *in the story* than in—possibly parallel, possibly differently-triggered—emotional engagement in the reader). But there is, I think, a sequential emotional contour to the story, with at least one resonant 'cold spot'. I will be marshalling corpus stylistic evidence, including evidence about the patterning of consciousness-projecting and mentally-evaluative verbs, to support this identification.

To have time to discuss the textual evidence in some detail, I must summarize preliminary considerations quite briefly. Thus my abridged answer to the question "How does a poem, story, novel or play cause a reader to feel moved and even 'immersed'?" is that usually this involves the text depicting a situation in which the reader develops an emotional engagement with a depicted focalized character. In the particularized and imaginable narrated situation, the reader learns explicitly or implicitly what *the character* feels strongly about (in the narrative present), or is moved by or emotionally engaged by. Immersion or engagement is a drawing of the reader into empathy or sympathy with a depicted character, achieved by furnishing the textual means with which the reader can 'see into' or *see along with* that character's imagined consciousness.

So far, I have mostly tested my stylistic predictions on stories by John McGahern (although I have done other kinds of stylistic studies on Alice Munro's stories). Given the conditions sketched above, I believe we can hypothesise that projections of one or more characters' deepest feelings via desire modality (*will, would, wanted to, hated to, gladly*) and mental process verbs of evaluative reaction (*like, hate, fear, admire, resent, etc.*), will *standardly* be important in the establishing of reader involvement.

In the McGahern stories I have analysed so far, there is indeed more projecting volitive modality (characters *wanting X, wishing Y, hating Z* etc.) and more mental reaction or consciousness projection by the main character, in the high-emotion passages than elsewhere in the story.

One verb in particular seems to play a prominent role in emotive passages, and that is feel—or of course more typically, in past tense stories, *felt*. For reasons I have no time to set out here, feel/felt is more linguistically versatile, and can often be more demanding of the reader's empathetic understanding, than such standard narrative verbs as *say, think, know*, and

*tell*. But *feel* isn't the only important verb, associatable with high emotion passages; as I research this further, two others are proving quite prominent too: *want* and *see*. For me it is no surprise that *want/wanted* should be so important: *want* is surely one of the most standard means of expressing volitive modality. *See* is another frequent verb in narratives, often used metaphorically to report a character's belated realisation of or insight into a situation. But why should it be prominent in high-emotion passages? I have as yet no answer, but simply report that, seemingly, it is.

Of course it would be absurd to expect just a few verbs, with a main character as their subject, such as *she felt a longing to, she wanted to..., she realised that....* always to be used prominently in stories where high-emotion passages were involved. We can be sure that there is a multitude of ways of creating highly moving and immersing passages in stories. The reality of there being a variety of ways won't cause a stylistician to abandon the search for main trends, main cues, however. After all, there is a good deal of commonality of experience (I propose), when readers from very different times and places read a particular poem, novel, or story: if there were not, and if, further, the similarities of experience were not enabled by the writer's compositional choices, writers would not go to the trouble they do. So I am confident that, in general, all sorts of different readers tacitly agree about certain kinds of effect, including recognising where the most moving or disturbing parts of individual literary stories are; all that the analysts need to do is identify the various things that contribute to readers reaching that shared identification.

The text-analytical computational tools I have chiefly used are those now widely used by those working on corpus stylistic analyses of English texts: WordSmith Tools and Wmatrix. WordSmith Tools (Scott 2004) enable the text-analyst to generate word-frequency lists; calculate a text's keywords; generate its word clusters (also known as n-grams or lexical bundles); and produce a concordance for any word in the target text. Wmatrix (Rayson 2003, 2008) does some of the same tasks, and also offers an automatic word-by-word semantic analysis of English text; it can calculate key semantic domains, and provide a part-of-speech tag of every lexical item or multi-word expression (with 97% accuracy). The semantic tagging assigns a semantic tag to every word of the text (with a claimed 92% accuracy), there being 21 discourse fields and approximately 200 semantic categories.

At this stage I have not attempted a 'scientific' or 'objective' method to confirm that just brief passages of a short story will be highly emotive and immersive, or to identify exactly what those passages are, in any given short story. Rather I seek the reader's assent to both the claim and my identifications. In the case of John McGahern's short story "All Sorts of Impossible Things", for example, I am convinced—and hope that others will agree—that the most reader-immersing and moving passage is centred in the long penultimate paragraph. (I say 'centred' since, like Free Indirect Thought, emotive narrative passages may well be ones where as readers we are confident of the nucleus, but simply cannot always be definitive about the boundaries of a particular occurrence: the particular words that mark the opening and termination, as it were, are indeterminate).

But my remarks about the emotional 'high point' of "All Sorts of Impossible Things" will make little sense unless the reader has some idea of the story's plot. So here it is, in summary.

The story is told in the third person, primarily through the point of view of a lonely schoolmaster, James Sharkey. The story begins with Sharkey and his friend Tom Lennon, spending a Sunday afternoon hunting rabbits with two hounds; one, Coolcarra Queen, is a retired never-quite-successful racing dog that belongs to Lennon. Though they are unaware of it, this will be their last Sunday of hunting because of Lennon's failing health (he has a weak heart); Lennon is a fixed-term agricultural instructor with a wife and children, preparing to take exams which, if passed, will give him a permanent post with benefits.

After the unsuccessful day's hunting, Sharkey goes to Charlie's bar for a drink, and we are told in analepsis of his disappointment in love: hyper-sensitive about his

premature baldness, he had pressed his girlfriend Catherine for an answer to his marriage proposal, and she had rejected him rather than be so coerced. He was never again seen in public without his brown hat on, and this in turn ‘caused scandal’ at Mass on Sundays, until he and the parish priest reached an accommodation (Sharkey takes the collection in the church porch, with his hat on). Over the next few weeks Lennon grows weaker but still plans to take the exam; with Lennon’s reluctant agreement, Sharkey takes Coolcarra Queen off his hands “until you’re better”, and she settles happily at Sharkey’s house. Sharkey visits the bedridden Lennon frequently, and on the night before the exam, cuts his hair and helps him shave, so that he is (in Lennon’s quip) “as good as for a wedding”.

Early the next morning, Lennon drops dead while trying to start his car with the starting handle. After the funeral Sharkey comes home to Coolcarra Queen, whose excitement at his return triggers an answering surge of excitement in Sharkey, whose mind races briefly with the prospect of “all sorts of impossible things”.

Having predicted that in general highly emotive/immersing narrative passages will be ones where there is (a density of) representing of a focalised character’s mental reactions or projected consciousness, I reviewed the semantic categories adopted by Wmatrix and used by that software to tag *automatically* all the words in a text that appear to conform to that category. Among Wmatrix’s array of semantic tags, the super-category X2 covers all ‘Mental actions and processes’; my assumption was that such a category would be too indiscriminate, insufficiently ‘delicate’ in Hallidayan terms, for the question at hand. But I wondered whether one of its sub-categories might be more central (i.e., central to the identification of those words in a text that particularly relate to a character’s deepest mental reactions). That sub-category is X2.1 (glossed in the Wmatrix inventory of semantic domains as covering ‘thought, belief’). The kinds of words that Wmatrix tags instantiations of the X2.1 subcategory include *feel, felt, thought, thinking, suppose, and suspicion*.

Other semantic categories (in Wmatrix), besides X2.1 (‘thought’, ‘belief’) that I propose may be relevant to the textualizing of empathy/immersion include the following: E1 (Emotional Actions, States and Processes); X3 Sensory covering all the senses; and X7 Wanting. But here I focus on items from X2.1, which for this story seemed to be much the most numerous and prominent. X3 (more particularly X3.4, Sight, will feature more prominently below when I turn to the Munro story).

In “All Sorts of Impossible Things”, much the most prominent item falling into the X2.1 category is *felt*. It is 10 of the text’s 24 words or phrases that the semantic tagger automatically allocates to this category.

Additionally, we can exploit the resources of Wmatrix to focus on the set of words from the story that occur at the intersection of the X2 semantic tagging and one of the grammatical (parts of speech) tagging categories, namely that which tags all past tense action verbs (the category is abbreviated as VVD). It emerges that (in this story) *felt* is the third most frequent VVD item, after *said* and *went*, and more frequent than other past tense action verbs such as *took, asked, began, wore, watched, stood, and saw*. Wmatrix finds 239 instantiations of the VVD category in “All Sorts of Impossible Things”: unsurprisingly, *said* as most frequent (27 instances): I have argued elsewhere (Toolan 2009) that *said* and *says*, which tend to be high frequency items in past- and present-tense heterodiegetic narratives, should not usually merit close stylistic attention. But after *said*, the next most frequent VVD items in the story are (equally unsurprisingly) *went* (9 instances) and—much more interestingly—*felt* (also 9 instances).

At this stage all I hope to have suggested to you is that *felt* (and its lexemic relatives: *feel, feeling, etc.*, all of which are X2.1 instantiations) is quantitatively interestingly prominent in the McGahern story. The question to explore now is whether it is prominent for the reason I have hypothesised, namely because it can be used in projecting character emotions and relatedly reader-involvement and engagement. How, in short, is *felt* (and *feel, feeling, etc.*) actually used in the story?

What I found, in broad terms, was a broad progression in the story from uses of the ‘feel’ lexeme in situations—in the narrative or the direct speech—which were not particularly emotionally heightened to uses in situations where such heightening was almost always present. Thus in the early pages of the story we find Sharkey inviting Lennon for a drink after their day’s hunting: “Do you **feel** like coming to Charlie’s for a glass?” Lennon declines the offer, adding “Anyhow, I’m beginning to **feel** a bit humped” (bold added). Clearly there is no ‘high emotion’ in these uses of **feel/felt**.

On the other hand I propose that there are three emotionally-charged and highly reader-involving moments or passages in the story. These are at the point where Sharkey and Cathleen’s relationship irrevocably breaks down; when Sharkey cuts Lennon’s hair the night before his permanency examination; and at the end of the story when Sharkey—passingly—becomes excited at all sorts of future possibilities. Again, at this stage, I can only appeal to the judgements of other readers by way of confirmation that these three passages do indeed stand out in terms of emotional involvement. And in all three passages, among other noticeable features, *felt* is disproportionately prominent item, used with clausal or complex noun-phrase complements expressing full propositional descriptions of character response and reaction. That is to say, *felt* is not used, in these passages, in such simple non-immersing constructions as *he felt angry*, *he felt the fine grain of the wooden table*, and so on. Instead it is used in the following ways, to give two examples from the first ‘peak’ emotional passage:

He **felt** his whole life like a stone on the edge of a boat out on water.

As she passed through the gate he **felt** a tearing that broke as an inaudible cry.

Or consider this sentence from the second emotional passage, again with my bolding of the *felt* item:

He wanted a haircut, and that night, as the teacher wrapped the towel round the instructor’s neck and took the bright clippers out of their pale-green cardboard box, adjusting the combs, and started to clip, the black hair dribbling down on the towel, he **felt** for the first time ever a mad desire to remove his hat and stand bareheaded in the room, as if for the first time in years he **felt** himself in the presence of something sacred. But the highest of three emotional ‘peaks’ in the story is, as proposed earlier, at its close.

I reproduce its final two paragraphs here:

As he petted her [the greyhound, named Coolcarra Queen] down, gripping her neck, bringing his own face down to hers, thinking how he had come by her, he **felt** the same rush of **feeling** as he had **felt** when he watched the locks of hair fall on to the towel round the neck in the room; but instead of prayer he now **felt** a wild longing to throw his hat away and walk round the world bareheaded, find some girl, not necessarily Cathleen O’Neill, but any young girl, and go to the sea with her as he used to, leave the car at the harbour wall and take the boat for the island, the engine beating like a good heart under the deck boards as the waves rocked it on turning out of the harbour, hold her in one long embrace all night between the hotel sheets; or train the fawn again, feed her the best steak from town, walk her four miles every day for months, stand in the mud and rain again and see her as Coolcarra Queen race through the field in the Rockingham Stakes, see the judge gallop over to the rope on the old fat horse, and this time lift high the red kerchief to give the Silver Cup to the Queen.

And until he calmed, and went into the house, his mind raced with desire for all sorts of such impossible things.

This, I submit, is a passage of high emotional drama and interiority to which the whole proceeding story has been building and which few attentive readers will be untouched by. The emotional ‘catching up’ of the reader, or the immersion of them in the poignant situation of James Sharkey, so aware of what once might have been but what now is chiefly a memory or longing, an overwhelming sense of desire and grief and loss, is achieved by many kinds of stylistic texturing. The prominent use of *feel/felt*—not I believe as a necessary means of consciousness projection but perhaps as a default or typical means—is just one of the resources so deployed.

## Why should *She felt that...* sentences be so instrumental in high emotion narrative passages?

The above question merits a detailed study of its own. I will limit myself here to noting first the enormous semantic versatility of the English verb *feel* (in Hallidayan labelling terms (it can denote a material, or mental, or relational, or verbal process). But as a means of narrating a character's reactions to others or to a situation, *feel/felt* is interestingly different from some other proposition-projecting verbs such as *say/said* or *think/thought* or *know/knew*. While these others can be used to introduce or follow what can by convention be taken to be verbatim or faithful report of a fully-formed thought or utterance, the clausal complement of *feel/felt* is always understood to be the narratorial gist or version of whatever the person doing the feeling felt. And what a character 'felt' mentally can often be much vaguer than what she or he thought or knew. In that sense it is deeper, in the realm of incompletely articulated and externalised judgement, and involves more text-reader empathy than reader-processing of what (we are told) the character thought, or said, or knew (as matters of clear narratorial record, as it were). Alongside the ways in which *feel* patterns like other cognitive verbs like *think* (*She felt/thought that he should apologise*) there are ways in which it patterns differently:

X felt annoyed that Y was late. That Y was late made X feel annoyed.

\*X thought annoyed that Y was late. \*That Y was late made X think annoyed.

What a character 'felt' mentally can often be much vaguer than what she or he thought or knew. In that sense it is deeper, in the realm of incompletely articulated and externalised judgement, and involves more text-reader empathy than the reader-processing of what we are told the character thought, or said, or knew. Feelings are necessarily subjective, and often indeterminate, in ways that thoughts, sayings and knowledge are not, even if they may be. So imagining that you—a reader/viewer—can understand and perhaps even feel what a character might have *felt* is a more speculative activity than is often the case when you are asked to understand that a character *said* or *thought* (because the latter are more fully 'reduced' to clausal representation).

*Felt* and *saw*, like *said* and *thought*, can be used to report 'full propositions':

*He felt/saw/said/thought (that) the decision was wrong.*

*She should not have said that, he said/thought/felt/saw.*

But in other respects *felt* can behave differently, for more subtle or indefinable empathic purposes, than many other standard projecting mental or verbal process verbs (*see*, *think*, *say*, *tell*, *hear*). To begin with, *feel/felt* can be used intensively where those just mentioned cannot: *he felt uneasy*, *he felt anxious*, *he felt bullied*, *\*he saw angry*, *\*he thought sad*, *\*he said anxious*. And the *feel* intensives—*he felt uneasy*, etc--are, significantly, less determinate and more cancellable than *he was uneasy*, *he was bullied*. They relay an impression rather than recording a fact.

*Felt* (and *saw* and *sense*), unlike *said* or *thought*, can be freely used with complex (clause-like) noun phrases as Object:

*he felt himself in the presence of something sacred*

*he saw himself in the presence of something sacred*

*\*he said himself in the presence of something sacred*

*he thought/knew himself in the presence of something sacred*

*He sensed/saw a great urge to...*

*He felt a wild longing to walk round the world bareheaded....*

*\*He said a wild longing to walk round the world bareheaded....*

*\*He thought a wild longing to walk round the world bareheaded....*

*There was no comfort in what [a/the lack of hope that was genuine, reasonable, everlasting] she saw, now that she could see it.*

*She saw a wild longing [in him] to walk round the world bareheaded...*

*She sensed a wild longing [in him] to walk round the world bareheaded*

*Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity* (Araby)

One reason you cannot think or say ‘a wild longing to walk round the world bareheaded’ but can feel it is that the thing felt is not fully reduced to clausal or propositional form. In addition when you ‘feel a longing’ to walk round the world, the process is distributed through the whole phrase ‘feel a longing’; there is no such dispersion in the (ungrammatical) ‘say a longing’ or ‘think a longing’—the longing to do something is quite distinct from the saying or thinking (reporting) about the longing.

In a sense then, *feel/felt* sentences can be used to report character experiences such as *a wild longing to walk round the world bareheaded* that cannot be reduced to an orthodox grammatical Direct or Indirect Thought (or Speech) sentence. Thus, arguably, sometimes *feel/felt* narrative sentences can be used to report ‘deep’ character emotional reactions and responses which are really too deep or inchoate to be reducible to a simple propositional form. They are thus communicatively occluded, and demand of the reader a greater-than-usual insight fully to understand and interpret them.

### **Alice Munro’s “Passion”.**

How does the above patterning compare with what is to be found in the ‘most emotive’ passages in Munro’s “Passion”? Again, I begin by postulating, claiming myself to be an ‘average’ attentive reader, that a couple of short adjacent passages are the most emotionally engaging and immersing ones—with the twist that in “Passion” there is no clear moment of feverish or heightened feeling, but rather a short episode of chilling or cold realisation, of emotionally-arresting realisation (on the part of the character Grace and then, by extension, on the part of the reader). But first, again, a brief summary of the story itself (with thanks to Susan Lohafer, from whom, by way of personal communication, this summary is taken, lightly amended):

After forty years, Grace revisits a summer community in the Ottawa Valley, where, at the age of twenty, she met the Travers family. Now, seeing their former home, she recalls the past, and the following story unfolds. Young Maury Travers, on vacation from college, pursues Grace, a working-class girl with few prospects. He romanticizes her poverty and her spirit. While he is naïve and uptight, she is smart and inquiring. She is drawn to, and befriended by, Maury’s mother, whose intelligence and history are sometimes at odds with the comfortable life her second husband provides—the life Maury plans for Grace. A welcome guest in this lively home, Grace drifts into an engagement with Maury, and then one day meets his older half-brother, Neil, a married doctor for whom alcohol is a distraction from hopelessness. Grace has just cut her foot when Neil arrives in his roadster; immediately there is ‘chemistry’. He whisks her off to the hospital for stitches, and then, with her consent, taking her on an odyssey into the countryside, leaving duty and propriety behind. He teaches her how to drive, and introduces her to passion when he casually licks her palm. That is the extent of their sexual encounter that afternoon, although Grace also knows she can’t or won’t return to Maury. Grace and Neil also share a more powerful understanding: she sees he has a bleak vision, of life’s promise undercut by its emptiness. Serving breakfast at the hotel next morning, Grace learns that after leaving her, Neil killed himself in a car crash. A few days later she is visited by Maury’s father, taking charge in this ‘very sad’ situation; he gives her a check for one thousand dollars for her ‘to make good use of’. After imagining a gesture of refusal, she takes the money and, it is implied, used it for the ‘start in life’ which has enabled her to become the person she now is, living elsewhere and differently.

Relative to the whole story, I propose that the following nearly adjacent short passages are the most emotionally-resonant and reader-engaging of the entire story (they are passages that other readers and critics seem repeatedly to note and discuss too):

When she'd said that, she felt cold. She had thought she was serious, but now she **saw** that she'd been trying to impress him with these answers, trying to show herself as worldly as he was, and in the middle of that she had come on this rock-bottom truth. This lack of hope--genuine, reasonable, and everlasting.

\*\*\*

She'd thought it was touch. Mouths, tongues, skin, bodies, banging bone on bone. Inflammation. Passion. But that wasn't what had been meant for them at all. That was child's play, compared to how she knew him, how far she'd **seen** into him, now...

What she had **seen** was final. As if she was at the edge of a flat dark body of water that stretched on and on. Cold, level water. Looking out at such dark, cold, level water, and knowing it was all there was.

(*Runaway* New York: Knopf, 2004, pp. 192 and 193, bold and underlining added)

As before, I used Wmatrix's semantic and grammatical parsing resources to attempt to identify the kinds of lexical items (in particular the verbs) that seemed to be differentially prominent in the above passage—i.e., strikingly more prominent here than in the surrounding story text—and instrumental in the expression of character thinking and desire. The verbs *feel* and *think* are important again, but even more prominent in the Munro emotional cold point, by comparison with the McGahern, as I have tried to highlight by added bolding, is *see* (semantically X3.4 in Wmatrix's classification: 'Sensory: Sight') and its inflected forms—although this is partially concealed by the slightly informal or character-reflective sentential punctuation Munro has adopted. The latter means that, in the final paragraph quoted above, there is arguably an ellipted projecting clause subject and verb which, if restored, would be *she saw*. In other words—again, arguably at least—the first two sentences of the final sentence might underlyingly read as follows:

What she had seen was final. She saw that it was as if she was at the edge of a flat dark body of water that stretched on and on. [underlined text added]

Having said that, I would not wish to lean heavily on such putatively ellipted wordings, regarding these as a deflection of our attention from the actual wording of the actual text.

As indicated earlier, there are multiple resources used in the textual creation of these immersive passages. Both Wmatrix and WordSmith will confirm that the *lexical* keywords in the Munro passage, when compared with the vocabulary in a large sample of imaginative writing (from the British National Corpus), are these: *level, water, cold, bone, rock-bottom, worldly, everlasting, impress, inflammation, mouths, tongues, dark*. Those words, in other words, are statistically confirmed as strikingly disproportionately frequent in the target passage. And the following are the themes or topics that Wmatrix judges to be disproportionately prominent semantic domains in the same passage, again compared with the BNC Written Imaginative sample:

*Darkness; long, tall and wide; degree; substances and materials: liquid;*

The above information about keywords and semantic domains can assist in formulating predictions about characteristic features of such highly-immersive passages in a larger set of stories (see below).

As for the X2.1 semantic category with which I first explored the McGahern story, there are 78 items automatically assigned to this category from the Munro story, the most prominent being *think(s)/thought/thinking* (34 in all), *feel, felt, feeling* (18). Space limitations prevent a fuller discussion here, but I hope my underlinings of items in the quoted Munro passage show how even in such a brief passage, predicates like *felt* and *thought* (and others such as *know/knew/known*) are disproportionately prominent. The picture is further complicated by metaphoricity: for example, when the passage runs *She had come on this rock-bottom truth. This lack of hope--genuine, reasonable, and everlasting*, it is clear that *come on* is a conventional metaphorical variant of words like *felt, realized, or grasped*. But Wmatrix

categorizes this *come on* as word to do with ‘Moving, coming and going’ (M.1) rather than as the X2 mental process that it functions as here!

To conclude—and with no space here to discuss textual encodings of volitive modality, wishings and wantings, which are often another prominent feature, my ongoing explorations of the texture of ‘highly emotive and immersive story passages suggests that at least the following (with example instances from the two stories discussed above) are frequent and constitutive features. None may be actually necessary conditions for the creation of contrastively ‘deep’ or strong reader-engagement, but they may be sufficiently typical to merit further study.

1. Key projecting verbs are *think* and *see, feel* and *want* (*she saw now/ she had seen* does in ‘Passion’ some of what *he now felt* does in McGahern’s ‘All sorts of impossible things’).
2. Negation is widespread: *impossible things, a lack of hope, that wasn’t what had been meant...*
3. Sentence grammar is comparatively elaborate, complex; sentences are longer; includes nominal clauses and clefting; but with the focalising character often as Subject..
4. More temporal simultaneity (marked by *As he did x, he felt y* structures, which typically combine report of a *physical* or external narrated event with report of a mental or internal event/reaction/insight; hence a double telling); more temporal staging, or multiply-coordinated processes or events...
5. heat, light and dimension words are prominent: *cold, dark, deep, rock-bottom, inflammation*
6. Absolute/ultimate words are used: *all night... the best steak, every day for months, the Queen; all sorts of...rock-bottom, everlasting, deeper than she could ever have managed, on and on, all there was...final.*
7. Textual sites of emotion/immersion may not invariably be marked by ‘emotional’ language alone (*feel, desire, want...*). Or such processes are metaphorised.

### **A final thought**

The methodology of corpus stylistics is remorselessly comparative. Thus its practitioners want to see a profile of the lexis (or semantics, or the grammar) of what I’m postulating are the high-emotion passages **compared with** a profile of the lexis or grammar in the non-emotive passages. And they want to see some significant linguistic contrast. Without which they are understandably doubtful about my claim that the language of the high-emotion passages is different from the remainder, and instrumental in creating emotionally-engaged responses from readers. Fair enough; but at the end of the analysis we need to remember that the passages (so called low emotion and so called high emotion) are not divorced from each other, but rather form an integrated whole; so that whatever effects the emotional passages achieve is partly managed as a result of being encountered before or after--in the context of—the low intensity passages.

### **References**

- Jacobson, Howard 2010. Howard Jacobson on taking comic novels seriously. Review. *The Guardian* Saturday 9 October.
- McGahern, John. 1992. “All Sorts of Impossible Things”. In *Collected Stories*. London: Faber. Also readable online in Ploughshares, vol. 6, no. 1, 1980. url: <http://www.jstor.org/pss/40348469>
- Mead, Rebecca. 2011. Middlemarch and Me: What George Eliot teaches us. *The New Yorker*. February 14.
- Munro, Alice. 2004. “Passion.” In *Runaway* New York: Knopf.
- Smith, Zadie. Middlemarch and everybody. In *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* London: Hamish Hamilton 2009, 28-40.

- Martin, Bruce K. 1994. Fred Vincy and the Unravelling of *Middlemarch*. *Papers on Language & Literature*, Vol. 30, no.1, Winter, 3-24.
- Toolan, Michael. 2009. *Narrative Progression in the Short Story: A Corpus Stylistic Approach*. Amsterdam: Benjamins.