The Nobility in Seeing Oneself: Unreliable Narration in British Postmodern Fiction

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The Nobility in Seeing Oneself: Unreliable Narration in British Postmodern Fiction

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This Thesis, “The Nobility in Seeing Oneself: Unreliable Narration in British Postmodern Fiction,” by Jessica Marzocca, has been approved for submission for the Degree of Master of Arts in English (Writing) by:

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Abstract

In an interview in 1989, Kazuo Ishiguro, author of *The Remains of the Day*, expresses an interest in “the whole business about following somebody’s thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves,” a curiosity that directly correlates to the functionality of unreliable narration (Mason 347). That same interest can spill over into trying to trip up or hide from readers, a jump easily made when considering novels narrated in first-person like *The Remains of the Day* or Martin Amis’s *Money: A Suicide Note*, or even Muriel Spark’s third-person novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Unreliable narration connects these novels, as do the themes, ideology, and practices of postmodernism, and together they provide a solid foundation for readers to conceptualize a cohesive definition of unreliable narration, a notoriously ambiguous and elusive aspect of narratology.

One of the first in his field to ponder the distance between narrator, reader, and implied author, Wayne C. Booth in his collection *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, “for a lack of better terms,” calls “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” (Booth 158-159). While recognizing unreliable narration is simple, defining its characteristics in concrete and universal terms is an elusive task since a novel’s reliability, far from being a given, is always suspect. Postmodernism assumes the instability of identity and the fluidity of character development, but the ability to relate these findings to readers is a narratological concern. Thus, the relationship between a postmodern identity, instances of unreliable narration, and narrative trustworthiness defines these novels and their narrators. Unreliable narration is contingent on gaps and silences – in these empty spaces we find reminders to look deeper and piece together the narrative puzzle so that we can first recognize that the narration is unreliable and second have
the tools necessary to define it in quantifiable terms. First-person narrators Stevens and John Self and the third-person narration focalized through Sandy of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* exemplify their unreliability through instances of contradiction, by concealing parts of or the entire truth, or in moments of questionable judgement, creating a tension of distrust for readers and, in doing so, resist categorization in a genre known for individualism.
In an interview in 1989, Kazuo Ishiguro, author of *The Remains of the Day*, expresses an interest in “the whole business about following somebody’s thoughts around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves,” a curiosity that directly correlates to the functionality of unreliable narration (Mason 347). That same interest can spill over into trying to trip up or hide from readers, a jump easily made when considering novels narrated in first-person like *The Remains of the Day* or Martin Amis’s *Money: A Suicide Note*, or even Muriel Spark’s third-person novel *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Unreliable narration connects these novels, as do the themes, ideology, and practices of postmodernism, and together they provide a solid foundation for readers to conceptualize a cohesive definition of unreliable narration, a notoriously ambiguous and elusive aspect of narratology.

A novel’s reliability, far from being a given, is always suspect. Postmodernism assumes the instability of identity and the fluidity of character development, but the ability to relate these findings to readers is a narratological concern. Thus, the relationship between a postmodern identity, instances of unreliable narration, and narrative trustworthiness defines these novels and their narrators. Unreliable narration is contingent on gaps and silences – in these empty spaces we find reminders to look deeper and piece together the narrative puzzle so that we can first recognize that the narration is unreliable and second have the tools necessary to define it in quantifiable terms. First-person narrators Stevens and John Self and the third-person narration focalized through Sandy of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* exemplify their unreliability through instances of contradiction, by concealing parts of or the entire truth, or in moments of questionable judgement, creating a tension of distrust for readers and, in doing so, resist categorization in a genre known for individualism.
Pinning down a universal definition of unreliable narration is, as discovered by narratology theorists like Wayne C. Booth in his 1961 book *The Rhetoric of Fiction* and those following him in more recent times, elusive and frustrating. The conceptualizations necessary for the task required Booth to pioneer new terms, outline them, and utilize them in his definition; these efforts are commendable as the foundation of narratology as we know it, but have become dated and often so vague that the definition is of little use. Booth coins the phrase “unreliable narrator” and, to educate readers, puts it in context with his interpretation of the implied author: “the author’s ‘second self’” and a completely separate entity from the true author (151). He, “for a lack of better terms,” calls “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” (158-159). This ambiguous definition relies entirely on the implied author, a concept already difficult to define and even more so to recognize in fiction, as well as the “dramatic irony” of “the author and audience” somehow sharing “knowledge which the characters do not hold” (175). Booth’s work is groundbreaking for what it contributes to narratology, but more recent critics have expanded upon his work to conclude more precise and usable definitions.

Ansgar Nünning directly references and builds upon Booth’s work in his article, “‘But why will you say that I am mad?’ On the Theory, History, and Signals of Unreliable Narration in British Fiction,” to further clarify and define unreliable narration. He argues that Booth’s dependence on “the ill-defined and elusive notion of the implied author, which hardly provides a reliable basis for determining a narrator’s unreliability,” renders the method, as even Booth admits, “almost hopelessly inadequate” to the task (Nünning 85, Booth 158). Nünning’s definition argues that unreliable narration is not determined based on “the critic’s intuition” but rather on “such signals as textual inconsistencies, the verbal habits of the narrator, and the
discrepancies between the fictional world presented by a text and the reader’s world-knowledge and standards of normality” (Nünning 85). Such a weighted focus on “a broad range of definable” qualifications, including “both textual data and the reader’s preexisting conceptual knowledge” rather than vague feelings, sets Nünning’s definition apart (101). Defining unreliable narration thus becomes a task reliant on subjective, individualistic qualifications rather than on deciphering authorial and implied authorial intent.

While unreliable narration resists definition by relying partially on feeling before any concrete attributes can be discovered and analyzed, postmodernism actively evades concrete definition because of its nature. Terry Eagleton in his book, The Illusions of Postmodernism, attempts to pin down the entire philosophy in a definition evocative of the theory itself. He calls postmodernism “a depthless, decentered, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, derivative, eclectic, pluralistic art which blurs boundaries between...art and everyday experiences,” and a “style of thought which is suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, identity and objectivity, of the universal progress or emancipation, of single frameworks, grand narratives or ultimate grounds of explanation” (vii). For Eagleton, postmodernism “sees the world as continent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate, a set of disunified cultures or interpretations which breed a degree of skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and to coherence of identities,” and is, ultimately, highly experimental and individualistic (vii). Postmodern fiction in particular pushes the boundaries of expectation to deliver contemporary literature meant for readers to engage on a personal level.

Mark Currie’s book, Postmodern Narrative Theory, applies definitions of postmodernism like Eagleton’s on literature, and more specifically on narratology and the concept of an unreliable narrator, to an attempt to define postmodernism. Currie argues that defining “words
like *postmodern*” is an illusion and we must embrace “an oscillation as severe as this, between a kind of writing and a universal condition,” because to think otherwise is “folly” (1). Currie offers three answers to the question, “what is a postmodern novel?” (2). The first is that the genre “takes the issue of the relationship of fiction and reality as central concern;” the second is “postmodern novels are intertextual novels;” and the third is “postmodern novels represent a contemporary state of global culture dominated by new technologies” (Currie 3-4). These three definitions of a postmodern novel are reminiscent of Nünning’s qualifications of unreliability. Postmodern novels, Currie posits, are “highly self-conscious,” engage in their own analyses of the “possibilities and problems of narrative,” and are thus extremely wide-ranged in terms of style while simultaneously very similar in motivation and narrative strategies (5). Postmodern fiction asks readers to participate, to bring their knowledge of the world to the table in order to fully understand the narrator’s perspective; postmodernism is not contingent on unreliable narration nor is unreliable narration on postmodernism, but when utilized together the two play off each other to create unique, extraordinary novels.

In Ishiguro’s *The Remain of the Day*, Amis’s *Money: A Suicide Note*, and Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, postmodernism and unreliable narration collide in how they mutually define each other and by challenging notions of artistic honesty. The 1960s-1980s “postmodern phase” in which these authors published these novels “was marked by radical skepticism about all the achievements and devices of intellect and reason,” including and “significantly for literature and writing” by questioning “how far, if at all, language could reliably mediate any such encounter” (Stevenson 106). Is language capable of resolving our postmodern identity crises? Through small, often contradictory narrative elements such as diction, contextual and intertextual references, and voice, these authors construct narrators whose artistic honesty is
equated to their reliability, making the postmodern qualities of the novels reliant on the narratological ones and vice versa. The artistic “‘honesty’ or ‘integrity’ of a novel is integral to “certain strands of ‘postmodern’ thinking” that “refuse such questions on the grounds that they arise within an ideal of aesthetic autonomy that has been discredited as theoretically naïve,” and thus sparks the question: can narration bridge the gap between intellect and reason, between narrative and reality? (Bewes 421). Ishiguro, Amis, and Spark construct narrators who contradict fundamental aspects of themselves, in effect “lying,” and therefore determine that the conversation revolves around honesty. In a postmodern perspective, a narrator’s dishonest narration is not as important to analyzing a text as are the reasons for dishonesty, the conditions of it, and the implications it has on both narrator and novel. In these novels, the authors challenge notions of artistic honesty as emphatically as they complicate their narrators.

The major narratological approaches to Ishiguro, Amis, and Spark offer valuable insight into the specifics of unreliable narration in these novels and especially the concrete moments and tendencies to look for when attempting to categorically define the narrators’ style of narration. While there is much scholarship on Ishiguro’s and Amis’s narratology techniques, there is significantly less on Spark’s. This gap in scholarship is not surprising, since Spark wrote earlier in the twentieth century and predated the postmodern movement; however, this should not preemptively exclude her work from postmodern themes, techniques, or analysis.

Critics of Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* often point to analogous features of the novel as indications of Stevens’s unreliability: his voice, World War II, and the fallibility of memory. Lilian R. Furst argues convincingly for the latter in her article, “Memory’s Fragile Power in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Remains of the Day* and W. G. Sebald’s ‘Max Ferber,’” concluding that Stevens’s memory is both the foundation of the novel and too “brittle” to hold it up (Furst
She posits that Stevens’s memory is “resistant to complete understanding” and consequently impedes his ability to recognize and narrate reliably (530). Unreliability, Furst asserts, stems from a reader’s sense of unease and is supported with quantifiable literary devices (533). Elif Toprak Sakiz agrees with Furst’s claims in her article, “Implications of Narrative Unreliability in Kazuo Ishiguro’s The Remains of the Day,” theorizing that by taking “a closer look at the textual clues that manifest Stevens as a narrator that is unreliable not on account of unknowingness but due to a strategy to cope with forceful identity-making processes,” readers learn “instrumental” skills to “dismantling the whole text” (1052, 1055). Through this process, readers learn to recognize, characterize, and define unreliable narration. Sakiz ultimately argues that Stevens displays both reliable and unreliable characteristics, as does Kathleen Wall in her article, “‘The Remains of the Day’ and Its Challenges to Theories of Unreliable Narration.” Wall first addresses and dismisses vague definitions from critics like Booth, concluding that a more efficient method is “in the verbal habits of the narrator” not “the narrator’s deviation from the ‘norms and values’” of the author, and subsequently asks the question, “what bearing does it have upon our perception of unreliability if the narrator provides the means for correcting his or her unreliability – consciously or unconsciously?” (Wall 20, 21). Assuming that there is a truth to discern hidden by the narrator’s unreliability, The Remains of the Day challenges “our perception of the irony implicit in unreliable narration” (37).

Martin Amis’s Money: A Suicide Note is a narratological rollercoaster. Addressing the contextual motifs of the novel in relation to narration’s effect, Javier Rodríguez Doñate in his article, “‘Addicted to the Twentieth Century’: A Reassessment of Martin Amis’ Money: A Suicide Note (1984),” argues that “late capitalism, free-market economic policies and, enveloping all this, postmodern culture are the main motifs of both the novel and the decade of
its publication” (65). Doñate is one of many critics to consider the implications of Amis inserting himself into the narrative as a character and asserting himself as “not only omniscient but also omnipresent, a God-like figure who is in control both of the real and narrative worlds” (71).

Robert Duggan in his article, “Big-Time Shakespeare and the Joker in the Pack: The Intrusive Author in Martin Amis’s ‘Money,’” makes the same point about the character Martin Amis, calling him a “tyrannical and omnipotent author-figure” capable of dismantling the entire narrative (103). Duggan relates *Money*, a “novel of authorial intrusion” on multiple levels, to *Othello*, noting that “it is through the prism of Shakespearean appropriation that the postmodern skepticism concerning motivation is primarily manifested” (86, 88). Self’s unreliability is constructed by coalescing his inability “to understand literary references” and the fact that “he is at the center of an *Othello*-like plot” (93, 99). Daniel Lea’s article, “One Nation, Oneself: Politics, Place and Identity in Martin Amis’ Fiction,” contributes to the criticism of Self’s fanaticism for money as culpable for his unreliability, arguing that Self is living “a fantasy of capitalist exorbitance protected from the reflections of conscience by the seductive reassurance of money” and therefore has no capability of reliably conveying his life (Lea 70). On every level – his perspective, his “intellectual independence,” and his “independent self” – Self is “usurped and eviscerated by the imperialistic dictates of profit” (73). These critics agree; Self has no concept of himself and thus has no hope or capability of reliably narrating his life.

Few of Spark’s critics address the narratological implication of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Peter Robert Brown in his article, “‘There’s Something about Mary’: Narrative and Ethics in ‘The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie,” considers “the ways in which Mary is victimized not only by Miss Brodie and her set but also by the narrator and narrative of the novel,” attributing equal culpability to fellow characters, the narrator, and readers for Mary’s plight (Brown 229).
Brown argues that “Spark draws readers’ attention to Mary’s victimization by ironically and satirically depicting the activity of narrating and the often dubious authority on which it rests” (229). Significantly, Brown notes that many critics of the novel claim it “is narrated by an omniscient narrator,” but counters with the analysis that “there are good reasons to question the narrator’s epistemic and ethical authority” (229-230). From another narratological angle, Randall Stevenson, in his article, “The Postwar Contexts of Spark’s Writing,” concludes that the novel is “interested in artistic creation itself” (Stevenson 100). Through the example of the “death in a hotel fire of” Mary, “whose fatal bewilderment may well result from her teacher’s convincing her of her clumsiness and stupidity,” Stevenson argues that Miss Brodie’s “struggle to see who can shape reality most adroitly around her vision and versions of it” is “partly narratological,” as is her cultivating of a “’set’ naturally enough described as ‘Miss Brodie’s fascist!’” and “strongly identified not only with artistic practice, but with the dictatorial, regimenting tactics of fascism” (100, 101, 102). In “a literary sense,” Stevenson argues, Spark is “postmodern before her time” for her use of these narratological techniques (107).

Looking at interviews by these authors can provide extra insight to their creative processes as well as the intentions behind their narrative choices. In an interview with Brian Shaffer for *Contemporary Literature* magazine in 2001, Ishiguro speaks to the construction of Stevens – the butler, narrator, and protagonist of *The Remains of the Day*. He commends Stevens’s improvement from beginning to end of the novel and his newfound ability to self-reflect and self-criticize both his past choices and his current ones, saying:

“Stevens, at his novel’s close, is perhaps deluding himself in thinking that he still has time to lead his life in a different way…But I wanted to suggest somehow that even the fact that he finally comes to see himself clearly is an achievement and a sort of dignity in
itself. There is something noble – even heroic – in his ability to face up to those very painful things about himself. There is something positive about Stevens’s triumph over that impasse, even though there is still something sad about him” (Shaffer 11-12).

Stevens’s unreliability, among other things, stems from his inability to perceive the world around him without incredible subjectivity bordering on bias coloring his view, a fact Ishiguro carefully constructs as he explores Stevens’s character. In an earlier interview with Gregory Mason for *Contemporary Literature* magazine a few months after *The Remains of the Day* was first published in 1989, Ishiguro discusses his trend of unreliable narrators in his first three novels. He argues that he is “not overwhelmingly interested in what really did happen,” but much more so in “the emotional aspect, the actual positions the characters take up at different points in the story, and why they need to take up these positions” (Mason 342). Ishiguro enjoys writing character studies, especially of narrators like Stevens who have so many contradictions. He comments that “things like memory, how one uses memory for one’s own purposes, one’s own ends, those things interest me deeply. And so, for the time being,” he continues, “I’m going to stick with the first person, and develop the whole business about following somebody’s thought around, as they try to trip themselves up or to hide from themselves” (347).

Similarly to Ishiguro, Amis has given many interviews on his writing process. In an interview with Patrick McGrath for *BOMB* magazine in 1987, Amis remarks, “what puzzles me is not my characters doing it, it’s why I make them do it” (McGrath 28). Amis ponders his powerful position as author over the characters he creates as well as the moral implications of his role in their struggles. He asks, “I wonder what I’m up to that I must arrange these things. What does it mean morally? Is one accountable for it?” (28) The author is usually a separate entity from the text – creator, not character – but in a move that echoes Kurt Vonnegut’s *Breakfast of
Champions, Amis inserts himself into Money as a character and changes the fundamental rules of fiction. Suddenly, as Amis says, “you have this very troublesome analogy, the equivalence of the writer and the godlike figure, in that they are entirely on a par” (28). As a counterbalance, Martin Amis the character is not also the narrator; Self remains narrator even after Martin Amis appears, and while “Martin Amis was spouting off about the accountability of the author in fiction, and so on, John Self would be thinking about his toothache or his car” (28). Although removed from the responsibility of narrating, Martin Amis still manages to narratologically complicate the entire composition of the novel and the reliability of Self’s narration.

In a rare interview with Robert Hosmer for Salmagundi magazine in 2005, only a year before her death in 2006, Spark comments on a majority of her work throughout her fifty-plus year writing career, including The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie. Speaking to her general style and methodology for fashioning the narratological elements of her writing, Spark comments, “if I have a voice peculiarly my own it’s probably only in the descriptive and narrative parts” instead of in the individual voices of her characters (Hosmer 149). The question of the distinct voice of the third-person narrator of The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie requires a different approach to analyze its narrative reliability than the other novels specifically because of its different narrative point of view. Calling a third-person narrator unreliable presupposes the fact that the narrator has biases and opinions, like a character. The issue for The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie, then, is that the narrator is neither one of the cast of characters nor a completely omniscient and omnipotent entity removed from the characters’ minds; instead, the narrator focalizes the narrative through Sandy’s perspective, biases, and opinions as a grounding tactic, which opens the narrator to criticism of reliability.
There are several concrete factors to which readers can point that reveal a narrator’s unreliability. Some qualities include voice, contextual information, unreasonable moral alignments that override emotional reactions, the representation of time, and the foundation of truth and authority built with readers. Each narrator displays these qualities in different ways. The questions to answer are: what “signals suggest to the reader that the narrator’s reliability may be suspect?” and, through those signals, how do these authors play with narratology? (Nünning 95). Nünning argues that “contemporary British fiction often calls into question conventional notions of unreliable narration,” and these novels certainly deliver on that end (94).

A brief overview of each signal is useful before discussing the novels. Voice and “the verbal habits of the narrator,” Nünning argues, is one of the two major “clues to unreliability” (96). The other is the contextual and intertextual knowledge readers bring to a novel such as “norms, cultural models, and conceptual frameworks,” which builds a “pragmatic framework” for readers “that takes into consideration both the world-model and norms in” their minds “and the interplay between textual and extratextual information” (Nünning 99). The ethical mind of the narrator is another indicator of reliability; those who “violate the standards that a given culture holds to be constitutive or normal psychological behaviour are generally taken to be unreliable” (100). The issue with this point is that universality is an illusion and “no generally accepted standard of normality exists which could serve as the basis for impartial judgements,” meaning that no two readers come to a novel with the same ethical mind and thus cannot judge a narrator by the same ethical code (101). A narrator playing with the representation of time is an easily recognizable and “definable textual inconsistanc[y] which functions as” a clue to unreliability (96). Rounding off the list, narrators build a foundation of trust with readers that, though Nünning argues it is a misleading description for all it sums up the intent, necessitates
reading “between the lines” of what narrators say and mean, to automatically question a narrator’s authority and discern for oneself the truth (95).

That moments of reliable and unreliable narration can be combined in one narrative is Kathleen Wall’s entire thesis. She argues Stevens displays both types of narration in *The Remains of the Day* and is thus both a reliable and an unreliable narrator, despite acknowledging the apparent mutual exclusion, and her conclusion can be applied to *Money* and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* as well. A novel with instances of both reliable and unreliable moments is far more common than one of only one type. Nünning also argues for acknowledging a narrator’s reliable moments in an otherwise unreliable narrative. He posits that a combination of the two creates “untrustworthy narrators” who “can be defined as those whose commentary does not accord with conventional notions of sound judgement,” but who nonetheless narrate as accurately as anyone can (89). Any first-person narrator can be considered unreliable to some extent on the foundational truth that no one is completely unbiased all the time; Nünning and Wall concur.

In Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, protagonist Stevens narrates his trip to visit an old colleague, Miss Kenton, while reminiscing about the good old days when he was head butler for Lord Darlington, a British noble who has since fallen from social favor for his ties to the Nazi regime. Stevens’s intense focus on the minutia of butlering for Darlington and his resulting pride in his work as a “great” butler is narrated alongside subtle, and later more overt, musings about placing all of one’s self-worth in the hands of another’s greatness, a distinctly postmodern concern. Stevens moves fluidly back and forth between the present and the past, only breaking from his natural storytelling when confronted with regrets such as missing opportunities to connect with his father on any level other than professional, not noticing or
outwardly returning Miss Kenton’s affections, and the moral implications of supporting Darlington’s Nazi ties by staying silent. Although Stevens has human, emotional reactions, he is trained to repress them to the extent that he conceals the emotional vein of his narrative from readers and forces us to interpret them from his narratological gaps. By the end of the novel Stevens progresses past his automatic repression of emotions and proves himself capable of overcoming his stagnant and old-fashioned view of his career and his individuality.

Kathleen Wall and Ansgar Nünning both apply their alternative approaches to defining narration beyond just reliable or unreliable to Stevens and The Remains of the Day. Wall posits that Stevens is both, a duality that rests on his moments of self-reflection that lead to clarity, which she calls reliable moments. Wall argues that “the novel both facilitates and frustrates the discovery of truth,” and concludes Stevens breaks from the binary of reliable or unreliable to become both at once (Wong 54). The only hole in her argument is that Stevens’s sporadic moments of reliability cannot outweigh his overwhelming unreliable narration. Yes, he displays both types of narration, but infrequent reliable moments do not qualify as reliable narration. Thus, Wall’s conclusion that Stevens is both unreliable and reliable at once is not enough.

Nünning’s approach is to argue that Stevens’s moments of reliability in an otherwise unreliable narrative create untrustworthiness. Nünning’s definition of an untrustworthy narrator is two-fold: “the report a narrator gives of the events may be heavily flawed although the narrator himself may appear to be absolutely trustworthy,” and a “narrator may be quite trustworthy in reporting events but not competent in interpreting them” (89). Stevens fits easily into this definition – the first can be observed in his incessant truth-claims intended to support his narration while instead working against it, and the second in his clear bias in narrating events at Darlington Hall to present Darlington in a positive light. According to Nünning, since Stevens’s “commentary does

13
not” always “accord with conventional notions of sound judgement,” his narration is best called untrustworthy (89). Nünning concludes that because Stevens’s moments of reliability occur in an otherwise unreliable text, and because those moments of reliability call into question how we should read his unreliability and vice versa, that the narration is overwhelmingly untrustworthy, an analysis that agrees with Wall’s and expands it into a new name.

Analyzing Stevens’s voice as one of the more obvious indicators of his narrative unreliability allows readers to understand his voice in two contexts: as “a mere portion of a stream of information” and as “part of the whole stream’s commentary upon itself” (Wall 24). Through his “verbal tics,” Stevens reveals inconsistencies of his narration by addressing a “you” persona, by switching from “I” to “one,” in his defensive phrases, and in his overall elevated diction, which is the bedrock upon which the other three are built (29). Without his trademark elevated diction, Stevens’s narration loses a vital sense of time, place, and position as a fossil from a forgotten era whose worth is dependent entirely on the historical details he can provide. Stevens’s “uncompromising rootedness in the past” through his “curiously stilted speech” is his coping method for “a world growing more and more incomprehensible to him, a world that can hardly accommodate great butlers,” and when he retreats to the safety of this diction, he simultaneously finds comfort in a past more comprehensible to him and removes the option of overwhelming emotions in his present (Furst 542).

Similarly, by addressing a “you” persona, a subsection of the discourse on the relation between implied author and implied readers, or narratees, Stevens conceals his self-preserving narration in the guise of a more universal one. There are two types of narratees – general and specific – the former defined by “signals that contain no reference to the narratee” and the latter by signals that “define him as a specific narratee” (Indrani and Phil 423). Stevens addresses both
kinds of narratees but is most intriguing when he addresses a specific one “by using the second-person pronoun ‘you’ or ‘we’” as a fellow Englishperson, most likely someone who has experience as a servant “in big houses” (423, Westerman 3). When he pontificates, “when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman,” he arguably addresses a very specific narratee – a younger and more naïve version of himself – to convince that younger self through nationalistic and self-important means that serving Darlington is a good decision despite all the hardships it brings him. Additionally, since Stevens “claims one must maintain one’s professionalism and dignity before any audience, that one must never be ‘off-duty’ in the company of another person,” he would never display such vulnerability to anyone but a younger version of himself (Westerman 3).

Adding to the discourse of his unreliable diction, by switching from an “I” persona to “one” Stevens distances himself from his emotions to achieve two goals: make his narrative as relatable as possible and revert to emotionlessness to retain his dignity. He does this “in an attempt to generalize, or universalize what is personal, or subjective,” but the move has the simultaneous result of restoring his dignity as an austere, English, professional butler (Sakiz 1053, Wall 24). Therefore, as Stevens changes his pronoun from “I” to “one,” an excessive universalized formality, he produces an unintended additional effect: he trains himself to avoid emotional intimacy, even within the privacy of his own mind. Insinuating that this tactic is deliberate gives Stevens more agency over the minutia of his narrative than he perhaps deserves, but this intense control does hide a tumultuous emotional state in which he, in a motion toward postmodern values, productively questions the foundation of his personality, moral character, and identity.
Stevens’s uncertain phrases, however, only highlight his uncertainty. He utilizes two types: ones to reaffirm and ones to admit his shortcomings; both are intended to strengthen his credibility but instead break it down and leave readers suspicious of his narration. The excuse of thirty years provides reasonable “opportunity for the excuse of memory and the revelation of its quintessential fragility” to play a large role in the construction of narration and thus because of this large amount of time and because he is a practical man, Stevens feels he must justify some of his assertions with additional truth-claims (Furst 534). For example, when Stevens mentions how his desire to take a holiday “is no doubt substantially attributable to” Miss Kenton’s letter, he immediately follows with the additional claim, “but let me make it immediately clear what I mean by this,” and retracts the emotional weight from his prior statement to relate it instead “with professional matters” (Ishiguro 4, 5). He frequently utilizes phrases such as this; for example, “I should say,” “I should point out,” and “I feel I should explain,” all of which create an unintended defensive tone in the narrative (Wall 24). Additionally, to prove his sincerity, Stevens occasionally admits “the limitations of his memory” through phrases such as “it is possible this is a case of hindsight colouring my memory,” “it is hard for me now to recall precisely what I overheard,” and “I cannot recall precisely what I said” (Furst 536, Ishiguro 87, 95, 167). While it is not surprising that Stevens cannot perfectly recall conversations from thirty years ago, “these sporadic defects in [his] memory do have the effect of casting a shadow over what he claims to recall well” (Furst 536). The combination of weak reaffirmations of truth and outright confessions of false memories only adds to the reader’s suspicions of Stevens’s reliability, even in moments when he appears to be entirely reliable.

Allowing us more avenues to define Stevens’s unreliability and its effect on the novel, contextualizing his narrative in the 1930s before World War II help us naturalize “the text, using
what we know about human psychology and history to evaluate the probable accuracy of, or motives for, a narrator’s assertions” (Wall 30). Although contextualization depends entirely “on the norms, cultural models, and conceptual frameworks that readers bring to the text,” our subjective responses construct unreliability for most readers, therefore making this approach to determining unreliability a useful one for how it provides a basis of truth against which the narrative is compared (Nünning 99). One example of contextualization is Stevens’s reaction to Darlington’s Nazi ties. Since Stevens views loyalty to his employer “as a prerequisite of his employment” and “believes that it is not proper for him to criticize or to query Lord Darlington’s decisions even in the privacy of his thoughts,” he ignores Darlington’s fascist allegiances and unreliably glosses over them in his narration (Furst 546). Subsequently, Stevens “emerges as a pathetic, almost tragic figure, as he is brought down by an exaggerated adherence” to a professionalism so pervasive it influences his ability to narrate reliably (546).

Contextualizing Lord Darlington’s actions as fascist and Stevens’s narration as unreliable is possible through two scenes – the 1923 meeting at Darlington Hall and the early-1930s incident with the Jewish maids. The first of the two political meetings Darlington hosts in support of Germany after the Great War, the 1923 meeting is “an effort to follow up the international conference of 1922 in Italy” to sway powerful men’s sympathies for lessening the harsh impact of the Versailles Treaty on Germany (Wong 62). Stevens’s tone while narrating the meeting portrays a convening of honorable and sympathetic allies working together to soften the blow to their defeated foe, led by Darlington who opens the meeting by outlining “the strong moral case for a relaxing of various aspects of the Versailles treaty, emphasizing the great suffering he had himself witnesses in Germany,” whereas Stevens’s silence on the ethical implications of the meeting connotates his approval of it, or at least his understanding that he
does not have the authority to *not* approve of the meeting (Ishiguro 92). Some critique does slip out, such as Stevens’s curiosity at “the determination on the part of some persons to maintain the appearance that this was nothing more than a social event that they had actually gone to the lengths of having journals and newspapers open on their knees,” but his narration of the meeting is overwhelming positive since he focuses mostly on his butlering duties such as his pride in seeing the “magnificent banqueting hall employed to its full capacity” or how dinner “had been executed without any significant difficulties” (92, 98). In ignoring the connotation of the meeting’s intentions and focusing instead on what he calls a “triumph” of his “dignity,” Stevens does not conceal Darlington’s actions as he seemingly would like; with an average person’s knowledge of World War I and the subsequent political and economic ramifications on Germany, contextualizing this scene reveals the beginnings of Darlington’s fascist mindset and political ties (110). Additionally, the scene reinforces Stevens’s suspect reliability skewed toward portraying his employer as a great man.

Working opposite to Stevens’s narration, Miss Kenton’s reaction to Darlington’s loyalties proves that characters within the narrative can recognize and denounce them, making it thus inconceivable that Stevens remains as oblivious to the implications of those allegiances as his narration would have us believe. When Darlington resolves to fire two Jewish maids for being Jewish in the early 1930s, calling the decision “regrettable” but necessary “for the safety and well-being of [his] guests,” Stevens claims his “every instinct opposed to the idea of their dismissal” but resolves his “duty in this instance was quite clear,” again adhering to professionalism instead of his moral compass, and informs Miss Kenton of Darlington’s command (Ishiguro 147, 148). In this instance, Stevens’s rare emotional and moral reaction goes unspoken as he allows Miss Kenton to believe he supports letting the maids go, no matter the
ethical implications of it. Even when she threatens, “I will not work in a house in which such things can occur,” Stevens considers her reaction a joke, since, as he says to her, “our professional duty is not our own foibles and sentiments, but to the wishes of our employer” (149). From this scene we learn two things: Darlington subscribes to anti-Semitism and Stevens will overlook his employer’s morally questionable decisions to maintain his professionalism. The resulting unreliable tone of the scene paints Stevens in a poor light and influences readers to question if other moments of his narrative contain the same editing.

Stevens’s moral code is intrinsically tied to his sense of professionalism, skewing his ability to reliably narrate instances in which professionalism overwhelms any other emotion or ethical judgement, and since Stevens sets rigid, emotionless expectations for himself, he clings to his professionalism and defends it at any cost. Professionalism, for Stevens, is tied up with dignity, Englishness, and restraint. According to Stevens, the superiority of a great butler reflects “the English landscape at its finest…probably best summed up by the term ‘greatness,’” the “lack of obvious drama or spectacle that sets the beauty of” that land apart, and most importantly, “the factor which distinguishes [great butlers] from those butlers who are merely competent is most closely captured by this word ‘dignity’” (Ishiguro 28, 33). Relating that concept to the idea that a butler’s “professional prestige lay most significantly in the moral worth of one’s employer,” Stevens tangles the moral worth of one’s employer, professionalism, Englishness, and restraint together into a lifestyle determined to poison his relationships with others (114). The narrative implications of that rigidity are evident in his relationships with his father, Miss Kenton, and Lord Darlington.

Stevens’s sense of professionalism is learned from his father’s example, constructing a father/son relationship dependent on their shared profession and professionalism instead of love
and resulting in the foundation of Stevens’s tendency for unreliable narration. Emotion plays no role in their relationship and that distance is reinforced by the three great butler stories Stevens shares with readers to prove professionalism is key. In each story, the butlers act with great dignity in extreme circumstances; in the first, a butler in India kills a tiger in the dining room before returning to wait on his employer’s guests without making a fuss; in the second, Stevens’s father chastises two drunken guests for insulting his employer’s good name and secures an apology from them without alerting or alarming his employer; and in the third, Stevens’s father serves the odious general responsible for Stevens’s older brother’s death so professionally that his employer receives a tip for his exceptional service (Ishiguro 34-42). The morality Stevens learns from these stories directly leads to his emotionally stunted dynamic with his father.

Butlering is all that binds them, as exemplified in their last conversation during the 1923 meeting at Darlington Hall. Deathly ill, Stevens’s father says, “‘I’m proud of you. A good son. I hope I’ve been a good father to you. I suppose I haven’t,’” to which Stevens replies, “‘I’m afraid we’re extremely busy now, but we can talk again in the morning’” (97). He cannot even address his father directly, instead saying to him ‘I’m very glad Father is feeling better’” (97). Their inability to connect emotionally is indicative of their brand of professionalism altering Stevens to his core and irredeemably impacting his narration; if he lacks the emotional range to connect with his father, how can he reliably narrate his life?

Stevens faces similar hurdles in his relationship with Miss Kenton with the significant difference that she is capable of experiencing and accepting her emotions, which makes for awkward and tragically sad tension between them when Stevens is unable to do the same, tension which colors Stevens’s present-day narration just as much as it affects his reactions to her kindness in the moment. Stevens’s goal of attaining the elusive title of great butler and Miss
Kenton’s goal of showing him they are in love are counterpointed only because Stevens’s dedication to professionalism makes him ignorant to his and others’ feelings. One notable instance of this disconnection is evident in how Miss Kenton cares for Stevens’s father as he dies. Stevens is too busy serving the Darlington Hall 1923 political conference to sit with his father and when Miss Kenton informs him that his father has passed away, offering her condolences and displaying her sadness in her words and actions, Stevens, as usual, gives no indication of his emotions and merely says, “you see, I know my father would have wished me to carry on just now” to justify prioritizing his job over his family (Ishiguro 106). All Miss Kenton can respond is, “of course, Mr Stevens” (106). She clearly disagrees with his choice, but his lack of emotional response gives her no authority to try and change his mind, restricting her to witness of his emotionless nature. And when Stevens finally displays a capacity for emotion in how he reads unhappiness into Miss Kenton’s letter and elatedly travels to visit her after years apart, he cannot understand that “she has not the slightest intention of returning to Darlington Hall” and admits, “perhaps through wishful thinking of a professional kind,” that he may have read too far into her words (Furst 548, Ishiguro 140). Only in the dramatic present of Stevens’s travels does he approach understanding the repercussions of his emotionally repressed identity on his diseased relationship with his father, feelings for Miss Kenton, and repression of his employer’s true nature.

Lord Darlington’s effect on Stevens is massively understated within his narration due to the depth of his emotional trauma because of his employer. Because society becomes aware of Darlington’s Nazi ties and shuns him for it even after his death, Stevens breaks from professional protocol and denies working for him on two occasions and the reliability of his narrative suffers for it. First, he denies it to a chauffeur who helps fix his car – the chauffeur asks if Stevens
“‘used to work for that Lord Darlington’” and Stevens responds, “‘oh, no, I am employed by Mr John Farraday, the American gentleman who bought the house from the Darlington family’” (Ishiguro 120). The second instance is a memory sparked by this interaction – a few months prior, when Mr Farraday’s American guest Mrs Wakefield asks if Stevens worked for Lord Darlington, he clearly answers, “‘I didn’t, madam, no,’” and lies to Mr Farraday when questioned, saying “‘it is not customary in England for an employee to discuss his past employers’” (123, 125). His emphatic denial in both instances conceals the depth of his emotional trauma at the hands of Darlington, whose Nazi ties infect not only his reputation but also Stevens’s sense of self-worth. In this crucial break from professional protocol, Stevens lies to fellow characters by denouncing Darlington, and then also lies to readers by retracting that denouncement: “the great majority of what one hears said about his lordship today is, in any case,” Stevens remarks, “utter nonsense” (125). In a move characteristic of his narration, Stevens first advances his postmodern sense of self-identity as he productively recognizes that attaching his identity on another is ill-advised, and then immediately regresses to a skewed preference for professionalism over his individuality.

Time in The Remains of the Day is frequently very choppy and as Stevens looks back at his life from the dramatic present in the 1950s and meanders through memories, he experiences achievements and setbacks in observing the structure of his identity and the foundation of his dual unreliable-reliable narration. Stevens reveals his emotional triggers and tumultuous sense of identity in the turning points between his past and present and, crucially, how “Stevens has told his tale is as revealing as what he has told” (Wong 65). Two major examples stand apart from the rest – again the early 1930s incident with the Jewish maids, and the 1930 meeting at Darlington Hall. The first is a fractured series of events – it begins with Darlington ordering Stevens to fire
two Jewish maids for “the good of this house,” moves to Stevens’s emotional reaction of “not unperturbed” and Miss Kenton threatening to resign while Stevens tells her, “we must not allow sentiment to creep into our judgement,” then a year passes in which Darlington “severed all links with the ‘blackshirts’” and finally admits to Stevens, “it was wrong, what occurred,” and ends with Stevens aghast as Miss Kenton says he never showed a compassionate reaction to her or anyone else (Ishiguro 146, 147, 148, 151). Although Stevens removes much of his perspective from the events, the sequence hinges on his emotional state. Stevens’s sense of self-identity comes under fire in this series of events as Miss Kenton’s expectation of his sympathy wars with Darlington’s expectation he will do his job, wherein the former can only reconcile with the latter once Darlington shows regret for the anti-Semitic decision, allowing Stevens to do the same and voice a resistance he considers “quite self-evident” (154). The result of these few pages is an unchronological whirlwind of emotions Stevens plainly cannot recognize as such, despite his opinion otherwise, and showcases his inability to self-critique his actions unless through the lens of professionalism, a flaw of his character Miss Kenton and readers cannot ignore.

However, by far the best example of Stevens’s disconnected and therefore unreliable storytelling is his depiction of the, what he calls “unofficial,” meeting “between Lord Halifax and the German Ambassador of that time, Herr Ribbentrop,” mediated by Darlington at Darlington Hall in 1930 (Ishiguro 135). Although he would deny it, how Stevens narrates this day is based entirely on his emotions. He begins with a lecture on the historical importance of polishing silver in the butlering profession, which leads into a description of how his superior silver polishing skills positively influenced the meeting between Darlington and Ribbentrop, a historically important moment (135). Then, Stevens admits Ribbentrop was a trickster, that his “sole mission in [England] was to orchestrate” Hitler’s deception, but counters that he was such a
“well-regarded figure” that no one could have known his true intentions (136). This aside of Herr Ribbentrop’s trickery is immediately followed by a three-paragraph defense of Darlington in which Stevens addresses the anti-Semitic rumors circulating about him, which he cuts short with, “but I drift,” before returning to discussing silver polishing and yet another aside about how butlers have recently begun to question the virtues of their employers (136-138). The only thread connecting these events together and in this specific order, “carnivalesque in its indiscriminate jumbling of the trivial and the consequential,” is Stevens’s inability to question Darlington or to differentiate their values (Furst 539). His defense of Darlington feels insincere because of readers’ contextualization of Darlington’s reputation and the resulting hit to his postmodern sense of identity is detrimental to his credibility. Stevens makes little progress in his attempt to separate himself from Darlington’s meeting with Ribbentrop because, according to professionalism, his identity is contingent on Darlington’s. Thus, when Stevens’s narration of Darlington’s interactions with a Nazi highlights his achievement of well-polished silver instead of Ribbentrop’s status as a Nazi, Stevens emphasizes his unreliable tendency to rearrange events to protect Darlington’s reputation and, concurrently, how his blind professionalism poisons his postmodern sense of identity.

Memory is “a crucial but fallible, certainly a ‘fragile’ power” for Stevens’s narration and he likes to blame it for his unreliability, but when he narrates complex scenes in minute detail and claims a faulty memory for those instances that paint him in a negative light, readers wonder if the issue at fault is memory or a resistance to self-criticism (Furst 531). In admitting this fallibility, Stevens simultaneously urges readers to trust his honesty and casts “a shadow over what he claims to recall well” (536). He asks readers to trust him as he presents us with irreconcilable facts such as his loyalty to Darlington, his adherence to professionalism, and his
ability to maintain a healthy self-identity concurrent to that – and yet, the faulty memory on which the narration rests makes the foundation of the novel “brittle” and unstable enough to topple it all (550). The question to ask is, “what bearing does it have upon our perception of unreliability if the narrator provides the means for correcting his or her unreliability – consciously or unconsciously?” (Wall 21). Stevens provides us with numerous examples of both reliably and unreliably narrated scenes and often calls our attention to its designation on his own accord. He proves time and time again that he is self-conscious “about the fallibility and uncertainty of his memory in the construction of his narrative,” self-reflecting on his authority as narrator when he cannot seem to do the same work on his self-identity (Sakiz 1054). If Stevens admits his faults, “how much credence can be invested in his version of the happenings at Darlington Hall?” (Furst 536). More importantly, how can we reconcile the facts of his unreliability and his awareness of it?

The general effect of the novel is unease, specifically because of Nünning’s reasons for naming it untrustworthy, and depends entirely on Stevens’s narration. Similarly, the postmodern aspects of the novel are contingent on the dramatic arc of Stevens discovering his own identity separate from his employer’s and the ensuing emotional rollercoaster as he comes to terms with his past. The designation of reliable or unreliable cannot always be separated in this novel, not when Stevens combines truth-claims with instances of ignoring blatantly fascist values – the jostling back and forth of his reliability, the extreme anti-Semitic ideas Stevens unintentionally defends, the intense longing for a return to a time Stevens perceives as superior, and the carefully constructed diction to reflect that time and his professionalism – they all facilitate the novel’s fluid relationship with truth and fiction. The novel feels both fragmented and whole and by the end when Stevens determines that he should return to Darlington Hall and become a better
“banterer” so he can better serve his witty new American employer, Mr Farraday, readers observe Stevens come so close and still fall short of understanding the full impact of his career on his sense of identity and self-worth. The level of self-deception Stevens operates under, and the effect it has on something as fundamental as his identity, makes for an unreliable narration with definite moments of reliability that is, by the end, best categorized as untrustworthy.

Martin Amis’s *Money: A Suicide Note* tracks the downfall of screenwriter John Self in 1980s New York as he devolves into a suicidal alcoholic obsessed with money. Narrated in first-person, the novel begins with what claims to be Self’s suicide note, signed “M. A.” for Martin Amis, and ends with another italicized section also written by Martin Amis. These sections introduce Amis as a character within the novel, someone with whom Self interacts in his narrative and who is capable of influencing the plot from within instead of solely without, as implied author. The novel’s inclusion of an author/character dynamic complicates the parameters of narration and of Self’s role. Self’s personality is frequently abrasive, offensive, and tactless and he displays infrequent moments of productive introspection that he quickly dismisses in favor of continuing his unsavory habits in willfully ignorant bliss. Self experiences an outside conscience through Frank the Phone, who harasses him through phone calls with specific details about his character and activities, and whose identity is unknown until the end of the novel when he reveals he is Fielding Goodney, Self’s business partner for his movie *Bad/Good Money*. The main dramatic action focuses on the film and Self’s interactions with the actors involved, whose outrageous names like Lorne Guyland, Caduta Massi, and Spunk Davis characterize their outrageous demands for the film and who do their best to make Self’s life difficult. The other major plot is Self’s relationships with Selina and Martina, the former his British girlfriend who clings to him for his money and the latter his new, married, American girlfriend who would
rather him read a book than spend money on her. *Money* slowly reveals itself a postmodern satire, especially in Self’s relationship with his father, Barry, as it questions notions of identity through Self’s unreliably narrated position as a protagonist too blind to see the truth evident to everyone around him.

Examining John Self’s voice as a basis of his trustworthiness allows readers to critique his repeated, specific tonality and the implications it has on his narratological reliability. Nünning argues that “the verbal habits of the narrator,” especially when they are repeated as often as Self does, construct unreliability, and Self’s voice is distinct enough to warrant analysis (Nünning 85). First, consider “the extent to which he overuses the personal pronoun ‘I’ or the possessive ‘me’ throughout his narration;” every scene highlights Self’s perspective until his narration becomes “ironic and paradoxical” beyond the usual expected selfishness of any ordinary first-person narrator (Doñate 69). Self cannot observe the world around him without first filtering it through the lens of the making and losing of money which then, according to his understanding of life, necessitates relating those observations back to himself. In this tangled web, Self, money, and his experience of the world are symbiotic. His narcissistic individualism “finally betrays him” in the end, “shedding light on his incapacity to look beyond his egotistic self so as to discern what is really going on around him” (69). Secondly, Self uses words like “rug” for hair and phrases like “upper west side” for the left side of his mouth where a dying tooth plagues him (Amis 7, 10). These verbal habits are repeated, taught to readers so that once we understand “rug” is hair we can easily translate “I’ve got the mind of a kid, but I’m a pretty senior partner over at Rug & Gut and Gum” to mean hair, stomach, and mouth in a flippant tone (117). Learning the quirks in Self’s diction allows readers to ground ourselves in his voice and build the kind of functional relationship required to recognize his unreliability.
Besides Self’s distinct voice emphasizing his eponymous attitude, it also significantly provides the excuse for violence, either verbal or physical, against anyone who questions, rejects, or irritates him. Concerning physical violence, Self makes two consecutive attempts to rape his girlfriend, Selina, and offers clues in his diction to how he narrates the scenes unreliably. To establish his predatory perspective, Self critiques his technique as he assaults Selina and relates tips to readers like “take the odd slap in the face as part of the deal” and “undress before the action starts” to make the assault easily conducted (Amis 232). These guidelines suggest a lack of ethics and perpetuation of violence to maintain one’s status, since Self attacks Selina because he feels something is owed for his financial generosity, but as he watches Selina make up a bed on the couch for herself over “painkillers and scotch” and concludes that “this rape lark” is “seriously overrated,” Self insinuates he does not consider himself a rapist, even going so far to ask, “how do rapists cope with it all?” (233). His tone in this scene is emblematic of his inability to treat those in his life as anything other than commodities for him to use and abuse as he pleases, and of his inability to reliably narrate his actions; even after offering advice for assault and saying, “I tried to rape her,” Self denies he is a rapist (232). He even rejects the designation of attempted rapist, one who fails as spectacularly as he fails at all his other endeavors, and subsequently admits two things: that he can recognize being a rapist is a negative and undesirable attribute, and that his narcissism corrupts his ability to self-criticize. The artistic dishonesty resulting from these conclusions plants itself firmly in Self’s voice and functions as a significant marker of both his unreliability and the satiric narrative commentary on his character.

Observing Self’s diction habits is crucial to analyze his narrative for unreliable narration, but an equally important endeavor is examining the relationship between narrator and author and the juxtaposition of Self’s narrative voice to the knowledge of his death. This duality is
established in the preface, in Self’s suicide note, where readers are greeted with, “this is a suicide
note,” and warned “by the time you lay it aside…John Self will no longer exist” (Amis 5). Immediately following is the jarring observation, “there are many more suicide notes than there are suicides,” which playfully contradicts the previous statement and pushes against binaries like truth and perception; does Self commit suicide, as the title of the novel and the note suggest, or, as the note also suggests, not? (5). In only a few lines readers are presented with irreconcilable claims disguising themselves as fact and, throwing another narrative wrench into the suicide note, it is signed “M. A.,” insinuating that Martin Amis “will adopt a certain role” in the novel and thus subverting the expectation that Self would write his own suicide note (Amis 5, Doñate 70). Amis-character, Amis-author, and Self-protagonist-narrator all share the responsibility of storytelling in Money: Amis pens the suicide note and Self narrates the events directly leading to it; however, reconciling Self’s role as narrator-protagonist and Amis’s role as narrator-witness and implied author results in a narrative so fractured readers cannot help but mistrust it.

Another postmodern technique used to fracture the narrative is the subversion of chronological time, resulting in frequent holes in Self’s narrative that confirm his inability to narrate reliably and, furthermore, affirm his inattentiveness and alcoholism as major attributes of his downfall. Self acknowledges the jolting condition of his conceptualization of time when he notes, “sometimes I feel that life is passing me by, not slowly either, but with ropes of steam and spark-spattered wheels and a hoarse roar of power or terror. It’s passing, yet I’m the one who is doing all the moving. I’m not the station, I’m not the stop: I’m the train. I’m the train” (Amis 108). Although this introspective moment feels productive, Self makes no changes to his habits. He continues as he began and when scenes begin to whip by causing readers to observe him as if from a train window, Self hurtles on with no sign of slowing down.
Money’s playful relationship with time deteriorates as Self falls into alcoholism and loses time, which he either narrates so hazily and disjointedly that readers cannot discern what is happening or he cannot remember to narrate at all, warning us that his memory is extremely fallible and full of holes of far greater consequence than a typical first-person narrator. Self’s deficient memory manifests in both ends of the lying spectrum: oversharing and under-sharing. An example of oversharing, early in the novel Self announces, “unless I specifically inform you otherwise, I’m always smoking another cigarette” (Amis 13). However, soon after setting a parameter of his narration, he breaks it and narrates lighting a cigarette; “the first cigarette would light a trail of gunpowder to the holster, the arsenal inside my chest. I patted my pockets and lit it anyway” (Amis 16). In a similar manner, Self’s tendency to overshare his financial confidence manifests a penniless future instead of a rich one, since incessantly repeating an opinion in this novel can only lead to its opposite outcome. Every time he asserts how much money he has, “plenty of it,” and how he is “due to make lots more,” he drives another narratological nail into his financial coffin (67). A more subversive form of oversharing is evident in how frequently Self mentions visiting prostitutes; when he confesses, “I haven’t been behaving as well as I’ve led you to believe…I’ve gone back to Third Avenue, not to the Happy Isles but to places like it, to Elysium, to Eden to Arcadia – no more than once a day, I swear to God,” he contradicts every prior instance of oversharing and reveals they are, in fact, under-sharing (196). Prior to that confession readers believe Self visits prostitutes frequently, but now we know he does so daily. In this transformation of his deficient recollection and in his blatant oversharing, Self indicates an issue of memory and lack of discipline to stick to established rules, constructing a facet of his unreliability and leading to the flipside issue of obfuscation.
Self frequently loses days to an alcohol haze, waking up once with surprise puncture wounds on his back and many other times with no indication of his activities at all besides a missed day on the calendar — narratologically relevant moments for how they prove Self’s tendency to under-share. The blackout episodes increase when Self makes plans with Martina. The first time he asks her to lunch and wakes up to “eight-fifteen” on his “travel clock,” he does not realize it is the evening until he gets outside his hotel and wonders at the dark sky (Amis 43). He loses an entire day to drinking and the narrative suffers as much as he does since readers also lose that day and are tricked, like Self, by the seemingly accurate clock. Self misses another day when he makes plans with Martina for dinner and realizes during a conversation with his bellhop Felix that he did not sleep the day away, he was out partying and came back “covered in lipstick” (195). From this news Self concludes “this was a real bitch, no error,” that he “could remember nothing to speak of about last night, yesterday, or the night before” (195). In this tendency for blackout periods, Self proves that he is “utterly ignorant of the reality that surrounds him and, and the same time,” is “so enclosed within his dreamy self-centered existence” he cannot accurately narrate the events he does remember (Doñate 74). By providing concrete evidence of Self’s unreliable narration through these instances of lost time, Amis critiques Self’s time period with a postmodern lens. The social commentary that money clouds a person’s reliability or poisons one’s ability to interpret the world with any kind of truth is a scathing criticism of the fast-paced 1980s and its detrimental dependency on the financial. Self is representative of that mindset, and the novel mocks his kind of businessman.

Contextualizing a text provides a foundation of reliability that can be used later to comparatively recognize and define unreliability; having the context of what is true makes recognizing what is false easier. The historical context of Money is the 1980s, allowing readers
to interpret the novel in conversation with our prior knowledge of the era to recognize and categorize Self’s unreliability and “Money’s intertextual aspects can be regarded in themselves as indicative of the novel’s postmodern status” (Duggan 88). The novel is heavily influenced by the aesthetics and values of “late capitalism, free-market economic policies and, enveloping all this, postmodern culture” (Doñate 65). In the tumultuous eighties, “politics and culture were inevitably linked more tightly than usual, as culture and values were put into action against the conservative politics” of political leaders like American President Ronald Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who Self denounces for leaving the Western Alliance “in poor shape:” “they’ve got an actor,” he commiserates to readers, “and we’ve got a chick” (66, Amis 146). A product of his time and cultural mode, Self “is a victim of his capitalist logic and thus” often “unable to distinguish between reality and fiction if economic exchange does not intervene,” hence his unspoken but highly documented preference for the company of prostitutes and business partners, who have as healthy an appreciation for financial motivation as he does (Doñate 67). The postmodern movement rampant in the 1980s focuses on individual desires and self-expression and as evidenced by Self, it all boils down to money.

Self further contextualizes his narrative in the specific time period of the British royal wedding and subsequently juxtaposes his and Selina’s relationship to Prince Charles and Lady Diana’s in various ways, often with the intention of devaluing his love life in favor of the royals’ public one. *Money* was published in 1984, three years after the wedding and in a society still focused on the couple but more aware of the reality of Charles and Diana’s marriage, and even modern readers can contextualize the novel’s references with popular knowledge. Self mentions the royal wedding on several occasions: when he hears about the engagement, when he quasi-proposes to Selina and argues they should get married on the same day as Charles and Diana, and
when he gets stuck in “a rush-hour style traffic jam at 12 p.m.” the day of the wedding; every
time he admires Prince Charles, who Self says “pulled a little darling” who “doesn’t look as
though she’ll give him any trouble – not like” Selina gives him (141, 72). From Self’s
contextualization of Prince Charles’s treatment of his wife readers can juxtapose the nature of the
royals’ relationship to Self and Selina’s and recognize the toxic and satiric similarities. Such a
comparison is possible only because of the narratological assumption that readers already
possess the knowledge required to contextualize the novel.

Money’s intertextuality, like contextuality, adds layers of understanding between readers
and narrative while leaving Self out of the loop, who gets stuck on the very literal understandings
of art because of his inability to analyze it. One intertextual reference is George Orwell’s Animal
Farm, which Martina buys for Self after a lunch-date gone awkward. Self is shocked Martina
would purchase him a children’s book and when he complains to her, “‘I’m too old for animal
stories,’” he cannot understand why she laughs (Amis 197). Because he lacks the critical skills to
analyze a satire, Self misses the allegory of the Russian Revolution and “cannot avoid reading it
strictly as an animal story,” hence identifying “with the dogs that appear in the satire” with all
their “pejorative connotations: laziness, greed, over-sexuality and quarrelsomeness” (Doñate 70).
As highly as Self praises the dogs, he despises the pigs, wondering “how come the pigs were
meant to be so smart, so civilized and urbane?” and concludes that Orwell “just can’t have seen
any pigs in action. Either that, or I’m missing something” (Amis 191). The irony of this moment,
shared between readers and narrative while excluding Self, is possible only because of his
blanket resistance to analyses other than financial. This moment is one of many that reads as
objectively comedic – Self’s blindness to the world around him causes both his downfall and the
hilarious conditions of it as he repeatedly fumbles on the simplest of social and logical puzzles.
Narratologically, the novel relies on intertextualizations like *Animal Farm* to form a productive relationship between readers and the larger narrative underneath Self’s narration led by Amis-author-and-character who relates pertinent information Self cannot see and calls upon readers’ knowledge Self does not possess.

The other key intertextual reference is *Othello*. Money’s “appropriation of Shakespeare’s *Othello* and crucially of scholarly criticism on the play illuminates an issue of central importance in Amis’s novel and postmodern fiction more generally: lack of character motivation” (Duggan 86). Indeed, Self lacks motivation. He desires to make a movie and does so, he desires sex and finds a prostitute, he desires oblivion and drinks – Self meets his “needs” instantaneously with little to no frustration or delay. The source of stagnation in his relationships with others, critically with Selina, Martina, Fielding, and Barry, is that relationships require a level of attentiveness, willingness to compromise, and baseline ability to empathize. Like Othello, Self is blind to his friends and associates’ machinations against him and tragically falls. Self’s social blindness is rooted in his selfishness, which can be observed when he and Martina see the play *Othello*; as Self narrates how Martina “frowned and sniffed,” “sniffed and writhed,” he is more concerned with his urgent need for the restroom than he is with her emotions, assuming in his self-absorbed way she is reacting to his “noxious” rented tuxedo like he imagines the rest of the audience does (Amis 277, 278). While Othello’s blindness results from the combination of his shortsightedness and Iago’s devious manipulations, “the myopia featuring Othello’s vulnerability to Iago’s lies in *Othello* becomes in *Money* the means of John Self’s downfall, as it is through his failure to read the contracts which he signs that Self falls foul of Fielding Goodney’s scheme” (Duggan 92). The narrative coup culminates in this *Othello*-like climax of realization and horror as the novel reveals Fielding’s true role of Iago, of antagonist. The intertextual paralleling of Self and Othello
determines a substantial narratological aspect of Self’s characterization: like the famous general, Self is more susceptible to the will of others than he is capable of making his own ethically-sound judgements, and that shortcoming directly correlates to his unreliability as narrator.

Judging the ethical mind of the narrator to determine his or her reliability, however, is subjective. For Self and fundamentally for his satire of the period, ethics are intrinsically tied up with financial concerns and

“he sees with the eyes of capitalism and interprets with its logic. His intellectual independence, which supposedly pre-exists his commercial adventurism, actually becomes the servant of that system; his independent self is usurped and eviscerated by the imperialistic dictates of profit. Given this colonisation it is redundant to conceptualise a separate identity, whether individual or national, outside money, for such an identity is fatally compromised” (Lea 73).

Self’s obsession with money is so complete that it supersedes any other ethical mind he might have. His narration is so infected by his greed to strike rich on *Bad/Good Money* he cannot accurately discern the events happening around or to him. Self is not obsessed with just making money, however, but also with spending money. He has no use for hoarding it, choosing to stay at a dumpy hotel instead of the fancy one Fielding recommends, and even offers money to readers, saying “I love giving money away. If you were here now, I’d probably slip you some cash” (Amis 48). His emphasis on transactional relationships and the high-traffic cash-flow of that kind of lifestyle overtly reveals his skewed ethical mind and flawed perception of his experiences. Considering that the postmodern elements of a novel depend on its ability to push expected boundaries to make us think, the satire of Self’s role as financial emblem requires an essential lack of introspection for readers to draw any conclusions of his caricature of 1980s
society. His preference for tangible money, for the physicality of buying goods and services with a fistful of cash, crushes his ethics and leaves him hollow – the satire of that persona is implicitly exemplified in Self and his treatment by those around him, especially by Barry Self.

Self’s entire existence relying on money to function is especially evident in his relationship with his “putative” father, Barry (Duggan 101). Self and Barry are both dominated by a “monetary view of human value” and are able to understand each other on a superficial level through that shared belief; Barry runs a successful pub in London and Self is described by his interviewer for *Box Office* as “one of the top commercial directors in the country” (101, Amis 53). Both gamble their careers on the continued happiness and satisfaction of their clients and yet, though they have similar financial concerns, they cannot find common ground on which to bond. Thus, their father/son relationship is incredibly strained, so much so that Barry invoices Self for the cost of raising him. Self is furious and cannot see the resemblance between himself and Barry; he is stuck on the insult itself, not the amoral code behind it and cannot see that the invoice proves he and Barry are more similar than they are different, even if that similarity manifests in an emotional chasm between them instead of familial closeness. The blind dependency on a patriarchal foundation of the self is yet another example of Self’s adherence to a corrupt system and even more so of the novel’s satiric criticism of that system.

But, as the novel approaches the denouement, Self’s family drama is inverted with the distinctly postmodern reveal that his father is not Barry but his bouncer Fat Vince. Suddenly, John Self ceases to exist as his identity is stripped from him and he becomes Fat John, like his father and half-brother Fat Paul; thus, John Self dies the death of namelessness. Self’s narration now has a new facet of unreliability – even his identity is on shaky ground – and Barry’s lie feels insignificant in light of the implications of Self’s identity; who is he? If he is not defined by
emulating Barry’s resentment of his wife’s death and subsequent descent into a debauched life, or mimicking Barry’s love for money to remain emotionally detached from those around him, then what does define him? Self realizes, in the disconnected, emotionless way of one experiencing a great trauma, he defines himself by factors that no longer pertain to him. His love for money no longer brings him closer to understanding or forming a connection with Barry and he has no money left after Fielding’s con to make him happy on its own – and instead of perhaps seeking to connect with Fat Vince on a familial level, he attempts suicide. Self’s moral character is precarious enough as it is that when hit by the death of his name, he and his narrative fall apart, revealing the fragility of his code of ethics and his narrative reliability. These instances of Money paralleling a corrupt father/son relationship to the destabilizing power of money focuses the postmodern effect of the novel on a more specified cause than the financial – identity is the true substance of the satire and, although he would rather believe he is beyond such sentimental notions, Self lays the foundation of his identity on that of his father. By challenging notions of name and identity, Money takes an overtly postmodern stance: relying on anyone else for something as central to the self as name or identity leads to one’s downfall.

The foundation of trust between narrator and readers in Money is propped up with toothpicks and necessitates that the novel relies on the more stable narrative behind Self’s narration, built and maintained by Amis-character as implied author, to have any narratological authority. Trusting Self as a narrator is arduous and ill-advised because he makes it so difficult to believe anything he says, especially in relation to his shaky memory. His tendency for drunkenness causes frequent blackouts and gaps in his memory that cannot be filled by his narrative prowess, namely because he has none, and like The Remains of the Day, Kathleen Wall’s question of reliability is applicable: “what bearing does it have upon our perception of
unreliability if the narrator provides the means for correcting his or her unreliability – consciously or unconsciously?” (Wall 21). In instances such as determining if a stain on his pants is either “champagne, or urine” and admitting, “I think I know the truth. The memory is there somewhere, it has being – but it is loathsome to the touch,” Self actively pushes away memories of his unsavory actions from his own mind and from readers’ potential understanding (Amis 66).

In this rare moment of introspection as he clarifies the gap between what he experiences and what he narrates, Self’s authority as narrator topples and is replaced by the stable comedic and satiric narrative tone that conceivably originates from Amis-character, who is established as implied author. The novel composes a foundation of trust with readers separate from Self’s narration and is thus critical of his oscillating reliability and its satire of such a narrator. “Martin Amis” does not become narrator but in his manipulation of narratological elements, which is only recognizable in conversation with the suicide note signed “M. A.,” Amis becomes an integral authority of the novel, one readers are more likely to trust than Self.

Self’s comical inability to self-criticize is evident also in his automatic reaction to Frank the Phone, calling the experience “a curious call, a strange call” from “some whacko. No big deal” (Amis 22). Except, Frank is the biggest deal of Self’s life, considering in the final act of the novel Frank reveals his identity is Fielding, Self’s business partner and executive producer of *Bad/Good Money*, and that the movie is a scam to rob Self of his savings and reputation. Self once again proves his unreliability and provides on another level the means for his downfall; if he cannot reliably narrate information as crucial as the sound of Frank’s voice or remember instances when Frank claims to have seen Self in person, then what other pieces of his narrative does he omit? How else does he conceal his character through what he chooses to narrate, unreliably presenting himself to readers and constructing an irrefutable comedic tone to his
bumbling ineptitude? And then, once his narrative incompetence is established, what effect does it have on readers? Readers can usually expect a certain amount of transparency from narrators; *Money*, however, utilizes Self’s blindness to those around him to subvert that expectation and in effect allows Self to remain narrator while utilizing the holes in his narrative to ironically answer the questions they incur. The satire of that dynamic and the comedy of it shared between narrative and readers results in an environment in which Self’s narration is valuable only for what he cannot narrate, because it is in those moments that the novel reveals its most riveting critiques of Self and the persona he embodies.

Despite all his unethical choices, glaringly obvious gaps in his narrative, and overwhelming blindness to the world around him, Self infrequently demonstrates “that he is aware of his condition when, for example, he states” that “perhaps there are other bits of my life that would take on content, take on shadow, if only I read more and thought less about money” (Doñate 67, Amis 223). His obsession with money overrides any other mode of understanding the world, but by acknowledging this shortcoming he complicates his formerly uncontested position as completely oblivious and unreliable. In this moment, Self can be considered reliable. Or, at least, not unreliable. The first time he travels to London Self entreats readers to believe his slump is not characteristic of his London persona but an anomaly; he says, “ah, you saw me at my best in New York, at my most disciplined, decisive and dynamic. Over here, I find I have a tendency to go downhill” (Amis 65). Instead of convincing readers he is always more depressed in London than he is in New York, Self proves he is blind to his true nature: he is the same in both cities, an unapologetic alcoholic with no regard or appreciation for emotions or motivations beyond the financial. This denial serves two purposes – to provide yet another reason for readers to approach this novel cautiously with Self’s unreliability in mind and, contrastingly, to prove
Self is capable of introspection, an aspect of his personality previously unconfirmed. Even if that introspection is shallow, some completive thought is better than none. However, when in conversation with the overwhelming moments of unreliability, the reliable instances feel simultaneously too sparse and incredibly important; they are allowed to be both, and readers are allowed to question a narrator’s reliability even when offered contradictory evidence. Despite evidence of reliability, Self’s otherwise unreliable narrative overwhelms those too-few trustworthy moments and presents to readers an emphatically unreliable narrator with little regard for anything other than money, whose apathy for reliability directly impacts the satiric elements of his narrative – in *Money*, unreliable narration supports the novel’s postmodern commentary on the narrator’s role in a world so illegible to him.

Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is narrated in a third-person omniscient perspective focalized through the character Sandy’s experiences and biases with occasional appearances of a separate and mocking omniscient voice. The novel follows Miss Brodie, a teacher at the Marcia Blaine School, and the six girls of her set of favorite students, nicknamed “the Brodie set,” as they navigate school, sex, and Miss Brodie’s pre-conceived expectations of them in early 1930s Edinburgh (Spark 1). Each girl is “famous” in the school for a specific attribute: Monica “for mathematics which she could do in her brain,” Rose for sex, Eunice for “her spritely gymnastics,” Sandy for her “small, almost nonexistent, eyes,” Jenny for being the prettiest and most graceful of the set, and Mary for “being a silent lump, a nobody whom everybody could blame” (Spark 3-4). The girls are amazed by Miss Brodie’s worldliness and strive to please her even as she restricts them to the one-dimensionality of their famous traits. The novel enjoys playing with chronological time and often reveals the destiny of a character before they even start down that path, such as with Mary’s death in a hotel fire at age twenty-
three or one of the set betraying Miss Brodie and causing her dismissal from the school. The narration of *Miss Brodie* appeals to readers as conciliatory as it simultaneously constructs irrefutable aspects of unreliability with the outcome of reinforcing the postmodern tone of the novel.

After questioning who, exactly, is the narrator? and determining that the most evidence points to Sandy as focalizer for the third-person narrator, looking at the definition of a focalizer set by Gérard Genette in his article, *Narrative Discourse; An Essay in Method* is an important step to analyzing *Miss Brodie*. Genette defines focalizing a narrative as establishing a third-person narrator whose biases and tone come from one of the characters within the narrative itself even though that character does not take on the role of narrator. Focalization, for Genette, has a total of three types, two of which are relevant to *Miss Brodie*: “internal focalization” as “*Narrator = Character* (the narrator says only what a given character knows)” and “external focalization” as “*Narrator < Character* (the narrator says less than the character knows)” (190, 189). These concepts can coexist, not in the same narrative moment but in the same narrative, since “the commitment as to focalization is not necessarily steady over the whole length of a narrative” and the type can change for various reasons, as it frequently does in *Miss Brodie* (191). Sandy focalizes the arc of the plot and its resting points as she, in her way, concurrently resists Miss Brodie’s teachings and is fascinated by her. Noting that Sandy plays a larger role than just character and remembering that she does not fully occupy the position or privileges of narrator allows readers to better understand the narratological structure of the novel and, more importantly, to critique it.

Most narrative trends in *Miss Brodie*’s diction reinforce that Sandy is the novel’s focalizer, but others point to a separate entity’s voice, one that is often mocking and in
possession of a more omnipotent range of knowledge than Sandy displays. This mocking voice also occasionally reveals more than Sandy would like to admit, for example when she and Jenny wonder at their newfound, and what they deem very extensive, knowledge of sex: Jenny references a “girl employed by her father in his grocer shop” who has “recently been found to be pregnant” and the ensuing conversation reveals the depth of the girls’ ignorance (Spark 15). Jenny notes that “‘it all happens in a flash,’” to which Sandy replies, “‘you would think the urge would have passed by the time she got her clothes off,’” and the narrator adds to the exchange, “by ‘clothes,’ she definitely meant to imply knickers,’ but ‘knickers’ was rude in this scientific context’” (15, 16). In this narratological augmentation of the girls’ conversation the narrator implies omniscient knowledge of the inner workings of Sandy’s mind, insinuates that the comment delves deeper into Sandy’s dialogue than she would care to share, and does so in a tone clearly mocking the girls’ attempts to understand sex. Crucially, this is a tone that Sandy’s focalization would not employ against herself, thus proving the existence of a secondary narrative voice that both filters Sandy’s focalization and makes independent, omniscient choices for the narrative.

Examining the focalized voice of the narrator requires an analysis of how Sandy’s focalization and the narrative tone work in tandem to construct characters such as Mary, whose designation of “lump-like” predetermines her fate and is reinforced both by the narrator’s repetition of the phrase and Sandy’s dismissive treatment of her (Spark 8). She of “merely two eyes, a nose and a mouth like a snowman, who was later famous for being stupid and always to blame,” Mary has no opportunity to establish her character prior to being designated a “silent lump” before she has any dialogue (10-11, 4). The issue with depending on an unreliable third-person narrator for an unbiased presentation of characters is that
“we read the narrator’s description of Mary before we read other characters’ responses to her and before we see her behave in ways that lead others to identify her as stupid, so if we take the narrator’s discourse as authoritative, then we might also accept her characterization of Mary as sufficient” (Brown 236).

If readers “accept the narrator’s description, then they might find themselves among those who identify Mary as stupid and lump-like,” pushing readers into making an ethical judgement of Mary’s character with very little evidence beyond the narrator’s evidently biased descriptions of her (234). In moments such as these, Sandy’s focalization and the third-person narrator’s omniscient voice coalesce. Further into the novel when we have more opportunities to observe Mary’s character, we are restricted specifically by Sandy’s focalized obliviousness to Miss Brodie’s bullying. Miss Brodie puts Mary down for a myriad of reasons related to her perceived stupidity and Sandy participates if not intentionally then by ignoring her, but the narrator’s additional dismissive treatment “endorses certain opinions and judgements about” Mary and “actually contributes to” her characterization as stupid (234). For example, when Miss Brodie and her set walk through Edinburgh she gives Mary permission to “‘speak quietly to Sandy’” and Mary responds, “‘Sandy won’t talk to me,’” Miss Brodie’s response is shocking for its callousness – she says, “‘Sandy cannot talk to you if you are so stupid and disagreeable’” (Spark 28). Part of recognizing unreliability is analyzing “the verbal habits of the narrator;” if those habits include repetitively insulting a character in description, highlighting bullying from a figure of authority, and downplaying Sandy’s focalized ignorance, then perhaps that narrator’s reliability should be questioned (Nünning 85).

The editorial omniscience behind those comments contributes equally to the narrator’s suspect reliability, especially since the narrator tends to make sly moral observations and
condemnations without substantiating them in quantifiable fact and often drags readers into making similar judgements, exemplified again in Mary’s dismissive treatment by the narrator. As a result of targeted diction, Mary becomes an embodiment of stupidity and readers thus learn to “pity Mary, just as we might be appalled by the ways in which she is treated” (Brown 245). However, “the narration and narrative complicate such responses” (245). Since readers play a role in Mary’s characterization, since we participate in classifying Mary as “lump-like” and often fail to imagine she could push back against those expectations, the resulting narrative irony “invites readers to resist the narrator’s discourse and to question the ethics of the narrative to which Mary is subjected” as it, at the same time, encourages us to participate in that subjection (Spark 8, Brown 247). The “moral force of the novel resists precisely” this conflict of constructing “Mary’s victimization while simultaneously enabling” us “to recognize that implication,” challenging us to “reflect on the ethics of narrative” and our “own ethical responses to narrative” (245, 247). In this mode, readers are culpable for Mary’s characterization of stupid only if we agree it is correct. Despite the narrator’s efforts to implicate us in the ostensible stated object of confirming Mary’s stupidity and to relegate her as an unimportant distraction to Sandy’s focalized narrative, our resistance to it and our sympathy for Mary results in a failed narratological device. While “persons should be allowed to articulate many of their own ends and should be allowed to achieve them,” when we “consider Mary, we see that she is never the subject of narrative, but is always subjected to narrative” (243). Although it is through the narrator’s unreliability that Mary is denied the opportunity to break from expectation, readers are responsible for recognizing that distinctive moral code and questioning the narrator’s empirical reliability. A failure to accept that responsibility results in readers as liable for Mary’s characterization as the narrator.
The third-person narrator’s moral code can be discerned largely from readers’ and narrator’s treatment of Mary’s and is unsuccessfully challenged by Miss Brodie. In her unique position of a woman supposedly in her prime and a teacher to impressionable young girls, Miss Brodie occupies a startling space between character and narrator in a way unlike Sandy; while Sandy focalizes the narration through her experience and perspective for the third-person narrator, Miss Brodie attempts to commandeer the narrative for her own uses as she plots “the lives of the human beings around her as though they were simply parts of a fictional word of her own making” (Cairns 203). She does so not with the intention of becoming narrator of the novel, per say, but to better exert her will on those around her, in effect “narrating” them, and subsequently offers “equivocal suggestions about the ethics and ‘moral perception’ involved in art and imagination” (Stevenson 101). While it is critical to note that Miss Brodie’s position in the narrative does not promote her to narrator, the consequences of her machinations do hold implications for the novel: although Sandy focalizes the narrative and we read her world through her lens, Miss Brodie’s maneuverings influence Sandy. Therefore, the entire tone and moral code of the novel is dependent on Miss Brodie because without her, Sandy has no authority to rail against, no singular person to blame for her poor self-worth, and losing that antagonist role would derail the whole ethical structure on which the novel is built.

The narrator’s ability to build a reliable foundation of trust with readers is grounded in the narrative’s gift of information otherwise inaccessible from Sandy’s focalization, making the narrator’s editorial omniscience crucial to constructing epistemic authority. The narrator “frequently interprets, qualifies, and comments upon the speech and actions of various characters, often revealing motives and meanings not readily apparent to the characters themselves” (Brown 231). One such instance can be observed when the narrator introduces the
girls as “famous in the school, which is to say they were held in suspicion and not much liking” (Spark 2). From this remark,

“we can say that the narrator’s gloss on the girls’ fame introduces the familiar disjunction between appearance and reality and helps to establish the narrator’s epistemic authority; the narrator is able to offer readers accurate interpretations of various phenomena because she possesses information unavailable to any specific characters and knows more than they” (Brown 231).

As the Brodie set is launched in this sly manner, the narrator deviates from Sandy’s focalization to omnisciently narrate perceptions of them held by the entire school, or so readers assume. The narrator provides no proof of this claim that the girls are not liked by their peers, and yet readers believe it because the delivery is humorous and shrewd enough to be conceivably true, and, crucially, because it occurs early enough in the novel that readers have yet to form our own opinions of the girls. More importantly than narrating a popular opinion as only an omniscient narrator can, however, this moment is also vital for how it introduces the narrator’s omniscient capability of filling the gaps in Sandy’s focalization, often in a sharp and comical tone. Although unreliability is established in how the narrator treats Mary, by also providing a larger social picture of the Brodie set than just Sandy’s biased perspective the omniscient narrator argues for an equal responsibility in conveying relevant events and deviates from Sandy’s focalized tone with scathing perception and ostensibly reliable narration.

Influencing the ethical structure of Miss Brodie as well as serving its own purpose of settling the novel in the specific period right before World War II, the contextual history of the rise of fascism in the United Kingdom is a movement Miss Brodie admires and encourages her set to as well. In Miss Brodie’s fascist sympathies, the novel “portrays the ethical and political
dangers inherent in narrative and narrating and offers a broad critique of institutionalized power and the narrative authority that such power often assumes” (Brown 229). Fascism prioritizes the group over the individual and exalts the leader over the group; it is no wonder Miss Brodie embraces such a regimented ideology when she runs her classes with a disapproving air meant to punish those who go against her. For example, when she asks, “‘who is the greatest Italian painter?’” and one of her set replies, “‘Leonardo da Vinci, Miss Brodie,’” she snaps back, “‘that is incorrect. The answer is Giotto, he is my favourite,’” and punishes what is an arguably correct answer with first rejection and second by lauding her opinion over others (Spark 7, 8). This choice gives a teachable moment the uncompromising tone of fascist intolerance and reinforces her narrative as the only correct one. Although Miss Brodie contradicts her group-think fascist mindset with wisdom such as, “‘phrases like ‘the team spirit’ are always employed to cut across individualism, love and personal loyalties,’” her view of individualism only applies to situations that do not question her authority – she expects her girls, despite this vocalized value, to support her unorthodox teaching style against the school’s conspiracy to “‘prove personal immorality’” against her and in her personal campaign against Teddy Lloyd (82, 134). Thus, when Miss Brodie is betrayed by one of her own, she cannot tolerate the insult to her role as unequivocal leader.

While Miss Brodie loves the 1930s rise fascism, Sandy’s focalized narration does not – as evidenced in the gleeful drama of dragging out the reveal of Miss Brodie’s betrayer for half the novel. When Sandy meets with Miss Brodie “‘in the window of the Braid Hills hotel’” and listens to her contemplate, “‘I can’t see how Mary could have betrayed me’” and “‘I wonder, was it Rose who betrayed me?’” in a characteristic attempt to catch Sandy off guard and encourage her to gossip about the rest of the Brodie set, readers cannot expect the betrayer’s reveal in the
following sentence (Spark 63). But, in silent response, Sandy confirms her importance as focalizer: “it is seven years…since I betrayed this tiresome woman” (63). In the act of betraying Miss Brodie, Sandy throws off the learned weight of fascism and rebels against her teacher with the ultimate act of individualism, a concept despised by fascists for how it separates the group. The omniscient narrator confirms this plot arc as narrative unreliability and a focalized anti-fascist mindset, wherein the latter helps construct the former, when “it occurred to Sandy…that the Brodie set was Miss Brodie’s fascisti…all knit together” in one “body with Miss Brodie for the head,” a realization narrated with disgusted tone (31, 30). From Miss Brodie’s relentless emphasis on fascism through direct lessons of how she is “quite sure the new regime would save the world,” and more indirect lessons of her fascist values, Sandy learns to equate fascism and Miss Brodie with hatred (131). This paralleling is evident in how Sandy utilizes fascism in a subversion of its values for her own purposes – when Sandy informs headmistress Miss Mackay, Miss Brodie is “‘a born Fascist,’” she does so uninterested “‘in world affairs’” and very interested in removing Miss Brodie from a position of power over impressionable students, therefore utilizing Miss Brodie’s lessons against her to depose her (134). Sandy’s hatred for the connected ethical mode of fascism and persona of Miss Brodie is focalized into the novel’s narration and serves to unreliably contort the narrative into one that cheerfully withholds information from readers for dramatic effect.

Sandy’s individuality as Miss Brodie’s betrayer serves a secondary purpose of helping to construct postmodernism in the novel’s period setting of the 1930s. Spark’s fiction written in the 1950s and 1960s grounds her in postwar critique, a movement which embodies “specific stresses…events in the mid-twentieth century had forced upon the imagination of European authors” such as the rise of fascism and the social implications of that ethical structure gaining
such powerful traction before World War II (Stevenson 108). In the context of postwar Europe
and those large sociopolitical questions, Spark “displayed postmodern characteristics some time
before these had become commonplace in anglophone writing,” making her a postmodernist
before her time for her exploration of culpability and individuality (107). However, Spark is also
a “postmodernist exact of her time and because of her time” for those same reasons – Miss
Brodie’s narrator’s reaction to fascism confirms this interpretation: the individualism of
postmodernism clashes with fascism, and so the focalized narration through Sandy’s character
clashes with fascism, grounding the novel in the specific sociopolitical rhetoric of Spark’s time
(107). This notion is exemplified in Spark’s study of her contemporary social issues through a
critique of Miss Brodie’s fascism, which appears in moments such as when Miss Brodie and her
set are touring Edinburgh and they observe the “endless queue” of unemployed men waiting for
the dole, a group with whom Miss Brodie sympathizes in her fascist way: “‘they are our
brothers,’” she tells her girls, but “‘in Italy the Unemployment problem has been solved’” (Spark
40). In this scene and the novel’s infrequent depiction of social disparity, Miss Brodie and other
examples of postwar fiction “retain strong components of realism, even while challenging…the
reliability of art’s representation and ordering of reality,” and thus often narrate concurrent
political and cultural movements such as the social issues fascism claims to solve (Stevenson
108). The 1950s and 1960s when Spark wrote this novel was an “uneasy period” of “darkening
pressures shaping its shaking imagination” and not even a story about schoolgirls, especially not
a story about schoolgirls, can escape those postmodern modes (109).

The specific postmodern time period of Miss Brodie and its unreliable narration are
enhanced by the novel’s playful relationship with linear time and storytelling. Determining the
dramatic present is difficult thanks to the leaps through the 1930s as Sandy’s focalization darts
from memory to memory, but it is arguably set in Sandy’s “middle age” as “Sister Helena of the Transfiguration,” her name when she becomes a Catholic nun, as she converses with a man admiring her work in psychology (Spark 33, 137). The scene is split by more than one-hundred pages and is key to divining the narratological effect of Sandy’s focalization. Sandy and the man talk about the Edinburgh of their youth and the different façades of it they experienced and when he comments, “the influences of one’s teens are very important,” Sandy breaks down the postmodern influences of her focalization with her response, “‘oh yes…even if they provide something to react against’” (34). The novel contends that Sandy’s “something to react against” is Miss Brodie and her constricting parameters of success. The unchronological nature of this scene results in a delayed understanding – the first half feels significant although we cannot pinpoint why, and the second half reminds us of that feeling and how it can be applied to the novel we just finished – and since it is in that unchronological narration that readers are twice presented with Sandy’s motivation as character, as focalizer, for her betrayal of Miss Brodie, the same drama constrained to one consecutive scene would have significantly less impact on the novel’s ability to critique fascism and Miss Brodie’s role in it.

The reliability of a third-person narrator is difficult to analyze in most novels and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* is no exception, despite the inclusion of a narrative focalizer to ground the narration in Sandy’s perception and biases. In fact, Sandy as focalizer complicates more than she resolves since her narrative voice shares space with the omniscient narrator, whose voice still holds significant narratological sway over the tone and effect of the novel. Reconciling these two narrative voices and their capabilities of unreliability proves *Miss Brodie* capable of standing up to narratological inquiries, forcing readers to accept that a novel can be both reliable and unreliable with neither overpowering the other but coexisting if not in harmony
than not in discord, and results in a sophisticated novel grounded in the arduous task of
perceiving and relating truth. Spark’s work is yet more proof of a novel’s capability of evidently
mutually exclusive attributes working together to not only complicate the narrative in individual
ways, but also to construct a distinctly postmodern tone. The postmodern aspects of Miss Brodie
work in tandem to the narration’s unreliability, often playing off each other to intertwine the
concepts so that only one would feel lonely and inadequate to the task of grounding the novel in
a specific time and place.

Unreliable narration is a concept relatively easy to recognize but significantly harder to
define, making it, and narratology in general, difficult to analyze unless precluded by repeated
narrative trends. Approaching the monumental task of giving the term concrete definition, then,
requires a more quantifiable approach than a theoretical one. Defining unreliable narration
becomes possible, although still subjective, by analyzing repeated, material narrative attributes
such as narrative voice, representations of time or moral characterization, contextualization and
intertextualization, or trends in diction. Even finding evidence to support a novel’s postmodern
motifs does not guarantee convincing readers of its unreliability; while the ingenuity of
postmodern narrative playfulness supports unique novels and exciting and groundbreaking
critiques of a wide range of social, economic, and politic topics, postmodernism and unreliable
narration do not require each other to exist or function. However, the two coalescing in the same
narrative does result in poignant critiques of our world and our place in it. The best way to
discern unreliability is through contradictory, often very small, pieces of evidence gathered with
a suspicious eye, and the best way to define unreliability is through example; thus, the
subjectivity of determining the status of a narrator’s reliability could not find better examples
than the narrators of *The Remains of the Day*, *Money: A Suicide Note*, or *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. 
Works Cited


McGrath, Patrick. “Martin Amis.” *BOMB*, vol. 18, Winter 1987, pp. 26-29. JSTOR, 


