The Power of Subversive Writing Style and its Depiction of True Human Nature

Writing style in literary works is important to acknowledge because of how it defines the work itself. In the three literary works of *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and *The Stranger* by Albert Camus all tactfully use interchanging perspectives or editorial interjections to subvert the common single perspective narration. Language is inextricably linked to humanity and touches upon almost every aspect of human life. Language in the form of the written word or literature has this immense power in its ability to express man’s truth and all its complexities. Experimental and subversive writing styles possess a different type of power in the sense that they are able to reflect the non-conformist tendencies of the alienated human. The word choice, detailed descriptions, and symbolism are all aspects of writing style and reflects the author’s creative intentions. The two literary works of *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and *The Lover* are both very unique in the sense that the former uses an epistolary narration form and the latter implements use of the genre autofiction. Whereas, *The Stranger* is unique in the sense of its inconsistent and erratic switching from sparse description to moments of extraordinarily detailed accounts of what is happening through the main character of Meursault. The novels *The Stranger* by Albert Camus, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and *The Lover* by Marguerite Duras all demonstrate how subversive and experimental writings styles confront the general acceptance of the
monotonous human life by emphasizing how authentic human nature lies within the alienated and non-conformist individual.

Moreover, the sentence structure and the simplicity in word choice depicted in Camus’s *The Stranger* and Duras’s *The Lover* evoke a sense of detachment and isolationism from social conformity. The titles of the novels themselves reflect the simple sentence structure and word choice the authors use throughout the narrations. They also suggest an air of disconnection which is further emphasized through the very general and ambiguous article of the word “the”, but “the” also acts as a definitive, which the symbolic definitive is the alienated person. After each article in the title it is then followed up with a vague but descriptive noun, thus the titles themselves are superficially simple, but withhold deep meaning. This is also seen in the beginning of Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*, when Meursault reports that his “Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know. I got a telegram from the home: ‘Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.’ That doesn’t mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday” (Camus 3). The terse and staccato like group of sentences creates the tone of disengagement and apathy. However, it is this distinctive sentence structure and simplistic word choice that creates a duality in the preliminary observation of the apathetic tone. Meursault is ousted by his surrounding society because of his matter-of-fact demeanor about his mother’s death which is portrayed through terse sentences. It is more socially acceptable to show a public display of immense grief and mourning, but Camus shows a complete rejection of social indoctrination and instruction.

However, Camus’s sentences are not as simple as they seemingly are because of how the opening lines of the novel may have a cold tone, but in reality, the simple words and the short phrasing reflect the simple naturalness of death. The scholarly article “‘What- It’s- Like’ for the Other: Narrative Knowledge and Faith in The Meursault Investigation”, by Grace Whistler,
makes the bold claim of how “extraordinarily acute illustration of how a novel’s narrative can act as a window into the mind of the Other, through which we can perceive truths otherwise inaccessible” (Whistler 164). Conventionally, death is perceived as a negative and strikes fear or sadness in people, however, the truth that is conveyed is that death is a natural occurrence that should not be looked upon with terror. Meursault behaves as “the mind of the Other” by how his reaction to human mortality is acceptance, instead of refusing to acknowledge the inevitable. Death is an innate and natural part of human life; therefore, Meursault is not displaying apathy, but more of an acceptance and acknowledgment that death is naturally inevitable. Camus’s subversive writing style yields deep insights into the authenticity of non-conformist ideologies on human nature and death.

Similarly, the female narrator in Duras’s *The Lover*, confronts the idea of detachment and lack of belonging. She has a memory when she recalls “I think it was during this journey that the image became detached, removed from all the rest. It might have existed, a photograph might have been taken, just like any other, somewhere else, in other circumstances” (Duras 10). Duras’s sentence structure parallels the sentence structure to Camus’s opening lines in the sense that both use common knowledge words and that their phrases are cut short by either a period or a comma. However, Duras puts more emphasis on the power of her writing style by making written language synonymous with imagery. In this comparison it further exacerbates the idea of how writing style has the power to subvert the fundamentals of imagery into making it equal to the use of descriptive words. There is also the common tone of separation and isolation from the social status quo expressed through the narrator. The narrator speaks of a photo that was never taken and in which she was not a part of in the least bit. Camus is also echoed in the description
of the non-existent photograph in regards to the tone of commonality because of how the phrase “just like any other” connotes a broad relativism.

Also, there is the questioning of human existence, especially those that are isolated from the norm, due to the absence of the photo and the non-present narrator in the photo. Duras’s writing style and her word choice of “might” connotes the idea of endless possibilities which can be seen as a non-limiting and nonconformist in itself. The scholars Jeffrey S. Staley and Laurie Edson both address the idea of conformity in their article “Objectifying the Subjective: The Autobiographical Act of Duras’s *The Lover*” when they assert that “…autobiography [is] maintaining identity between two selves, the public and private, as a story of truth: ‘Truth in autobiography is not merely fact or conformity to ‘likeness’, to the ways one appears to others […] it is the *story* of identity” (Staley and Edson 288). Duras’s abstract use of autofiction and her simple, but deeply meaningful sentences all point to the formation and narration of identity. The focus of the novel should not be the validity of facts and events, but it should be the exploration of an identity of a socially alienated woman. The use of the first-person perspective of “I” reinforces the journey towards authentic identity in Duras’s auto-fictional narrative. The emphasis on the ousted individual also relates back to *The Stranger* and how the identity of main character epitomizes social isolation. The action of combining autofiction and a dynamic writing style provides genuinely unique insights into female nonconformity. Whereas, Camus uses his novel as a story of truth in male nonconformist identity. Nonetheless, both clearly use similar sentence structure and word choice tendencies in order to layer meaning into their narrations about true human nature in the outcasts of society.

However, Duras takes the use of her writing style a step further by having her narrative told in more of a free form and non-linear way to express the authenticity in writing through a
non-conformist lens. She fluidly shifts perspectives and this is expressed when in the description of “He says the hat suits her, suits her extremely well, that it’s very… original… a man’s hat […] She’s so pretty…” (Duras 33). The short wording persists which emphasizes Duras’s distinct writing style, but there is a shift in perspectives throughout the novel. The previous example about the photograph was relayed in first person, whereas in this example it is told in the third person perspective. The shifting perspectives are expertly tied into the narrative by how the changes are subtly placed. Also, the change in the narrative perspectives allows for a more authentic type of account because of Duras uses it to reveal qualities of the non-conformist. Within the third perspective, it is shown that the male hat that the female wears is very unusual because of how social gender expectations judges against masculine clothing on women and vice versa. However, Duras fights against these gender confines by having no words of condemnation towards the woman for wearing a masculine article of clothing. Additionally, the short sentence phrasing reflects how the narrative itself is told through a non-linear way. The scholar Janice Morgan, author of “Fiction and Autobiography/ Language and Silence: L’Amant by Duras”, observes how the novel is “narrated largely in the first person, the text is composed of fragments taken from shifting time frames, fragments that are related not in an external, linear way, but in circular, associative patterns that convey the more intimate, psychological rhythms of that experience” (Morgan 272). The broken-up wording of the non-existent photograph expressed in Duras’s writing style sets up the pattern on how the narrative will be told, which is also demonstrated in the third person perspective of the female narrator’s manly hat. Through the fragmented and cyclical narration Duras implements, she is able to actively subvert social norms, such as gender roles. The use of flashbacks and distinct sentence structure all are encompassing
parts to writing style and how they aid in the portrayal of human truth or the “psychological rhythms” of the authentically alienated person.

Additionally, the power of subversive writing styles impacts the narration completely including how the roles of symbols or motifs are distorted into representing abstract human complexities. Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* and Duras’s *The Lover* uses their specific writing styles to compare natural environmental symbolism to truth in man. Both authors use nature imagery to represent that natural human behavior is rooted in the acceptance of the abstract and the rejection of norms. Werther reports in his letter “I have never felt happier, and my feelings for Nature, down to tiny pebbles and blades of grass, have never been so full and acute, and yet—I do not know how to express myself […] and everything slides and shifts before my soul, so that I cannot grasp the outlines” (Goethe 55). The description of the natural imagery is highly detailed to showcase how the intricacies of nature mirrors the elaborateness of human emotion. Nature itself is in a constant flux of change which is similar to human nature’s state. The description of nature is associated with human feelings of happiness, but it also related to a feeling of being lost and not being able to maintain or balance stability in life. There is also the detail of how Goethe focuses on the minute details of nature such as the “tiny pebbles and blades of grass”, but he then expertly shifts the lens by applying the attributes of nature to the universal suffering of humans. The tumultuous disposition of nature and human nature are fully intertwined in a way that can only be exhibited through the dissent from normalized writing styles.

Werther’s social rejections and his symbolic use of nature imagery is entangled in his epistolary writing style. Similar to *The Lover*, Werther’s letters are not centered around validity, but instead the purpose is to express a form of true individuality. The scholarly article “Werther
and the Epistolary Novel”, by Robyn L. Schiffman, claims that “instances of communication happen constantly or characters want them to happen, yet these instances are always in a state of flux, where the medium may fail or blur with other acts of self-expression” (Schiffman 423). Goethe’s novel may at first seem like a single perspective, however, the novel is narrated through a frame tale. The frame narrative and the epistolary style are two key facets of what makes his writing style very unique. Additionally, the narration is interrupted by editorial comments and interjections which further puts the narration into a state of “flux” similar to that of physical nature and human nature. The main objective of the letters is to share information in general rather than accomplishing correspondence. The information provided by the letters may “fail or blur” the absolute facts, but triumphs in raw human emotion which is actively shown through the nature motif and symbols. The experiences of human emotion are at the core basis of reality and truth which is what through the character of Werther confronts when he uses emotional passages as truth instead of accepting the conventional and objective truths as facts. Therefore, alienated individualism and its foundations in self-sovereign individualism is evidently expressed in how Goethe tailors the epistolary style to his own individualistic writing style tendencies.

Correspondingly, Duras uses her own mixture of autofiction and personal writing style to deepen the symbolic meaning of nature and its relationship with the chaos of human life. The female narrator recalls the image of “the Mekong and its tributaries going down to the sea, the great regions of water soon to disappear into the caves of ocean. In the surrounding flatness stretching as far as the eye can see, the rivers flow as fast as if the earth clopped downward” (Duras 11). The carefully chosen water imagery reflects Duras’s slight shift in her writing style because of how her phrasing is longer, less staccato-like, making the description flow more
fluidly. This switch up in sentence length and this idea of fluidity is similar to that of human nature. In the novel there is a rejection of the caging and confinements of social normativity and instead embraces the socially nonconforming lifestyle. The “Mekong” river acts as a symbol for the whole of humanity and the “tributaries” represent the socially alienated people, which may portray a type of divide, but the essence of both is water, meaning that the nonconformists make up a vital part of total humanity. Additionally, the fluid aspect of water can be related back to living a life outside of social norms because of how there is a sense of freedom in not having to maintain a façade lifestyle. It proposes that it is unnatural to live in restrictive social human constructs and that natural human behavior originates from freely living life based on individual wants, and needs. The natural imagery of water combined with ideas about social human characteristics shows that the boundaries of society has corrupted human nature into trying to fit certain socially created categories or labels. However, the naturalness of fluidity strongly goes against any strong definable absolutes about how a person should behave in society, thus supporting the idea that truth in human identity is within the socially isolated. Also, Duras alludes to death in her river description when she uses the word “disappear” which acts as another unifying force in regards to humanity, but it also functions as a subtle message at how individual authenticity is being overpowered and drowned out by the pressures to maintain the social status-quo. This further implicates that truth in human nature is exhibited in people who refuse to live by strict social guidelines.

In light of how nature acts as a symbolic force to truth in living human nature, both Camus’s and Goethe’s writings undermine this image by applying it to the relationship between humans and the nature of death. Camus uses nature to exemplify the violence in humans and how aspects of the natural environment mirrors the violent mentality of humans. Meursault
reports how his “eyes were blinded behind the curtains of tears and salt. All I could feel were
cymbals of sunlight crashing on my forehead and, indistinctly, the dazzling spear flying up from
the knife in front of me” (Camus 59). The particular aspect of nature Camus uses is sunlight and
how it has this power to “blind” people, similar to how societal pressures have the power to
make individuals abandon their sense of self and become part of the normalized collective.
However, this blindness also refers to how humans are at the mercy of their absurd emotions and
can be blinded by violent emotions such as rage which can lead to acts of physical hurt. The idea
of natural violence in humans is emphasized by how Camus, similar to Duras, slightly changes
his sentence structure by using more descriptive language when detailing nature. In the academic
article “Marie Cardona: An Ambivalent Nature- Symbol in Albert Camus’s L’étranger”, by
Arthur Scherr, declares how “the glowing orb, symbolizing unharnessed Nature, ultimately
drives Meursault crazy, ‘causing’ him to shoot the Arab” (Scherr 7). Camus uses a more specific
word choice in his description of the blinding light of the sun when he uses words like
“crashing” and “dazzling” because of how they connote a sense of violent awe. The sun, in a
way, creates this momentary lapse of Meursault into self- madness induced by the heat and the
violent impact of the sun’s light. Camus mirrors the description of the sun to the buildup of
violent insanity in Meursault by creating a sense of urgent tension and energy. The
“unharnessed” and unrestrained Nature that is mentioned in the novel reiterates the idea of how
there is an unbridled power in having no limitations, similar to how there is immense power in an
identity rooted in truth. Also, the parallel of how natural violence compared to human violence
demonstrates how there is a sense of innate violence in man. However, the idea of innate human
violence and coming to an understanding about it depicts a true ideology which is ostracized by
society. Camus is not arguing that human violence must be a part of society, rather he is
commenting on how there needs to be an understanding and an acknowledgment of the absurd nature of human violence in order to counteract it. There is also a sense of fight when it comes to the refusal to accept a socially normative life and to live a life based on uniquely individualistic desires.

Goethe demonstrates the complexity of true human nature by showing a fluctuation of emotion towards nature through Werther’s epistolary writings. Werther’s shift in his feelings about nature is shown how “[his] heart’s immense and ardent feeling for living Nature, which overwhelmed [him] with so great a joy and made the world about [him] a very paradise, has now become an unbearable torment, a demon that goes everywhere, torturing [him]” (Goethe 65). The language that is used to describe nature is very fanciful and laden with tumultuous emotional connotations. The mentioning of the “heart” acts as a dual symbol in how it represents that nature is the main source of all life, but it is also directly alluding to how it is a literal life providing organ for humans. However, the “heart” is not just a physical thing, people have deemed it as being the center from which emotions originate from in humans. The interwoven symbols of nature and the human heart mirror each other in the sense that both are constantly in a state of change. There is no stability in both of their essences which further corroborates the idea that rigid social ideologies are unrealistic and unnatural. Furthermore, the autonomic functions of the heart itself are in a constant state of motion in order to maintain life and when this motion stops it ends in death. The physiological properties of the functioning heart suggest that living a fluid and nonconformist life is true living, whereas socially made restrictions on how people should behave acts as a type of death in one’s individual self. The idea of instability is clearly outlined through the completely opposite tones expressed in in a single statement. The first part of the phrasing expresses a mood of perfect utter bliss and nature is almost exalted or admired in
a God-like way, hence the “paradise” reference. However, this positive image is juxtaposed and warped by a violent shift in attitude. The God-like admiration for nature changes with how the wording becomes very dark in tone. The “unbearable torment” is an explicit example of how nature is now at the heart of human misery and pain and then to reference nature synonymously to a “demon” undermines that previous God-like adoration. In this intense shift of wording through Werther, Goethe is able to depict nature as a place of heavenly delight to that of hellish suffering which reinforces the idea of how transient human emotion truly is and how it is genuinely natural to have shifting individualistic perspectives that do not conform to social expectations.

In essence the power of subversive writing yields an authentic truth about humanity that cannot be ascertained through socially accepted conventions. The authors Duras, Goethe, and Camus all exemplify the isolated individual and their truths in their novels by using their uniquely experimental writing styles to undermine the social conventionality of sentence structure, narrative, and naturalistic symbols. Living a life ruled by social restrictions and limitations leads to a death in the individual self and a stifling of human truth. A world ruled by social norms entraps people into a state of complacency, but people must reject social group thought in order to keep their individuality alive.
Works Cited


