The Manipulation of the Reader's Response to *Lilli Stubeck*

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To suggest that an author attempts to manipulate a reader's response is to acknowledge that the reader's own thoughts, ideas and emotions are called upon in judging the merit of a literary work. Thus, in considering structure, the reader's response becomes an issue of literary significance. Jonathan Culler's discussion is useful here in recognising structure and meaning as the potential properties of a literary work which "are actualised by the theory of discourses applied in the act of reading".[1] In answering Barthes' question regarding the discovery of structure without the assistance of a methodological model, Culler emphasises the need for an implicit understanding of literary discourse.[2] Later in his discussion, Culler focuses on "the notion of effect"[3] and on the author who, as reader of their own work, will be dissatisfied with little or no effect.

Accepting both Culler's insistence on the need for a literary discourse as well as his notion of effect, this writer is given a starting point for consideration of James Aldridge's attempt to manipulate the reader's response to **The True Story of Lilli Stubeck**. The text is structured so that it will be read in a particular way and with particular effect. If one were first to consider the novel in the light of literary discourse, or as Culler would suggest, what one must look for, then a basic starting point might be the meaning of a story about a young girl who lived in the country

town of St Helen during the time of the Great Depression.

Here, what Culler refers to as the implicit knowledge of the reader and the implicit knowledge of the author[4] affords the novel the very basic structure of time and place. It may well be argued that the choice of an Australian country town at the time of the economic depression of the thirties is quite deliberate and is, therefore, designed to produce an effect. One very obvious effect is achieved early in the novel as the Stubeck family are introduced and given their particular stamp as an itinerant family who would not have bothered to work even if it had been available.[5] The characterisation of the Stubeck family is important and becomes quite significant when considering the historical context in which they are cast. If it were simply a matter of characterising a family group living out a fairly desperate existence, then the chosen historical context would not assume the same significance. However, if the historical context does contribute to the novel's structure, then the author is attempting to manipulate a response that not only stems from his own inspiration and experience but also from an historical and social view of the individual which he anticipates the reader will recognise. To this extent, it is worthwhile applying a consideration of Marxist theory to the novel's structure and the author's attempted manipulation of reader response.

According to such a view, the characters should be seen as human beings whose material lives have been created in historical conditions.[6] Indeed, Miss Dalgleish's inheritance of colonial wealth makes her "an anomaly"[7] in a depressed country town.

The deliberate choice of the Great Depression as the time context for this novel is intended to produce a response from the reader. It is a period which readily allows a writer to highlight the disparity between rich and poor, appealing to a common knowledge about the genuine scarcity of employment, the deprivation of the poor, and the sustained lifestyle of the rich. Marxist theory, in arguing that the rules of dominance and subordination govern the social and economic order of periods in human history,[8] assists the reader in

accepting the choice of this particular phase of economic and social history. The effect of these ideas in such a setting intensifies the Dalgleish background of colonial wealth made possible by a capitalist order accustomed to making rules of behaviour[9] and, in so doing, creating a climate of dominance and subordination. The effect is further amplified by circumstances generated in the absence of social welfare, health authorities, and rich charities.[10] For her part, Miss Dalgleish is prepared to confront such circumstances not merely in terms of laying down the rules of behaviour for subordinates, but in deciding that they did not exist or should not exist and, in this way, removed any consideration that might be owed.[11]

If one pursues Marxist theory, an added dimension is also given to the author's characterisation of Abraham Devlin. Devlin's preaching in St Helen, "a society with little political or ideological inspiration in it",[12] suggests that the author is inviting the reader to apply some political or ideological inspiration to the meaning of his story. Through Devlin, the author succeeds in evoking an image of someone who has embraced the Utopian ideal at an appropriate time in history and who envisages a non-capitalist, socialist society. Devlin's preaching Utopian literature from his soapbox is not recognised by the town as an attempt to discuss contemporary problems and the attainment of a state where such problems do not exist. The failure to attract a receptive audience is subtly accounted for by the absence of a real proletariat in a town that survived by providing services for the farmers.[13]

Lukács, the first major Marxist critic, asserted that "To 'reflect' is 'to frame a mental structure' transposed into words", [14] and saw the novel as "a special form reflecting reality"[15]. Lukács' ideas provide a useful starting point for consideration of other means by which Aldridge frames a mental structure for his readers. When Lukács contended that

A novel may conduct a reader 'towards a more concrete insight into reality', which transcends a merely common-sense apprehension of things[16]

he was advancing the argument that a literary work must reflect not merely individuals in isolation but "the full process of life".[17] Aldridge, while presenting **The True Story of Lilli Stubeck**, structures his work so that he presents a microcosm of a particular society at a particular time.

The title, **The True Story of Lilli Stubeck**, and the author's inclusion that "If ever there was a Lilli Stubeck, this would be her true story as far as I am able to tell it"[18] frames a mental structure by providing the reader with a familiar form of motivation, that is, realism.[19] To this end, the task of providing the reader with an illusion of the real is assigned to the narrator, Kit. As a participant in many incidents and as the beneficiary of Lilli's black exercise book, he sets out to provide a retrospective of events that he alone can present as true and accurate. At the outset, great care is taken by the narrator to impress that he did not hold the same opinion of Lilli as the rest of the town.

. . . I knew Lilli better than most people and at the end of it all I had more information than anybody else.[20]

Kit assumes the responsibility of shaping the reader's perspective of the major characters. Indeed, it is through his narration that Lilli, The Point, and the Dalgleish home become the recurring motifs of the novel.

If one is swayed by Boris Tomashevsky's distinction between bound and free motifs,[21] the above examples sit comfortably with his definition of the bound. In addition, there are a number of inclusions, or free motifs, which accommodate the argument that such structural matter is intended to manipulate an artistically and intellectually satisfying experience. Some examples relate to the use of scholarly and classical references. Lilli is described "as a ready-made Galatea",[22] Miss Dalgleish cites Bennett and Wells as the authors Kit should avoid and German authors such as Thomas Mann as those he should read.[23] The various Utopian movements about which Devlin lectures weekly are listed

for the reader to either learn about or recognise,[24] just as Kit recognises Priestly as the discoverer of oxygen but knows nothing of his eudemonism.[25] So too, Lilli is able to enlighten Kit "about her secret sensibilities",[26]at the same time instructing his own sensibility in listening to the tomato plants closing up, ". . . a curious mosaic of sounds, a tiny silken rustle all around . . . "[27]

It is through Kit that the development of certain relationships become the crucial elements in the unfolding of Lilli's true story. He describes his own relationship with Lilli as that of an equal.[28] Lilli's trust in Kit is openly demonstrated, especially during those nocturnal visits when she seeks his help.

Later in the novel, Kit describes himself and Dorothy Malone as "tenuous links"[29] in the relationship between Lilli and Miss Dalgleish. It is this latter relationship which demands and receives Kit's loyalty and it is this same relationship which is central to the novel's structure. Aldridge, with the title and the introduction of Kit's superior knowledge, arouses the reader's curiosity. Mere curiosity is then tinged with mystery with the departure of all the Stubecks except Lilli, who remains with Miss Dalgleish. Some of the mystery is dispelled by the knowledge that Matty Stubeck received thirty pounds for his daughter,[30] a price that sounds an echo of Biblical betrayal. Engaged in following a relationship that never loses its aura of mystery, the reader is informed that

They were now in each other's domain and the course of Lilli's 'tragedy' had been set.[31]

As the focus is directed towards Lilli's personal development, particularly the question of her future, it is seen that Lilli's aim becomes that of retaining her own identity. This is communicated by Kit who explains Lilli's rejection of her inheritance in terms of inevitability.

. . . it was the choice she had been forced to make all her life. It was the choice she had always made with Miss Dalgleish, and she had made it again. She was Lilli Stubeck or she was nobody . . .[32]

In retaining her individuality, Lilli receives auxiliary support from Devlin and Kit. Devlin's support is made manifest in saving the "collective conscience"[33] by taking responsibility for Mrs Stubeck and Jackie. It is also Devlin who causes Dorothy Malone to report that his and Lilli's knowledge of one another seemed to stem from their acceptance of each other.[34] Moreover, it is Devlin who accompanies Lilli when she departs St Helen. For his part, Kit is both an auxiliary support and a hindrance to Lilli and her fate. From the beginning, Kit accepts what is unique and indestructible about Lilli. He laments during her illness that "her self-sufficiency had been taken away from her" and that "she didn't seem to know how to get it back".[35] Despite this, he accedes to Miss Dalgleish's request to fetch Lilli's clothes from the Point and admits that, if given the choice, he would leave Lilli with Miss Dalgleish.[36]

The author also draws attention to the binary oppositions that are woven into the narrative for the purpose of manipulating the reader's response. This structured technique is apparent in the naming and characterisation of Abraham Devlin. The combination of Old and New Testament names told the townspeople something about Devlin and it is intended that the reader, too, should contemplate the possibility that such a christening was the result of a parent's religious ire.[37] Even more telling is Kit's suggestion that an opposite was responsible for turning Devlin

into a gentle, sometimes helpless, innocent man who nevertheless had his own powerful convictions. [38]

Other oppositions such as nurtured/natural values, retaliation/forgiveness, foreign/native, parent/child, are the parts that make up the whole story. Through these oppositions the reader comes to accept Lilli's true story because they focus on Lilli's background, her character, and the incidents that make up her fate. The attitude of the people of St Helen towards the Stubeck family as gypsies, foreign, not truly Australian,[39] is sustained by those who think of Lilli's exodus as a return to the gypsy in her.[40] Miss Dalgleish and Lilli are

described as self-possessed, having different moralities.[41] Both were firmly convinced of their self-worth but disagreed on the measurement of that worth. For Miss Dalgleish, it was her material upbringing and outer display of wealth and authority. For Lilli, it was an innate self-recognition which was just as rich but totally free of material possessions. When Aldridge details Miss Dalgleish's bedroom with its French paintings, Japanese prints, expensive bibelots and European mementos,[42] his narrator comments on seeing Miss Dalgleish and Lilli as two of a kind. In terms of strength of character, this may be the case, but in terms of individual identity, it is not. Their "strong, silent arguments"[43] constitute a power struggle between the one accustomed to dominate and the other choosing to assert her self-possession.

It is for this reason that Lilli retaliates so vehemently when mocked, and it is for the same reason that she is tolerant of Devlin, a victim of mockery whose forgiveness or lack of retaliation "must have annoyed her". [44]

The parent/child relationship of Lilli and her mother provides the reader with another view of Lilli that has something to say about the complex nature of her character. When Lilli decides to move back to The Point with her mother and Jackie, there is no explanation from her in terms of love or responsibility. While it is acceptable to interpret Lilli's decision as a natural course of action on the part of someone who cannot abandon her origins, it is preferable to see in her an innate sense of social justice. She also possesses a strong sense of social realism, demonstrated by her reaction to Dr Dixon and the use of Kit as a mediator.[45] Lilli responds to a mother who desperately needs her. Similarly, though she has resisted Miss Dalgleish when her need was only to dominate, as the terminal illness takes its course, Lilli responds to her need, not her domination.

At the beginning of his narration, Kit informs the reader that when it came to their final judgement of Lilli, people saw her as "'a tragedy'"[46] and used a tone which suggested ". . . her curious fate was something she thoroughly deserved".[47] As the writer unfolds the essential truths about Lilli Stubeck, the reader is gradually led to a conclusion which suggests that Lilli was not a tragedy and that her fate was inevitable rather than deserved. Ultimately, the reader must be satisfied that all the incidents comprising what Kit has referred to as a "Greek drama"[48] going on in the Dalgleish house are resolved in a manner which is true to Lilli's character. If Lilli had remained with her inheritance it would have meant living with all the constraints that went with it. Instead, the news of her departure is representative of breaking free of those constraints. In the author's vision, Lilli appears as a revolutionary who will eventually understand Devlin's Utopia and show him how to attain it.[49] This vision is the culmination of a text which is rich in structure, a richness which manipulates the reader's response to result in an eminently satisfying experience, intellectually and artistically.

Notes

1 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Competence* in Tomkins, Jane P. (ed.), **Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism**, Johns Hopkins University Press, London, 1980, p.102.
2 ibid.
3 ibid, p.104.
4 ibid.
5 James Aldridge, **The True Story of Lilli Stubeck**, Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria, 1985, p.2.
6 Raman Selden, **A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory**, 2nd ed., Harvester Wheatsheaf, London, 1989, p.25.
7 Aldridge, op. cit., p.23.
8 Selden, loc. cit.
9 Aldridge, op. cit., p.24
10 ibid., p.90.
11 ibid., p.94
12 ibid., p.105.
13 ibid.
14 Selden, op. cit., p.29.
15 ibid.
16 ibid.
17 ibid.
18 Aldridge, op.cit., flyleaf, no pagination.
19 Selden, op.cit., p.14.
20 Aldridge, op.cit., p.1.
21 Selden, op.cit., p.13.
22 Aldridge, op.cit., p.40.
23 ibid., p.126.

24 ibid., p.107.
25 ibid., p.159.
26 ibid., p.59.
27 ibid., p.60.
28 ibid., p.10.
29 ibid., p.126.
30 ibid., p.31.
31 ibid., p.39.
32 ibid., p.181.
33 ibid., p.149.
34 ibid., p.120.
35 ibid., p.157.
36 ibid.
37 ibid., p.103.
38 ibid.
39 ibid., p.1.
40 ibid., p.182.
41 ibid., p.56.
42 ibid., p.174.
43 ibid., p.79.
44 ibid., p.107.
45 ibid., p.110.
46 ibid., p.1.
47 ibid.
48 ibid., p.160.
49 ibid., p.182

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Jenny Bates taught English, History and Drama in New South Wales secondary schools for fifteen years before moving to her current position of Teacher-Librarian, a post which she has held for three years. Since her initial B.A., Dip.Ed., she has completed an M.A. History (Pass with Merit), Sydney, and a Graduate Diploma in School Librarianship, Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education. She is currently in an M.Ed. (Hons) course at Wollongong University, specialising in Children's Literature.

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