

ERSKINE'S MOCKINGBIRD APPROACH VIA SEMINO'S MIND STYLE

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Abstract: The paper focused on Kathryn Erskine's Mockingbird expands upon an interesting type of relationship between metaphor and mind style (an impression of a world view) identifiable in the novel's first person narrative. The first person narrator, Caitlin, a little girl suffering from Asperger's syndrom, a form of autism, experiences difficulties in establishing communication and social relationships. So that such an experience could be properly tackled, Semino's mind style and Grice's theory of the maxims of quantity and relation will be turned into account in order to reveal how through the processing of linguistic and psychological patterns positive effects of communication and successful human relationship will be accomplished.

Keywords: Erskine, Mockingbird, Semino, mind style, communication, social relationships, Asperger's syndrom

Kathryn Erskine's "Mockingbird" expands upon an interesting type of relationship between metaphor and mind style (an impression of a world view) identifiable in the novel's first person narrative. The first person narrator, Caitlin, is a little girl who suffers from Asperger's syndrom – a form of autism which causes her problems with communication, social relationships and imagination, even though she has near-normal language development and average-to-high levels of intelligence.

The book has received the prestigious National Book Award for the manner in which Erskine has treated "Asperger thinking" with a view not to making Caitlin "medically correct", but rather a "believable" and "empathetic" character.

Closely following this interpretative line, mention is to be made of the fact that Caitlin consciously ponders on her own difficulties and peculiarities, including her perceiving other people's use of metaphor. This is actually one of the main reasons why Caitlin finds people and the children in the school she is learning rather confusing. On page 95, for instance, while talking to Michael, whose mother had been killed on the same day and by the same person as her brother Devon, she hears him mention all sorts of metaphorical constructions that his grandmother would employ.

For instance, the highly charged metaphorical construction "be an angel" addressed to Michael whenever his grandmother wanted him to bring her a glass with cold tea, makes Caitlin imagining an angel holding a glass with cold tea in its hand. The phrase "Hold your

pants tight” used by her grandmother instead of “be patient” makes her laughly ask him why he would put his trousers off.

Caitlin also tries to understand metaphorical expressions and to use them properly when addressing grown-ups. For instance, she tries to explain “it rains cats and dogs”, mentioning the fact that cats and dogs do not fall on you; instead she emphatically gives the dictionary meaning “to pour out”/”to rain heavily”. To our surprise, she makes an attempt to explain “it rains frogs”, with the final conclusion that frogs may fall on you if they had been raised up by the storm. Caitlin's analytical mind and her remarkable perception regarding some physical aspects that normally pass unnoticed, although not consistently exploited by novelist, appear on page 117. During a charity action, Caitlin was asked to say something nice. To her father's surprise, noticing that somebody had hair in the ear she finally said: “I don't think you are disgusting only because you've got hair in the ear” (118). Such statements prove that she is not reluctant to saying things that are obviously true. In other words, Erskine inspiringly exploits the “folk psychological notion” that autistic people have problems with metaphor and that they can hardly accept saying something that is obviously not true.

In order to achieve her goal of making Caitlin “believable” without imposing to herself to achieve accuracy in medical terms or perfect “consistency” (Grice, 12) in terms of the narrative or linguistic characteristics, Erskine intuitively gains the quality of identification with the character by building for her a “secret dwelling of understanding”, rather than “a common structure of social understanding” (Gilder, 109).

This “secret dwelling of understanding” is closely related to the movie entitled “To Kill a Mocking Bird” that Caitlin and Devon watched together. Since the father figure from the movie had already killed a mad dog that was likely to harm his children – Jem and Scout – who resemble Caitlin and her brother Devon a lot, Caitlin expected the father to kill a bird as well. In order to demolish Caitlin's pre-emptive subjectivity regarding the father's personal hostility to both animals and birds, Devon balances his logical cognitive demand, explaining to her the title of the movie.

To avoid to spoil the movie by rigidly imposing an inappropriate standard of meaning upon it, Devon states that it means the fact that “it is not correct to kill an innocent person, who, anyway, does not intend to harm anyone” (89). The emotional power of the statement is brilliantly rearticulated by Caitlin who claims that the bad people who fired their guns at school had not paid attention to the English class when the movie was discussed, because they “did not get” (89) at all the meaning of the book.

By stating this meaning so strongly, Erskine is elaborating Devon's perceptual field and his intention to enlarge Caitlin's perceptual field as well. Caitlin's personality is built upon a qualitative, emotional and intuitive configuration which amounts to the following abilities: drawing, minding things, remembering things that the other people forget, looking for information in books and in the computer, helping people, hearing things the other can not, being kind, sincere, reading, preparing cereals properly, noticing things the others fail to notice, placing things in the washing machine and being persistent.

In order to subsume or mediate these fragmented construct hierarchies into an integrated whole, in an attempt to “extend her mind beyond the skin” (Semino, 4), Caitlin first recalls the hospital scene when she learned that the doctors could not save Davon's heart. Then, inside the chest which Devon intended to be his project for the Scout Vultures, she fancies herself as being Devon's heart.

This form of thinking herself embodied in Devon's heart reveals Caitlin empathetic quality of identification with him in an attempt to bring him back to life. Her failed

imaginative resurrection of Devon ends up with the same words that the people from the hospital uttered “We could not do anything” (104).

The novelist exploits the role of limited versus elaborated choice in the reconstruction of Devon's death by simultaneously carrying out her interpretative responsibilities in the sense that Caitlin's father, profoundly affected by Caitlin's behaviour, turns on the TV for a change only to face another shocking image that of the killer of his son, brought about at Fox Fine News. Since the social cognitive understanding of what the killer had done amounts to an indecent gesture, the TV speaker concludes that in spite of his ironically pathological behaviour people could find now reconciliation.

The novelist's attempt to impose an appropriate standard of meaning upon it, makes Caitlin look for the word “reconciliation” in the dictionary. And this is what she reads: “the condition of reaching an emotional conclusion due to a difficult event such as the death of one's beloved relative” (105).

Given autism, and Asperger's syndrome in particular, Caitlin has difficulties in social relationships and communication. The unusual lexical and grammatical patterns reflect her condition. Such linguistic patterns are obvious in Caitlin's discussions with her father and, most specifically, in her discussions with Mrs Brook, the psychologist. Mrs Brook tries to make Caitlin improve her behavioural patterns such as those of looking at people while talking to them, of controlling emotions and of observing the other people's emotions, of refining her manners in terms of “tact” and “ability” when dealing with a difficult situation. “Empathy” (110) is presented to her as the amplifying of the value of attending properly to other people.

The first step taken by Caitlin meant to demonstrate her ability to relate to other people involves Michael, whose mother was killed during the same accident as Devon. Her discussions with him are either uninformative (e.g. Michael wears the same overalls as Scout in “To Kill a Mocking Bird”, or it refers to things she wears and things she would like her father to buy for her), or too informative (I will be eleven next month).

We join Caitlin and enjoy her “private” choice of interrelating with Michael (who is seven years old) and with his friends in terms of “belching” (120) the alphabet. The unconventional sounds and gestures are clear shreds of evidence of her need to empathetically interrelate with people. Her conclusion “They all consider me extraordinary” (120) suggests that Caitlin's communicative behaviour is involuntary rather than deliberate. Her involuntary behaviour is mainly related to Devon and his comments on the movie “To Kill a Mocking Bird”. Devon was claiming that the best part of the movie consists in the scene staged out by Scout when he addresses a mad crowd and makes them all leave simply saying “hello” and by mentioning the fact that he knows their kids from school.

Since Caitlin pretends that she can't get the meaning of the scene, Devon explains to her that she is very similar to Scout as she always speaks obvious things, making people exclaim “Oh” and become pensive. Being told that she can solve a lot of things if she behaved like Scout, she wonders whether she could wear overalls similar to that worn by the heroine and thus reach reconciliation. Such a detail can be interpreted as the result of a genuine inability to realize what information is relevant and how much detail is required.

If we interpret it following Grice's theory of the maxims of quantity and relation, according to which one's exchange of information should be as informative as required, and not more informative than it is required in order to be relevant, we could argue that Caitlin's behaviour can be regarded not as a “violation of the relevant maxims” (Semino, 12), but rather as an infringement of it. Thomas Jenny's concern with “infringement” (12) has brought

about the following explanation to infringement, namely that the non-observance of significant details arise due to the fact that his/her performance “is impaired in some way, by nervousness, excitement or because of some cognitive impairment” (Semino, 12).

In Caitlin's case, the “breaking” (12) of Grice's maxims of quantity and relation can be interpreted as an instance of “cognitive impairment” (12), due to her inability to realize the relevant details compared to the “irrelevant or distracting” (12) ones (a characteristic associated with autistic persons). Another cognitive limitation termed by Happe's “theory of mind” consists in the inability to realize “the mental states of other people” (Semino, 13).

It occurs several times with Caitlin when, for instance, she fails to realize that Josh, the one whose cousin actually shot Devon and two more people, instead of intending to harm Michael, another autistic child, he actually intended to protect and catch him in case he might fall while climbing the bars. Neither does she realize it when one of her colleagues tried to comfort another injured girl.

When Rachel, another colleague passing by the school where Devon was shot, heard the hooter and thought that another armed attack took place, fell down from her bike and got hurt, Caitlin considered that she might want to hide so that nobody could notice her embarrassment. So she started making preparations rearranging the objects from the classroom. Her rearrangement of various objects and her sincere remark that Rachel's face looked “swollen and bluish and repulsive” (111) made everybody consider her odd and unfriendly.

For further revealing the workings and limitations of Caitlin's mind, we posit that they mostly arise from her relationship with telling the truth. It goes without saying that when she noticed Rachel's injured face she could not have said anything else, because it would have meant to disregard the truth about it.

Contemplating a possible relation between mind style and pragmatics, we assume that the presentation of Caitlin's conversational behaviour is achieved mainly through the use of direct speech. For instance, before presenting Josh's determination to no longer abuse the autistic child William H, the novelist minutely describes how Josh violates William's “Private Space” (Semino, 13) casting him to the ground. After that Josh starts smiling maliciously which generates a double reaction on the part of Caitlin. Firstly she ponders that people should not smile when they harm somebody because smiling stands for kindness. Secondly, she decides to interfere and talk to Josh. The latter addresses her saying “You are like a dog! You are slavering on your sleeve” (119) - a reference to the fact that whenever she felt embarrassed, she used to suck the sleeve.

Consistent patterns of communicative behaviour are exploited by the novelist to emphasize Caitlin's attitude to details. So, she repeatedly utters that Josh should not violate the Private Space of another person. She even tramples on his own toe to show him what his “Private Space” is. Being linguistically aggressed by Josh, she replies saying “You should observe the Good Manners and say ‘Excuse’ me, please, but you are intruding upon my Private Space” (120). Since Josh keeps refusing to apologize, pretending that he did nothing wrong she looks at him and says “Oh yes. You did” (120) hoping that he will understand that she refers to his having aggressed Michael.

Josh misunderstands her and convinced that she blames him for his cousin's having killed Devon, he replies “I don't have to apologize for that. It was not me who did it! See? It was my cousin! I did nothing” and continues “I can do nothing regarding the fact that your brother was killed”. “It's not my fault”. “No!” (121) His yelling makes her suck the sleeve;

she tries to run away as far as possible from Josh's yelling, only to realize that it was her own yell that has terrified her.

A completely different behavioral-communicative background is revealed in chapter 22 where Caitlin is introduced to Mr. Walters, the drawing teacher. As Caitlin refuses to be drawn by him, Mr. Walters chooses her father with a view to teaching her how to grasp the people's emotions while drawing their portraits. She watches him and directly comments on his drawings; noticing her special concern for drawing, Mr. Walters asks her to draw his portrait, encouraging her to start with the exterior of his head and then to slowly move to his eyes.

As concerns the speech act verbs used to introduce direct speech, Caitlin's narrative does not contain common speech act verbs such as "admit, beg, demand, promise, warn", *a. s. o.* Caitlin relies on basic verbs indicating the occurrence of speech, such as "say, tell", and sometimes or less frequently on simple utterance types such as "ask, answer, call, explain".

The fact that Caitlin often uses indirect speech in order to explain to herself the intentions and attitudes that lie behind what the other people usually say, reveals, in our opinion, her attempt to surpass the difficulties of understanding the illocutionary force of the other characters' utterances.

For instance "I suck my sleeve. I don't think there is something good in anything. And I wonder what could reconciliation do. And what it means. And when daddy gets back to the living room and turns off the television I ask him 'What does reconciliation mean?' He tells me that he has to call a neighbour, but when Mrs Robbins arrives, he forgets to ask what reconciliation means. He only says that she will look after me, because he has got a headache and that he has to take a shower. I wonder whether it is one of those showers when he cries. I close my eyes" (60).

Since "reconciliation" is the key word of the entire novel, it lends a strong psychological and emotional tonality to Caitlin's reporting conversations and her own thoughts. Caitlin reaches reconciliation by convincing her father to carry out Devon's plan of building a chest, in the Mission style for the Scout Vulture project. The accomplishment of Devon's project has given birth to a particular emotional change that has filled in the entire ceremony of recalling and praising the three victims of the shooting event when they all lost their lives.

The principal's reverential speech, which ends emphasizing the fact that the chest was finished and then donated to the school by Mr Harold Joseph Smith, Devon's father and by his sister whom he adored, Caitlin, is followed by her insight into what Devon's chest was like, with the name Scout carved and hidden under the lid and with the Mockingbird carved on the lid. The sequence of actions associated with the ceremony are well rendered by Caitlin and they include the fact that everybody applauds, that father blows his nose, wipes his nose, but smiles; it also involves Michael who smiles and points to her saying "she did everything" (131).

Moreover, Mr Walters, the drawing teacher, holds out a drawing tablet and a big box with coloured pencils, adding that "I know you don't like colours. But I have thought you are prepared to test them". Her additional remark "Mr. Walter has got it. Maybe I will be also able to use them. I slowly hold out my hand and grasp the box with coloured pencils" (131) is indicative of her determination to capture the complete picture of objects, people, of herself. Consequently, her mental functioning may be perceived to be more or less standard or normal by the readers" as a result of the processing of linguistic choices and patterns in the text"

(Semino, 16) which reveal the positive effects of communication and of successfully accomplished human interrelationship.

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